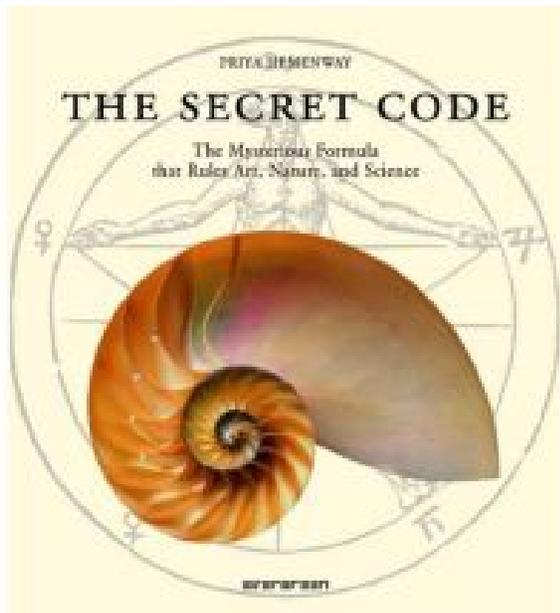


The Golden Ratio and Community

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I recently read [*The Secret Code: The Mysterious Formula that Rules Art, Nature, and Science*](#) by Priya Hemenway. It is a book about the Divine Proportion or the Golden Ratio. The Golden Ratio is roughly five to eight (more precisely the square root of five). It turns up in nature in numerous ways and you see these proportions over and over again in art and architecture because it resonates with us in some mystical way.



It came to mind as I was pondering the relationship between using Open Source software and being actively involved in an Open Source community. I developed the theory that the more one actively participates in their Open Source community, the more satisfied they are with their Open Source choice. Could the Golden Ratio apply here as well? We may not be able to divine the exact relationship, but I do know that the success of any Open Source project relies on an active, engaged user and developer community, and that there is something mystical involved.

I began this line of thought because I've been working with libraries migrating to Open

Source library systems (Koha and Evergreen) for the past few years. In my home state of California, I worked with nine library systems that migrated to Koha. These libraries used grant money to offset migration costs. Most of these libraries were small library systems with minimal IT staff. They were looking for ways to reduce costs and, in this, they accomplished their goal. The annual savings in library system costs for these libraries exceeded the amount of grant money expended.

I was also involved in an Open Source IMLS grant project that focused on Evergreen. It involved King County Library System and seven grant partners. At the beginning of the grant period, each of the partners was seriously pursuing Evergreen. By the end of those three years, five of the partners had migrated to Evergreen.

For the IMLS grant, we interviewed the grant partners to find out the degree to which they have become active in the Evergreen community and correlated that to their level of satisfaction with their choice. In every case, the greater the involvement with the Evergreen community, the greater the level of satisfaction. It's impossible to know how much the grant influenced their level of participation in the community but I do know it was a big factor because it helped them dedicate staff for that purpose.

The partners that used grant funds to add a staff position whose job was to interact with the Open Source community are among the most enthusiastic Evergreen supporters today. Their organization benefited from having one staff person embedded in the larger community because it ensured that they had access to not just their local expertise but also to the greater resources of the Evergreen community. In most cases, these enthusiastic Evergreen libraries also ended up getting involved in committees (often more than one), attending conferences, and

eventually they ended up working on development projects.

Like the Evergreen libraries, those Koha libraries that are most active in their Open Source community are also among the most enthusiastic. They are the ones that initiate innovative joint development projects and respond to and request help from others using Koha mailing lists and the IRC channel. The others, those less visible, seem to be going along for the ride, satisfied with their move but not jumping up and down.

People who work in libraries understand the importance of community. Our libraries exist to serve our communities. Today, libraries are finding new ways to reach out, rather than expecting everyone to come to us. The more we actively engage in our communities, the more we learn new ways to make a difference. By actively engaging with the world outside the library doors, we find resources that will help us inside. We also learn what resources we need to bring in in order to better serve our patrons. Participation is key to our success. This is the same for our Open Source communities.

The Evergreen and Koha communities are both composed of an expanding array of librarians, software developers, system administrators, circulation clerks, library directors, commercial service providers, trainers, and end users. Being an active player in the Evergreen or Koha community is the best way to ensure that the product continues to evolve in a positive direction. The community is each library's insurance that there will always be support and that the product will improve. There are no equity partners and no stockholders to make this happen. There is only the community and the slow but definite evolution into a robust, multi-faceted resource of people committed to both their Open Source and their library communities.

Just like the Divine Proportion, there is some kind of resonance between librarianship and Open Source. Both are based on an optimistic, collaborative, intelligent worldview in which relationships and community matter and where everyone has something to contribute. I think that's a magical formula indeed.

