

Chapter 102

Rethinking Expertise in the Web 2.0 Era: Lessons Learned from Project Durian

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ABSTRACT

Social software facilitates the linking of people in unprecedented ways and leads to new knowledge creation and application practices. Even though expertise remains an important constituent of these practices, there is a knowledge gap in the literature regarding its role. This chapter was written with the aim of filling this gap by using Project Durian as a case study. Project Durian presented a unique opportunity to study expertise as mediated by social software because it involved both social software and various layers, forms, and configurations of expertise. In this chapter, data from Project Durian are used to examine the outsourcing of tasks and the role that social software played in that outsourcing. Data analysis indicated that, in the hybrid practice that was established, expertise was spatio-temporally distributed, involved individuals with a broad range of skills, facilitated the crossing of disciplinary boundaries, and was renegotiated. The implications of these findings for expertise in the Web 2.0 era are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is an exploration of the novel practices of expertise in the light of social software, using Project Durian as a case study. Project Durian (Sintel, 2011) was initiated in 2009 by the Blender Foundation (Blender Foundation, 2011), the organization behind Blender¹, a 3D content creation suite. As a Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) activist and a committed Blender advocate, I had been closely following Project Durian from

its beginning. However, because the natural foci for the Blender community were (a) the software and (b) the movie, it did not occur to me at the time that I was actually participating in a massive, groundbreaking crowdsourcing practice revolving around social software. It was only after the project had ended that I began to reflect on it, explicitly thinking about Durian in terms of expertise and social software. This chapter is a first attempt at exploring the relation between social software and expertise in the context of Project Durian.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-7230-7.ch102

As Blender is FOSS, its history and development can be fully understood only in the context of the free software movement. Consequently, Project Durian will be introduced against a FOSS and open content backdrop.

Free and Open Source Software

The term FOSS denotes software that is characterized by four kinds of freedom as defined in the licenses through which the software is distributed. These four fundamental freedoms grant users the right to run, copy, distribute, study, change, and improve the software (Free Software Foundation, n.d.; McGowan, 2005). What these freedoms mean in practice is that the end user can obtain the software without cost, has an unlimited number of licenses, may use the software for any purpose, may study and improve it, and may redistribute the improvements to the community so that others can also benefit. FOSS offers many advantages over proprietary software, including, but not limited to, reliability, security, performance, stability, cost, escape from vendor lock-up, and scalability (Chopra & Dexter, 2008).

What is unique about FOSS is the underlying production model, which has two distinctive features. First, the source code is produced using a peer-to-peer development model that is public and collaborative in nature. Unlike proprietary software development which is highly centralized, open source software development is not. Raymond (2001) compared it to a bazaar. Second, the vast majority of open source software developers are volunteers, which means that for the most part they are not paid for their contributions and write code in their spare time.

While FOSS initially emerged as a model for software development, it has gradually evolved into a phenomenon with far-reaching effects (Raymond, 2001; Lessig, 2005; O'Reilly, 2005a). The collaborative ideas and principles that underlie the development of FOSS can be applied to any type of collaboration that focuses on any kind of work

or content (Schweik, 2007). The FOSS movement has affected many other areas of human activity, content creation being one of the most pertinent for the purposes of this chapter. More specifically, thanks to Creative Commons licenses (Creative Commons, n.d.), nowadays users can create and share digital content legally. Such licenses allow the distribution of copyrighted digital content in a reasonable way. For example, users can use a photograph released under a Creative Commons Attribution license to create a derivative work at no charge provided they give credit to the individual who created the original photograph (Creative Commons, n.d.; Lessig, 2004).

Project Durian: An Historical Account

Located in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, the Blender Foundation is a non-profit organization that coordinates the development of Blender. More specifically, the Blender Foundation maintains and improves the source code of Blender; establishes services for the users and developers of Blender; establishes funding for the development of Blender; and provides individual artists and small teams with a complete free and open source 3D-creation pipeline. In addition to coordinating software development, the Blender Foundation also organizes open projects. These projects usually have two main targets: a development, software-related target and a creative target. The open movie projects are the means by which the Blender Foundation realizes these targets.

Since 2006, the Blender Foundation has successfully created five open projects: Orange (2006, produced the 3D animated movie *Elephant's Dream*), Peach (2007–08, produced the 3D animated movie *Big Buck Bunny*), Apricot (2008, produced the open game *Yo Frankie!*), and Durian (2009–10, produced the 3D animated movie *Sintel*). These projects are open in that the final product, be it a movie or a game, is released under an open license. More specifically, each

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