Free as in “free speech” or free as in “free labour”?

A philosophical enquiry into free culture

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Free software sustains and enables the internet. Across the world, people continue to freely contribute ideas and expertise to an important and growing movement. The internet itself was largely born out of a culture of contributing code and content in an electronic public “space” of global proportions. This has meant that the constellation of software supporting the internet, and the content that sits upon it, is to a large degree, non-market, peer-produced and free (as in “freedom” *and* as in “beer”). But, why do people code, hack, test, write and create free culture?

None of the current theories give a satisfactory answer to the questions raised, namely: why do coders, users and lots of amateur artists contribute to free culture projects?

Free labour sustains the free software and free culture movements, and yet we’re still pretty much in the dark as to why people do it. Indeed, this question continues to puzzle many people who find it difficult to fit into traditional concepts related to production. Theorists and researchers have used a number of approaches: from individualistic or psychologistic theories, which usually end up identifying personal preferences or “motivations”; to concepts of frictionless information or institutional frameworks; essentialist claims about humans; gift economics; free-market economics; bazaars; theories of public-goods; and even the concept of “fun” itself, in an attempt to explain it. But ultimately, the explanatory factors continue to be shrouded in mystery. None of the current theories give a satisfactory answer to the questions raised, namely: why do coders, users and lots of amateur artists contribute to free culture projects?

This article examines free software and free culture, together with the concepts that Hannah Arendt presents in *The Human Condition*, to outline some of the key aspects of labour within what Yochai Benkler calls “peer-produced commons production”. It questions whether there is more than just simple motivational factors at work underneath the surface of the so-called “Hacker Ethic”. Indeed, making “things” is usually classified outside the realm of the life world, and the question of free-software problematises some of our common-sense impressions of what work *qua* work actually is.

Free as in “software”

The dynamics of software production are complex, and the resources required to sustain it are expensive, in terms of equipment and basic necessities, but also in terms of the wider economics of the computing industry. Software development is hugely profitable and employs a large number of people involved in labour intensive, complex and demanding work, which is exploited using copyright and patent monopolies. This, in turn, generates large profit mar-

gins and, as can be seen from salary levels, rewards many programmers handsomely. However, software programming remains a labouring activity; in other words, the activity undertaken by the programmer is exchanged for their wages. The product of this labour, *code*, is alienated and appropriated by the employing company.

Free software, on the other hand, is produced outside of the office-factory - indeed, it is freely produced and contributed to projects that have many features in common. They are owned, if they can be said to be owned at all, by everyone, and it is freely available to be taken and used – although sometimes restricted by license requirements, such as the GNU General Public License (GPL). This code is produced neither wholly as a job nor as a hobby. But its commons-based approach means that it is never wholly appropriated or alienated from the producer either.

This raises two related issues about contemporary free software development that this article intends to examine: (1) Why free-software is undertaken by programmers; and (2) whether free-software points toward a different relationship with the "work of our hands" and the possibilities for emancipation from necessity.

Hannah Arendt's distinctions between *Labor* and *Work* offers useful concepts that can help in understanding why free software is produced and can contribute to further understanding of the activities associated with it. As Arendt explains in *The Human Condition*, the etymology of the two words, *Labor* and *Work*, casts light on the fact that although today we use them synonymously, this wasn't always so. John Locke, for example, drew a distinction between "working hands" and "laboring bodies" and this has some resemblance to the ancient Greek distinction between "the craftsman" and the work of "slaves". This bifurcation of the process of production has also been mirrored in the distinction between manual and intellectual labour and the corresponding connotations and values we have associated between them.

Arendt explains that in classical times, *Labor* was associated with contempt, an activity that left no trace, no monument, no great work worthy of remembrance. Labouring was for those who, like "slaves and tame animals with their bodies, minister to the necessities of life". In order that we could become *political* - i.e. that which distinguished us from animals – we had to escape from necessity. Today, the production of labour is the production of the masses, and Marx notwithstanding, it has historically been feared by the owning or thinking classes – controlled and channelled through overcoding structures that have been able to appropriate their productivity. Think, for example, of the school, the hospital and the assembly lines for the mass produced cars, producing what Foucault termed the *docile bodies* of the workers. These workers performed a fraction of the entire process of production and were thereby alienated from their labour. By being forced to work by necessity (i.e. to enable them to buy food and shelter) meant that they were not able to become fully human; alienated from the products of their own hands, unable to act or think politically and easy to control.

