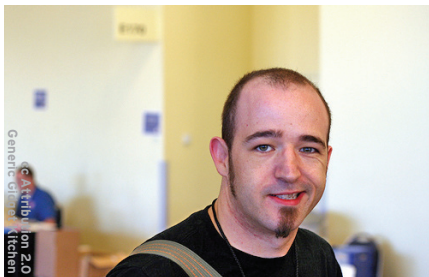Herding cats with Ubuntu community manager Jono Bacon

GROUP EFFORT

Jono talks about the inspirations and challenges of community management. **BY AMBER GRANER**

Jono Bacon works at Canonical as the Ubuntu Community Manager. He is also author of The Art of Community *and founder of Severed Fifth, an open source music project. He took some time from his wide-ranging responsibilities to share some insights on the Ubuntu community.*

> © Attribution 2.0 Generic · Gille_kitchen

"… we try to build inspiration that is more around the ethos of the project."

Q Jono, can you tell readers a little about yourself – where you are from, how long you've been working with FOSS, especially Ubuntu?

A I first got involved in Open Source back in 1998 when my brother introduced me to Linux. I was absolutely captivated by the idea of a global community of contributors working together to build something as complex and fundamental as software.

I started out building a community site for UK Linux users called Linux UK, then joined the KDE project, founded the KDE Enterprise project, worked with the KDE Usability Study, and wrote some small apps. After this, I moved my focus to other advocacy efforts; I founded the Infopoint project in England, set up some local user groups (Wolverhampton LUG and PHP West Midlands), wrote some advocacy material for charities to use open source, and started writing some Gnome applications.

Around this time, I co-founded the LugRadio podcast and Jokosher audio multi-tracker project, before joining Canonical to bring my focus to Ubuntu.

Q I've heard you mention that community management is, at moments, like herding cats. What is the biggest challenge you face when dealing with large communities?

A I believe that community is fundamentally a "soft science"; it exists in a world in which "yes" and "no" are not the only possible outcomes. Community management deals with the huge intermediary gap of "maybe" and all the subtleties involved.

As part of the work, I believe I have a responsibility to our community to provide an environment that is fun, rewarding, and productive. The real challenge is to provide an environment that has all the tools to support community members and optimize them for success but not to overtly pressure them, given the constraint that they are community volunteers.

I started referring to it as "cat herding" because fundamentally community members are driven by their own schedule and priorities, and I can't demand them into a different set of priorities. We instead try to produce an environment that inspires contributions in a way that meets the goals of the project and is collaborative with other community members.

Q Many Ubuntu community members volunteer their time on the Ubuntu Project with the end goal of having an Ubuntu Membership or being sponsored to attend the Ubuntu Developer Summit (UDS). How do you manage the community volunteers' expectations with regard to these types of goals?

A I don't believe that anyone should join Ubuntu just because they want either (a) Ubuntu Membership or (b) a free ticket to UDS; the inspiration should instead be contributing a brick in the wall for a global movement that is bringing ethical and functional change to computing and technology. Membership is an attribute of that change, and UDS is an instigator of that change, but they are a means to an end.

Of course, there will always be some "trophy collectors" who just want the badge of honor of Ubuntu membership or a UDS lanyard, but we try to build inspiration that is more around the ethos of the project.

Q Can you tell readers a little about the Ubuntu Community Team goals that came out of UDS-M in Brussels – what are those goals, how do you track them, as well as reach them? How big a part do the volunteer community members play in reaching those collaborative goals?

A We defined a key set of goals for the Maverick cycle, and these are primarily based around developer technology (e.g., daily builds and distributed development), desktop innovation (e.g., socializing the new Ayatana work such as the panel menu and application indicators), growth in our translations community, refinements to our processes (e.g., how application developers can get visibility of their apps in the Ubuntu Software Center), and more.

We define this set of goals and then track them using a set of assigned work items in publicly accessible blueprints,

and then I use a burndown chart to track progress throughout the cycle.

