Chapter XII

The Rise and Fall of an Open Source Project: A Case Study

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Abstract

The majority of open source projects fail. This chapter presents one such project as a case study, written from the perspective of the sole developer. It charts the various stages of development, from initial motivation and enthusiasm through the later stages of apathy and decline. It deals with many of the problems encountered by a sole developer, and the various approaches undertaken to maintain development momentum. This chapter provides anecdotal evidence as opposed to statistical analysis, giving an individual’s perspective on the development life cycle of an open source project, illustrating real world barriers to development and the typical issues that can stall a project.
Introduction

Where and why does an open source project start? What motivates the developers, and drives them to create applications and tools that are often equal to software many users are accustomed to paying for? Why are there so many that do the same thing? And why are the vast majority of projects left languishing, unloved and un-patched, forgotten and abandoned in some corner of the Internet? This chapter deals with these questions through the eye of a developer who started one such project—a modest digital photo and image manager called Kalbum, which briefly flourished between October 2002 and March 2003. Kalbum itself is suffering a slow and prolonged death, tucked away somewhere on a hard disk in the vast array of storage hosted at Sourceforge.net. SourceForge.net is a testament to the power of open source, as well as its impermanence. It’s a Web site that hosts well over 100,000 open source projects, and yet only a tiny fraction receives any kind of attention. For every amazingly successful project like Firefox, there is a Kalbume somewhere, lurking in the shadows.

Background

The dynamics of a project like Firefox and a project like Kalbum are entirely different. For one thing, Firefox has never needed to depend on a sole developer, never had to fight for time with work and family commitments. Firefox inherited much of its codebase from Mozilla—one of the largest, and incumbent community-developed projects in existence. More surprising perhaps is that there is anything common to Kalbum and Firefox other than the open source development model, and, of course, there is. The motivation for Dave Hyatt and Blake Ross to fork development (Hudson, Morrison, & Veitch, 2005) from what they saw as Mozilla’s lumbering, over-burdened Web browser is exactly the same as the spark of motivation that ignites the first coding session, the first night of furious programming, that forms the basis for a new project.

This is why Linux has become so successful. While undoubtedly benefiting from the main tenets of open source freedom, as laid down by Richard Stallman in his 1985 GNU Manifesto (Stallman, 1985), it’s the motivation of its thousands of developers that gets the work done. And there are a thousand different reasons for each developer’s motivation, whether it’s simply because they’re being paid a wage by a company like Red Hat, who need the Linux kernel tailored to their requirements, or an individual who just desires a certain device to be supported. The freedom provided by Stallman’s license creates an environment of development unlike any
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