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The belief that all software should be free

Computers have been around for a very long time, and alongside that computer hardware has existed computer software for almost as long. In the young days of software there was not much concern with its distribution. There was a small population of users of software because costs for computers used to be so high. As the price of hardware decreased, so did the price of software, it became readily available to the public. This caused a much larger population to be able to use and create software which eventually led to a large change in how it is used.

Around the 1950's software was freely created and distributed alongside the hardware. You were given the software bundled up with the hardware; an engineer would install it on the computer as it did not have preinstalled software. Around 1969 software began being sold, dawning the term commercial software. Commercial software began to be pirated, and producers were upset by this. Bill Gates, who is said to be a big pioneer in software, even wrote a letter against piracy which is dubbed *Open Letter to Hobbyist*. He discusses his frustration in this letter, and makes claims that unauthorized copying would discourage innovation. He makes some of the earliest arguments as to why software should be paid for, but also mentions how he also believes it should still be "free."¹

When speaking of software in the free sense, people often confuse it for free, as in free beer, but the free in software is more like freedom of speech. Free software is software that is created and can be used however the user wants to use it. The software comes with its source code to allow anyone to change the program as they would wish. Also anyone can redistribute

¹ Open Letter to Hobbyist By Bill Gates

the code to anyone and distribute the modifications to anyone. The purpose of free software would be to have that software gradually be modified by anyone and increase the speed at which the software evolves, making it more useful for everybody. Richard Stallman is one of the largest advocates for free software and is passionate in his beliefs that all software should be free.²

After the 60's and 70's the way software was being distributed was changed, much of the free software from the earlier days was gone. In 1983, Richard Stallman published the GNU manifesto and started the GNU project. In 1985 Richard Stallman then founded the Free Software Foundation, which he used as a way to support the movement of free software. Richard Stallman published many essays where he goes into detail about why software should be free and the philosophy behind it. He is one of the biggest supporters of the free movement and has had a large role in supporting it since starting the foundation.

In 1998 the Open source initiative was founded by Bruce Perens and Eric Raymond. The group was all about supporting open source software. The open source support differs from the free software movement in philosophies and end goals. Open source initiative isn't advocating "free software" but rather open software in business-case grounds. The open source initiative has a much larger focus on licensing for software, but not all licenses require the software to be free.³ For these reasons Richard Stallman as often criticized the Open Source Initiative claiming they take away from what free software truly means.

Although there are many movements to get software to a free state, software has not seen much change in the way it's distributed. Many corporations and companies still keep much of their code and software closed. Companies sell their software and restrict users from using it in the way they want, and can only use it as the company intends. Many companies and others who

² Free Software, Free Society by Richard Stallman

³ Open Source Initiative Website

make a profit off of selling hardware do not need to justify the need to sell it or keep it closed. The main reason for this is economics, where the software owners believe if they release the source code and make their software free, then they'll be missing out on a profit.

Software that is closed and not free is referred to as proprietary software. The software is often limited in its use so that profit is not lost from the owner. The software may restrict how many computers may use the software or who uses it by use of a product key. While this type of software is often looked down upon in the free software movement⁴, there is no doubt that this type of software has its own benefits. Proprietary software often is refined; operating systems such as MAC OS or windows have been worked on for a long time, and are very reliable for the average user. Also the software has dedicated supports that are knowledgeable about the software since they are the only ones working on it⁵.

Much of the FOSS (free open source software) movement is based upon why free software is so great, while ignoring benefits that commercial and proprietary software offer. The argument is that the only reason proprietary software exists is because of a personal and economic reasons. While no one wants their code to be taken and turn a profit for someone else who hasn't changed anything about their code. Saying that's the only thing one can get from keeping their software closed is just false.

While others may not be able to modify and update their closed code, if they are updating their own code, an owner can get their code to work as they wish near perfect. Open source code often suffers from different modifications over time, and harder to debug issues due to different people working on the code. While the code may see modification, there is no guarantee that an

⁴ Free Software Philosophy, GNU Website

⁵ "Is Proprietary Software safer than open source?" CMS article

open source won't be prone to abandonment.⁶ An owner who is making profit off his software and work has much better incentive to keep his work going and not leave behind the software. While open source may offer alternatives to many proprietary software, most people will move back to software that works. All types of software do have their benefits and no type is necessarily bad or immoral, but perhaps a better direction is a software distribution that capitalizes on all of these ideas.

The way we're seeing software move is the direction I believe we should be taking all software. More and more companies are starting to make different projects open source and contributing to other open source projects. There is a larger acknowledgement of open source software and the free software movement is starting to be introduced to more than the technologically savvy. Whether or not software is made open source or not, is entirely up to the owner, but I believe that it should all be available in some open source way or another. Perhaps an owner of proprietary software can release some open source code or notes once their software is finished and running how they want. This could allow others interested in this type of software to modify the code to a different use. As long as innovation is being encouraged and software is being evolved, I believe that the current state of software is ok.

⁶ Open Source Vs. Proprietary software

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