



Unlocking the Black Box

For me, and possibly for many of you as well, the “view source” command is a central tool in the design and/or development of digital products. It is a means for understanding how someone’s program works and learning by imitation and extrapolation. It is an immensely powerful and empowering tool, in spite of being a rather straightforward concept: Unlocking the “black box” that digital products can be. View source is the equivalent of a behind-the-scenes access allowing users to see for themselves the

mechanisms on which the tricks of the show rely. In other words, it transforms the black box into a transparent one that anyone can

open, explore, and learn from without depending on any external help. This is another empowering aspect of view source: Not only can we see and learn, but we can do it on our own, independently. No middle man is needed. This is not without its challenges (sometimes, help from more experienced learners or even professionals is greatly appreciated), but it is, essentially, about individual freedom and a vector of equality.

At the same time, as this summer issue of *XRDS* will show, view source can be a unique tool to support collaboration between people and the creation of communities. If view source has the ability to make us grow as individuals, it also has the power to bring us together and make

us work and create together. I recently attended a webinar on creativity given by HCI professor Alan Dix. He shared how time and teamwork were the “ingredients” leading up to the invention of Post-it notes (a process initiated by Arthur Fry and his, rather accidental, elaboration of a weakish glue). It is the idea of teamwork that comes to mind now that I am writing about communities and creating together, as a group. In any creative process, getting some kind of third-party input is key. Contributions from others are essential in the process of going from an initial, vague idea to its full-blown, successful realization as something novel and useful (the two characteristics of any creative solution, according to Dix). Great things

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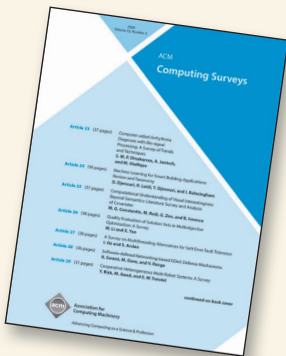


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do not get created in a vacuum. What is interesting is that third-party contributions to the creative process can take many different forms. It can be something written in a scientific paper or a textbook, for example. By the way, in academia, we often say there is no difference between reading and writing, in the sense that you cannot write without reading. (Actually, that's probably something that's true for writing in general and not only for academic writing, but I'll stick to my area of expertise here.) And it doesn't only have to do with the scientific approach (i.e., researchers building on each other's work), it also and, maybe perhaps, mainly has to do with developing your thinking by confronting your perspective. For instance, I am currently re-reading a textbook on qualitative research, and it has unexpectedly led me to conceptualize my data in a completely different way. Third-party contributions to the creative process can also be a comment uttered by a colleague in passing, a question from a student or, if we come back to this issue's topic, someone else's code.

From a creativity-oriented perspective, code is an interesting "medium" because it is very rich (in spite

of being pretty dense, and succinct). It tells you a lot about how the author thinks about a particular problem. Indeed, when checking out someone else's code, you are not only getting a solution, but rather a different way of looking at the problem you are interested in. It is this new perspective that can open up your mind and lead you to a completely different solution than the one chosen by the author of the third-party code—one that you would not have come up with on your own. There lies the magic of collective creative processes.

That being said, view source as a collaborative creativity tool has the potential to contribute to shaping not only what we produce, but also how we interact with each other. And on a deeper level who we are and what we are for each other as members of a local and global communities. View source as a community-shaping tool is the focus of this current issue of *XRDS*. I hope the articles featured within will lead you to question your understanding of view source and provide you with a new, broader perspective on what role it can play for small, local groups as well as for society at large. Ultimately, this issue is also about the deep and often unexpected, and/or overlooked, ways in which technology can affect society. This is because technology shapes both what we can do and, above all, with whom—either directly (i.e., through direct collaboration) or indirectly (i.e., being inspired by someone else's work).

This issue's guest editors are Irene Soria, from the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana in Mexico, and Martin Bayo, from the Universidad Nacional del Litoral in Argentina. They have worked in close collaboration with this issue's lead editor and long-term *XRDS* contributor, Gunnar Wolf. All three of them are passionate about free software, open code, and online communities. I could not have thought of a better team to bring this issue to life. I hope you will enjoy it and learn from it as much as I have.

—Diane Golay

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