

Free Software, Free Society

Milan Santosi

2012-04-12 Thu

Outline

- 1 Introduction
- 2 What is Software?
- 3 Free Software Economics
- 4 The Four Freedoms
- 5 Examples of Licensing
- 6 Conclusion

Overview

- Understanding software
- What are the four freedoms of free software?
- What's the difference between Open Source and Free Software?

Considerations about Software

- Source Code is a work of authorship, similar but not identical to works of literature, a cooking recipe, or a musical piece.
 - Side Note: Legally, works of authorship fall under Copyright.
- Some form of Instruction set to make a machine do something.
- Condensed knowledge, or information (hence IT).

Considerations about Knowledge

- Information has unique properties, it is not a real commodity and it cannot easily be contained.
- From an economic point of view, knowledge is a positive externality.
 - Software, like all knowledge, should be accessible in a democratic and nondiscriminatory way.

Intellectual “Property”?

- Umbrella term for copyright, patent, trademark and other categories law. Those have virtually nothing in common.
- Commonly misused to actually mean anything.
- Implies claim to ownership, in particular of ideas.

Market implications

- In a free market economy monopolies are usually seen as dangerous and have to be avoided.
 - Monopolies on public goods are really, really bad.
- Software still generates economic value; however, most is generated by use, not sale of software.
- Software patents are in effect monopolies on ideas.

Freedom 0

- You are free to run the program, for any purpose.
 - Not as obvious as it might seem.

Freedom 1

- You are free to study how the program works, and change it so it does your computing as you wish. Access to the source code is a precondition for this.
 - The user controls the software, not the other way around.

Freedom 2

- You are free to redistribute copies so you can help your neighbor.
 - Few people realize how important sharing is, in particular sharing of public goods. Contrary to common propaganda, ideas, techniques, stories, melodies, images etc. are NOT hurt by sharing. On the contrary, sharing keeps them alive.

Freedom 3

- You are free to distribute copies of your modified versions to others. By doing this you can give the whole community a chance to benefit from your changes. Access to the source code is a precondition for this.

F/OSS Licensing

Openness of source is less decisive when one or more of the four freedoms are formally or effectively taken away. The term “Open Source” is usually used synonymous to Free Software, in the past the term was coined to avoid misunderstandings.

- GPL
 - Copyleft, restrictive, enforces all four freedoms.
- BSD
 - Non-copyleft, permissive, not all rights have to be conserved.

On Flash

Flash is not actually secret but adobe keeps making new versions which are different, faster than anyone can keep up and make free software to play those files, so it has almost the same effect as being secret.

On non-free formats

It's bad to distribute recordings in mp3 or any other proprietary format. Although there is free software to handle those formats, distributors legally can not include support for such formats because they are patented in many countries. Modern distributions of GNU/Linux facilitate use of these formats by letting the user decide, thereby avoiding legal issues. Whether or not this is a good thing is a question of moral. On the one hand, many of these formats have become pseudo-standards and for most users, the short term usability aspect prevails. On the other hand, it's a very bad idea if we were hoping to get rid of proprietary formats eventually.

Wrap-Up

- If you want to support freedom, don't distribute recordings in non-free formats. Please use formats such as .ogg, .webm, or .png.
- In an epoch when governments work for the mega corporations instead of reporting to their citizens, every technological change can be taken advantage of to reduce our freedom.

Further reading

- Richard Stallman: The GNU Manifesto
- Ben Klemens: Math you can't use
- Eric S. Raymond: The Cathedral and the Bazaar
- Stephan N. Kinsella: Against Intellectual Property

- Websites
 - <http://stopsoftwarepatents.com>
 - <http://defectivebydesign.org>
 - <http://patentabsurdity.com>
 - <http://fsf.org>