Switching to free software

How to get the best software without spending a penny

Robin Monks

Free software is fast becoming the standard in quality software. It's now possible for anyone to find a quality, free replacement for almost any proprietary program. In many cases, the free program is better than its proprietary counterpart.

You may not realize it, but there's probably a free software replacement for every software program you own: from your word processor to your photo editor to the actual operating system.

Before I get in to the meat and potatoes of finding free alternatives and replacing your current proprietary application, I want to dispel a common myth of free software: free software is not low-quality or code stolen from similar proprietary software. Free software is lovingly made by either a single developer (or a community of developers) who love to code, and want to share their creation with the whole world.

Benefits of using free software

Some of the major benefits of free software are that it is free from cost, has no in-built banner ads and has no spyware in the installer. However, when you see the word "free" in relation to free software, you can be sure it's "free" as in "freedom". This is due to the biggest benefit of free software: that it has no restrictive licenses.

Other benefits of free software may not be as immediately apparent. Since free software usually has a larger user base, there are more people reporting bugs on different systems, and depending on whether the source code is available, there may be many developers not involved with the project fixing problems as they see them.

Also, free software usually has more add-ons and templates created for it. You can usually find forums and communities for free software, as well as contributed FAQs and documentation.

Another benefit of free software is you can install it on as many computers as you want, and you can be sure your friends and colleagues will be able to get access to that same program.

How to find free alternatives

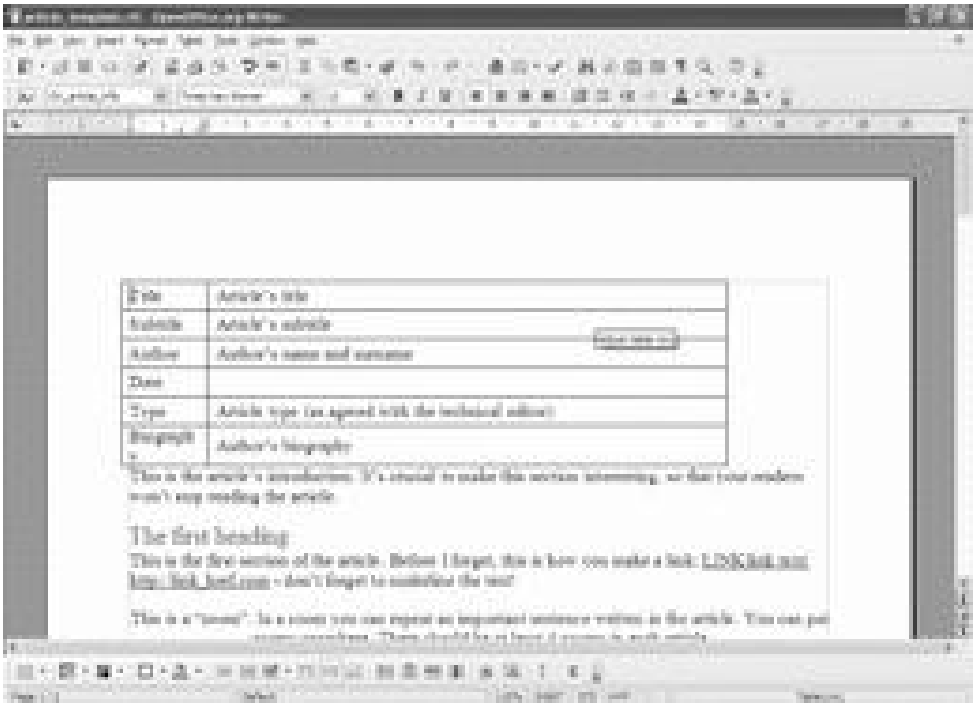
Now down to the crunch—learning to find those free alternatives. There are dozens of ways to find free software, and I'm going to show you how to use a few of these methods.

The primary way to find free software is to do a search via one of many websites (Fresh Meat (`http://freshmeat.net`) and L are two primary ones) either by an actual text search, or by narrowing the software list by category.

