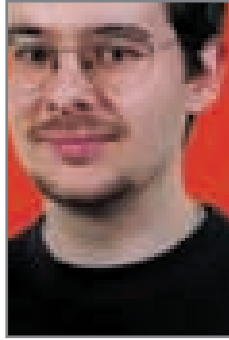


Daniel James



Linux users are often described as a community, rather than as mere customers. A two-way relationship exists between the people that write free software, and those that put it to work in their organisations. In the early days of Linux, the community was comprised mostly of hackers and highly knowledgeable individuals who were able to contribute directly to the codebase, with both patches and new programs.

Now that the community numbers in the millions, the proportion of users able to contribute actual code rather than bug reports and wish lists is steadily diminishing. Linux is finding its way into desktop clients, set-top boxes, PDAs and all kinds of embedded systems – the users of which will never see source code, let alone compile or modify it.

A high proportion of non code-contributing users presents a challenge for business models based on free software. Running a successful project often means having to provide technical support for a very large number of people at all levels of competence, and paying high bandwidth charges so that those people can download your work. That's before salaries for developers, who like anyone else need a roof over their head.

If we consider that a freely downloadable Linux distribution such as Mandrake, which comes on two full CDs, may have hundreds of thousands of downloads, then the cost of providing FTP servers alone can be considerable. The authors of the project might have to pay their ISP as much as £15 per gigabyte of data transferred, which would mean they were effectively paying for you to have their work.

Conventional thinking has been that Linux users who cannot fix or improve code themselves will pay others to do it, thereby creating a service-based revenue stream. However, some kinds of software just don't need associated services, and the proceeds from support for other kinds might not be enough to pay the bills of the project.

The dot-com boom is long gone, and investors will no longer throw money at free software projects with unsustainable revenue models. Instead, Linux companies and individual developers will have to find ways to earn their keep without compromising the fundamentally free nature of the operating system.

While corporate subsidy, in which a hacker is salaried by a company which expects little in the way of exclusive work has kept many key Linux developers solvent, it is not available to many in the developer community. Other contributors to the Linux phenomenon have to keep their day jobs going, or risk bankruptcy, and that's not much of a reward for creating software of use to so many people.

One solution that has been used is to maintain a proprietary product in parallel to a free software version but, if a revenue stream

existed for the latter, this duplication of time and effort would not be necessary. There are two alternatives. In the first, users who cannot contribute code or other help could send cash directly to a project, as a voluntary donation. If you've downloaded .iso images of Mandrake, you can now send the company behind the distribution money to cover the cost of providing the software to you.

While the GNU GPL does allow authors to charge for the software they write under the licence, a culture has developed where many Linux users expect to get programs as free beer, or for the unit cost of distributing them. The ease with which software can be redistributed undermines efforts to create revenue from boxed retail sales.

A second alternative would be to support developers who release Linux software with limited functionality, in something like the traditional shareware model. Freely downloadable programs might be intended for trial use, or have additional features which are released with the purchase of a licence key. A good example would be the cross-platform IglooFTP client, in which a message pops up after 30 days use asking you to register the program for a modest fee.

It's a well known saying of Linus Torvalds that the person who writes the code gets to choose the licence. A typical

Linux system already contains a mixture of licences – with the kernel, Apache, Perl and KDE all released with different rights and responsibilities. No-one would be compelled to use Linux shareware, since the core system and many applications will remain free, thanks to the GNU GPL.

Of course, the author of non-GPL software is not entitled to make use of the code already written under that licence, and it would be their decision if they wanted to release their own source code, or not. It would be a challenge to the advocates of exclusively GPL-licensed systems to provide a better program.

Some forms of demoware would be unacceptable, such as the Adobe FrameMaker beta that was boycotted by the Linux community because it was programmed to stop working on a certain date. But sensitively licensed shareware could provide independent Linux developers with the ability to earn a living.

Ask the developers of the free software you use if they need help – the answer will almost certainly be yes. If that means you support their project with just some of the money you might have spent on a proprietary operating system and applications, then you'll be getting excellent value.

Time to pay up for your free software

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