

THE FIREFOX DIGITAL MEMORY BANK: COLLECTING AND PRESERVING THE HISTORY OF FIREFOX AND MOZILLA—A PROPOSAL

Center for History and New Media, George Mason University
<http://chnm.gmu.edu>

The Need

The rise of open source software lies at the heart of some of the most exciting stories in the recent history of technology. Key among these is the story of Mozilla. Opening the source code for its Netscape Communicator in 1998 to independent developers worldwide, The Mozilla Foundation—with a paid staff of fewer than 50—has facilitated the development of one of the most visible and highly respected pieces of software in the world: the Firefox web browser.

Open source successes like Firefox have begun to garner interest from social scientists as well as computer scientists, but they have not (until now) drawn attention from historians. The decentralization of open source ventures poses particular challenges for historical documentation. Traditionally, subjects in the history of science and technology have been documented largely through their own institutional traces—the papers generated by labs, universities, scientific and professional organizations and corporations. The open source movement has produced some of this conventional documentation, but it tends to be ephemeral and not representative of the movement as a whole. In an age when six different people on six different continents may collaborate to develop a particular piece of software, it can be difficult to gather a sufficient record of its creation.

With funding from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, the Center for History and New Media (CHNM) at George Mason University is developing new approaches to online collecting of history with a particular focus on the problem of documenting a historical subject that has few central archives and institutions: open source. With Mozilla's cooperation, a new *Firefox Digital Memory Bank* will become a centerpiece of our recently launched *Open Source Historical Archive* (<http://opensourcearchive.org/>), CHNM's larger effort to collect, preserve, and analyze the history of open source as a cultural movement, spanning both free/libre and open source software and broader examples of commons-based peer production like Wikipedia. By using proven online collecting techniques and consolidating scattered materials, we aim to create and preserve a more thorough record of Firefox, Mozilla, and their key role in the open source movement.

The Opportunity

Although Firefox may not be structured in a way that lends itself to traditional methods of historical documentation, it is particularly well situated for using new “open source” methods for collecting digital historical materials. Because Firefox is an online

community of developers and users stretched around the globe, a digital archive is the most practical means of documenting its history.

With roughly 40 employees, 100 core engineers, 10,000 volunteer testers, and 40 million users, a digital collection of Firefox history has a vast pool of potential contributors. The large number of responses posted on the message board located at <http://ex-mozilla.org> indicates a strong willingness by many former employees to discuss their experiences working at Mozilla. Likewise, the success of Firefox's current initiative to collect user testimonials for marketing purposes demonstrates that the software's users are equally amenable to online historical reflection. Firefox/Mozilla's developers and users are clearly committed to open source means of software production, and it seems they may be similarly interested in "open source" opportunities to write their own histories. Captured in sufficient numbers and preserved for the long term, these participant histories will provide future historians of technology with important insights into a key period in the history of computing. Fortunately, with the Mozilla Foundation's cooperation, CHNM stands ready with the tools, staff, and resources necessary to build the *Firefox Digital Memory Bank*.

What We Will Do

Using proven techniques of online collecting and archiving developed in past projects like the *September 11 Digital Archive* (<http://911digitalarchive.org>)—which collected more 150,000 objects related to the 9/11 attacks—and especially *Echo: Exploring and Collecting History Online* (<http://echo.gmu.edu>)—our longstanding effort to collect and preserve the history of science, technology, and industry—as well as the considerable history of science and technology expertise of its staff members (four of whom hold PhDs in this area), CHNM will create a central online clearinghouse for Firefox and Mozilla history as told by its employees, core engineers, volunteer testers, and users.

Specifically, we will:

- Organize and archive Mozilla's existing video testimonials and ads and make them publicly available;
- Conduct IM and web cam interviews with former and current employees, engineers, testers, and users;
- Conduct broad-based outreach efforts to collect other materials such as emails, original IM transcripts, documents, and written histories;
- Develop contextual materials and publish two professional papers on the history of Firefox and Mozilla;
- Archive materials located within the Mozilla museum, ex-Mozilla.org, and similar existing collections to ensure their long term viability;
- Permanently preserve and provide access to the entire Firefox and Mozilla collection to future generations of researchers, scholars, students, programmers, and members of the general public.

CHNM will conduct the *Firefox Digital Memory Bank* project in full consultation with the Mozilla Foundation. Thus the details of system design, outreach efforts, and collection priorities must remain somewhat undecided. A good starting place, however, may be CHNM's most recent collecting effort the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank* (<http://hurricanearchive.org>). Created by CHNM in cooperation with the University of New Orleans and the Smithsonian Institution, the *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank* collects stories, images, and other documents related to hurricanes Katrina, Rita, and Wilma. With the present situation on the Gulf Coast, social dislocation renders traditional community history projects difficult to manage. The *Hurricane Digital Memory Bank* responds to this problem by allowing the uprooted people of the Gulf to preserve their memories via the web. Similar techniques might be applied in creating an online archive for Firefox, whose community is diverse and scattered around the world.

What We Will Learn

It is our hope that the *Firefox Digital Memory Bank* will enable researchers to explore a wide range of questions related to the open source movement. What motivates people to work on open source projects? What types of benefits do people engaged in open source projects receive? How do far-flung developers manage successful collaboration despite differences of time zones and languages? How can the open source method of production be applied to projects other than software? Do contestants in Firefox's testimonial campaign, for example, appreciate this experiment in "open source marketing" as much as they appreciate Firefox's open source software? The answers to these questions—and many others like them—will provide both future historians and Mozilla itself with a better understanding of the needs and practices of its developers and users. In this way, the *Firefox Digital Memory Bank* will stand as an important resource both now and for years to come.

About CHNM

Since 1994, CHNM (<http://chnm.gmu.edu/>) has used digital media and computer technology to democratize history—to incorporate multiple voices, reach diverse audiences, and encourage popular participation in presenting and preserving the past. CHNM combines cutting edge digital media with the latest and best historical scholarship to promote an inclusive understanding of the past as well as broad historical literacy. CHNM's work has been recognized with major awards and grants from the American Historical Association, the National Humanities Center, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the Department of Education, the Library of Congress, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Sloan, Hewlett, Rockefeller, Gould, Delmas, and Kellogg foundations. CHNM maintains a wide range of online history projects directed at diverse topics and audiences, making them available at no cost through its website. In 2004, CHNM's websites had 250 million hits and more than 8 million visitors—making it one of the busiest non-commercial history education site on the entire World Wide Web.