

Opensourcedom: The Rise of the Little Americas

“Zoo-boon-too.” Not “ex-uh-bun-too.” *Xubuntu*. A flavor of Ubuntu. Not quite as literal a flavor as Android’s version names, such as “Kitkat” or “Jellybean,” but a technical flavor nonetheless. When I first encountered it as a middle-schooler, I was horrified. Where are the .exe files? What is this “terminal” that I have to use? Why is a mouse the logo? And I stuck to using Windows 7.

I have the right to make the choice of whether to use Windows or Ubuntu. The inalienable right to liberty is one of America’s defining principles. But how much of this freedom is the liberty of choice, and how much of it the liberty from cost?

Freedom from economic avarice and the fear of expenses would eliminate immeasurable stress and greatly ease living. So long as there is no inflation, an infinite allowance would give the poor equal rights to the wealthy. People could own anything they wanted, and live contentedly alongside one another. The world would be liberated from the needs of the poor, the sick, the wounded, and money could be fed into whatever field people wished.

But the world is in no position to achieve absolute equality right now. Nor would it want complete equality, as that would likely manifest itself into a dreaded communism and the resulting despotism—a diversity, of the *process* of reaching equality, is the ultimate goal. And we’re on the way.

With the focus of American society moving away from the strict political goals of democratic ideals, a new focal point lies in the advancement of math and the sciences, or the two collectively as their practical application: technology. Society is stable, but the digital world of the Internet is surely dynamic; billions surf the web and form complex online communities and manage the hardware behind the machines.

The best maintained of these are the open-source software (OSS) projects. Chrome the browser and Chrome OS (OS for “operating system”) is an OSS, as is Ubuntu OS or the Apache HTTP service. Open source means that a software is open to contribution by anyone, and the code is available to everyone; edits only have to be accepted and tested by a parent company, such as Google for Chrome or Canonical for Ubuntu.

The public availability of the code opens up a range of new effects that proprietary software cannot engender. The first is that the software becomes freeware. If any company tries to take ownership and profit from it, another group can simply reproduce the project for free and attract all of the consumers. This attention, this public appeal, is key to its success: people’s eyes light up at the word “free,” especially monetarily. Whereas our government bestows freedom upon the people, this is not something that can be tangibly felt; the roll of money in your pocketbook, rather than being transferred that of a tech company’s, is cozily kept in your possession. There is no need for cost analysts and profit predictors—whoever should want the software should receive it. Anybody and everybody can use it.

Hence the birth of a communal equality. Equality is the foundation of democracy. Democracy guarantees freedom to all. This freedom is discussed by Ubuntu’s “Our Philosophy” page:

“Free software gives everyone the freedom to use it however they want and share with whoever they like ... We are able to give access to essential software for those who couldn’t otherwise afford it – an advantage that’s keenly felt by individuals and organisations all over the world” (“Our Philosophy | About Ubuntu”).

The right of accessibility for *all* people, the equal representation of *all* people is fundamental to this idea of OSS. If software favors one group of people, such as the wealthy class who alone have the ability to buy the high-end closed-source software such as Autodesk’s AutoCAD. If regular people do not have the ability to pay for it, then it’s too expensive to be practical.



The Xubuntu Logo, Americanized

At the time Google Chrome came out eight years ago, the “bruising browser war,” as Google CEO Eric Schmidt put it, had long begun. The world had recently emerged from the fierce ‘90s wars between Internet Explorer and Netscape Navigator, with the former victorious. Eight years ago, Internet Explorer had over sixty percent of the global browser usage. Now, Chrome has over half of the global browser usage and over sixty percent of the total desktop usage. And it did so in less than a decade and in a much more competitive market with Safari and Firefox as additional players.

How? It’s open source, of course. Firefox also is open source and has settled into a comfortable third place for global usage. People didn’t want to spend hundreds or thousands of dollars to get a PC for Internet Explorer or a Mac for Safari; they wanted to browse the web.

It’s truly amazing what this type of product can accomplish. I use both of these for the majority of the time I spend on a computer; yet they don’t cost a *cent*; you could get an infinite copies of this operating and of this browser for a four-hundred dollar license to MS Office Pro. Or an app for a five bucks on the App Store. Or even a ninety-nine cent song in the iTunes store. Nothing with a price tag can compare.

Then it seems somewhat communistic. Everyone can own the same share of these products as they would like, and no one benefits more or less than anyone else. But this is false—OSS is not static, but highly dynamic. The users have the ability to change the software as they wish. It is not a company in the lead, changing elements to their best interests—it’s the people. It is, in the modern sense, a system *for* the people, *by* the people.

If a duplicitous, closed source company decided to deliberately create flaws so that they could earn extra money from repairs, nothing is stopping them. Likewise, if a company is profitable enough to stop a breakneck pace of development, they are at their leisure to do so. The motivation to appease *others*—as in the case for a company developing software for *consumers*—is very different than *self-interest*—which drives OSS. The developers of Ubuntu and Chrome work fervently to have better software mainly for *themselves*—who wouldn’t want the best software?—and this leads to the pleasant benefit of helping out everyone else as well.

But while this is all so optimistic—if only our natural rights and civil virtue could be embodied in a virtual, digital world—there are inevitably downsides to OSS. Companies of this sort do not gain much money from their products. Rather than earning money directly from sales of a product—the major source of income for paid-software—the profit for the small teams managing the OSS have to depend on money from support teams and special customizations. And, of course, free code means a higher vulnerability to hacking. Wikipedia is similarly susceptible to malicious or misinformed edits. However, considering that Wikipedia’s information is generally reliable and Ubuntu OS arguably even more secure than Windows or Mac OS, the number of good-samaritans who patch up vulnerabilities in OSS far outnumber the malevolent hackers seeking to destroy others’ information. That being said, the high pay and private code of Apple’s or Microsoft’s employees offer as much extra “security” as would closing America’s doors to Muslims stop terrorism—little at all. Even this ostensible negative of payless work benefits by building selfless goodwill and, surprisingly, security.

To be open source means a specific subset of freedoms: Ubuntu’s page on open-source specifically states that “the term open source was coined in 1998 to remove the ambiguity in the English word ‘free’” (“Our Philosophy | About Ubuntu”). Thus, “opensourcedom” is a subset of what we call “freedom.” Free from monetary concerns, from despotism, from lack of representation. Innovative, self-sufficient, daring. As our ties to America’s revolutionary roots and to the humanities slackens, the democratic potential of modern technology becomes ever closer in likeness to what Americans believe. America fostered these technological creations, but in each one there is a reflection of American beliefs. These technological products are the little Americas of the future.