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Ethics Paper

From an ethical standpoint, copyright laws affect each person every day. For computing professionals, these copyright laws are essential to be aware of, whether they are using open-source resources or not. According to the U.S. Copyright Office, “Copyright is a type of intellectual property that protects original works of authorship as soon as an author fixes the work in a tangible form of expression” (Office, U.S. Copyright). This means that as soon as code is created, it is under the author’s copyright. Even if the code has not been typed yet, if the author can legitimately express the idea of their program, it is under copyright. A default copyright protects the author’s work from copy or reuse, but there are ways to allow others to use your intellectual property in an open-source environment through licensing.

There are many different types of licenses, and each has a specific use and imposes specific limitations on the use of that work. A couple of the most common types of open-source property licenses are MIT License and GNU GPLv3. The MIT License allows others to do almost anything they want with the author’s code. The GNU GPLv3 is similar but restricts others from distributing your open-source property as a closed-source version (Choose an Open Source License). These are two liberal licenses, allowing others to have significant freedom in what they choose to do with your copyrighted property. There are much more restricted licenses available,

most likely involving professional legal counsel and registration of your property. However, those pull the author away from being in the open-source category.

I would use a different license depending on the code that I was creating. According to the IEEE, computing professionals should be holding themselves and each other accountable for their code, integrity, and social implications (IEEE Code of Ethics). This would allow me to use an MIT License on simple code I create that has no societal implications. On the other hand, if I were to create something that could be maliciously used against others and their privacy, I would most likely choose not to make it public and open-sourced or heavily restrict its use through licensing.

With the huge amount of open-source code online, it may cloud the legal use of other's property. As a computing professional, you are expected to "... credit the creators of ideas, inventions, work, and artifacts, and respect copyrights, patents, trade secrets, license agreements, and other methods of protecting authors' works" (ACM Code of Ethics). Even though there is a large amount of seemingly free code online, computing professionals should ethically give credit for property that is not theirs to the original author. According to the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, "When you copy code from an external source. Whether you are copying a snippet of code or an entire module, you should credit the source" (Academic Integrity at MIT). It does not matter if it is one snippet of code or an entire section that you have adapted; you should be giving credit to the author and the location of the source. Though this might seem daunting, a simple rule of thumb for open-sourced code online is, if you didn't come up with the idea, give credit to who did. Upholding your work's ethical and legal integrity is well worth the effort and will help ensure a successful career as a computing professional.

Works Cited

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