The End of a Red Giant

Thoughts on IBM's acquisition of Red Hat

As I'm sure you've now heard, Red Hat is being acquired by IBM (https://www.redhat.com/en/about /press-releases/ibm-acquire-red-hat-completely-changing-cloud-landscape-and-becoming-world's- 1-hybrid-cloud-provider).

Reactions have ranged from:

(reddit1.png)
The first two emotions everyone experienced.

to:

(twitter1.png)
The classic humourous response.

to:

Spencer Krum is installing RHEL
@nibalizer

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Hey RedHat folks! I know nothing about the deal, but I've been happy at IBM for a while and happy to answer questions about what it's like here on dm or whatever! ❤️❤️and welcome!

12:44 PM - 28 Oct 2018

(twitter2.png)
The classy response.

to:

[–] **xanderdad 21 points** 18 hours ago

Hooo boy... As an ex-Red Hat'er, I'd love to see what's going down on memo-list right now.

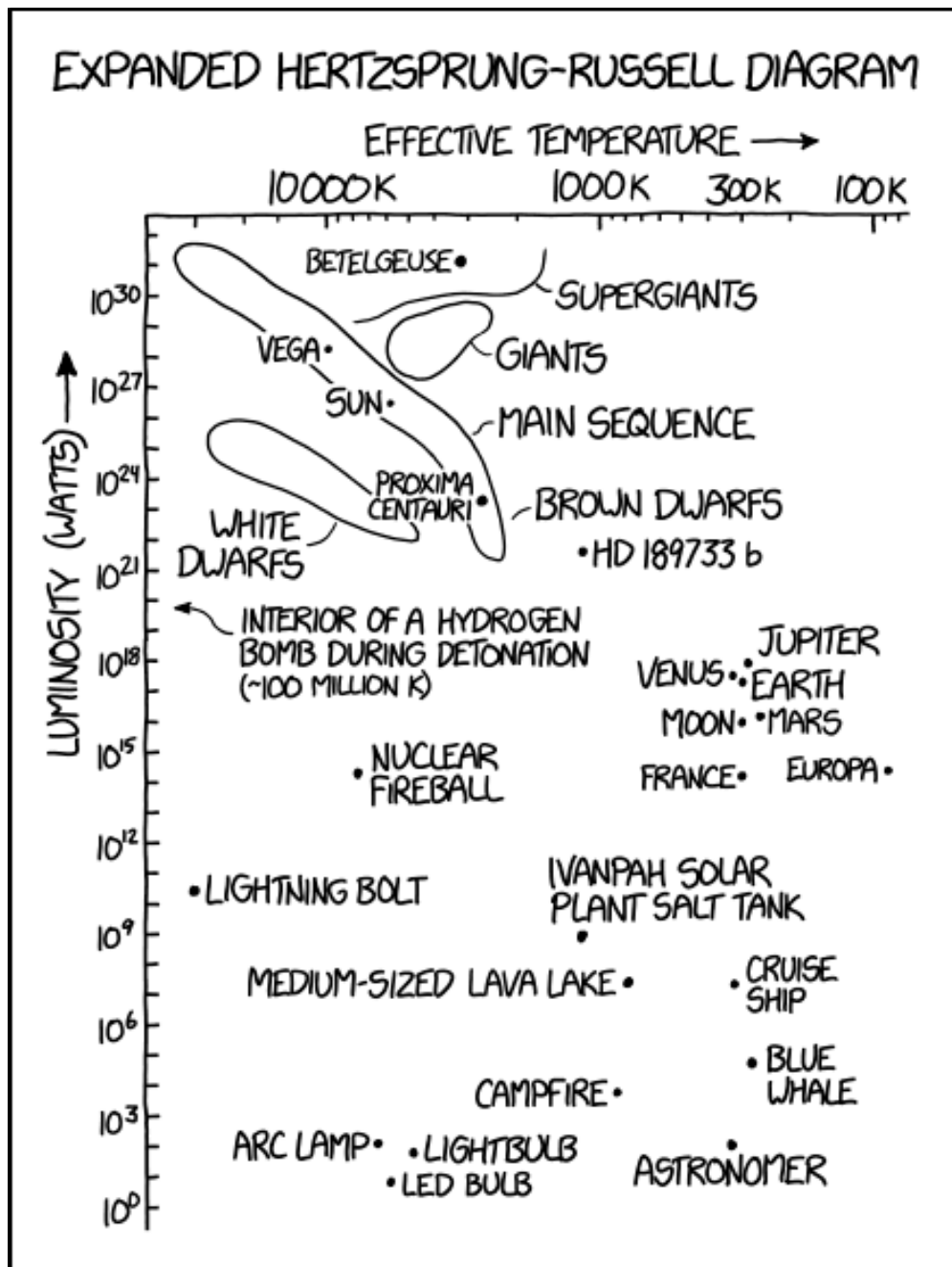permalink embed save report reply

(reddit2.png)
The thing we're all curious about.

to everything in between. If someone were to leak me a copy of the memo-list *2018-October.txt.gz* mailman archive, I'd sure love to see that! (Of course I'm joking and I wouldn't actually ask anyone to do this.)

In any case, the reality about all of this is much more nuanced. I'm going to try and explain my thoughts as factually as I can.

(Yes, the post title is an astrophysics joke.)

(https://imgs.xkcd.com/comics/hertzsprung_russell_diagram.png)
A more interesting variant of the Hertzsprung-Russell diagram. Source: https://xkcd.com/2009/

A part of history:

I joined Red Hat in 2014. (/blog/2014/04/02/working-at-redhat/) I became part of history, and felt very lucky to see inside this special unicorn. Red Hat was special because they proved that Copyleft (https://www.gnu.org/licenses/copyleft.en.html) could be a viable business model. Whatever your opinions on corporations and licensing are, this is a very interesting data point.

