

Re: Compare Linux and FreeBSD Redux

Source: <http://unix.derkeiler.com/Newsgroups/comp.unix.bsd.freebsd.misc/2004-05/1104.html>

From: John S. Dyson (*toor_at_iquest.net*)

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In article <10bdcem8tdo6v2e@corp.supernews.com>,

"Neil Bradley" <nb_no_spam@synthcom.com> writes:

> "krf" <krf@Vega.com> wrote in message

> news:pan.2004.05.28.02.21.55.238893@Vega.com...

>> *By happy chance a Linux job came in over close to Dallas today (Thank you*

>> *MS and SCO!!!) Sorry, I have to disagree with you guys who don't like the*

>> *GPL controversy. I think it has been the greatest thing to happen to*

>> *Linux (and I assume, other non-Redmond OS's).*

>

> *Well, GPL and Linux are two completely separate things. My beef with the GPL*

> *is that it attaches politics to the license on what you can and can't do*

> *with the code. The BSD license truly is free.*

>

When looking at the attributes of the licenses, neither the free (e.g. BSD) or redistribution encumbered (GPL) licenses force the redistribution of the software. So, any rhetoric about a license keeping the source code or binary code available is specious.

The major thing that the licenses really do is to specify the terms for subsequent redistribution of the programs. In the case of BSD, the major 'cost' of redistribution is to make sure that the recipient has information about the copyright, license and subsequent terms of use. Those BSD 'conditions' for redistribution are essentially the 'common sense' requirements that provide the license information to the recipient. (Essentially, the BSD is practically the minimally restrictive true license without being public domain.) When redistributing other people's BSDed work, the source code of your own, potentially costly or time consuming add on modifications aren't encumbered and you can keep your modifications and add-on inventions secret while continuing to redistribute the runnable programs. Your modified versions of BSDed software IN NO WAY negatively impact the availability of the original code that you started with -- so the 'freeness' of the original code is NOT impacted by the BSD or GPL type licenses, whether or not you keep your potentially large source code investment secret or instead decide to let other people have it (hopefully, under free, BSD like terms.) There

is NOTHING magical about the BSDL, and no implication that add on works must be licensed for free use, and no serious conditions for redistribution of source or binary are imposed by the BSDL.

In the case of the GPL, there are conditions upon redistribution of runnable programs. Those conditions put the greatest burden on developers who create significant add-on enhancements. For individuals who are simply creating carbon copies of pre-built runnable GPLed programs, then there is practically NO encumbrance for that redistribution. Most of the (almost NIL) redistribution encumbrance for those who only 'copy' GPLed works is to provide pointers to the original source code locations on the net, offering copies of the software or other similar conditions. GPL is quite nice for the CDROM marketeers, where subsequent derived sources are strongly encouraged to be made available (due to the effects of the GPL terms) by those developers who invested in the add on innovation. In the case of the GPL, the only significant cost is incurred by the add-on software development investment that can be deemed to be 'derived' from existant GPLed programs. (Derivation can theoretically incorporate significantly greater investment of time and effort than the original GPLed codebase.) Summing up the conditional freedom for redistribution for GPLed code: similar to BSDLed code, source code can essentially be passed from friend to friend without significant consideration. For runnable GPLed programs, as long as the programs aren't modified, then the programs have few effective 'restrictions', not alot different from BSDL, but the source modifications for GPLed programs can slightly complicate the redistribution -- and one should apriori plan to give the source code modifications of GPLed works to those who receive the binaries.

There are more details than the notes above, but the qualitative difference between the 'freedom' of each license is most strongly felt by add-on developers. Any claimed 'promotion' of the freeness of the code is somewhat specious, because AFAIR, neither license forces the delivery of runnable programs or source code to any third party.

The 'forced' distribution of pieces of 'software' is mostly related to the requirement that source code be provided/offered/or pointed to for those who are given binary copies of the GPLed work. When doing significant upgrades to GPLed code, it is simply important to understand that the product of that add-on development must generally be offered to the 'customer' who receives the code. A wise developer will do a risk assessment for the potential of the 'expensive' add-on work being divulged to a competitor, or the customer will opt-out of a subsequent support arrangement since he supposedly has access to the source codebase. In some cases, the risk will be very low, the add-on work is so customer specific as to be unhelpful for other applications, or the customer has no interest in providing the support himself. Admittedly, in MANY cases, this 'risk' is small, but in some important cases, the risk can be high.

>From a philosophical standpoint, the rhetoric about GPL is well sold to the developer community, but it is exactly the potentially most innovative and productive add-on developer community who incur the highest cost in the GPL scheme. On the other hand, the marketeers, those who started the project on the 'ground floor', and those who benefit from name recognition incur the least cost in this scheme, and GPL is essentially a license of free software for many individuals in each of those categories — but cost with relatively less benefit (but still beneficial) is incurred by those often-unsung add-on developers.

John