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Ethics of Copying Code

There are many places where people can easily share their code with others and that sparks some ethical and legal questions with it. Due to this, many types of copyrights exist to help protect both the authors and users of programs. This paper will give an overview of what copyright is regarding the creation of software, what licenses I would use, and the obligations of being a programmer.

There are many different ways people define copyright. However, all revolve back to protecting intellectual property. According to Copyright.gov, copyright is a type of intellectual property that protects the original works of a person who “fixes” or physically creates something. Another definition of copyright that paints a clearer picture is from the group Thales they describe software copyright as legal protection for code that’s used by programmers to prevent others from copying their software without proper permissions from the copyright provided. Overall these two definitions explain that a copyright is used to protect an owner from others wrongfully taking their work, however, copyrights also exist to protect the users of the software being used. An example of a license that protects both the author and user is the open-source license Apache License 2.0. This license gives users complete permission to use, modify, and distribute software commercially as long as it includes the copyright notice in the material and any changes are documented. It also protects the author from issues that occur due to the

software as it states that the author does not have liability for any damages caused and lack of warranty.

Many different licenses can be used to protect your code. Some people prefer the idea of only using open source while others don't want people to mess around with their creations. For me, it would have to be on a case-by-case basis. For most projects I make on my own, I feel the Commons Clause license would be a nice fit. Commons Clause is an interesting license I saw as I support the idea of having code be accessible, however, I feel there should be some limitations with others that copy or use your code. I feel if someone is copying code you don't explicitly want others to use on their own projects, you should have the right to restrict it in some way. Although I feel this way, I am not against the use of others' work if you respect the wishes of the author when it comes to using their products. With the Commons Clause license, it does give others the freedom to use the product in any way. The only main limitation it has is that others can't sell said product if they don't transform it like adding new tools or plugins for it. The website for the license itself gives good examples of what is and isn't allowed to use a program under the Commons Clause. An example of something that is allowed is for a user to make an application that uses a library that has mathematical algorithms. The license allows you to create an application that uses this library and sell the product you made as it uses the library and builds upon it with the new application created. An example of something that isn't allowed would be a user taking the algorithm library, changing the name of the library and functions, and then attempting to sell it as its own product.

There are some obligations that we as programmers should follow when it comes to copying code off of the internet and copyright. When it comes to copyright, I feel we should respect what copyright that others have placed on their work. I mainly feel this way as I would

want to expect others to respect my wishes when it comes to how I want others to handle what I create so I should have to do the same for others. When it comes to taking code off the internet, work, or school, I'm usually fine with it if it's open source and you are transforming said code into something different. However, I'm not a fan of taking large portions of code or full-on programs and attempting to pass it on as your own without doing anything with it. The only time I would take code is usually off stack overflow where I try to first understand what the code is and then implement it for my intended purpose. I usually don't like copying large portions of code as I feel I don't actually get to learn what I'm taking fully which doesn't let me improve as a programmer and can cause issues down the line if it infringes on the wishes of the original author.

Overall copying code from others is a tricky subject to deal with as it raises many ethical questions. Due to the issues that copying code can give, many licenses exist to protect both the user and authors of products. I fully agree with these licenses that exist as I feel it should be the right for anyone to protect what they create from others copying it if that is not what they wish for.

Works Cited

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