Review your Favorite Software Lib!

Many of us seem to like reading reviews about interesting books. But here is a secret: Somebody has to write them! We KI editors do not succeed very often in persuading colleagues or students to contribute a review of an interesting recent book.

One reason may be that writing book reviews is considered unrewarding. The argument goes: To review a book, I need to read it with extra care; then I have to write this report text; and in the end nobody will cite me, so a book review won't boost my citation index! While we editors would admit the boosting part, we do not really buy the rest of the argument. First, science is about understanding others' work, too; so from time to time we guess we are all reading texts carefully as part of our daily work. Second, a book review in the KI journal is typically one page; so writing it is no big deal, and formulating concisely an opinion about something you have read would normally help you get this opinion straight. Not to mention that you get the free physical review copy for this historical piece of furniture in your lab: the bookshelf ...

Anyway, the simple truth is: Book reviews are hard to come by these days. To keep alive this esteemed text type, we editors have decided to open up the category of the to-be-reviewed: We invite you to review software!

Many of us are using open source software extensively in their research projects and/or their teaching. The sheer availability of libraries like OpenCV and Boost, of frameworks like Ros and Orocos, and of little demo collections like AISpace has been enhancing enormously the productivity in our research and teaching. Twenty, maybe even ten years ago, we had the deplorable, and frequently deplored, situation that we had to re-invent and re-implement the larger part of AI technology to get some more comprehensive AI programming done. Today, a huge body of methods and algorithms is available for free in excellent implementations by the specialists of the respective fields. Integrating pieces of this ocean of open source code into a coherent system is still no trivial task, and you need to know well what you wish to achieve and how. But it is way more effective than starting from a compiler and a blank editor page.

So, a good and popular software lib appears to play a role similar to what a good and popular monograph or textbook used to play, and still does: It would both structure and advance the state of the art in its domain and thereby serve as a platform for going beyond this state -- the proverbial giants' shoulders on which we all stand. New such giant books used to be covered in book reviews to make others aware of a new book and to help mature the field by adding a piece of public discussion. Should we not cover new giant libs or new releases in the same way then?

So here is our call to keyboards: Review your favorite software lib! For the KI journal, it should, of course, be one that is of use for the larger AI community, but, frankly, I would have trouble making precise what cannot possibly be of use here. The respective lib should be open source or otherwise available with no impediment for research and teaching. To stretch the idea of a software lib a bit for the purpose here, you may also review a public text corpus or a crowd-sourced knowledge repository, or a large collection of test data for some family of algorithms, or the like. The purpose is to make others, who need not be specialists of the respective lib's area, aware of what is available, and to provide an opinion about its positive and not-so-positive aspects.

All else is like in a traditional book review in the KI journal: Typically one page, with a hard maximum of two; electronic submission; an editorial review process, which is lean for book reviews; fast publication, first on-line and then in print. If in doubt, consult the authors' instructions and/or the editors. And if you feel like writing a review about an old-fashioned book (which you may read on some screen, if you prefer), then be invited, too.

Joachim Hertzberg

KI co-editor, book reviews