Q At UDS-M, Robbie Williamson, mentioned the management rotation that he and Matt Zimmerman had recently participated in. Are there areas or managerial roles of Canonical that, if given the opportunity, you would like to rotate through for a given cycle? Why?

A There are always managerial challenges that attract me inside Canonical, and I often get pulled into discussions about these, but I enjoy my primary focus and dedication being on my community team. As such, the current approach works well for me; I can support the team and give them what they need, but be involved in helping other teams to manage their work and achieve their objectives.

Q Many readers of *Ubuntu User* have heard of your most recent book, *The Art of Community*. Are you currently working on any new books? Are you currently developing or do you have plans to develop any "Art of Community" workshops or training seminars?

A I currently have no plans to write another book, but I have had a few ideas of topics that would interest me. I would preferably like my next book project to be the second edition of *The Art of Community*, but that probably won't happen for a while yet. As for training seminars, I have no classes but often provide consultancy to other groups, organizations, and projects around community management and growth.

Q Are you actively and/or deliberately mentoring people to become community managers? If so, how do you mentor them? What skills do really great community managers need to develop? Do you see *The Art of Community* as an

introduction to community management?

A I see *The Art of Community* as a good textbook for new community managers, but it only scrapes the surface of the topic. I am always keen to share and discuss best practice, and I am keen to provide an environment in which community leaders can exchange information and best practice. To do this, I founded the Community Leadership Summit [1] to get community leaders and prospective leaders together to exchange this knowledge.

Q You have a recurring column in *Ubuntu User*, how do you pick a topic? What challenges do you face in preparing this column?

A I don't really have any particular process for picking topics, I just tend to pick something that is bouncing around my brain that day. The biggest challenge is getting the column in on time with all the other stuff I have on my plate. :-)

Q To date what has been your most rewarding moment, both professionally and personally while working with Ubuntu and why?

A One of the most rewarding moments, and one that I often talk about, was a kid emailing me from Africa thanking me for my work and telling me that he would walk three hours from his village to his local town to work on Ubuntu in an Internet cafe and then walk three hours home. He thanked me for helping to make his community experience worthwhile. This provided a double-edged sword for me; while I felt great that his hour online was worthwhile, it also raised in my mind that I have to commit to always making his hour count. That story has underlined my career as something I strive for.

Q While wearing the hat of Ubuntu Community Manager, what has been the most influential "lesson learned" with regards to managing community?

A The most influential lesson learned has been that community managers are fundamentally there to listen. We are often used to advising, speaking,

and otherwise spewing forth, but we sometimes forget to listen. A few years back, I was forgetting to listen and got some positive feedback about it. Since then it has helped to remind me that without good input from the community, I can't do a good job, and to get good input I need to be a good listener.

Q What do you do when you are not working on Ubuntu? I heard you are a musician; can you tell readers a little about your band and your music?

A Outside of Ubuntu, music is my passion, and I spend hours in my home studio writing and recording. A little while back, I founded Severed Fifth [2], which is a Free Culture music project. I had read about some bands releasing their content under Creative Commons licenses, but I was concious that those bands already had reputations from the existing music economy. I wanted to see how far an unknown musician could take their music.

To do this I wrote, recorded all the guitars, bass, drums, and vocals, and released "Denied By Reign," the first Severed Fifth album. More recently, I have completed writing the follow-up album, which is much more accessible music-wise (it is less death metal and more rhythmic and thrash-oriented). I have put together a live band, and we are about to start playing shows. I am bringing my ethos and experience of community to Severed Fifth and building a community around it who spread the word of the project, collaborate on art and materials, and more.

Q How do you balance your work, family, hobbies, etc.?

A It is tough at times. Both my wife and I have personalities that like doing stuff, so we tend to work a lot and spend a lot of time doing things. I think though that it is critical to find ways of relaxing and spending time together, and getting plenty of exercise. ■