

The Digital Artisan is Dead! Long Live the New Product!

Agreeing on Standards as a Strategy for Independence

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New economic models of collaboration such as the Digital Artisan are still built on a conventional understanding of the product. If we move attention away from the product and towards the spaces in-between, literally nothing seems to stand in our way. It is the interfacing of products which best describes the new reality. This, not collaboration per se, holds the strategic key for independent development.

Micz Flor, Berlin Aug2001 (written for ASU 2)

A few years ago, the sudden surge of a revolutionary scent took hold of the developed world. The 'Digital' had arrived and melted into all kinds of discourse. The 'Digital' seemed to bring together the social and the economic, the information and the product, the communicative and the competitive. Enthused by the digital era's utopian powers and its free floating potential of the shockingly new, many alternative economic and social models were formulated.

Many such models responded to the dramatic changes perceived in the way we work and the way we exchange goods and labour. Collaboration became a central tenet in getting things done. A prominent sign of the time was the Digital Artisan, originally conceived, conceptualised and implemented by Richard Barbrook.

Today, the Digital Artisan is dying. At the time of birth, much effort was spent formulating the differences between the work process involved in digital media and the conveyor-belt factory. During this process, one crucial phenomenon did not receive much attention, namely the gradual disappearance of the product itself.

The downfall of the Digital Artisan might be used to outline the profound ways in which the concept of collaboration is being restructured. Today, efficient collaboration has little to do with making products. Instead, successful collaboration focuses on the interfaces between products: these invisible, almost non-existent, but immensely powerful and strategic in-between spaces.

The Rise of The Digital Artisan

The 'Digital Artisan' was born in the mid 90s, the last decade of the 20th century. This was the decade in which the depressing, economic slide downward

was suddenly overturned by the arrival of the 'there's-no-limit' digital world, which was vast and as globally networked as locally possible. The 90s offered us an endless sea of interactive experience and mind-expansion and, along with them, a desire for tools and solutions - the key to success for the Digital Artisan.

In those days, CDs weighed heavier than gold. There was a belief that the economic logic of the digital world would ultimately supersede the restraints and repression of the factory-based conveyor-belt slavery of Fordism. The effect digitised formats and networks had on day-to-day life influenced not only the hard structure of markets and products, but also the soft reality of the way we live and work. Based on such experiences and realities, the Digital Artisan was invented as an alternative model to embrace this change. In fact, further developments of the concept attempted to postulate all requirements of a scientific theory: describe the existing structure sufficiently, expose points of potential intervention to control the reality of the market, and predict a future development or - at least - allow a qualified guess.

The Digital Artisan in a Nutshell

In one sentence, within the digital world modes of working underwent dramatic change, which in turn generated a new social and economic structure of 'work', which in turn triggered the emergence of socio-cultural work structures, then described in Richard Barbrook's "Digital Artisan Manifesto".

But, the most significant change is implied by the product itself. It is digital. This means that the existence of a working prototype is all that is required. Then you can go and launch global distribution. This is very different from other product cycles. Imagine the reproduction of the prototype of a car (probably from Ford). In comparison, the digital prototype is re-produced at next to no costs. The car, on the other hand, requires the factory, the conveyor-belt, the workers, the material, the logistics. When the Digital Artisan is at work, very little of that is needed. Once the first Tomb Raider game is burnt onto a CD, the costs of reproduction are laughable.

More importantly, not only is the product different, but the production process is a different one entirely. The Digital Artisan locates himself (mostly him, sometimes her) in a quintessentially different working environment. When working in the field of digital media, your skills are situated at the centre of production. Your skills will get you a job. Additionally, when a task needs to be done, you form workgroups which come together to solve the problem, and everyone chips in their skills. This means that your work is self-determined and your learning is too. Workgroups are also project oriented, a distant cry from the organisational structures of ancient factories. In other words: it's your decision if you want to work on weekends or stay in the office late.

The Fall of The Digital Artisan

Many factors contributed to the end of the Digital Artisan. To name but a few, the Internet - which had played such an important role in his rise - accelerated his death. Instead of passing work to the skilful Digital Artisan from the West, the

Internet turned out to be a brute tool of capitalism, buying into cheap HTML and Flash labour camps in the East and beyond.

Not only was the exquisite position of the Digital Artisan at risk from cheap competition outside of his/her cultural region. Even within its own habitat it became the victim of vicious competition. The implicit irony: an alternative economic model which positioned itself centre-left and outside of the old economy would be suffocated by the most fundamental equation of capitalism: supply and demand.

In the golden years of the Digital Artisan, there were very few skilled in quite the same way she was. This potential was immediately discovered by all sectors of society, and to reshape society as a whole. 'Digital' became desirable not only for education and economy, even art and culture, but also ex-convict rehab programmes, adult education courses, training centres, weekend public library courses. You name it, it discovered the Digital. In the end of this intense and short period of development, the Digital Artisan lost its exclusive status and became cheap.

