

OPEN SOURCE VERSUS PROPRIETARY SOFTWARE

Is computer software a commodity like a lawn mower that you can buy in a hardware store? You can take that lawn mower home and use it for its intended purpose, which is mowing grass. Or, you could take it apart, or you could re-sell it or give it away to a friend, or you could destroy it, or you could weld it into a giant piece of folk art if the mood struck you. You own it and you are free with respect to it. You possess the thing and you possess “the use of the thing,” and the cry of liberty is that we ought not to separate these two concepts.



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Or is computer software a commodity like a membership in a golf club, that you possess or “own” but can only make use of under defined conditions? A golf club member has private enjoyment of what is a shared or common good, hence the agreement to be bound in the future by rules of behaviour. The golf club can take an enduring interest in your “use of the thing” in a way that the hardware store cannot with respect to your lawn mower.

Ever since the concept of software was invented in the 1950s with the development of programmable electronic computers, a debate has raged over the status of software as a

commodity. Everyone agrees that it is something valuable that can be sold, even for a profit, but there is sharp disagreement over what it is that is being sold. Ultimately, software is nothing but a coherent sequence of ones and zeroes, that can be manipulated by a computer processor, stored on some medium like a hard disk, and transmitted over a network. Moreover, it can be copied and regenerated endlessly, and every copy has the same utilitarian value as the original (if the word “original” still has any meaning in these circumstances). Does that mean that it is in the nature of software that it is free?

The free open source movement says that software should be more like hardware, where the developer is selling the thing and the use of the thing at the same time. Any restriction on the future exploitation of software is immoral. If there is to be any enduring connection between developer and customer, then it is at the level of “software as a service.” Give away your product but charge money for support, is the idea here.

The proprietary movement says that software is a commodity that can be sold under the conditions of a licence or a contract. That contract almost always restricts the further distribution of that software, its “reverse engineering,” or its use for anything other than the developer’s intended purpose. Anyone seeking to secure the “use of the thing” along with the thing itself is accused of being a pirate, and therefore likened to a violent criminal who attacks ships on the high seas.

There are billions of dollars at stake in this feud. It is a battle that is bitter and deeply personal. The chief proponents of the free open source movement have been Richard Stallman and Linus Torvalds, and their triumph is the GNU/Linux operating system, which is a Unix-like environment that is covered under “copyleft.” Copyleft says that you can do anything you want with software — go ahead and re-sell it and provide support services for profit if you like, like Red Hat does — but the only thing you can’t do is restrict its further use. The chief proponent of the proprietary movement has been Bill Gates, whose triumph was to secure the IBM PC platform for his MS-DOS closed source operating environment. Richard Stallman called Bill

Gates an enemy of freedom and an anti-competitive hindrance to the natural development of computers. Bill Gates called Richard Stallman a communist.

Richard Stallman started the GNU software project (GNU stands for “GNU is not Unix” — it is a recursion joke) in 1983, and Linus Torvalds developed a Unix-like kernel in the early 1990s under the “copyleft” GNU public licence. Bill Gates got the “deal of the century” in 1981 when IBM handed over their new microcomputer, called the PC, to Microsoft for the development of a proprietary operating system. What happened since was a triumph of skilful marketers and aggressive lawyers to lock up the large commercial and government markets in favour of proprietary software. Microsoft became a de facto monopoly, and even the United States government could not, or did not want to, do anything about it.

In my view, the years since 1981 have been lost years to the natural and advanced development of computers. We keep hearing how the new amazing technology can store “X times the number of books in the Library of Congress.” But we’re not reading them, because the content is restricted by “digital copyright.” We’re told that the Internet can transmit a Hollywood blockbuster or all the songs the Beatles recorded in a few seconds. But we’re not doing that, because strategic lawsuits against public participation by motion picture and recording industry lawyers are fearsome and effective. We complain about the shoddy workmanship that underlies our computer’s operating system, but we can’t fix it ourselves or switch to a better product from a competitor, like we can with the other goods and services that we buy.

There is hope for the future. Red Hat has proven that it is possible to be a profitable enterprise software company where the core product is available for free, without restriction, to anybody. They accomplish this remarkable feat by treating software as what it is, which is nothing but a set of instructions (lines of code) that makes something happen. That’s called a service, and you can make money supporting a service. As for the lines of code . . . give them away! Sun Microsystems built its business on the greatest free open source software there is, which is the world-wide protocols or standards that underly the Internet. Cisco builds appliances called routers whose guiding principles have been in the public domain since the 1980s. Money

is being made, without restricting the freedom of the customer to do whatever he wants to do with what he has purchased.

There is another way than the “trust us, we know what’s good for you” model of the proprietary software movement. Open source software can provide employment to legions of developers, who will always be needed to sustain the service that we expect from our computers. It can even make some companies very profitable. They can do that by selling the thing and the use of the thing, which is what freedom of ownership is all about.

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