

Book Review

Perspectives on Free and Open Source Software, by Joseph Feller et al (eds).

MIT Press 2005, (538 pp incl. Index), ISBN 0-262-06246-1, £25.95.

One could argue that the market for writing about Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) may be over-saturated. We have witnessed an explosion in recent years in the quantity and quality of research dedicated to looking at the FOSS phenomenon in a vast number of fields, from economic studies, to sociological research of the communities, and legal analysis of the licences. One should then ask if the market needs yet another collection of articles dealing with the subject of Open Source. Fortunately, the volume edited by Joseph Feller, Brian Fitzgerald, Scott Hissam and Karim Lakhani is a worthy addition to the growing literature.

The book “Perspectives on Free and Open Source Software” is organised in five sections, each dedicated to a specific field of study. These are Motivation in FOSS development; Evaluation of FOSS Development; FOSS Processes and Tools; FOSS Economic and Business Models; and Law, Community and Society. At first glance, each section brings together some of the most prominent experts in their respective fields. The impressive line-up of contributors includes Rishab Aiyer Ghosh, Josh Lerner, Ross Anderson, Eric von Hippel, Paul A. David, Lawrence Lessig and Tim O’Reilly. This collection of academic luminaries should in itself ensure the quality of the volume, and the reader interested in the study and understanding of the FOSS movement is not disappointed.

While the quality and relevance of the papers can be a bit uneven, the collection has enough depth and novelty to make the volume’s reasonable price worth paying. While it is difficult to judge an edited book by each individual article, it is pertinent to highlight some of the additions that I found particularly interesting. As a legal academic researching the legal implications of FOSS, I find those articles that deal with the community and development aspects the most useful. Because of these, I can highlight the following additions:

- “Two Case Studies of Open Source Software Development: Apache and Mozilla”, by Audris Mockus, Roy T. Fielding and James D. Herbsleb: This was by far the most useful of all articles, particularly because it contains hard data on two of the flagship open source programs. Mozilla and Apache are precisely the type of software that proves FOSS works, and looking at how the software is developed by a collective mindshare is tremendously useful.
- “An Analysis of Open Source Business Models”, by Sandeep Krishnamurthy: This offers a very good analysis of different FOSS business models. I found particularly useful the talk about the growing need to provide support for FOSS products, and the different models that apply to GPL and non-GPL software.

- “Incremental and Decentralized Integration in FreeBSD”, by Niels Jorgensen: This provides an excellent look at the division of work and organisation of a large FOSS operating system.
- “Legal Aspects of Free and Open Source Software”, by David McGowan: Deals very well with the contract/licence dichotomy that is gaining momentum in the legal research of open source software.

To summarise, this is a must-have for everyone interested in researching FOSS in depth. Those who do not want to buy the book may be glad to learn that most chapters can be found online:

<http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?tids=10477&ttype=2>

The book should be read in conjunction with another MIT Press book edited by Rishab Aiyer Ghosh entitled “CODE: Collaborative ownership and the Digital Environment”¹

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¹ Reviewed in *SCRIPT-ed* @: <http://www.law.ed.ac.uk/ahrb/script-ed/vol3-3/code_review.asp>.