

IM Interview with Brian King
August 8, 2007

Olivia Ryan: When did you begin using computers and how did you get interested in computers?

Brian King: I was a late starter. I had little interest as a child and teenager, preferring outdoor pursuits. Even during my first degree course in college, my only exposure was to use PCs to write a few essays.

My interest arose when I realised my initial qualification did not give me any career options I particularly liked, so I started looking elsewhere.

Olivia Ryan: Have you had formal computer training?

Brian King: Yes. My second college course, a post-graduate, was a higher diploma in Information Technology; an intensive 1 year computer science course. My initial degree was Politics and History.

Olivia Ryan: When did you begin contributing to open source projects and how did you first connect to open source?

Brian King: My first exposure to open source was in 1999, with the Mozilla project. My employer at the time, XML Workshop (<http://www.xmlw.ie>) chose the source to build children's learning software. I started communicating with Mozilla developers (then at Netscape) and other volunteers via mailing lists and IRC.

This was one of the first 3rd party applications, back in the day when the Platform was, how should I say, less than stable.

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

Brian King: I started contributing front-end code, XUL/JavaScript/CSS, to the Editor module (Mozilla Composer at the time). Apart from that, I have contributed nothing to the core base. My main interest has been in working on 3rd party applications that use Mozilla technologies.

I have worked on themes, extensions (called add-ons these days), and full-blown enterprise applications. At Mozdev Group, I worked on, for example, a Firefox toolbar for Earthlink, a browser kiosk for Brooklyn Museum, and Browser/Mail distros for

Linspire Linux.

Now I have my own company, Briks Software (<http://briks.si>) and the platform is more popular than ever. I am working a couple of large scale XULRunner applications, and some add-ons for Firefox and Thunderbird. One such project is Fotofox, a photo uploading add-on in collaboration with the Mozilla Corporation.

Over the years I've enjoyed the role of evangelising Mozilla Products and the Platform. I have spoken at numerous conferences, talked at local web group meetings, and written a number of technical articles. I co-wrote the O Reilly title, 'Creating Application with Mozilla' which was published in 2002.

I have been involved with mozdev.org since 2002 and have been on the board of directors since 2005.

- Olivia Ryan: How do you generally communicate with the people you work with? What method of communication do you think generally works best?
- Brian King: I'm not a huge fan of the phone, so I tend to use Email/IM/Bugzilla a lot. These are great tools for tracking issues in projects. Chat rooms for developers (IRC/Jabber) work well when you need a quick answer.
- Olivia Ryan: How much communication and coordination is there between different aspects of the project? (e.g. between those who work on the front-end and those who work on the back-end.)
- Brian King: That depends on the project. If the project is planned well and has a strong architecture, then both can work well in isolation. Once a set of core interfaces are agreed on, all the UI team needs to know what interface methods to call. For the most part, UI Design can be independent. However, that is not to say that back-end design can not affect the front-end. In my experience with clients, the projects that succeed the most are the ones where all teams collaborate tightly, and communicate regularly and openly. With regard to the Mozilla code-base itself, many features are hammered out on mailing lists and in Bugzilla.
- Olivia Ryan: How are disagreements generally resolved? For example, if two people working on the same project disagree about a particular UI feature, would they tend to work it out between them, get a "manager" involved, or bring in the broader community? Feel free to use a specific example if it's easier to do so.

Brian King: In the early years of Mozilla, there was much bickering about UI features, and as a result many features (some ill-advised) were packed into the software to facilitate the broadest group of users. As a result, it became bloated, non-intuitive, and contributed to a lot of the bad press Netscape was getting in those days. Something positive came out of it, a fork, that led eventually to Firefox. Firefox keeps it simple, which ironically, appeals to a broader user base.

Personally I tend to stay away from disputes, and just worry about the coding. The client is always right. Or not! But lately I've been getting more involved with the architecture on projects I am working on, and tend to speak my mind more. I usually look for the compromise, i.e. try to take bits from other people's vision, merge it with my own, and find some middle-ground. Sometimes it depends on deadlines and what the technology allows (or perceivably allows) at the time.

Olivia Ryan: What do you think the best option is for Thunderbird?

