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CSCI 301 – 40

February 19, 2020

Ethics Paper

With the rise of the internet, social networking sites, and instant communication, the sharing of information has become commonplace for society in the modern era. Need that recipe for those ever-sweet chocolate chip cookies? Ask someone on Facebook. Forgot when that one meeting was? Shoot your friend a text. Instant sharing of information can be great and beneficial in many ways, especially in dire situations, but when it comes to code found on the world wide web, is it the same? When code is found or shared on the internet through sites such as GitHub and StackOverflow copyright still applies, even if no specific license has been attributed, as well as the ethical and moral fact that someone worked on that code, expending time and effort to make it functional -- taking that code and claiming it as your own can be considered stealing -- even if no profit or gain is produced as a result.

Firstly, the question is posed, how does copyright relate to computer science? Copyright can be applied to any type of intellectual property and is defined as: “The exclusive right given by law for a certain term of years to an author, composer, designer, etc. (or his assignee), to print, publish, and sell copies of his original work” (Oxford Dictionary). Due to computer science being recognized as a creative endeavor and therefore falls under intellectual property, code that programmers have written falls under the United States legality in relation to copyright law.

Now that copyright can be understood as it applies to computer science, the programmer must find the correct license to apply to their code. This however, can prove to be especially

difficult, specifically, finding the correct license to use in certain situations can be challenging when first stepping in the ocean that is United States law. According to GitHub's article on opensource code, the MIT copyright license covers the basis for most code and is the easiest to use. When looking at the license as a stand-alone, it covers the basic need that a programmer may encounter when first beginning to protect their intellectual property and is the default of most programmers, including myself. This license was chosen simply because of its conciseness and coverage, allowing for a quickly understandable and easily digestible paragraph that discards much of the technical language included in the larger licenses. When it comes to larger projects, however, the GNU Affero General Public License v3.0 seems to be the most in depth and should be used when deciding what license to apply on more important corporate endeavors.

This then begs the question, "What should a programmer do if the code does not have a license in which it is attributed to? This begins the blurred line of ethics and morality in copying code from the internet. As programmers, §1.5 of the ACM code of ethics speaks to this issue quite plainly stating "Respect the work required to produce new ideas, inventions, creative works, and computing artifacts." This section specifically speaks to the copying and/or reproduction of code retrieved from anywhere and infers that, as a programmer, reproducing code without permission defies this very concept by disrespecting the work involved with producing the code primarily. Acts that would go against this idea should be avoided, although if the reproduction of the code is absolutely necessary, the original author should be attributed accordingly, even if there is no monetary gain or social advantage involved with the production of the personal code. This concept is similarly reflected in §1 of the IEEE code of ethics where programmers are to "[...] strive to comply with ethical design [...]," As stealing of private

property is considered not only illegal but unethical, the stealing of online code should be no different.

As technology grows to become more networked throughout the world, laws and regulations must adapt to account for the constant change and exchange of information. When looking at code online, it must be viewed as intellectual property and the laws pertaining to it should be considered when copying or using the code in any way. The act of stealing a car is illegal, so why should stealing code be any different?

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