But was the Digital Artisan all that new in the first place? Despite his futuristic and utopian assumptions, the Digital Artisan's concept of work, products and resources was astonishingly closely to those of times prior to the industrial revolution - which is not that surprising given the name 'artisan'. The pre-modern artisan would contribute his specific skill and artistry to a project, let's say building a gate. One would be the blacksmith doing the iron work, another artisan would contribute the masonry. By combining their skills, they would build the gate. In theory and practice, the Digital Artisan would do the same. Together they would build the CD, the software, the website, the trailer. Following the same principle, collaboration meant working on a product together. The fact that it was digital is more or less secondary.

Away From the Product and Between the Products

The concept of the Digital Artisan so clearly illustrated a contrast to the Fordist model of factory production that it ended up proposing something new by doing the same... only differently.

Modelled on pre-industrial concepts, the Digital Artisan failed to give full credit to the dramatic change of the developmental Process, while pondering the product. Collaboration would still be measured by the outcome, functionality and/or acceptance of a product. This product would be the result of a more flexible work process, but it was still oriented towards deadlines and budgets.

True, collaboration is a mighty strategy for developing products in the networked world. Looking at successful collaborations today, the Linux OS is most commonly held up as a shining example. And rightfully so. But what is most striking about successful products in the Open Source community is not the product itself, but the process by which such collaborations become powerful.

Prior to product development, yet another process of collaboration lays the most essential foundation for any larger development: the invention and agreement on

standards and interfaces. The key to new modes of working in the digital age is the collaborative decision making on standards, rather than combined efforts of developing applications.

The Win-Win Scenario of Collaborative Decision Making

One prominent example of the powers of standardised interfaces is the development of the Apache webserver. And for good reason, since this example is rooted in the Open Source community. Standards require two things: clarity and transparency - not necessarily key objectives of most software developers aiming to own code and patent algorithms.

What the Apache webserver does is hand out required files using the Hypertext Transfer Protocol HTTP. There are many applications which do exactly that. What makes Apache so interesting however is the clear definitions by which third parties can produce plug-ins to be used by Apache before returning HTML to the users. Such applications are called Apache Modules.

Running a module on Apache means little to the Apache application. It simply means passing a piece of text onto the module before sending it back through the Internet. All the work is done by the module. One very successful example is the module for PHP, which allows the creation of flexible and dynamic webpages. Many similar modules exist which allow the expansion of the Apache webserver into a powerful tool, interacting with many different applications or data formats on the server.

Once interface standards have been established, this co-evolutionary development becomes like a chicken and egg race (if there is such a thing). Media Players are a very good example of this process. If you want a player to become very prominent, it should support many types of media. And if you develop a new codec for playing video or audio, you would want it to be compatible with as many players as possible. The Player is little more than a shell in which codecs can be placed. And the strength of that shell is the clarity and transparency by which the interface standards are defined.

Agreeing on Standards as a Strategy for Independence

Agreeing on standards is not exactly new, in fact it is one of the foundations of the industrial revolution (following artisanship...). What is new though is the strategic use of such standards to remain independent and flexible, not unlike the initial goals of the Digital Artisan.

We can observe such a process today in the field of streaming media. In terms of market presence, Microsoft and RealMedia are in a neck-to-neck race. Sticking to their very corporate policy, neither would release their property (i.e. codecs) openly. Quite the opposite. Smaller developers who are trying to establish themselves on the market are increasingly going for alternative solutions.

In the case of video streaming, this seems to be MPEG-4 - instead of Windows - or RealMedia. With such a mutual agreement in place, independent developers can

work on their individual products while still ensuring a cross-compatibility between products. If you are working on motion tracking for MPEG-4 or live streaming for MPEG-4, it seems obvious that in the end your motion tracking software can be used for a live video stream as well, as long as both systems are based on the MPEG-4 standard. Such common denominators, i.e. standards and interfaces, might well break the backs of larger corporations with a less developer-friendly attitude.

Standards Want to be Free

The Digital Artisan was conjured up to describe a new mode of collaborative working. Its shortcomings are twofold: its failure to provide an accompanying redefinition of the outcome (i.e. product) of its collaborations and a thorough understanding of the qualitative changes in collaboration itself.

It could be argued that by proclaiming the necessity of generalised standards and interfaces between products, we seem to be re-entering the first phase of the industrial revolution all over again: re-confirming the rule of standards as the key to mass-market conveyor-belt production.

In which case, it seems even more significant to stress the importance of collaborative work on standards and interfaces, as well as demanding that such standards and interfaces should exist in the Public Domain by default, thus resisting the 'destiny' of private property.