You can also find free software by looking at various online directories, such as DMoz (`http://dmoz.org`), or by searching for a free version of that application. As an example you can search Google (`http://google.com`) for "free word processor" or "open source word processor".

Another way to find a free alternative is to ask, either in an IRC channel (such as the ##mac, #fsf, #gnu or ##linux chan-

OpenOffice 2.0 Beta



nels in freenode) or in an online forum. Technical friends and relations may also be able to help you locate that prize freebie.

A final way to find free software should be rather obvious... you're reading it right now! Other magazines, newsletters and online articles can also show you how to replace various proprietary software currently on your PC.

Of course, finding the program is only half the task; you then have to find out how to install it, and determine whether or not your computer can run it. Occasionally, you may also need additional libraries (which are reusable functions programmers use to save coding time and distribution size) or programs to run the program on your operating system.

Practical steps

The first thing you should check when looking at a piece of free software is whether it is truly free. Freeware isn't always free software. Some "freeware" programs contain advertisements or spyware programs, so be careful. If in doubt, Google the program name and see what other users think about the program.

Secondly, always read the software's own website. Usually, download sites leave out important bits of information and almost never contain the latest version. Also, most download sites won't show screenshots, sample files and documentation related to the program.

Next, hopefully before you download, you should check the system requirements; if your OS (operating system) isn't listed, and the source code isn't available, you're out of luck. If you can get the source code, you may be able to compile the software yourself, with the right tools. Most programs that you can build from source have instructions on how to do so either on the website, or in the source code archive.

The final step, after you've got your program, is to decide whether you want to make it your default program, if you haven't already. Most programs provide an option to take over from any proprietary software on your PC in the "Options" or "Preferences" dialogs.

Case in point: productivity tools/home publishing

To give you a head start, I'll show you some common replacements that you can do in just a few minutes (minus

download time) for office applications. You should keep in mind that the replacements I'm going to show you are not the only ones out there. I'm not trying to give a definitive guide, just a few examples.

It's worth noting that there are a few complete office replacements out there, although you may prefer to get each application separately. To begin, I'll cover some of the office suites, then the individual programs.

These programs have an interface very similar to their proprietary counterparts, and most have common features like spell check, graphics and internet connectivity (eg, saving to HTML). Overall these programs are an excellent replacement to MS Office, and should be considered before spending the big bucks on proprietary counterparts.

The biggest free productivity suite around is probably OpenOffice (http://openoffice.org), with its large feature set, it deserves its title. It has a word processor (Word), presentation designer (PowerPoint), spreadsheet program (Excel), database development environment (Access), equation writer and a simple drawing program.

Another alternative for Linux users is Koffice (http://koffice.org). KOffice, like OpenOffice, has replacements for all Microsoft Office's components but KOffice uses KDE libraries to have the "feel" of the program match the desktop environment. It's also a worthy MS Office Replacement.

Either one of these programs can completely replace MS Office and be used in places where Office couldn't dream. These programs freely provide their source code and can be customized by developers.

One of the daily programs we all use is a word processor. It's also a rather expensive tool. Considering that Microsoft Word is released every two years, at about US$109 (that's for the upgrade, US$229 full). That's a lot for a souped-up typewriter.

If you're looking for a replacement for Word alone, you can try AbiWord (http://abiword.org). It also opens Word files, and as a bonus is a very small download at under 6MB.

When it comes to replacing just Excel, Gnumeric (http://www.gnome.org/projects/gnumeric/) and Sharp Tools Spreadsheet (http://www1.cs.columbia.edu/sharptools/) are good contenders. Although not perfect, they both have a great feature set, work on multiple platforms and use files compatible with other applications.

For an Access replacement, there's a new kid on the block, Kexi. Kexi is a part of KOffice but is currently only available separately from the project. You can get a pre-release version of Kexi at their development site (http://kexi-project.org).

I don't consider Outlook as a traditional office application, although it is easily replaced with Thunderbird (http://getthunderbird.com) or Evolution (http://www.gnome.org/projects/evolution/).

Getting support

The level of support available for free software is amazing. Most free software has both official and community support. Official support can come in many forms, and depending on the program, may include commercial support.

