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Who Gives a Crap About Open-Source Software?

By Thomas Eldredge

Source code is the set of instructions that some programmer wrote for your electronic device. That programmer may very well have been me, and I may have told that device to despise you and to do anything in its power to make your life hell. Keeping that in mind, take a long, hard look at your laptop. Do you have any idea what that thing is thinking right now? I do, because I told it to find out what you're thinking, and then tell me so I can sell you stuff.

In truth, I didn't do that. I'm a mediocre programmer, but if I was more talented, I certainly could. I could because you would let me, because you don't care if the code running the devices you rely on is open-source or closed.

I don't mean to harsh on the ignorant masses or those taking advantage of them; we all swing both ways. Lord knows, I'll jump in the crowd in a pinch, and on my best days, I've got all the scruples of a fox hoarding for winter. At some level, we're all just monkeys that learned to make stuff and do stuff, and then learned to buy and sell the stuff we make and do.

Patent laws encourage people to make and do stuff in new ways by allowing them to protect the way they make and do stuff. This promotes invention and ingenuity and generally makes for good business.

Source code is an anomalous problem in patent and copyright law, because it is both a device that must function properly to perform a task, and also a piece of intellectual property that can be easily

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reproduced. A new book is copyrighted against reproduction of its content, and a new engine might be patented against duplication of the process by which it is manufactured or the way it operates. The ease of copying software creates rampant opportunities for competitive theft and pirate distribution.

As monkeys who make and do stuff, we tend to specialize. I specialize in making fun of other monkeys. Some monkeys are shovel makers, rocking-chair salesmen, undertaker's assistants, auto mechanics, or computer programmers.

Sometimes mechanic monkeys get married to programmer monkeys. In such marriages, if the programmer monkey buys a car, the mechanic monkey will most likely have a look under the hood to verify that there is an engine in there, and that it is not sewn together from banana peels. If, however, the mechanic monkey buys a Windows PC or a Mac, then the programmer monkey should become enraged and throw poo at the screen.

Closed source, proprietary software is basically a car with the hood welded shut, with a big sticker across the seam that reads "DO NOT REMOVE BY PENALTY OF LAW," and has a hologram of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs crossing their giant, prosthetic, male enhancements over America. Needless to say, this kind of industrial freedom is the brass ring for automotive manufacturers, but since most mechanics are way tougher than most programmers, it remains unreachable.

If mechanics were denied access to machines the way programmers are denied access to programs, then Hogwarts would probably be the leading manufacturer of everything.

Oh, but Thomas, you ignorant slut, a machine cannot be copied onto a thumb drive or shared over the interweb; are we supposed to ignore that? We do ignore it; it happens all the time. By sheer volume, proprietary software is copied more freely than open-source software, and Microsoft still posts profits.

Smaller software companies can be devastated by piracy. I have some sympathy for these struggling niche companies. I have enough sympathy to purchase their software at a fair price if they provide a working demo, and a quality product that fulfills my purpose. That said, I lose some sympathy if I cannot inspect the workings of the product, and more when I am hassled by serial numbers. I lose all sympathy the instant I see a "dongle."

"Dongle" is a word that expresses a feeling of cosmically justified rage. In the computer industry, a dongle is a small, phallic object that is used to physically violate your computer. These demonic artifacts grant digital droit de seigneur to software companies.

A car has a key to protect you from car theft. A dongle is much like having a separate key for your transmission, which has a tendency to jiggle loose just before your interstate exit.

The methods of protecting software have spanned from brazen to bizarre. Software companies are constantly improving the sophistication with which they skirt consumer protections and provide untested and unreliable products at outrageously inflated prices. While proprietary software companies busily undermine centuries of legal precedent, the open-source software movement

quietly builds the foundations and infrastructure of the computer and IT industries.

Linus Torveldes wrote the first Linux kernel in 1991. He and thousands of other highly capable programmers contributed to the GNU project, started in 1983. Their goal was to create a free and open-source operating system based on Unix. Linux and the open-source utilities Apache, MySQL, and PHP today constitute the backbone of the interweb and run the bulk of business servers. The open nature of this system has lead to an unparalleled level of stability and security. It's easy to see how open-source systems might become more stable over time thanks to open testing. However, it is hard to see how security might be improved.

Think of a bank. Now imagine a way to rob that bank. You'd probably want to get a copy of the building's blueprints. You might think that the availability of those blueprints makes the bank less secure. Next, imagine that you are trying to design a security or fire-suppression system for this bank, and imagine you must do this without dimensions or blueprints.

So now you're a bank robber and you've got blueprints. You know the staff at the Linux Credit Union has blueprints, too, and they all carry tasers and handcuffs and practice jujitsu. In the Windows Bank, they wear blindfolds and carry Nerf weapons. Which would you rather rob, or even sell Girl Scout cookies at? Think of this next time you bask in the glow of a blue-screen of death, or are caught by the inevitable pop-up ambush.

I don't honestly expect to convert anyone to Linux with this rant, but there are fantastic open-source software packages out there that you can run on Windows or Mac OS. Since this article has pretty much run out of funny anyway, I'm just going to list some of the open-source packages you should know about so you can download and use them for free, instead of paying some shmuck for hacked-off code that crashes every computer in a 10-mile radius. Okay, none of this stuff is perfect, but it is free, and since it's open-source, you're free to perfect it yourself if you're a big enough nerd.

· **Scribus** – Desktop publishing for people that think Adobe has too much money.

· **Abiword, Open Office**– Sweet office suites.

· **Blender** – 3-D modeling, animation, and CAD.

· **EphPod** – Windows iPod support without the iTumor called iTunes.

· **VLC** – A media player that doesn't report your activities to a CEO.

· **Gimp** – Photoshop for non-dummies.

· **Audacity** – Aud … aud … I bet it has something to do with audio.

· **Avidemux, Jahshaka**– Non-linear video editing suites.

· **Firefox, Thunderbird**– Web browsing and email. For the love of God, please use these.

· **TightVNC** – Remote desktop access and virtual networking.

· **PuTTY** – if you need this, you already know what it does; this is just here to give props.

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