

Two Bits

The Cultural Significance of Free Software

Christopher M. Kelty

In *Two Bits*, Christopher M. Kelty investigates the history and cultural significance of Free Software, revealing the people and practices that have transformed not only software but also music, film, science, and education. Free Software is a set of practices devoted to the collaborative creation of software source code that is made openly and freely available through an unconventional use of copyright law. Kelty explains how these specific practices have reoriented the relations of power around the creation, dissemination, and authorization of all kinds of knowledge. He also makes an important contribution to discussions of public spheres and social imaginaries by demonstrating how Free Software is a “recursive public”—a public organized around the ability to build, modify, and maintain the very infrastructure that gives it life in the first place.

Drawing on ethnographic research that took him from an Internet healthcare start-up company in Boston to media labs in Berlin to young entrepreneurs in Bangalore, Kelty describes the technologies and the moral vision that bind together hackers, geeks, lawyers, and other Free Software advocates. In each case, he shows how their practices and way of life include not only the sharing of software source code but also ways of conceptualizing openness, writing copyright licenses, coordinating collaboration, and proselytizing. By exploring in detail how these practices came together as the Free Software movement from the 1970s to the 1990s, Kelty also considers how it is possible to understand the new movements emerging from Free Software: projects such as Creative Commons, a nonprofit organization that creates copyright licenses, and Connexions, a project to create an online scholarly textbook commons.

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Praise for *Two Bits*

“I know of no other book that mixes so beautifully a deep theoretical understanding of social theory with a rich historical and contemporary ethnography of the Free Software and free culture movements. Christopher M. Kelty’s book speaks to many audiences; his message should be understood by many more.”—**Lawrence Lessig**, Stanford Law School

“*Two Bits* describes the way those who work and play with Free Software themselves change in the process—engendering what Kelty calls ‘recursive publics’—social configurations that realize the Internet’s non-hierarchical, ever-evolving, and thus historically attuned logic, creatively updating the types of public spheres previously theorized by Habermas and Michael Warner, among others. *Two Bits* does something similar, pulling readers into an experimental (ethnographic) mode that draws out how Open Source movements have garnered the momentum and significance they have today. The book—on paper and online—quite literally shows how it is done, itself embodying the standards that make Free Software work. *Two Bits* is critical reading, in all senses.”—**Kim Fortun**, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute

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