

AIM IM with Eric Shepherd <sheppy>.  
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Olivia Ryan: I'll start by asking a few background questions. When did you begin using computers and how did you get interested in computers?

Eric Shepherd: I first saw a computer in the principal's office in my elementary school (overseas, small school, nice guy, the principal was). It was a TI-99/4. I was programming it a couple weeks later. I was 9, so that would have been 1981. I was hooked with the first BASIC program I wrote to spit a poem out on the screen.

Olivia Ryan: Interesting. Have you had formal computer training?

Eric Shepherd: Yeah, I majored in computer science in college. Came 3 courses away from graduating, then didn't. It's a crazy story.

Olivia Ryan: I bet! When did you begin contributing to open source project and how did you first connect to open source?

Eric Shepherd: I actually didn't get involved in open source at all, from a contribution perspective, until I was hired by Mozilla. I was sort of pulled into it by friends that were involved in various open source projects, including Dave Miller here at Mozilla.

Olivia Ryan: What Mozilla projects have you worked on and in what capacities?

Eric Shepherd: My work has all been from a developer documentation perspective, with the exception of one or maybe two code patches I've contributed. I started out as a writer and now am the documentation lead and sort-of semi-official MDC owner.

As far as projects, it's been mostly Firefox, with just a tad of information about Thunderbird here and there. And of course all the back-end technologies. Gecko, etc.

Olivia Ryan: Do you anticipate continuing to contribute a tad to Thunderbird, now with probable changes ahead?

Eric Shepherd: Probably not much less than before, which has been really a small amount... it's a matter of whether or not there's a confluence of information that makes it important to mention Thunderbird while documenting the platform side of things.

But as for directly documenting Thunderbird development stuff, I probably won't personally be writing much. However, I continue to

encourage others to contribute content for Thunderbird!

Olivia Ryan: How steep is the learning curve for a new developer and how much assistance is usually given to a new volunteer?

Eric Shepherd: I think the learning curve is a fair bit steeper than it ought to be. We're trying to resolve that moving forward, between the FUEL library that will make critical tasks less complex, and the planning work going on the Mozilla 2 platform.

As for assistance given to new volunteers, the folks in IRC are helpful and always eager to get someone new up to speed. But there's a lot of pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps to do, too. You need to find where you can contribute and get in there on your own and just make it happen. Personally, I think that helps people figure out where they can best be of help.

Olivia Ryan: Do you think your colleagues agree that the learning curve is steeper than it needs to be, or do you think some people would rather keep things the way they are?

Eric Shepherd: My general impression (I haven't quizzed everyone) is that it's fairly well known that things aren't as easy as they could be. While there's a limit to how much we can change things without making a mess of compatibility and the like, we can make things better, and I hope to see that happen over the coming months and years.

Olivia Ryan: How do you generally communicate with the people with whom you work? What method of communication do you think generally works best?

Eric Shepherd: I spend my days in up to 10 IRC channels, which is where most communication takes place. Of course there's also a flurry of email flying about as well. On top of all that, we also have regular phone meetings.

Personally, I prefer email, because it gives me a record of what I've agreed to do that I can't lose track of. But IRC is the most immediate, which has a lot of value.

Olivia Ryan: How much communication and coordination is there between different aspects of the project? (for example, between those who work on the front-end and those who work on the back-end.)

Eric Shepherd: I've seen a lot less coordination and communication in environments where everyone works directly face-to-face all day. It's actually quite

impressive how well everyone works together, given that we have people that work together daily that may never have met in person at all. There are planning meetings that let us make sure everyone's on the same page in terms of what's happening with each module of the software, and that really helps everyone keep the project running in the same direction.

