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What's free about free software?

Computing and the American West

John Locke

Computer history has some interesting parallels with the history of the American West. After the initial forays of Lewis and Clark and the first set of explorers, early settlers crossed the plains in covered wagons. But the West wasn't accessible to most Americans until the age of the railroads, when the Union Pacific Railroad put tracks across the continent and started running a regular passenger service.

Railroad history

To ride the trains, you needed to pay a fare to the railroad companies. These companies became huge monopolies, because they controlled the only way for the average person to cross the country. For a time the railroads were *it*, and as long as the tracks went where you wanted to go, the rails were the cheapest and best way to get there. And after all, the major cities all developed along rail routes, so where would you want to go that you couldn't get to by rail?

Of course, with the advent of the automobile, that all changed, and today, while trains still exist and still go to a lot of the same places, they are a shadow of their former dominance of the transportation landscape, used by commuters in some cities, and by tourists. Most of us drive, because we have the freedom to go wherever we want, on our schedule. It still costs money to get there—we have to pay for the upkeep of our cars and fill them with gas. We've all paid for our roads through taxes, tolls, and other means. While there have been three big, dominant auto manufactur-

ers in the US, none have had a monopoly on sales—we all like different things in our cars, and make different choices based on our likes and needs. And we all need to go through some sort of drivers training before we're safe on the roads, yet hundreds of millions of us take this for granted.

Railroaded today

Microsoft is the Union Pacific of the computer world. Windows provides the tracks. In the computer world, we're in the very early days of the automobile, say in the 1920s—the railroads are still dominant, and go nearly everywhere you might want to go. But you have to go on their schedule, and

Driving the Golden Spike on the transcontinental railroad



you have to pay a fare to get on board. While there are dirt roads all over the place, few are paved, the trains will get you to your destination faster, and you pretty much have to be a mechanic to keep that Model T running over any large distance. But the car is clearly the future, and we're starting to build the freeways now.

In the computer world, we're in the very early days of the automobile, say in the 1920s...

Free software powers those cars. While there are still a couple of cities you can't drive to yet, you can pretty much go anywhere, including places you now can't get to by train. Free software will get you nearly everywhere you can get with Windows. There are great free word processors, spreadsheet packages, presentation programs, desktop publishing programs, astronomy tools, databases, everything that you might imaginably need to get where you need to go. But these programs aren't from Microsoft, or Adobe, or the other "standard" rail car manufacturers, which don't run on your average dirt road.

Once upon a time, only 15 years ago, there were several different word processing programs considered "standard". Anybody remember Word Perfect? It had a much bigger market share than Microsoft Word. Yet today, everybody expects Word documents and little else. At that point, having a different word processor was like having a rail car that fit a different set of rails—you couldn't just open a Word-Perfect document in Word and expect it to look the same.

Freedom to drive

In the free software world, where programs need to communicate with each other, they use established, open standards. A new document format has emerged, called the Open Document format. Unlike Word Documents, you already have a choice of several different programs that will read and write these documents without issues: OpenOffice.org, StarOffice, KWord, AbiWord to name a few. The state of Massachusetts recently mandated that all their office documents be stored in this format, to prevent being locked into a single vendor. Naturally Microsoft is complaining—if they can't maintain their advantage of being the only vendor ca-

pable of flawlessly working with their own office format, how can they maintain their monopoly? They would inevitably get a whole slew of competitors—bad for them, but good for the rest of us. Do you really want to be forced into paying Microsoft time and time again to keep buying access to your own documents? The state of Massachusetts decided, at least for them, the answer was no.

You can free yourself from vendor lock-in, too, by going to OpenOffice.org (<http://openoffice.org>) and downloading the full office suite, entirely free. Version 2.0 is out, and it has a database to rival Access—the previous versions already provided excellent replacements for the other Office products. OpenOffice.org Writer is better than Word in several areas:

- Bullets and numbering
- Outline numbering
- Page templates
- Predictable page formatting
- Master and sub documents, for those book authors out there
- Drawings with connectors that stick to objects as you move them around, like Visio

Naturally, it does have some drawbacks, too: the Outline view isn't as nice, incompatible with any macros you've developed (and Word Macro viruses), envelope printing is confusing, merging to a catalog list doesn't seem to exist. Are these features worth the extra \$300 per seat in your business?

Land grants and land grabs

In the 19th century, the land grant railroad companies were granted rights to pick and choose a swath of land across the country to lay down their rails. Did they choose the best route for their rails? Not necessarily. They picked the most fertile land, the most valuable land, and planned their rail route so that they could get the most dollars for the land granted to them by the government. A great-great-great grandfather of mine was on a crew that helped move the rails to a more sensible route, after the land grants were complete.

Today, it's Microsoft doing the land grabs, trying to bundle as much functionality into their operating system as possible. First it was the web browser. Lately it's the media

player. There have been dozens of other small companies unable to compete with the software giant, who have gone out of business—and as a result, we have fewer choices as a whole. When Microsoft asks, “Where do you want to go today?” think customer survey: they’re trying to find out where they should build their rails so they can extract more fares from you in the future. Never mind the fact that you can probably drive there today with free software.

Free software is about giving you the freedom to drive wherever you want. It’s not free of cost—you have to buy your PC (the car), you have to pay a mechanic periodically, you need to learn how to drive, and there are taxes, toll roads, and potholes all over the place. But when given the choice between a railroad and a car, most of us choose to drive, simply because we have the freedom to go where we want and when, not just because it’s cheaper. In many cases, the railroad is cheaper, especially in these days of escalating fuel prices. But the more people who choose to drive free software, the more roads will get paved. And if you need a mechanic, a map, or a custom vehicle, that’s what Freelock Computing, or dozens of other new service companies can provide!

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John Locke is the founder and manager of Freelock Computing (<http://freelock.com>), a consulting company that helps small businesses use technology to solve real business problems. John is the author of the book “Open Source Solutions for Small Business Problems”, and also maintains his own blog (<http://opensourcesmall.biz>).