

What motivates a FOSS developer?

COMP8440: FOSSD
Lecture 9

Does motivation matter?

- What is the aim?
 - Motivating someone to start the project
 - Attracting good developers to the project
 - Getting the most out of those developers
 - Encouraging good development practices
- Is it the same as for proprietary software?
 - Many common elements
 - Often no employer/employee relationship
 - That can be good or bad

Scratching an itch

Every good work of software starts by scratching a developer's personal itch

Eric Raymond, The Cathedral and the Bazaar

Opportunity to hack

- FOSS as a career starter
 - How can a inexperienced developer get experience?
 - Proprietary software isn't available to be studied
 - FOSS software is available, covers all areas of computing
 - No need to move and can be studied part time
- Programming can be addictive
 - Good developers tend to enjoy programming
 - The task becomes its own reward
- Highly visible
 - Some FOSS projects are highly visible
 - A good programmer can quickly gain recognition

Ego-boo

- Peer recognition
 - 'ego-boo' refers to the ego boosting from peer recognition
 - Leads to the strong cultural emphasis on giving fair credit and recognition
 - Often completely lacking in proprietary software
- Contrast with self-recognition
 - FOSS has a strong tradition of self-deprecation
 - Promotion of FOSS tends to come from users, not developers

How can FOSS projects maximise ego-boo to rewards to motivate developers?

Constructive Procrastination

- Procrastinating students
 - All students tend to procrastinate
 - Students who are good programmers tend to practice 'constructive procrastination'
 - Often work on FOSS projects to avoid study
 - Sometimes the FOSS project then becomes their career
- Examples
 - Samba: developed by procrastinating student at ANU
 - Linux kernel: developed by a student in Helsinki

Company Supported

- A new trend
 - Company supported developers now make up a very large part of larger FOSS projects
 - Trend started in late 1990s as part of dot-com boom
 - Lots of developers at large IT firms (eg. HP, IBM, Sun etc)
- Who is hired?
 - Strong preference for developers with proven record
 - Most start on FOSS as a hobby
- Internal reassignment?
 - Need to be careful not to bring proprietary development practices with them

World Domination

- Beating someone else
 - Some developers are motivated by beating the incumbent
 - Microsoft is commonly cited as the target to beat
- World domination
 - A common theme in FOSS humour
 - Mostly in jest, but some elements of truth

Immediate Rewards

- Speed of 'reward' is important for FOSS
 - The 'reward' may be seeing something work
 - Or may be getting patches accepted
- Faster release cycles
 - FOSS often has a fast release cycle
 - A public SCM means you don't need to wait for a release
 - Even with a SCM, releases still provide for a strong periodic push
- Important for new projects
 - More developers are attracted when they can get immediate positive feedback
 - Usual rule is not to announce a project till you have runnable code

t-shirt contests

- Small rewards, big results
 - Package a technical challenge
 - Offer a small reward (eg. a t-shirt)
 - Surprising number of entries!
- Examples
 - Samba crypto challenges
 - security challenges
 - bug-bounties
- Key factors
 - well defined problem
 - interesting technical challenge
 - some publicity for the winner