IM Interview with David Tenser
August 15, 2007

Olivia Ryan: I'll start by asking you some background questions. When did you
                     first begin using computers?

David Tenser: Aside from playing games on a Commodore 64 and an Amiga 500,
                     my first encounter with computers as a tool used for work rather
                     than play was on my first job when I was 14 years old. It was in
                     the local newspaper office and they were running PowerPC Macs.
                     One year later, my mother brought a computer home from work
                     back in. It had Windows 3.1 installed on it and I mostly used it to
                     play Sim City and Pinball Dreams. (Which, by the way, is a game
                     made by Swedes!)

                     She just had that computer on loan, but a few months later we got a
                     computer of our own that came with the (not so) fantastic
                     operating system Windows 95. During that first year, I managed
                     to break the computer several times, which turned out to be very
                     educating, as I eventually learned how to restore it using tricks like
                     copying command.com, etc. This is how I started to really enjoy
                     using computers.

Olivia Ryan: Do you recall the first programming project you worked on?

David Tenser: My first really interesting programming project (if you can call it a
                     project) was writing a fully graphical version of Battle Ship on a
                     Texas Instruments TI-82 calculator. I had to make use of all
                     available labels and cleverly build the logic using GoTo statements
                     in order to pull that off. Since there was a limit on how many
                     characters a program could contain, I had to deliberately cheat on
                     the syntax, which, thankfully, the TI-82 allowed.

                     The game eventually spread throughout the whole school, which
                     was really fun to experience. During that period, I also wrote a
                     pointless application that translated Morse code keypresses into the
                     equivalent character and sent it to a connected TI-82 using the data
                     transfer cable. I guess I was a geek already back then. ☺

Olivia Ryan: How did you first connect to the open source software
                     community?

David Tenser: That was when I first heard about Netscape 6. Back then, I had
                     just realized the superiority of Internet Explorer 4.0 and actively
                     encouraged visitors of my sites to not use Netscape 4.x because its

CSS support sucked. Netscape 6 interested me because of simple things like the catchy name of their technology, Gecko, and the fact that I'd been a loyal user of Netscape before I made the IE4 switch.

After using these test builds of N6 I somehow found out about Mozilla and tried it out as well. I was a bit confused by the fact that it seemed to be the exact same software as Netscape, except for a different logo and being slightly more up to date. So I immediately started to look up more information about this and after I found out that Netscape was really just a branded version of Mozilla, I saw no point in using Netscape anymore.

The more I was using Mozilla, the more I wanted to learn about it. I started to have general questions about things in the program and eventually found out about a newsgroup where people with more knowledge about Mozilla than I had used to hang out. There, I gradually went from someone asking questions to someone answering them instead. In that newsgroup, I got to know many people that became like remote friends. I especially remember a Danish guy called Jonas Jørgensen, who was very helpful and encouraging. Among other things, he introduced me to Bugzilla, a tool used to file bug reports and suggest new features in Mozilla.

As the 1.0 release was approaching, I considered myself an active community member, although I was mostly just voicing my opinion, filing bug reports, and answering other people's questions.

Olivia Ryan: Which Mozilla projects have you worked on and in what capacities?

David Tenser: Here's the thing: although I felt very involved with Mozilla by the time Mozilla 1.0 was released, I never really liked the software itself that much because I felt it was too slow, too bulky, and maybe more important for me, too ugly. I say "more important" because it has to be confessed I care a lot about looks even when it comes to computer software. If it looks sleek, sexy and shiny, it's more fun to use it. The old Mozilla suite simply wasn't cutting it for me.

So, when the Phoenix project was announced as a news blurb on MozillaZine, it immediately caught my attention. Even the initial 0.1 release solved the biggest gripe I had with the Mozilla Suite, namely the fact that it tried to throw in "everything but the kitchen sink". Phoenix 0.1, on the other hand, was nothing more than a

browser, but with a superior rendering engine compared to IE6. To me, this felt like the way of the future, to create a browser that people can actually use without feeling buried with a heavy and confusing UI. As I was actively answering questions in the MozillaZine forums, I also had the opportunity to interact directly with the developers in a way I'd never experienced before. I remember having interesting conversations with David Hyatt about how to settle on a nice default behavior for clicking on links with modifier keys (e.g. Ctrl) pressed, and in fact, my proposal is still used in Firefox today.

Around the time when Phoenix 0.2 was released, I was spending so much time answering questions in the forums (already then, Phoenix was very popular!) so I started to see the need of a simple website covering the basic support questions. I viewed this as my first real opportunity to give something back to Mozilla, and also to practice more on website administration. What initially came out of it was a simple three or four paged website with a Phoenix FAQ, Tips & Tricks page, and a Keyboard and Mouse Shortcuts page.

The very same day the site went public, I got an e-mail from a Mozilla official, Asa Dotzler, encouraging me and thanking me for what I did! That was probably more important for me than I first realized, because it really sparked my enthusiasm to keep working on it.

After a few months, I ended up with a fairly big site covering Phoenix support, download information, themes, and news. It was very popular at the time and was translated by other volunteers into many different languages. For a while, I was even contemplating putting up ads on it but I never did. By the time Phoenix was renamed Firefox (through Firebird), the content was finally moved over to mozilla.org and declared public support.

Olivia Ryan: How many hours a week did you typically work on the site?

