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A Comparison of the GNU General Public License and Creative Commons

When deciding how to share and license creative works or software, it's important to choose a license that best aligns with the creator's goals. The two licenses I will be talking about are the GNU General Public License (GPL) and the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike (CC BY-SA) License. These licenses offer mechanisms for sharing, modification, and redistribution while ensuring that derivative works adhere to similar terms. This paper aims to compare these two licenses, helping users make informed decisions based on their specific needs.

The GNU General Public License, developed by the Free Software Foundation, is specifically designed for software. Its primary objective is to safeguard users' freedom to run, modify, and distribute software. The GPL ensures that any modified or derivative software must remain under the GPL, preserving these freedoms. To achieve this, the GPL mandates the availability of source code for any redistributed or modified work. This robust "copyleft" feature makes the GPL particularly appealing for open-source software projects. However, its stringent requirements can sometimes pose compatibility challenges when integrating with software under different licenses. Additionally, the GPL's narrow focus on software makes it unsuitable for licensing non-software works.

On the other hand, the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License is a broader license designed for creative works such as literature, art, multimedia, and data. It permits users to share and adapt these works as long as they provide attribution to the original author and ensure that the derivative works are also licensed under the same terms. While the CC BY-SA shares the GPL's copyleft spirit, it is less restrictive and does not address technical issues like

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source code availability, as it was not specifically created for software. Instead, it is widely used for creative projects, offering flexibility across various mediums like images, text, and videos. The Creative Commons organization explicitly advises against using CC BY-SA for software, preferring licenses like the GPL for such purposes.

Despite their differences in scope and application, both licenses share common principles. They emphasize openness, the retention of attribution, and the sharing of derivative works under similar terms. Both licenses are irrevocable once applied, ensuring that users can rely on their terms indefinitely. However, the GPL's strict focus on software contrasts with the CC BY-SA's general applicability across creative domains. Moreover, the GPL's requirement for source code availability underscores its technical orientation, while CC BY-SA caters to creators outside the software world who prioritize sharing and adaptation.

In summary, the choice between the GPL and CC BY-SA depends on the nature of the work and the creator's objectives. For software projects, the GPL is the ideal choice due to its strong protections for source code and user freedoms. For non-software creative works, CC BY-SA offers a versatile solution that encourages sharing and adaptation while respecting authorship. Understanding the strengths and limitations of each license is crucial for creators to align their choice with their goals for collaboration and innovation.

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