Brian King: To become an independent project with it's own plans and revenue streams. At the same time it should try to keep as much of the current infrastructure as possible, e.g. using the same source repository, at least in the short-term.

Now is a good time to bring some new features to the traditional email client, which is being outshone by webmail. But this is not to say there is not a market or user base for it. There is also the question of openness and privacy. Your webmail sits on someone else's server, with Thunderbird you have more control.

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)?

Brian King: It always has, and still does rely enormously on volunteers. And Mozilla is always the first to acknowledge this. But the form this takes has changed. Before it was all about the code.

Post-Firefox, or rather since the Firefox project started, it is less about the code and more about other forms of activism. For example, marketing, where spreadfirefox.com has been an enormous success. Control of check-ins to the code base is much tighter than before.

The add-on developer community is still huge, and mozdev.org,

around since 2000, has over 1600 projects (not all active), and Mozilla Add-ons has cultivated a strong developer community.

Olivia Ryan: Do you think that professional marketers are necessary, either to guide the Spread Firefox community or to achieve goals that perhaps Spread Ffx may be less likely to accomplish, or do you think that Spread Ffx is in a position to take full control of the marketing efforts?

Brian King: Well, the Mozilla Corporation does have an internal marketing team, so they obviously think it is important. I tend to agree. It provides a bit of cohesiveness and direction that Spread Ffx perhaps lacks. But again, communication is crucial, and Mozilla Marketing should consult the community as much as possible.

Olivia Ryan: Why do you think people volunteer?

Brian King: People volunteer for a number of reasons, some altruistic, some not. Peer acknowledgment, belief in ideals, to further business ventures, or just a way to pass the time away.

Personally I was drawn in by the community spirit and felt, at least in the early days (and still do), that Mozilla is doing something important in the wider scheme of things.

Olivia Ryan: Do you consider open source software projects a public service?

Brian King: In general they are a public service by their very nature, but sometimes they are hijacked for other purposes. For example, a company will leverage a community to get/produce software to get a competitive advantage over their competitors. Ignoring the issue of whether developers should get paid for their work, they should examine their motivation for becoming involved and why the project exists in the first place.

But open source can be used for these purposes. It is not against making money, but rather about giving the most benefit to users.

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?

Brian King: First comes the idea, then the infrastructure (sites, developer forums, technologies). Then it comes down to a lot of hard work and also luck. The idea does not need to be new, once there is a clear goal in sight that differentiates it from other projects. For me,

that goal should always include data openness and interoperability. Many OSS projects are started as a knee-jerk reaction to a closed alternative.

Olivia Ryan: Why do you think 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?

Brian King: It stands on the shoulders of giants, namely the collective group of volunteers who have contributed to Mozilla over the years. It was also the vision of a very small group of developers who created the project out of the ashes of Netscape. It was of it's time, arriving at a time when the Web Browser scene was stagnant and idea redundant. As much as I dislike the term, you could say that Firefox was one of the primary forces behind Web 2.0, and will play a primary role on whatever the next phase is for the Web. So in summary, it is a result of collective hard work, vision, and luck!

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

Brian King: The focus has definitely shifted to what is happening within the browser window, as more and more applications move from the Desktop in there. But you could say the project was always about that, as the Mozilla browser came originally from the code that powered the Mosaic browser which was leading the way at that time.

But Mozilla's main ideal is to preserve choice and innovation on the Internet, and the Internet is about more than the desktop browser. For example, the mobile scene is now starting to get huge.

Olivia Ryan: What do you think the popularity of Firefox will do (or has done) for open source software as a whole?

Brian King: Firefox has been huge for open source. It was the first OSS project to reach mass appeal, at least in the pop culture sense of the term. It has also proved that open source projects can be financially viable.

Closed source projects will not stop and switch overnight, but it has made vendors shift their focus away from the bottom-line, and towards the users. And these two do not need to be mutually exclusive. Apple, for example, has done this successfully, but in a different way. Users, in the end, do not want to be locked in.

Other industries could pay heed too. Imagine the benefits to society if pharmaceutical companies pooled their research findings and got a drug to market quicker that could save millions of lives instead of worrying about patenting ideas to make money.

Olivia Ryan: Thanks so much! It' been a pleasure hearing your thoughts.

Brian King: You are welcome. It has been a pleasure sharing them.