

# Project Two: Observation of Firebug Development Group

## I. Introduction: What Is Firebug?

Firebug is an add-on for the open source web browser Firefox. The tool allows web developers to view a web page's HTML, CSS, and Javascript; edit the code in real-time; inspect page elements; and more. This allows a developer to work completely within the web page environment, instead of jumping back and forth from a text editor to the web page source.

A brief introductory video describing Firebug's features is at <http://getfirebug.com/video/Intro2FB.htm>.

Relevant links can be found here:

- <http://getfirebug.com/getinvolved> Main Webpage
- <http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group> Google Working Group
- <http://groups.google.com/group/firebug> Google Group
- <http://twitter.com/#!/firebugnews> Twitter
- [http://getfirebug.com/wiki/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://getfirebug.com/wiki/index.php/Main_Page) Wiki
- <http://blog.getfirebug.com/> Blog
- <http://code.google.com/p/fbug/> Google Code
- <http://code.google.com/p/fbug/issues/list> Issues

## II. The Expertise of the Group Members

It's difficult for me to judge the expertise of the group members since I don't have a firm grasp on all of the technical details that are discussed. Most discussions are related to working out bugs in the code or writing new code for new releases of Firebug. However it seems that the group members have a good deal of expertise for the following reasons:

- Several of the group members, including some of the most active and who seem to be in leadership roles within the group, are affiliated with companies such as IBM and Mozilla, as explained in their "Firebug source committer license declarations":  
[http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse\\_thread/thread/6fdd6e974763dc6f42728bae9e108ce](http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse_thread/thread/6fdd6e974763dc6f42728bae9e108ce).
- As mentioned, the discussions are pretty technical so they seem to know their stuff.
- There are frequent posts regarding new issues and often each post generates a lot of response from the community. To me this indicates the community consists of knowledgeable people who are actively engaged in the development of Firebug. In other words, the community seems to consist of professionals, rather than hobbyists. (Or maybe Firebug is their hobby but they approach it in a professional way.)

### Major Players

Links to the top posters websites are below. John Barton, Steven Roussey, and Mike Ratcliffe do a lot of posting to the Google Working Group. They seem to be most concerned with working out kinks in the code. They also frequently update the Wiki. Jan Odvarko does most of the posting to the Google Group, answering questions posted by outside developers. He also is the most frequent tweeter and blogger. The others chime in to the Google group to help with debugging.

John Barton: <http://www.almaden.ibm.com/u/bartonjj/>.

Jan Odvarko: <http://www.softwareishard.com/blog/about/>.

Steven Roussey: <http://twitter.com/sroussey>.

Pedro Simonetti: <http://jproton.com.br/> (in Portuguese).

Rob Campbell: <http://antennasoft.net/robcee/>.

Mike Ratcliffe: <http://www.msi-stuff.com/>.

### III. Technologies Used

The main technology used by the group members to communicate with each other is the Google working group: <http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group>. This seems to be where most of the day-to-day activity of the group takes place. In contrast to the Google working group, which seems to be for insiders, the Google group seems to be for "outsiders": developers who aren't involved in the day-to-day activities of the development of Firebug but who might create new add-ons for Firebug, have questions about Firebug, or just post comments thanking the group for its work.

The two Google groups are the places where most of the discussions take place on a daily basis. The Firebug group uses several other technologies to spread the word to an even wider audience: Twitter, <http://twitter.com/firebugnews>, a blog, <http://blog.getfirebug.com/>, a website, <http://getfirebug.com/>, and a wiki, [http://getfirebug.com/wiki/index.php/Main\\_Page](http://getfirebug.com/wiki/index.php/Main_Page). These are updated less frequently as the Google groups but are well maintained. The blog and Twitter feed serve a similar purpose: to communicate the latest news about Firebug. The website serves as the main portal to Firebug: it offers documentation, FAQs, and links to the Google groups, blog, and so on. The wiki seems to be the information repository for the group: it has release notes and separate pages for specific aspects of Firebug (CSS, HTML, and so on), among other things.

### IV. Development, Work Practices, and Firebug's Place within the Larger Open Source Movement

For me, the most interesting posts to the Google working group page concern the development and work practices of the group. It also gets to the heart of what we're investigating in this class: knowledge management within an open source environment. It's also a question asked by Cass Sunstein in his book *Infotopia*.

