Why Piracy Hurts Open Source

A proper view of open source is the right alternative to piracy.

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Over and over again, we hear from people in various software companies telling us that piracy hurts their industry. "Boo-hoo", I hear you say. "Piracy hurts the consumer by jacking up the price"—righto. As far as most of us are concerned, piracy is something that doesn't affect us; it simply means that the BMW-driving-industry-heads don't get such a fat check at the end of the month. But, have you ever considered the effect that piracy has on open-source software?

At first glance, piracy might seem to be "all in the spirit" of the open-source movement—a seemingly left-wing cause, designed to give big companies a run for their money and a way to "stick it to the man". Anarchists with CD burners pumping out free copies of proprietary programs should be all in the same vein, right? Wrong. Piracy hurts open-source projects in two big ways.

First, piracy helps to establish and cement major proprietary programs as the industry standard. Many people take for granted that they simply can download a CD image from a warez site or get their friends to copy the original. This makes for easy access to major software suites with zero dollars paid, and the software then spreads like wildfire. If everyone else is using this particular piece of software, then so must you, or otherwise you'll be left behind. This means that an open-source program will be fighting more and more against a popular commercial alternative.

Second, piracy makes open-source equivalents look inferior. With the removal of social conscience in regards to copying, no longer will a user make a choice based on the traditional parameters of budget, suitability and effectiveness. Piracy removes the cost factor, leaving the biggest and best as the only viable choice. Let's take a look at some real-life examples of commercial software and their open-source equivalents.

ADOBE PHOTOSHOP

Photoshop is widely regarded as the best image editor industry-wide, and the yardstick by which other editors are measured. All of my graphic designer friends use Photoshop, and none of them have paid for it. I've given them The GIMP, and although they all liked it to a point, none of them viewed it as a viable alternative to Photoshop, due to it not being as fully featured, among other issues like adjusting to another interface, which makes it harder to use at first.

However, none of them felt the sting of shelling out hundreds of dollars for this advanced piece of software, and therefore, none of them are able to make a proper comparison. The GIMP developers do a lot of hard work trying to make a free alternative to commercial graphic editors, and all I ever hear is, "it's not as good as Photoshop." Unpaid volunteers are competing against paid software designers and are being unappreciated by the masses.

MICROSOFT OFFICE

Office needs no introduction; it is used daily by millions, Microsoft's ubiquitous product has been around for more than a decade. Most people I know either got it preloaded on their new PC, or more likely, had it copied by a friend. The open-source alternative, OpenOffice.org, is gaining more and more popularity, but its importance is still not grasped by many who simply rely on a copy of Microsoft Office lying around (not a legally licensed one). If every user realized how much money they really owed Microsoft and had to pay-up, they'd be switching in droves!

If we were looking at the world of cars, where cost factor is still the main equation, most people would be going for the smaller, more economical version. Only those that could afford it or genuinely need it would buy a bigger car. In the software world, we simply can steal the biggest and best and no one is bothered by it. Why? Because everybody does it. Obviously, we need the return of the old social conscience, but that's easier said than done. How to combat piracy is outside the scope of this article, but we can at least cut down piracy in our own community. If a friend wants an illegal copy of a commercial program, please don't give it to them, but feel free to give them an open-source alternative.∎

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