Let's not forget our roots

Free software is not just about cost or stability: free software is a movement that mustn't forget the principles which made it possible

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GNU/Linux is growing all the time: new software is being created; new copies downloaded or bought; new users are discovering free software for the first time. With this growth we have seen the rise of polished distributions, sales-minded distributors, "XX" software is being released, and so free software is gaining commercial success in many fields. Even governments, from Peru to the UK, are now racing to use free software. But governments seem to be the only ones who are talking about switching specifically because they want free software, not just stable, secure and powerful software. It seems to me that many distributors are forgetting the roots of their products, and that's a dangerous thing.

Free software (or, if you like, "open source software", just replace the terms as you wish) is about more than high quality and low price. The strict definition of both doesn't even mention quality or price, they are merely incidental, and are only potential benefits. The strict definition is that binary programs can be freely copied, that the source code is available to all who want it (and, if the copyright owner desires, those who can pay for it), and that those who have the source code are free to modify it and redistribute the modified versions. Various licenses then dictate exactly how free we are in our use of the source code.

The freedom that these licenses give is the defining factor. And yet if you look at the web sites of many distributors, you won't find any obvious mention of this freedom. Some distributors make passing comments about "the freedom our operating system will give you", but they rarely explain themselves. If the users, potential or converted, are not fully aware of the defining factor of their operating system, what have they gained? A lot, perhaps, but not the most important thing of all: the knowledge that their operating system gives them the freedom to use their computer as they wish (within the confines of the law of course!)

Free software country

Now a common argument put forward is that you don't need to know any of that to actually use the operating system. I can use Mozilla without knowing a thing about the license, and not be any worse off in my use thereof. But let me draw a comparison. As citizens of our countries, we are members of the community of citizens known as "society", and our lives depend on the way that our societies and governments function. Hence at school we learn a little history, and a little about our country, and how it works. But the point is to ensure that we value our nation, we understand our role in our society, and we understand the rights we hold, so that if any of it changes, we can be aware of those changes, and object if we see fit. If enough people object, those changes can be prevented.

Now that is a little idealistic. No state in the world is that democratic or enlightened. The United States began on a good footing, but forgot to educate its children about its constitution, the way it functions, its history, and the world's history. That, combined with other factors I shan't touch on now, has lead to a country in which few people know and understand their rights, few know when they are changed, and so few object. A country founded on high and adventurous principles has stagnated and is now run more by corporate interests than the will of an active, educated public. (For the dubious technologist, you need look no further than the DMCA).

The free software movement started on high, adventurous

Fig. 1: Gentoo's social contract makes clear why free software is important

principles. They're enshrined in its licenses, and are well known by most of the programmers who have contributed to free software because they must know the licenses under which they release their work. If programmers were the only people to use free software, you could be fairly sure that the movement wouldn't lose its momentum (though there will always be those who refuse to see how impossible the movement would be without the principles at the root of it). But for users, and even contributors whose work doesn't go under licenses that they'd care to find out about (like documentation and graphics), there's rarely an indication of these principles, let alone an explanation.

How is the movement to remain healthy and principled if few know of or understand its principles? The licenses go a long way towards protecting users (and, I would argue programmers) from this problem, but it doesn't go all the way. Just as the constitutions and laws of our countries can and have been abused, so the licenses and principles of the free software movement can be abused. And if, over time, what triumphs is "Linux", and not free software, then we have lost.

Governments take a stand

It's interesting to note that some governments have taken a stand for the movement. In countries like Peru and Venezuela, politicians have made the case for free software to be used not only for reasons of stability, cost and secu-

rity, but also for more philosophical reasons to do with the freedom the software offers. Dr. Edgar David Villanueva Nunez, a congressman in Peru, wrote to Microsoft's representative in Peru that

> "the foundations of the bill clearly refer to the fundamental guarantees to be preserved and to the stimulus to local technological development. Given that a democratic State must support these principles, it has no other choice than to use software with publicly available source code, and to exchange information only in standard formats."

While he does also mention security as another key factor, he even points out that "at no point" does the bill refer to "freedom from charges". The core reason he cites for his decisions to support the bill (which, incidentally, would mandate the use of free software in government, and the exchange of information in open formats) are the principles of the free software movement: the freedom the software elicits and promotes.

What these governments know is that it is the principles of free software which make it so valuable. They promote community, freedom of use, quality, stability and competition. Without them, you'd be left with proprietary software developed by a community with no protection from sharks like Microsoft and Apple. They also know that these principles are not anti-corporate, but that they actually promote software development and help the industry.

Make yourself a Social Contract

Two projects spring to mind that do make some effort to uphold these principles and ensure that their users know about them. They do this through their "Social Contracts", which define exactly how they will develop their distributions of GNU/Linux, and therefore how their users will benefit from the principles of free software. The first of the two projects, Debian, wrote theirs as the flagpole of their distribution, and they are well known for their principled methodologies. The second project is Gentoo, which took Debian's contract, modified it a little, and posted it on their web site, with a fairly prominent link. Doubtless there are others, so please don't flame me for not mentioning your project

These documents are easy to draft, easy to make prominent, and are an easy way of saying to users: here is how we will empower you; our project will be guided by these principles, and you can be sure to gain these rights. They are not necessarily off-putting, or difficult to understand, and they

do the job, and even link to other resources where users can learn a little more. They also make a show of the principles, citing them as a reason to use free software, which is something that often seems absent in the marketing of many distributions.

The Open Source Initiative was created to end the ambiguity of the term "Free", and in doing so has shifted the emphasis from freedom to quality. Many now talk about a mythical split between practical and philosophical reasons to use GNU/Linux, despite the fact that one flows from the other. Few try to show businesses the freedoms offered; I tried and failed. Success on this front has come predominantly from persuading hackers and young democratic governments, often in less rich countries.

Conclusion

Perhaps what this tells us is that the principles are accepted by those with more open minds, which have not yet stagnated like the political systems of so many countries, in which established economics, politics and philosophies are doctrine, and questions are uncomfortable. And yet, like a Trojan horse, free software is rolling through the gates of the establishment, ready to jump up and reshape people's ideas about intellectual property and software. This can only happen so long as the foot soldiers know what they're going to be fighting for, and don't just fall asleep, or forget to get into the horse before it goes through the gates.

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