Software, Publishing, and the Bazaar!

by
Linda Rising
AG Communications Systems

As a subscriber to the patterns listserver http://hillside.net/patterns/Lists.html, I see a lot of unusual postings about software. The patterns community includes a lot of interesting people who have broad interests. They are writers, philosophers, building architects, a real diverse gathering. I love it!

In a recent posting, someone mentioned a paper, "The Cathedral and the Bazaar," by Eric S. Raymond http://www.ssc.com/linux/Eric/cathedral-paper-1.html. The paper describes "open source development" and the incredible success of the Linux operating system. Linux is interesting because as a recent article in Software Development (December 1998, p. 41), one of the best freebie magazines I know, "Linux may very well give Microsoft a run for its money."

Linux has always been freely available, available for use, yes, but also available for modification. Users become testers and modifiers and Linux grows in response. This is particularly appealing to members of the patterns community because of our fascination with the work of Christopher Alexander http://www.math.utsa.edu/sphere/salingar/Chris.text.html#PHILOSOPHICAL

Alexander is a building architect who believed in piecemeal growth that "emerges gradually and organically, if every act of building, large or small, takes on the responsibility for gradually shaping its small corner of the world…." (Alexander, C.A. et al, A Pattern Language, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 3).

I know it sounds a bit far-fetched — tough old software guys joining hands and singing "Kum Ba Yah," modifying software because they want to make it better. Wait a minute, what about money! If we throw everything out there for everyone to jump on, how will we all get rich? Forget it! Fun is fun but money is the name of the game!

I enjoyed the paper but I left it at that until I got an offer several weeks ago from Addison-Wesley to be an editor of a Patterns Almanac. Those of us who are following patterns know that the number of patterns has gotten out of hand. It's difficult or impossible to find the pattern we need to solve the problems we have. We need some kind of reference book of published patterns. I could see the need. I was tempted by the challenge but I also realized my limitations. This was much too big a job for one person. If this Patterns Almanac were to be truly useful it would require more time and more knowledge that I could contribute.

That's when I realized — what a perfect opportunity to extend the Bazaar model to something more than software. The source code is the book itself. The community would help develop the categories and identify the patterns to be included.

At the same time, I learned that another publishing house was planning to do something similar. I thought, if we could involve all the publishers in this

collaborative effort, we would not only avoid duplication of effort, but the end product would benefit from the contributions of even more experts.

When I made my proposal to Addison-Wesley, I was astounded to hear that they readily agreed and would: (1) put all the "source" for the book on the web, to allow others to contribute and (2) work with the other publishers to share the collected information.

OK, OK, and they all lived happily ever after! What's the catch? Why is Addison-Wesley suddenly so altruistic? Here's the surprise ending. Putting a book on the web does not affect book sales. Many readers are uncomfortable using the web or find it unreliable. Many want the book as a handy reference and don't want to have to struggle with network outages at critical times. Addison-Wesley finds that putting complete books on the web may even help book sales!

What does this mean for the software model? Instead of chaining people to cubicles and demanding unpaid overtime for unpleasant tasks, let's turn 'em loose! Let 'em find the stuff that's challenging and interesting where they can see real benefit from their work. Software products will be more usable, reliable, and, well, you know all those other "ilities." How will developers make money? How will the industry make money? I think the answers will be surprising. Just as Addison-Wesley's sales do not suffer, the software industry will find a way to capitalize on this radical approach.

Of course, there will be new problems and challenges! I wouldn't want it any other way!

Reprinted with permission from Applied Computer Research, Inc.