

Eric Raymond, “Homesteading the Noosphere”

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Background

In “Homesteading the Noosphere,” Eric Raymond gives a fascinating overview of the motivations and unofficial organizing principles of the software hacker culture which, he argues, are rooted in Lockean principles of ownership. Raymond identifies membership in the open source culture through the lens of variations of degree in zeal and hostility toward commercial software. The different combinations and intensities of these variations comprise nine different hacker attitudes – from those who zealously oppose and are openly hostile to “evil” commercial software to those who code as a hobby and happily enjoy using Windows for their day job (and occasionally on evenings and weekends).

Key Points

Raymond also explores the somewhat puzzling phenomenon of open source communities of uncompensated programmers who will develop incredibly useful and professional work at a rate faster than compensated programmers. He suggests that hackers have adopted a form of unspoken ownership rights based on “gift culture” where reputation, rather than monetary compensation, is the desired commodity. Raymond uses several historical and related theories to support his argument that the open source community does have a viable structure which allows for efficient paths to conflict resolution and software development.

Discussion Questions

1. What motivates people to volunteer (e.g., build houses, work in soup kitchens, clean up after disasters, teach children to read)? How have similar motivations driven the open source software communities?
2. How does “abundance” in the online environment affect the gift culture of the hacker community?

Additional Resources

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