Origins of Open-Source Software

The Origins

Open-Source software is software that is usually developed in a collaborative public manner and is made available usually for free to anyone who wishes to use it, to change it, and even to incorporate it into new software products.

In the early days of software development (in the 1950s) this is the way programs were largely being developed, where programmers left copies of their code in public spaces, in the form of tapes or punch cards, for others to use. This may be because a lot of early software development was done in academic institutions where there is less focus on commercial considerations.

The Hacker Ethic

In the 1950s–1960s at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, college students who staged pranks were called "Hackers", and the term eventually became used more generally to describe people who got involved in constructive projects that were undertaken for the pleasure of being involved in them, including computer programming projects. These computer hackers developed an approach to life, a philosophy, an ethos, that they called the "Hacker Ethic". According to author Steven Levy in his 1984 book "Hackers: Heroes of the Computer Revolution", the six key principles of the Hacker Ethic are:

1. Access to computers—and anything which might teach you something about the way the world works—should be unlimited and total
2. All information should be free
3. Mistrust authority—promote decentralization
4. Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, sex, or position
5. You can create art and beauty on a computer
6. Computers can change your life for the better

Open Source Software

As more software corporations began to emerge, in the 1970s and 1980s, two distinct points of views emerged, on the one hand open source developers believe that sharing code means the new programmers can learn by reading lots and lots of existing code, and because anyone can look at open source programs, the majority of the flaws in those programs (the "bugs") will be discovered and corrected, producing highly reliable and coherent software. On the other hand, closed source software developers, or proprietary software developers, believe that commercial organisations that pay staff to develop software should be entitled to sell their programs for a fee. In fact, Bill Gates, one of the founders of Microsoft wrote an open letter to open source developers (sometimes called "hobbyists") where he told them that he thought they "*must be aware, most of you steal your software*".