In contrast, Arendt argues that for those who *Work* – who "work upon" rather than "labor and mix with" – there is the possibility for the beginnings of reflexive behaviour (i.e. becoming self-conscious acting beings). *Work* for Arendt, produces durability, the products of work do not disappear but give our common lives stability and solidity – think, for example, of a table passed down generation to generation, contrasted with labouring in a field which would leave no such trace. For Plato, *Poiesis*, as making or fabrication, showed that the craftsman had within his mind an *idea* that could be shaped to a conscious material design: a creative act of production in the physical world. Where *Labor* only produces for the consumption or necessity of the labourer, *Work* creates something durable that will last (for now leaving aside the problematic ontological question of the status of source-code's obduracy). This is important because it is only by escaping necessity (i.e. the constant requirement to produce things we need) that we can begin to communicate and become human as political animals. For Arendt, *Work* is a prerequisite for the possibility of *Action* – the realm of great deeds and great words. As memorably related by Homer, Achilles was remembered for his *Action* - not for his need to satisfy his hunger and clothe his body.

To work for necessity, as many of us do in contemporary consumer society, would be classified by Arendt as *labor*. In fact, Arendt argues that we have become a *laboring society*; in other words, we have succeeded in levelling all human activities to the common denominator of securing the necessities of life and providing for their abundance. Therefore, whatever we do, we do for the sake of "making a living". Anything that cannot be classified as part of making a living becomes a "hobby", subsumed under playfulness

Fig. 1: 'Arendt' art by Trine Bjørkmann Andreassen

or non-serious activities. Our society is now shaped by the importance of producing objects for consumption, and the drive for profitability encourages the production of objects that simply wear out as quickly as possible. Living for necessity was the life of animals – the Greeks even derive their word for torture from *necessity* (the realm of labour) and not from *violence* (the realm of war) and in ancient societies torture could not be applied to *Free Men*, it could only be applied to labouring men or slaves who were subject to necessity anyway.

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Because life depends upon it, necessity is an extremely powerful drive. By directing our labour towards necessity, capitalism is able to reproduce itself as a social system. But free software seems more akin to the realm of *Work* than the realm of *Labor*, it lies to a certain extent outside of the market. Its commons-based production and the action of its producers seem to be less concerned with necessity than building durable, lasting things (the code). The care that goes into much free software production contributes to its craftsmanship – the production of code is in many ways "public", and the source code can be read and admired by others, in this respect it seems to be similar to a great speech or a work of art.

Free as in "freedom"

The second question this article asks is whether free software points toward a different relationship with the work of our hands and the possibilities for emancipation from necessity. Indeed, free software is not directly linked to necessity, and is in many ways similar to the creation of an artist – who Arendt identified as the only real "worker" left in society. She argued that we will not be free until we realise that we are subject to necessity and liberate ourselves from it. Whilst we are forced to "make a living" we will always be caught in a never-ending spiral of *laboring* and consuming. As technology creates more "spare time" the resulting shaping of our desires by the advertising industry makes us greedier and more craving of our appetites - met only by consumption of the consumer goods before us. Free software is created here, strangely enough in the space of consumption. However, it differs, as it is productive and creative. To create free culture is to contribute toward culture rather than consume (i.e. destroy it).

The possibilities offered by free culture are not (yet) completely linked or mediated through the operation of corporations and necessity. People can still write code, blog and share their thoughts on the web, and this act of sharing is also one of communication. However, it is a fragile space that seems similar to the temporary autonomous zones (TAZ) popularised by Hakim Bey. Will the creators of free culture and free software allow it to be overcoded, controlled and channelled towards consumption? Clearly, the vast resources that corporations bring to bear on projects often crush resistance to a bureaucratic mentality. Inevitably, the creators often have different sentiments to those who seek to make money, and eventually they come into conflict with the instrumental rationality of corporations (who aim for profit maximising). Some worrying examples include: the continuing commercialisation of the internet; IBM's forays into the Linux kernel; and even the colonisation of blogging and photosharing.

If we begin to view free software and open source no longer

purely for necessity or instrumentally (i.e. as not just a technical activity) we can reposition it within the realm of human creativity. If free software lies outside the sphere of *labor*, following Arendt, then perhaps, we can begin to understand it as a possible prerequisite for the beginning of political activity. Free software is interesting in that it seems to contribute towards the conditions of possibility for *Work* and *Action* – for humans to perform great deeds, and through the code to speak and create a trace or memory. For instance, Mathew Fuller's concept of *Critical Software* aims to act politically, to subvert existing codes and to give agency and freedom to the usually passive user. Similarly, free software, by giving away the source-code, simultaneously gives agency to the producer and the user opening the possibilities for *Action* rather than directing and controlling the user – e.g. think of the way a word processor can control the user by "suggesting" spellings and grammar.

The realm of economics and markets is the sphere of necessity – you do not have the freedom to act, creatively or politically as an agent. Conversely, free software and free culture seem to be constituted communicatively (i.e. as a conversation between volunteers), and could, therefore, open the possibility for decentralised, non-market commons-based production, within which may lie the seeds of a new politics – the politics of the commons.

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