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CrossFit: An Open Source Model

Fitness Years To Be Free

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CrossFit is often referred to as an “open-source” fitness movement. But what does that really mean? What is open source and how does it apply to fitness?

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“Open source” and the profound concept of “free software” arose from the research-oriented computer engineering culture of the '70s and '80s that delivered the technical foundations for much of what we take for granted in today's information economy. In narrow terms, “open source” and “free software” describe the intellectual property arrangements for software source code: specifically the licensing models that govern its availability, use, and redistribution. More broadly, and more importantly, open source has come to denote a collaborative style of project work, wherein ad hoc groups of motivated individuals—often connected only by the Internet—come together around a shared development objective that advances a particular technical frontier for the common good. Successful open-source projects are notable for their vibrant communities of technology developers and users where the artificial divide between producer and consumer is mostly eliminated. In most cases, an open-source project arises when someone decides there has to be a better way, begins the work, and attracts the support and contributions of like-minded individuals as the project progresses.

Open-source development has proven application in the realm of computing and communications. The model brings out the very best (and occasionally the worst) in people and has led to some magnificent pieces of technology and valuable marketplace disruptions. But what role can it play in the fitness arena?

Perhaps we can try a thought experiment and compare some aspects of CrossFit to the best known of the open-source projects: the Linux operating system (GNU/Linux for the purists). Eric Raymond is the chronicler par excellence of the open-source movement. The treatment below is from his book *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*. Here is how he characterized Linux as it emerged as a force to be reckoned with in the mid-1990s:

“Linux is subversive. Who would have thought even five years ago (1991) that a world-class operating system could coalesce as if by magic out of part-time hacking by several thousand developers scattered all over the planet, connected only by the tenuous strands of the Internet?”

Let's try a couple of minor substitutions:





"CrossFit is subversive. Who would have thought even four years ago (2001) that a world-class fitness system could coalesce as if by magic out of part-time hacking by several thousand fitness enthusiasts scattered all over the planet, connected only by the tenuous strands of the Internet?"

Now let's look at some critical aspects of the Linux development model identified by Raymond and compare them with CrossFit:

The Linux development model:

- Release early and often.
- Delegate everything you can.
- Be open to the point of promiscuity.

The CrossFit development model:

- Release early and often.
—Daily!
- Delegate everything you can.
—Meet the experts from the realms of climbing, lifting, swimming, gymnastics, fighting, you name it.
- Be open to the point of promiscuity.
—Read the WOD weblog comments.
—Check out the discussion board.
—See photos of athletes puking!

Let's examine some of the key open-source concepts delineated by Raymond and map them to CrossFit:

- The importance of having users.
- The open-source approach sets up conditions for independent peer review.
- Secrecy is the enemy of quality.
- Give away the recipe, open a restaurant.
- "Free as in speech, not as in beer."

On having users: The feedback loop between developer and user is essential for the viability of any product. Open source has proven to be a super-effective model for rapid evolution based on copious user experience. This is perfectly mirrored in CrossFit, with the increasing number of participants and practitioners supplying daily feedback and adapting the protocols to new environments.

On independent peer review: All of CrossFit's development work is in the public domain. There are no hidden components. Methods and results are freely available for evaluation against other models and protocols. Domain-specific



experts continue to come forward and pronounce their allegiance to CrossFit because they've seen the results, understand their significance, want to add their specialization to the program mix, and choose to partake of the community.

On secrecy as the enemy of quality: Engineering that does not get tested in the real world—especially against competing approaches—is rarely of high quality. CrossFit is based on black-box experimentation: work done in the open with lots of inputs leading to lots of outputs that further refine the program. Frequent and open testing against rival systems is part of the process. When your stuff is good, the right instinct is to share it, not hide it.

Give away the recipe, open a restaurant: Just because the formula is freely available does not mean it has limited commercial application. Recipes are rarely proprietary. What is valuable and commercially rewarding is the ability to use the recipe in crafting an outstanding dining experience. Similarly, CrossFit as a technology is an enormous enabler for the small-box fitness practitioner who can now replace the capital-intensive machine-based model of the big box with the skill-intensive and vastly more effective movement-based model of functionality, intensity, and variance. CrossFit supports the training business as opposed to the gym business. It is a community-developed program harnessed by trainers across a broad spectrum of endeavors, some commercial, some not. The ultimate commercial uses for CrossFit are unknowable and will be discovered only through marketplace experimentation.

On the meaning of free: The Free Software Foundation is the philosophical home and keeper of the faith for much of the open-source movement—though Richard Stallman the founder is adamant that the proper term is “free software” and that there is a stricter test that goes beyond opening up the code. The following is an excerpt from the “Free Software Definition” maintained by the FSF:

“Free software’ is a matter of liberty, not price. To understand the concept, you should think of ‘free’ as in ‘free speech,’ not as in ‘free beer.’”

Free software is a matter of the users’ freedom to run, copy, distribute, study, change and improve the software. More precisely, it refers to four kinds of freedom, for the users of the software:

- The freedom to run the program, for any purpose (freedom 0).
- The freedom to study how the program works, and adapt it to your needs (freedom 1). Access to the source code is a precondition for this.
- The freedom to redistribute copies so you can help your neighbor (freedom 2).
- The freedom to improve the program, and release your improvements to the public, so that the whole community benefits (freedom 3). Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

A program is free software if users have all of these freedoms. Thus, you should be free to redistribute copies, either with or without modifications, either gratis or charging a fee for distribution, to anyone anywhere. Being free to do these things means (among other things) that you do not have to ask or pay for permission.

Though this definition was written in view of computer software programs, it applies equally to a fitness program (which is ultimately a form of code) that meets the test of the four freedoms, as CrossFit emphatically does.

All too often in considerations of open-source initiatives, the focus is placed on the “free as in beer” potential, when what is truly essential is the “free as in speech” principle. It is neither a coincidence nor an accident that CrossFit emerged as a “free as in speech” fitness movement. The CrossFit founders are passionate believers in free men, free markets, and the promulgation of freedom in all its dimensions. They are especially beholden to those who safeguard and defend liberty; it is right and just that the program should be so useful to those who serve.

Links:

Free software definition:

<http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html>

Wikipedia entry on open source:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_source

The Cathedral And The Bazaar:

<http://www.oreilly.com/catalog/cathbazpaper/>