- Olivia Ryan: How are disagreements generally resolved. I know this a broad question, so feel free to use an example, but I guess I'm thinking of a situation where two developers have a disagreement over how to accomplish a given thing. Would they likely work it out alone, go to a "manager", go to the broader community?
- Eric Shepherd: That depends on the situation, really. Typically what I see happening is that one developer will submit a patch, attached to the bug report it's intended to resolve, and there will then be a discussion about the pros and cons of the patch, with others contributing suggestions and revisions. Eventually there's either consensus or at least begrudging acceptance on a final revision.
- Olivia Ryan: To what extent has Mozilla relied on the work of volunteers? Has that reliance changed over time? If so, in what way(s)?
- Eric Shepherd: The Mozilla project is mostly made up of volunteers. They're absolutely critical to the project. It's what makes the whole thing work; we have a huge developer base that can each contribute based on their particular skills. That's a fantastic resource.
- I can't speak for the past, since I've only been with Mozilla for about a year and a half now, but I think that reliance is only increasing as time goes on. There's a lot to do, and the more people to do it the better.
- Olivia Ryan: Why do you think people volunteer?
- Eric Shepherd: Some do it because they love the software but there's one little thing they don't like, so they fix it and then we never hear from them again. Others do it because they love the software and they want to contribute heavily to it. There are also people that contribute because it's a very well-known open source project, which makes it an obvious place to get involved if you're inclined to do so.
- Olivia Ryan: Why do you think Mozilla – in particular Firefox – has been able to attract a large number of users? What sets it apart from other open source projects? What sets it apart from other Mozilla projects?
- Eric Shepherd: I think it was the right idea at the right time. Until Firefox came along,

people had to choose between one of a number of so-so browsers or Internet Explorer, and none of them were exactly knocking people's socks off. With a good engine and a UI that offered new and interesting features, Firefox was a breath of fresh air.

Olivia Ryan: Do you think there is anything about the way the project was managed that allowed it to succeed in ways that other open source projects have not been able to succeed?

Eric Shepherd: Well... I think the fact that the Mozilla project is managed by people who "do management" is a good thing. It's not all programmers, some of whom are in charge. There are people who are very business-capable involved in the project, and that makes an enormous difference. Some projects are all programmers, and the result is not necessarily a good one.

Olivia Ryan: How would you list Mozilla's priorities? Do you think Mozilla's priorities have changed over time?

Eric Shepherd: Well, the primary goal of Mozilla is to foster the development of Internet technologies. We use Firefox as a means to do that. We test theories, we try things out, and if they work, we put them into the software. Ideally, these things become standards, and wind up implemented by others as well. I think that's been the idea all along, although you'd have to ask someone that's been with the project longer to confirm it.

Olivia Ryan: How would you define a successful open source project? What elements or practices do you see as necessary for developing a successful open source project?

Eric Shepherd: I think a successful project -- whether open or proprietary -- needs not just talented programmers, but talented managers and organizers. But it's also important to make sure that the project is accessible, in every sense of the word. Too many open source projects are surprisingly opaque, with little or no useful documentation. You have to combine a good product with good documentation and a vibrant community to have a successful open source project.

Olivia Ryan: I assume you formerly worked for a proprietary company?

Eric Shepherd: Yes, several of them.

Olivia Ryan: How did those experiences differ from working on open source? In any way -- issues related to management style, motivation, whatever...

Eric Shepherd: Well... in some ways it's nearly the same. Mozilla has a fairly well defined organizational structure, and uses similar methodologies to any business. However, we share information more readily, both internally and externally. I think there's also more tolerance for (even appreciation of) dissent in an open source business.

Olivia Ryan: What (if anything) do you think the popularity of Firefox will do for the open source software movement as a whole?

Eric Shepherd: I think it's already had a powerful positive effect on the image of open source. Firefox proves that it's possible to create an open source product that average users can adopt and fall in love with. Before Firefox, open source sort of had this "nerd aura" that was hard to shake. Now it's much more mainstream, which is fantastic.

Olivia Ryan: What do you think is the best move for Thunderbird at this point?

Eric Shepherd: I think the best move for Thunderbird is to move out on its own and spread its wings, so to speak. It's ready for its own organization that can take it on and give it the attention it needs. There will have to be ongoing coordination with Mozilla since there's so much shared code on the back-end, but I think that it deserves an organization of its very own.

Olivia Ryan: Are people who work primarily on Thunderbird supportive of this idea?

Eric Shepherd: From what I've seen, yes.

Olivia Ryan: And to end with a very broad question: What do you think is the future for open source?

Eric Shepherd: Judging by the increasing acceptance and adoption of open source software by individuals, businesses, and government agencies, I think open source has really established its footing. As long as there are great teams doing good work to keep the momentum going, I think it will continue to have a major impact on the way we use computers for the long haul.

Olivia Ryan: Thanks very much for your time, Eric

Eric Shepherd: Sure, no problem at all.