#### ***Infotopia* and the Development of the Open Source Movement**

In chapter 5, Sunstein investigates the open source movement, beginning with the creation of the principle of "copyleft," which can be described as "share and share alike" (167). Basically, copyleft does away with the proprietary software model used by traditional software companies in favor of a model in which the software code is freely available to all and can be altered, with the condition that any derivation of the code (e.g., a new software program based on that code) also be freely available. Sunstein describes how open source became a movement "with vivid personalities and a great deal of passion and commitment" (168). For some, open source became an ideology based on freedom (170-71).

#### ***Glut* and the Development of the World Wide Web**

In *Glut*, Alex Wright offers a similar analysis in his description of the development of the computer industry and the World Wide Web. Wright focuses on the "vivid" personality of Ted Nelson, an apostle for a more utopian, less corporate vision of what the web should be (208-39), and Tim Berners-Lee, the so-called father of the web who envisioned it as more of a two-way street between users or content creators (228). Wright also draws a connection between the social movements of the 1960s and the development of the web (236). This seems to fit with the ethos of the open source movement and perhaps the open source movement is a continuation of these principles.

#### **The Firebug Group's Place within Open Source**

The Firebug development group, working almost two decades after the development of the web and six decades after the development of the computer industry, epitomizes many of the characteristics of open source as described in *Infotopia* and its members seem to share a similar outlook with regard to web development as Nelson and Berners-Lee. For starters the group operates under a BSD license, as shown in

the posting by members regarding the "Firebug source committer license declarations" ([http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse\\_thread/thread/6fdd6e974763dc6/f42728bae9e108ce](http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse_thread/thread/6fdd6e974763dc6/f42728bae9e108ce)). BSD licenses, short for Berkeley Software Distribution, are "a family of permissive free software licenses" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bsd\\_license](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bsd_license) Wikipedia).

## Work Practices and Organizational Structure

In terms of their work practices the group resembles the network-node model of organizing, rather than the hierarchical model. Decisions regarding the organization of the group or the development of the software do not seem to be made by one person or a small group; rather, someone will begin a new thread on the Google working group proposing, for example, to make someone who has been contributing to the group an official "committer" ([http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse\\_thread/thread/fcecc79e1e848202](http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse_thread/thread/fcecc79e1e848202)). Then members will respond to the post, and a group consensus is reached.

Work on the software is handled in much the same way; see, for example, the post on planning for 2011 ([http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse\\_thread/thread/8cced68f74e934cd#](http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse_thread/thread/8cced68f74e934cd#)). A list of priorities is laid out and group members respond and add their thoughts. There do appear to be group leaders, such as John Barton, who make most of the posts--see the list of most active posters, <http://groups.google.com/group/firebug/about>. These leaders act to guide the group and focus its efforts.

That being said, it seems that some group members have more standing than others. The most frequent posters such as John Barton are often the ones who begin major threads (e.g., a post by John Barton laying out goals for 2011: [http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse\\_thread/thread/8cced68f74e934cd/9517bb407889c68f?lnk=gst&q=2011+planning#9517bb407889c68f](http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse_thread/thread/8cced68f74e934cd/9517bb407889c68f?lnk=gst&q=2011+planning#9517bb407889c68f)). And the opinions of the most frequent posters seem to carry more weight than the casual poster, perhaps only because they're the most involved in the project. I don't think the top posters to the Firebug group have reached the level of "open source tyrants," as described by Matt Schwartz in an article for *Wired* magazine: [http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/02/st\\_essay\\_assange/](http://www.wired.com/magazine/2011/02/st_essay_assange/). Still, it is interesting that a hierarchy does seem to exist even if it wasn't formally conceived.

## V. Conclusion: Firebug's Future

As Sunstein points out in *Infotopia*, the future of open source remains to be seen (174-79). However, he notes two of open source's greatest successes: the development and installation of Linux (170) and Apache (171) software in computers and servers worldwide. These successes prove that the open source model can work and be profitable.

The Firebug development group, while no where near as ubiquitous as Linux and Apache, seems to have a group of organized core developers and a devoted following. This will certainly help them sustain their group and grow in the future. Although Firebug is free and open source, some developers are apparently thinking about how to make money from it: [http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse\\_thread/thread/500c7d518d4a26bc](http://groups.google.com/group/firebug-working-group/browse_thread/thread/500c7d518d4a26bc). I'm not sure how selling an extension to Firebug fits within the legal principles of the BSD license but perhaps it is a model for the future growth of the application.