

IM interview with Dave Miller

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Olivia Ryan: I'll start with a few background questions. When did you begin contributing to open source projects and how did you first connect to open source?

Dave Miller: Hmm, I forget exactly when, but Bugzilla was my first experience with open source as anything beyond just a user of it. I had been involved in beta testing a commercial software product for the Mac, and having been a coder, wound up getting pulled in to help with that on the side (in exchange for royalties on the software sales).

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

Dave Miller: I eventually wound up kind of taking over that project, and decided I needed a way to keep track of the bugs people were reporting. I'd seen the bug tracker that BeOS had done on their website (which was a homegrown thing they did) and was impressed by it, and was looking around for something similar, and wound up finding Bugzilla.

So we installed Bugzilla, and of course, it never quite does exactly what you want, so started tweaking it, and eventually started contributing back some of those tweaks in an effort to make upgrades less painful. And the folks in charge of Bugzilla at the time (Tara Hernandez and Chris Yeh) ended up pulling me in as a committer because they liked what I was doing with it. mozilla.org only had one sysadmin at the time (Myk Melez), and he was going on vacation once and needed someone to cover in case of anything happening while he was gone, so I ended up getting access to mozilla.org's Bugzilla server in order to help fix things if anything happened while he was out, which eventually lead to more volunteer sysadmin work at mozilla.org.

On the Bugzilla side, Tara got a promotion at work and didn't have time for Bugzilla anymore, and asked if I'd take over managing the Bugzilla project. I think Bugzilla was around version 2.9 or so when I first got involved, and 2.14 or so when I took it over (could probably find the exact details on the news page on bugzilla.org).

The Mozilla Foundation ended up hiring me in as a full time sysadmin after Firefox started making money. Prior to that, I'd been at a variety of jobs including Steelcase, AOL, and Canonical, as everything from helpdesk to web app development.

Olivia Ryan: How much communication and coordination would you say there is between different aspects of the project? (e.g. between those who work on the front-end and those who work on the back-end.)

Dave Miller: I've never really been all that involved in any of the application development at Mozilla outside of the Bugzilla project and some of the other Perl-based webtools (bonsai/tinderbox/despot/mozbot/etc), and I live in Michigan and work from remote, so I don't see a whole lot of the interaction between other folks.

Olivia Ryan: Okay. To what extent has Mozilla relied on the work of volunteers? Has that reliance changed over time? If so, in what way(s)?

Dave Miller: Almost everything at Mozilla was done by volunteers at the time I got involved. Netscape had already been bought by AOL, and AOL was slowly phasing out their involvement with Mozilla. We had three or four people helping with sysadmin work as volunteers.

On the coding side and as a project as a whole, it seems to me like the level of volunteer help is still fairly proportionate, despite the number of people Mozilla has actually hired.

From an IT infrastructure standpoint, there's very little volunteer help anymore, that's almost all done internally by Mozilla Corp folks now. Which is probably good, that's one of those things they were only using volunteers because there was no other choice, and it's a good thing to have people actually dedicated to working on.

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

Dave Miller: I haven't personally observed a whole lot of change. The only big things I can think of are the shift from the Mozilla Suite to Firefox + Thunderbird, and perhaps the attempt to find Thunderbird a new home currently. And the Thunderbird direction change seems more a Mozilla Corp thing than a Foundation or Project thing; seems Thunderbird will likely stay just how it is structurally within the greater project, we're just getting the corporation subsidiary away from managing it.

That's one of the things that's always impressed me is how Mitchell keeps pushing to keep as much as we can in the open and always pushing to make sure we stay on track with our mission. It's seemingly an anti-corporate stance and we're pulling it off inside a corporation, which is always amazing to see.

Olivia Ryan: Do you think finding a new home is a good decision for Thunderbird?

Dave Miller: I'm kind of ambivalent about Thunderbird. Personally I think it would just be a matter of saying "ok, these people can only work on Thunderbird and we'll never pull them for anything else", but I suppose with all the release firedrills every time a new security issue is discovered, it's too easy to pull everyone to work on the release when you have the ability to do so.

So having a legal separation between the people working on the different projects so that they \*can't\* just go pull people to the other when they're in a pinch will probably help I suppose. They've been doing good at keeping the developers separate, it's mainly a management and build resources thing.

Olivia Ryan: Do you think (or do you know) if those working on Thunderbird are pleased with the anticipated new direction?

Dave Miller: From what I understand, the people working on Thunderbird have been helping to push to make this happen, because they feel like they've been getting the short end of the stick at Mozilla recently, and want to be able to have their own resources to use.

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

Dave Miller: Oh, I think it's done a ton, there. It's certainly the most successful open source project to date at getting visible to people who have no clue what open source is (and probably still don't). It's certainly done a lot for getting open standards back on the playing field in the browser space. IE7 probably never would have happened if Firefox hadn't gotten popular.

This is one of those market spaces where the competition is actually good and if there's lots of people out there making browsers that are all popular then we've done our job well, even if we aren't the most popular one.