Chapter 1.8
Open Source Survey Software

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ABSTRACT

One of the significant advances in software design afforded by the Internet has been the open source movement, an effort to collaboratively create software and make it widely and freely available to the online community. Although the open source movement started with Unix-like computer operating systems, it has expanded to include a wide variety of software programs, including tools to publish and analyze online surveys. This chapter introduces the open source movement, and then profiles three leading open source survey programs: phpEasy Survey Package (phpESP), PHP Surveyor, and the Moodle course management system.

BACKGROUND

The open source movement has its roots in the Unix community and, in particular, the development of the GNU Project back in 1984. The goal of this idealistic group of software developers was to create an entirely free Unix operating system so users would not be dependent on commercial versions from Sun, IBM, and others. Here is the introduction from the GNU Web page:

The GNU Project was launched in 1984 to develop a complete Unix-like operating system which is free software: the GNU system. (GNU is a recursive acronym for ‘GNU’s Not Unix’; it is pronounced ‘guh-NEW’.) Variants of the GNU operating system, which use the kernel Linux, are now widely used; though these systems are often referred to as ‘Linux,’ they are more accurately called GNU/Linux systems. (http://www.gnu.org)

Since then, the movement has grown far beyond computer scientists writing operating system code, and has become an ideology in which people freely contribute to content that is made freely available, and where changes are not only acceptable, but encouraged, just as long as the results are offered back to the community. In many ways, it is a sophisticated countercultural response to the limitations of copyrights and patents. As Raymond (1998) declared, “Perhaps in the end the open-source culture will triumph...simply because the commercial world cannot win an evolutionary arms race with open-source communities that can put orders of magnitude more skilled time into a problem.”

Not surprisingly, the open source approach has moved beyond computer operating systems into high-demand computer and Internet-based applications, including survey software. For those individuals or organizations unable or uninter-