

Open and Free

The trials and tribulations of an open source evangelist

I recently had the pleasure of attending a morning-long talk by Richard Stallman, the undisputed Father of the Free Software movement. At the invitation of OSDL CEO Stuart Cohen, Stallman made a special visit to OSDL headquarters in Portland, Oregon, before presenting to a local users' group.

I've heard Stallman speak before, and his message, while evolving over time, has not strayed from its central tenet of FREEDOM. However, from my new perch at the OSDL, I found myself reacting to him both with more sympathy and a more critical eye. In particular, a number of ideas stuck in my intellectual craw.

I am perfectly prepared to grant Stallman broad poetic licence (considering his substantial contributions to the poetry of software licensing). However, I and most others in the audience found his equating proprietary software with terrorism beyond hyperbole. His logic is straightforward "proprietary software licences force users to surrender their freedoms" - freedom of expression, rights to privacy, and self-determination. By extension, aggressive litigation by the likes of SCO and others hold open source software developers and users hostage, and force a (business) ideology of the few upon the many. Sounds familiar?

In these troubled times, however, I believe that such inflammatory terminology does nothing to forward the cause of open and Free software, and indeed only fosters the too-prevalent view of a wild-eyed and rampant GNU.

"Give me liberty or give me death!" - fine for Thomas Paine, but perhaps a bit extreme for most IT end-users. Stallman too, inveighed his audience to make personal sacrifices to preserve

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freedom. Generally, these sacrifices steered clear of martyrdom and involved forswearing the use of proprietary programs, file formats and other closed technologies. His core arguments remind us that building on proprietary albeit parsable formats today could expose us to the terrors of opaque extensions in future revisions.

For IT users, such sacrifice usually then equates to inconvenience. Stallman related his shock at having received an invitation to speak in a document saved in MS Word .doc format. "Plain text would have been a better choice, don't you think?" he quipped. The inviting body used proprietary software - it was more convenient to continue doing so even when compelling St. IGNUtius to come calling.

Invoking convenience raises the hackles of open source and Free Software purists - the fault must not lie in the software but in ourselves. They insist that users must be willing to retrain, retool, rethink their comforts for the sake of freedom. I happily overcame my sloth many years

ago and am today a productive user of GNU/Linux, OpenOffice, Evolution, GIMP, Eclipse, etc, in lieu of proprietary equivalents. I endured some inconvenience in doing so, but today I am whole again.

I cannot, however, preach this same sermon to business people and enterprise IT teams. Their time is precious, their desire for re-education is minuscule, and their technology requirements are aggressively forward-looking. Enterprise organisations that adopt Linux today often do so in spite of shortcomings in the OS and its accompanying software stack. They adopt Free and open source software for its cost benefits, reliability, flexibility, and to avoid vendor lock-in, but not because it is always "the best" in every way, and certainly not out of a more abstract commitment to freedom.

If a proprietary word processor, presentation program or graphics tool helps users produce better documentation or superior slides, or if a proprietary compiler produces faster or denser code for developers' applications, freedom quickly takes a back seat to market forces and broader perceptions of quality.

Freedom to be mediocre does not inspire revolution, or even noticeable change. A friend and colleague of mine at a Linux platform supplier likes to insist that "open source software will always meet and exceed the capabilities of its proprietary equivalents". I agree, but add "given enough time and resources". A more cynical acquaintance tacked on "and if proprietary software stands still in the meantime".

Yes, Free and open software have resulted in fantastic leaps forward in software quality and the ability to address complex engineering challenges. However, the successes of Free and open software should not overly intoxicate and the competition is intense. The "Evil Empire" does not dominate merely by being evil - its wares meet and even exceed the needs of its users, despite software being closed, buggy, un-secure and expensive.

The Open Source Development Lab has the goal of accelerating Linux adoption in the enterprise, and positions itself as the "centre of gravity" for the Linux industry. Implicit in the position is the idea of a continuum of practices, licenses and motivations. This continuum spans from purely Free Software to open source software distributed under a variety of licences and commercialised under a range of business models, through wholly proprietary software running in tandem with open source software with or on top of GNU/Linux.

Linux, ahem, GNU/Linux would not exist today without the GNU project. In great part, GNU/Linux owes the energy and speed of its evolution and broad propagation to Linus Torvalds's choice of the GNU GPL for his kernel. But would Linux have attained its market presence in the enterprise merely by being "free", in either sense of the word? Can Linux continue its ascent on the server, in embedded systems, and on the desktop, building on grass roots alone?

Open source need not apologise to Free Software for being business-driven. Selling Linux is not selling out. If Linux and open source software are not destined to be footnotes in the history of IT, they must be POPULAR. Adoption must be broad and justifiable. The OS and application stack must meet the needs of real users with compelling value.



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