David Tenser: More than I would be able to do today, for sure! I was definitely spending more time with Phoenix Help than I did on the homework of all classes combined. Luckily I didn't have a girlfriend at the time, so I could do whatever I wanted. ☺ As for exact hours per week, it's hard to estimate. I probably spent around 30 hours a week between the Phoenix 0.2 and Firefox 1.0 releases. Some weeks there was more work, and other weeks there was less.

Olivia Ryan:	You mentioned that receiving positive feedback from Asa motivated you to continue working the project. Were there any other motivations? And, more generally, why do you think most people volunteer?
David Tenser:	To me, the main motivators were education, experience, and giving something to the open source community. The thing that made me want to do this from the very beginning was not someone's encouraging words. Rather, it was (and still is) about doing my part in the open source community. I'm not sure why other people get involved in open source, but I would guess many share my view about this. Basically, open source is about collaboratively creating something that everyone owns, and the things you own, you tend to care about. Of course, there are many people that just want to have things their way and complain as much as they can to get their point across, but I wouldn't call them contributors. A contributor is someone who understands the bigger picture—that we're creating something together with a shared responsibility.

That is what I love about open source, and in part explains why I'm more forgiving about open source products, which generally seem to be a little more complex and hard to use—with Firefox being the shiny exception I might add. |
Olivia Ryan:	You have recently been hired by Mozilla. What will your new role include?
David Tenser:	I will be responsible for the support.mozilla.com platform, which will be a completely new support site for Firefox built from scratch by the community. My role will, among other things, be to mobilize and support volunteers of the community, and to serve as a primary interface for support between Firefox marketing, product, QA, and engineering. Put simply, this is Phoenix Help with a vengeance! Only this time, we're all doing it together, which I think will make a huge difference.
Olivia Ryan:	Sounds very exciting!
David Tenser:	It really is! I'm still in the middle of everything, quitting my current (also very interesting) job and signing a contract with Mozilla. It's both exciting and confusing at the same time. I was actually dreaming about this day five years ago, and now that the dream is becoming a reality, it's almost frightening. ☺
Olivia Ryan:	What do you think the popularity of Firefox will do (or has done) for open source software as a whole?

David Tenser:	I think many people are still unaware of the real benefits of using open source software. Firefox's strength is its ability to serve the needs of normal people, not just technical users. However, I'm not sure if the point of being open source has really gotten through to most people. This is something I'd like to change, by educating more people about the real benefits of open source.
	Firefox is *the* open source product today, and with that comes responsibility. No one can educate people about the benefits of open source better then we can. I'd also like the new support site to set an example of how support can be realized in an open source project without the need for a full scale helpdesk support.
Olivia Ryan:	How do you plan to educate the public about open source? To date it seems that marketing efforts have focused mainly on the usability of Firefox—I'm guessing that may change in the future?
David Tenser:	Educating people about open source is not an easy task and unfortunately, there's not an easy answer to your question either. I have no specific plans on how to do that yet, and it may not even be part of my responsibilities. This is just something that I care about and would like to, again, do my part in. I guess we'll find out whether or not I'll be successful. ☺ As for marketing focusing mainly on usability, I'm not sure if that's true. If you visit the Spread Firefox website, you'll see there is a great diversity of Firefox marketing efforts.
Olivia Ryan:	Do you consider open source software a public service?
David Tenser:	I'm not really sure what you mean by public service in this context.
Olivia Ryan:	It seems that some people who work on open source feel as though they're doing it for the public good and perhaps analogize it to working for a public utility. Others seem to think it is no different from any other standard business. Still others seem to think it falls somewhere in between.
David Tenser:	In that case, I think open source in itself is public service. However, the fact that you can actually make a living out of it is another matter.
Olivia Ryan:	How do you generally communicate with people in the Mozilla community and what form(s) of communication do you think is most effective?

David Tenser:	Speaking generally, I think the most effective way of communication is to talk face to face. Maybe it sounds old fashioned, but it's just so much easier to talk when you can use face expressions, body language, and everything. Even when talking on the phone, confusions and misunderstandings can happen. One benefit of writing is that you get more time to think about what to say. I often say things without thinking it through first, which, with a bit of luck is referred to as a sharp sense of humor, but other times leads to truly awkward situations. ☺
	Communication is an art form. There are so many different ways of making a point or asking a question. It's a true challenge to do it the right way, but fortunately I love to interact with people so I mostly manage fine.
Olivia Ryan:	How would you define a successful open source software project? What elements or practices are necessary?
David Tenser:	I think a transparent development and management model is vital to the success of an open source project. This is something that many open source projects are struggling with. Having a transparent communication is hard, and I'd love to improve that with Mozilla.
	Basically, the key to success is to involve as many people as possible in all aspects of the project, including decision making and marketing. Even if your project team ends up making the decisions of their own, make sure you reason with the community before doing so. This is basic psychology. The people in the community need to feel they are part of the project and that their voices are heard. Failing to keep the communication transparent can very easily lead to discontent within the community. This is something I have experienced from both sides of the fence—as a member of the community, and as a member of the project team. The lesson I've learned is that there should be no fence.
Olivia Ryan:	Thanks so much for talking with me today, David. Especially considering the week you're having!
David:	Not a problem. Thank you for asking interesting questions. It's probably best that I'm thrown back into the Mozilla world with a bang anyway. ☺