

Introduction

by Eric Lease Morgan, guest editor for special section

Open Source Software in Libraries

It is a privilege and an honor to be the guest editor for this special issue of the *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* on open source software. In it you will find a number of articles describing open source software and how it has been used in libraries. *Open source software* or *free and open source software* is defined and viewed in a variety of ways, and the definition will be refined and enriched by our authors. However, very briefly, for those readers unfamiliar with it, open source software is software that is distributed under one of a number of licensing arrangements that (1) require that the software's source code be made available and accessible as part of the package and (2) permit the acquirer of the software to modify the code freely to fit their own needs provided that, (3) if they distribute the software modifications they create, they do so under an open source license. If these basic elements are met, there is no requirement that the resulting software be distributed at no cost or non-commercially, although much widely used open source software such as the web browser Firefox is also distributed without charge.

In This Issue

The articles begin with Scot Colford's "Explaining Free and Open Source Software," in which he describes how the process of using open source software is a lot like baking a cake. He goes on to outline how open source software is all around us in our daily computing lives.

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Karen Schneider's "Thick of the Fray" lists some of the more popular open source software projects in libraries and describes how these sorts of projects would not have been nearly as feasible in an era without the Internet.

Marshall Breeding's "The Viability of Open Source ILS" provides a balanced comparison between open source software integrated library systems and closed source software integrated library systems. It is a survey of the current landscape.

Bob Molyneux's "Evergreen in Context" is a case study of one particular integrated library system, and it is a good example of the open source adage "scratching an itch."

In "The Development and Usage of the Greenstone Digital Library Software," Ian Witten provides an additional case study but this time of a digital library application. It is a good example of how many different types of applications are necessary to provide library service in a networked environment.

Finally, Thomas Krichel expands the idea of open source software to include open data and open libraries. In "From Open Source to Open Libraries," you will learn that many of the principles of librarianship are embodied in the principles of open source software. In a number of ways, librarianship and open source software go hand-in-hand.

What Is Open Source Software About?

Open source software is about quite a number of things. It is about taking more complete control over one's computer infrastructure. In a profession that is a lot about information, this sort of control is increasingly necessary. Put another way, open source software is about "free." Not *free*

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as in gratis, but *free* as in liberty. Open source software is about community – the type of community that is only possible in a globally networked computer environment. There is no way any single vendor of software will be able to gather together and support all the programmers that a well-managed open source software project can support. Open source software is about opportunity and flexibility. In our ever-dynamic environment, these characteristics are increasingly important.

Open source software is not a panacea for libraries, and while it does not require an army of programmers to support it, it does require additional

skills. Just as all libraries – to some degree or another – require collection managers, catalogers and reference librarians, future-thinking libraries require people who are knowledgeable about computers. This background includes knowledge of relational databases, indexers, data formats such as XML and scripting languages to glue them together and put them on the web. These tools are not library-specific, and all are available as open source.

Through reading the articles in this issue and discussing them with your colleagues, you should become more informed regarding the topic of open source software. Thank you for your attention and enjoy. ■