**Position Paper**

**Should All Software be Free and Open Source?**

By Harsh Sharma

Should all software be free is a question which has been debated since software emerged. People tend to value things which they can physically sense, like gold, houses, or computer hardware. But what about things which we can't sense, like software? People in general think since they can't physically experience it, it must not be valuable and be insignificant. Hence, they don't value software in monetary terms. So the debate, should the software be free or not. I personally think that all software should not be free.

"One thing you do is prevent good software from being written." wrote Bill Gates to a Homebrew Newsletter famously known as 'An Open Letter to Hobbyists'[1]. In this letter, he argues that the hobbyists have been sharing the BASIC software which then affects the sales of the software making it infeasible to work and update the software. The hobbyists mentioned in the paper could be considered as the general user of these days. Some of us would buy the software and then share it with our friends and family.

Once we have paid for a piece of software it makes us feel like we are the owners of it, especially when software comes in the form of CDs and DVDs. And since once we own the CD, it kind of becomes our intellectual property and hence we 'can' share it. The viewpoint might be flawed as though we own the CD, the content of the CD i.e. the software is not our property, instead, we are allowed to simply use it.

In the essay Richard Stallman says, 'Society must choose either to make it proprietary or allow free sharing and use'[2] once the software has been developed and shared. The problem is some software could be really expensive like Photoshop. Here in the US, it costs US$20.99/mo[3]. Imagine being from a poor country, you won't be able to pay for it in any scenario. Hence people share and pirate it. Are they ethical? I don't know. Also, there are students like me who aren't earning but still would need to use such advanced software. In cases like such, I think software should be provided for free or at some discount. But what about people who can afford it?

Imagine if I demanded a Lamborghini car to be sold for free. I'll be called crazy. People would say that the Lamborghini takes hundreds of human hours to build, tons of resources like metal and fiber, and a team of engineers to give it such speed. The car needs a highly advanced factory to build, etc. The same is true with software. It needs a team of highly smart people. Software is a result of their collaborative effort. And if in the end they are not paid, then why would they still be in this field?

My views are somewhat mixed up so far. Because on one hand, I understand the viewpoint of a regular user, I also understand that the software industry is a business after all. The software industry is now one of the most contributing industries to any nation's Gross Domestic Product [4] (GDP). 8% of India’s GDP comes from software industry [5] and hence many developing nations like India are booming because of the advancement in software industry. And so, saying that all software should be free would be a little ignorant of the economics. And a little selfish too.

Being a programmer myself I can appreciate the amount of effort one has to put into building software. The development cycle could take years to get the finished product. And not just the developers, but there's a team of testers, consultants, support, analysts, etc., each of which plays a crucial role in developing software which then could be used around the world. And saying all that effort should come to us for free isn't fair. All software can't be made available for free.

***REFERENCES***

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