Credit for Open Source Software Contributions

Exploring best practices

Outline

People disagree about credit for contributions

- "I was robbed of my first Linux kernel contribution"
- "I was unfairly accused of stealing code I didn't even look at"

Proposal: Publish a written policy for giving credit

How to decide who "deserves" the credit?

Give credit in the way that best accomplishes your goals

Discussion

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A little about me: Valerie Aurora

15 years professional software development (networking, file systems, Linux, Solaris)

12 years professional diversity, equity, and inclusion in technology

My work has been plagiarized multiple times 😡

And I've had to correct people for giving me credit wrongly as well!

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"How I got robbed of my first kernel contribution"

https://ariel-miculas.github.io/How-I-got-robbed-of-my-first-kernel-contribution/

Ariel Miculas fixed a 6-year-old bug that corrupted the task struct on PowerPC

The maintainer made some **minor changes** and checked it in with **himself as the author** and Ariel as "Reported-by:"

"My first contribution to the kernel was a really frustrating and discouraging experience, dealing with people who do not think it's important to get proper recognition for your work."

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(Semi-)happy ending

Lots of online discussion (e.g. https://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=37671991)

Inspired this working group session 😎

The maintainer apologized:

"I'm sorry about the way I handled your patch. I should have spent more time working with you to develop your patch. I agree that the Reported-by tag doesn't properly reflect the contribution you made, I should have realised that at the time."

But the commit still doesn't show Ariel Miculas' name 😡

Counterpoint: "I was unfairly accused of stealing credit"

Sometimes a contributor is wrongly accused of stealing credit

1. A contributor sends in a patch that needs a little more work

2. Another contributor is too overworked to review the patch

3. Some time later, the second contributor fixes the same problem

4. The first contributor says, "Hey, why did you commit your patch instead of mine?"

Open source leaders are often overworked and not generally rewarded for mentoring new contributors

Contributions come in many forms

Also DevOps, bug reports, design, documentation, event organization, mentoring, standards definitions, etc.

"A few individuals brought up situations where their work was sidelined or sidestepped when creating new IETF initiatives or working group drafts. For some scenarios mentioned, significant contributions were not acknowledged. In these cases, **the women had written drafts which were later usurped by other drafts without referencing the previous work or even acknowledging that the initial work existed.**"

https://www.ietf.org/blog/report-experience-of-women-participating-in-the-ietf/

(This happens to men and non-binary people too, obviously)

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People disagree about credit - a lot! From HN thread:

"In any other environment, **this would be plagiarism**. And it looks morally poor."

"FWIW a submission to LKML **does not come with any kind of guarantees for either accreditation**, use, timeliness or consideration."

"**It's unethical to not give credit**, in particular if Michael read his patch, changed some stylistic things, and submitted it himself. I'm surprised everyone thinks the maintainer is in the right here."

"**I used to think it was fine to take someone else's contribution and then create a total rewrite of it in my own branch and merge that**. Or to go into someone's PR and push a rewrite into a new commit on Github. [...] But someone had to do the same with me for me to realise that it kinda sucked and really soured the experience of being a contributor."

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Why people disagree about credit

Open source software depends on community contributions

Getting credit for their work is the main motivation for many contributors

But sometimes contributors don't get the credit they expect, because:

- Someone is overworked
- Someone makes a mistake
- Someone else takes the credit
- Someone wants credit when they didn't really contribute
- Someone wants to exclude people from "contributor status"

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What does a solution look like?

Reduces work for maintainers instead of increasing it

Sets expectations for contributors and reduces fights with maintainers

Attracts productive contributors who make a maintainer's job easier

Repels unhelpful contributors who create more work and steal credit

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One answer: A written public credit policy

Reduces work: Instead of figuring out what to do with each contribution, an individual just looks up the policy that the community adopted

Sets expectations: Contributors already know what to expect, and if there is an argument, the policy can help resolve the argument

Attracts productive contributors: People who have had bad experiences with other projects are more likely to contribute to your project

Repels unhelpful contributors: People who have inappropriate expectations for credit or like stealing credit will avoid your project

Who "deserves" credit?

Some forms of plagiarism are defined via convention and law: writing, art, etc.

Assigning credit for other things can be hard, and software is especially hard:

➔ Most software is a collaborative work, especially open source software

➔ Idioms, best practices, standards force code to resemble other code

➔ Copying similar code and altering it is best practice

So who "wrote" a line of code? Who deserves "the most" credit?

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Ask instead, "What behavior do we want to reward?"

Some potential behaviors your community might want to reward:

- Contributions, especially from new contributors

- Encouraging new contributors

- Collaboration and creative problem-solving

- Mentorship and peer support

When in doubt, give credit in ways that reward those behaviors

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Example: shared credit between two contributors

Given a code contribution whose first version was written by a first-time contributor, and whose final version was rewritten by a long-time contributor, what is the effect of:

1. Giving primary credit to the long-time contributor?
2. Giving primary credit to the new contributor?

Example: shared credit between two contributors

Giving primary credit to the **long-time contributor**:

- Likely to **discourage** the first-time contributor
- Unlikely to change the behavior of the long-time contributor

Giving primary credit to the **first-time contributor**:

- Likely to **encourage** the first-time contributor
- Unlikely to change the behavior of the long-time contributor

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Looking for collaborators on an example credit policy

Create a "menu" of options based on the behavior they want to encourage

Include specific instructions on what to do in difficult situations

Creative ways to give credit (awards, contributor of the week, git creditmap)

Want to contribute to or lead this effort? Please email the Open Source WG or:

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We promise to give credit accurately 🤩