Mozilla is a good example of free software having commercial telephone support available. This is a must for commercial users of free software, and can give piece of mind to both companies and individuals.

Another readily available method of support is forums. Almost every free software program has its own free support forum. The official forums are usually very friendly and answers can usually be found from previous postings.

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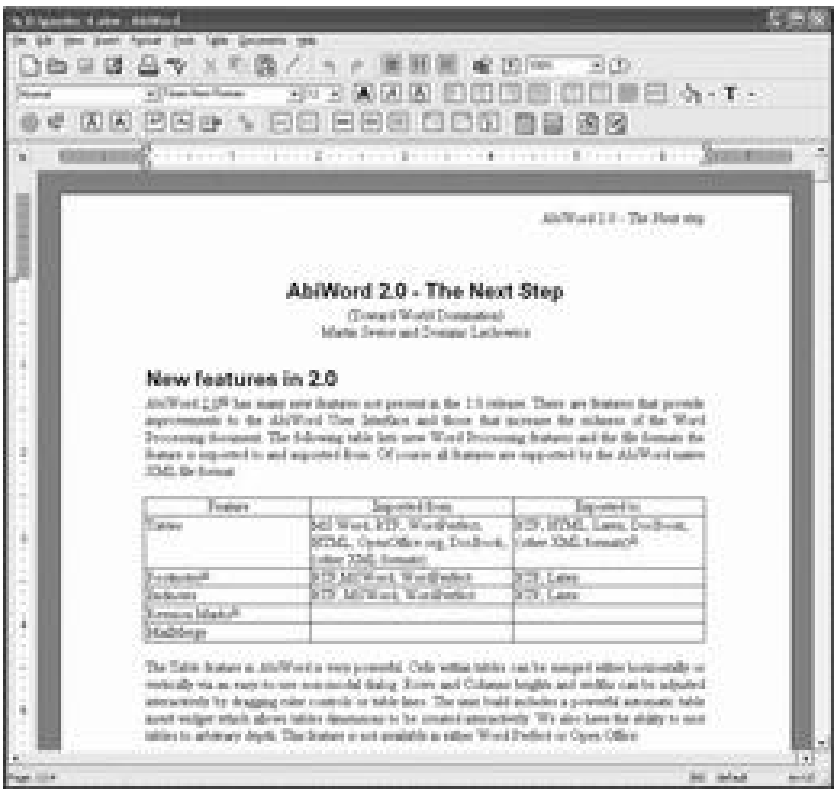
Thanks to large user bases, support forum questions are usually answered quickly. You should always read each individual forum's rules before posting, and you should search to see if anyone else has had that same problem.

IRC (Internet Relay Chat) is another support option. Depending on the project size you may be able to get an answer quicker this way. This is also a good place to get instructions and tips from other users that isn't available on the website.

If the project doesn't have any of these support features, you should look for unofficial sources. Some projects will link to these resources, if not, Google usually knows. Typing

AbiWord



"project-name support" can usually find some support options for you (e.g. "Mozilla Support").

If all else fails, try contacting the project author. Most authors I've talked to have been very helpful in locating and fixing program problems.

Conclusion

Hopefully this has given you the urge to replace all of your proprietary software. As you can see from this article and the other articles in this issue, free software is available to fulfil your every computing need, for free.

Free software is a viable alternative, not just for individuals, but also for corporate workstations. As a bonus, employees can easily take a copy (or ten) home. More and more governments and corporations are beginning to use free software, probably for this reason.

It's also possible to take free software to the next level by using a free operating system such as GNU/Linux. If you're just starting, you can try the Knoppix Live CD (http://knoppix.org), which doesn't require hard drive installation. Fedora Core (http://fedora.redhat.com) and Mandriva (formerly Mandrake) (http://mandrivalinux.com) are also good first choices.

I hope you'll continue to enjoy free software, and perhaps increase the use of free software in your digital life.

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About the author

Robin Monks is a volunteer contributor to Mozilla, Drupal, GM6 and Free Software Magazine and has been helping free software development for over two years.