Forking an Open Source Project Why, When, and How

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Perspective

Every time there is a fork, and I think forks are actually good things, it means somebody sees a need and a technical reason to do something different from the standard kernel. But most forks are failures. They find that the things they needed were not actually worth doing and as a result, most forks die. — Linus Torvalds.

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What is a Fork?

A fork is a natural divergence in purpose or direction from the original work or ongoing project.

A fork is not a first step in the process, but rather, a point in time, sometimes during a long process.

A fork is not to be taken lightly.

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Why Fork?

- Project maintainers unavailable
  - Abandoned
  - Lost code
- Project maintainers unwilling
  - Different philosophy
  - Lack of desire
- Project maintainers incapable
  - Inherited
  - Do not understand needs

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When to Fork

- After all other possibilities have been exhausted:

  - Change direction/focus

  - Add/remove features

  - Consider entirely new project

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How to Fork

- Unless the audience is known, announce publicly

- It is not necessary to gain consent or approval of existing maintainers (though often helpful)

- Decide on a revision which makes the most sense (trunk, tag, branch)

- Commit the code from the selected revision to new repository

- Begin work

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OS/2 Considerations

- Where to host repository - Netlabs, Github, Other, Self

- We are a small group; we can't afford to make enemies among us

- Be open to input from others concerned with *both* the original project *and* your fork

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Real Life Example: FAT32

The venerable FAT32 project received new life and new attention at Netlabs under the direction of Valerius.

His philosophy was radically different from Arca Noae's, and his motivations were different, as well.

Forking made sense to accomplish the goals of all concerned.

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Real Life Example: FAT32

The original project continues, adding support for more FAT filesystems, image mounting, etc.

The Arca Noae fork focuses on FAT32 exclusively, which fits with our philosophy of single-purpose components.

Arca Noae has control over what is included, what is not, documentation, and packaging.

The license remains the same (LGPL).

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References

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Questions?

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