They started with Linux and GNU (https://www.gnu.org/), and over the years, added all sorts of

projects to the mix:

- Fedora (https://fedoraproject.org/)
- libvirt (https://libvirt.org/)
- GNOME (https://www.gnome.org/)
- glibc (https://www.gnu.org/software/libc/)
- GCC (https://www.gnu.org/software/gcc/)
- GTK+ (https://www.gtk.org/)
- systemd (https://www.freedesktop.org/wiki/Software/systemd/)
- cockpit (https://cockpit-project.org/)
- FreeIPA (https://www.freeipa.org/)
- libguestfs (http://libguestfs.org/)

as well as countless others. Some of these projects even contain entire ecosystems of spawned child projects.

In my opinion, in addition to being highly elegant and innovative, these projects all have two things in common:

1. They are all under copyleft licenses like the GPL (https://en.wikipedia.org /wiki/GNU_General_Public_License).
2. They didn't receive as much drive from upper management as they deserved.

I can't prove these two points are related, and they might not be, but I can't help think it's worth considering. Some theories:

- Internal, anti-copyleft rhetoric from some individuals persuaded management to invest in alternate "permissively-licensed" technologies. There certainly are many different internal views on licensing. It's well-known that there are both FSF-members and ASF-members within Red Hat. The former generally prefer copyleft, while the latter generally do not.

- Passionate developers who understand software better, prefer to spend and invest their time on copyleft-licensed software where there is a greater chance that future patches to their code won't be taken proprietary and hidden from everyone. Good software engineers can get quite attached to their code, and keeping it in the open can allow them to continue working on the project, even if they've changed companies.

- Business partners convinced upper management that they were only interested in permissive licensing. This way, they could build off of Red Hat's shoulders with their proprietary forks, without having to release any of their added "secret sauce". This feels very much like giving away a lot of value for free, without much of a return on investment.

<u>Investment in permissively-licensed projects</u>:

On the flip-side of things, Red Hat upper management has invested heavily in many permissively-licensed projects. It's up to you to determine how much value or revenue they have brought to the company. In general they were all more recent endeavours:

- Openstack
- ManageIQ

- Ovirt / RHEV
- Docker
- Kubernetes
- Openshift
- Opendaylight

I'm extremely biased here, but I've found the above first list to be filled with projects that I find extremely useful, and this second list with projects that are filled with an large amount of marketing dollars and hype.

Instead of doubling down and continuing the copyleft tradition, new management very publicly pushed the "Open Source" terminology and focused more on non-copyleft projects. Some believe this to be very political (https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/open-source-misses-the-point.en.html), where others believe that "Open Source" is a mainstream equivalent to "Free Software" (https://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.html).

In any case, upper management *did* push a lot of top-down decisions onto engineering and developing these permissively licensed projects. They invested so much money into these ventures that it wasn't clear we'd ever see a return. To be clear, I'm not trying to disrespect OpenStack or Docker, there are lots of talented people working on these projects, but they both have some enormous design flaws too.

Had things been left to engineering, a traditional bottom-up approach would have ensured a longer term, independent prosperity for Red Hat. It might also have delayed a $34B dollar valuation, but it also would have cemented our independence for another 25 years.

Even more proof that modern Red Hat dislikes copyleft:

Red Hat recently acquired a GPLv3-licensed piece of software named Ansible. In general, I don't think this conflicts with my arguments that present-day Red Hat prefers permissively-licensed software, because in general, copyleft doesn't usually apply (/blog/2017/10/17/copyleft-is-dead-long-live-copyleft/) to automation software used in the Ansible manner.

The real proof comes when you look at how Red Hat released the previously non-public (proprietary) components from the Ansible project. Instead of licensing them consistently with the parent project (it would be unheard of not to) they opted instead to release them as ALv2 (non-copyleft) instead. You can see for yourself (https://github.com/ansible/).

My bias:

I am incredibly biased. I recently left Red Hat. (/blog/2018/04/04/leaving-redhat/) I'm not angry. I met a lot of great hackers there. But it was clear that the bottom-up, engineer-driven, copyleft days were over, and I wanted to spend some time trying to innovate in something that I believed in. My example is miniscule compared to the scope and engineer-years of some of the top-mentioned copyleft projects, but it does fit the same pattern.

Apart from history:

XXX

Did IBM just kill Red Hat?

No. Most of the important parts were already dead. If we're lucky, there will be less internal pressure on the Red Hat exec's to account for their bad investments, and they can instead focus on building good products and saving IBM. Red Hat is about *3%* (by employee count) of IBM. Maybe that part can hide away inside Big Blue, the same way some of the top Red Hat engineers hid away inside Red Hat and directed some great engineering.

Conclusion:

Red Hat was never special because "open source". Red Hat was special because they proved copyleft could be a sustainable business model. This space is wide open again. I look forward to seeing who will take their place.

There are a lot of great engineers at Red Hat that steal away time to work on projects that benefit the public good. Let's hope that this work is still funded at IBM or that those individuals find new funders. I'm happy to connect good developers that I know, to companies looking to support their hacking should both parties contact me (/contact/) and ask.

There's a small chance that the original, bottom-up, engineer-driven, copyleft culture can spread inside IBM. If it does, I think it could benefit IBM. I'm happy to consult on these crazy ideas if any of the 400k employees there would like to ping me. I'm hoping for the best!

Happy Hacking,

James

You can follow James on Twitter (https://twitter.com/intent/follow?screen_name=purpleidea) for more frequent updates and other random thoughts.
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1145 words

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Oh hello…

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