

Are large software companies bound to adopt the free software model?

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Abstract

abstract

Keywords

keywords

Introduction

1 What is free software?

Before pondering about the interest that large software companies might have for the free software model, we have to clearly define it. The concept has a large spectrum of significance and definitions are many. Nevertheless, they all share the same basis [1]. Firstly, the intrinsic quality of this kind of software comes from its openness: its source code is available for all, and above all, editable by all. There are thus no restriction on the amount of hacking that such a software can endure, which is a good thing, as the next section will demonstrate. Secondly, the available source code is candidate to redistribution, with or without modification. Lastly, a free software can be used by all and for any means. A differentiation must be made between free software and open source. A free software is by definition open-source, but the reciprocal isn't inevitably true. For example, the Android operating system for mobile phone is open-source, everybody can consult its source code and use it as an inspiration. But one does not have the right to entirely copy this code and rebrand it as his own. The definition of copy is fuzzy here. What differentiate a full copy from a largely inspired work? Of course, free software is free, in the sense that it doesn't cost any money to the user, but the free of the expression carries a sense of freedom and liberal philosophy, not only the monetary aspect.

Founded by Richard Stallman, a unique computer scientist, the free software movement is rooted in deep philosophical considerations which often get away from the more technical aspects. It was firstly mocked by large software companies, judged inefficient and idealist. Present

2 From the point of view of software companies

With free software come advantages, some related to the user base of the company, some related to its economic viability.

2.1 Impact on the user base

A company delivering free softwares automatically benefits from a boost in reputation, as with proprietary software and closedness come a sense of secret. Many companies, Microsoft for example, are labeled as evil because of their model. An other advantage is the openness of the source code, as experimented users can check for themselves the quality of the product by exploring its code. Moreover, a lot of questions stem from confidentiality interrogations. With proprietary software, a user can ask himself how his passwords are protected and if his credit card number is stored somewhere, at the reach of pirates. With free software, he can check that himself. And of course, the money aspect is a major advantage. When comparing two solutions, a user will easily lean toward the less pricy one, ideally, the free one!

The shortcoming of all these advantages is that they only concern experimented users, familiar with the computer and its world, whereas laymans will prefer a less intimidating solution. We can see here one of the downfalls of the free, free as in no money needed, software. Some unexperimented users will choose a proprietary solution because a bigger price tag means more quality. How can this free stuff be as good as the 200\$ one? This psychological effect, associated with the public lack of knowledge about free software, is the main brake to free software taking off. Moreover, a free software is built from others free softwares, contrary to proprietary softwares which pay licences to use some proprietary component, and the average computer user has a Windows operating system and a typical suite of softwares, often proprietary. Making him change his software suite and get out of his confort zone is no easy task.

2.2 Impact on economy

As a free software can be copied and reused by anybody, there is no use in patenting, nor in budgeting potential legal conflicts. Financially speaking, free software shows to be the smartest choice. As stated previously, an open software is built upon blocks of existing free softwares whereas in the proprietary world, the blocks are often proprietary too and as such, they are to be paid. From the other perspective, our free software could also be used as a building block, and its non-existent price could promote its regular, maybe even its use as an industry standard. Let's not forget an important building force: user contribution. Of course, any user can copy the free software and

label it as its own, but that's happily not the mentality of this scene. Instead, a user will often contribute to a project by the means of personal bug corrections or feature additions. All that being free of any charge, and made by people who use the software, who are therefore in first line to judge what are the weaknesses of a software.

Openness has a price, though, and the fact that the machinery of a software is fully available implies that even the bleeding-edge features, the smartest algorithms and the revolutionary ideas are at the reach of all, especially the concurrence. A line has to be drawn here, this is where the company has to make choice. Will it contribute to a joint progress or will it prefer to hide its discoveries and make money? And of course

3 Is it viable?

One the main characteristics of free software being its price, companies obviously need to switch to a more adequate business model to stay afloat. We have to keep in mind that the goal of a company is to make money, making free software or not, and this model must be economically viable.

Companies such as Ubuntu use a support business model. Their main product, the Ubuntu operating system, is free. They even sent millions of free CDs containing it for a while. Browsing through the foundation website, we remark several possible sources of income. The more visible is an online merchandise store which sells mugs and wearable items sporting the Ubuntu logo but this store is more of a marketing tool than a true mean of revenue. No, its true business model is to freely give the tools and to sell the knowledge. Ubuntu staff comprehends the developer of its products but also a lot of trainers, learning to users the ins and outs of Ubuntu. This kind of technical support is not meant for simple individual users but rather for corporations wanting to install Ubuntu on all their computers and to train employees.

The Mozilla Foundation has chosen another path, its main product, the Firefox internet browser, is financed by donations but this part of their revenue only accounts for about 5% of the total. The real revenue source is a partnership with Google. In Firefox's interface, a small search field can be seen at the top of the window. Any words the user will input there will be processed through Google Search, generating ad revenue to the search engine, a part of which is reversed to Mozilla. Stats

Another browser example is Chrome, the internet browser from Google.

Conclusion

Glossary

Free software [a](#)

Open source [a](#)

GNU [a](#)

Free Software Foundation [a](#)

Richard Stallman [a](#)

Sources

References

- [1] Richard Stallman. *Selected Essays of Richard Stallman*. GNU Press.