Free Software Matters: Microsoft Strikes Back

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Now that the Soviet Empire is no more, Microsoft has identified the greatest current threat to the American Way of Life. Not global warming, corporate irresponsibility, or bad public education: no, the nemesis of American values and global prosperity is—the free software movement.

It's nice to be appreciated. In all the years that my colleagues and clients in the community have been building the best-quality programs on earth and giving them away for everyone to learn from and use, there's always been a tiny bit of chagrin mixed with our satisfaction: our friends in Redmond just didn't seem to care. But when Craig Mundie, a Microsoft Senior Vice President, spoke in New York on May 3, all those years of being ignored ended.

We are realists and we did not expect to be thanked. We knew Microsoft wasn't going to give us an award for innovation. We did deserve to be lavishly congratulated for bringing back the fun and glory of programming on an unprecedented worldwide scale, enlisting thousands of volunteers in creating the most reliable and flexible operating system for personal computers along with thousands of applications packages performing every task that anyone needs computers to undertake. Our innovative technologies are available at minimal distribution cost to anyone, anywhere. Not only can everyone run our software: everyone can read it, learn from it, modify it or reuse it in any project of their own, redistribute it, sell it—do anything with it except reduce the freedom of anyone else. We think that's a contribution to society justifying an award, but we didn't expect to get

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one from Microsoft. What surprised us, now that Microsoft's paying attention, is that what they have to say isn't just hostile. It's also stupid.

Mr Mundie told his audience and the invited world press that the basis of continued global prosperity is the information society, which in turn rests on the continued viability of Microsoft's "commercial software business model." That model is to make software and sell it to people at high prices without giving them the rights to understand and improve it. Our model, which is to make the best software anyone knows how to make and then give it away to everyone else so they can try to make it better, threatens, Mr Mundie said, to prevent innovation.

Naturally an idea this dumb is not likely to be widely adopted unless it is confusingly dressed up to look like something else. So Mr Mundie explained that free software is like the dot-coms that everyone thought were so wonderful until it turned out that advertisers wouldn't pay for everything they were giving away. But the dot-coms Mr Mundie was talking about got enormous amounts of venture capital to produce very expensive content that was going to be "given away" to consumers in return for the right to sell their eyeballs to advertisers. When it turned out that this wouldn't make enough money to pay for the expensive content, everything folded. The free software movement can't fail that way because, our content isn't expensive: we collaboratively make it at a price so low we can afford to give it all away. We don't need advertising revenues or venture capital to make the product.

In fact, the technical development of free software so far is just a tiny first installment of what's going to happen next. Because the Internet is maturing throughout the world, along with a generation of programmers who have grown up with free software, there are tens of thousands of new potential contributors to free software each year, and the range of new subjects they can tackle is vast. Because the software is fully free and everyone can modify it, maintenance is in fact much easier and takes less of the collective brainpower available. And because all the code is reusable, it's much easier to start new projects because you can take over everyone else's solutions to all the familiar problems. So free software produces the kind of innovation and new product development that the dot-com world could only achieve using unsustainable levels of venture capital. Not only does Mr Mundie's example not support his argument against free software, it actually shows why free software is an inherently superior competitor when matched against Microsoft.

Thanks to the GPL, which is the real target of Microsoft's hostility, everything the free movement does remains free forever. Microsoft can't "embrace and extend" free software, and can't buy it up either. So Microsoft has to compete against it. Which, Mr Mundie admits in the most amazing part of his remarks, it can't. The free software movement, through the GPL, Mr Mundie said:

> fundamentally undermines the independent commercial software sector because it effectively makes it impossible to distribute software on a basis where recipients pay for the product rather than just the cost of distribution.

"Effectively makes it impossible" to sell bad stuff at high prices. Instead Microsoft would have to make much better software than ours so that people would pay much more for it. And that, Mr Mundie knows, they can't do.

So there it is. Microsoft now admits that, if they can't confuse the issue, we're a superior competitor and we're going to put them out of business. To attack us, you have to attack freedom. We're going to transform the global industry forever, making things better for programmers, users, and those who want to learn. From here on out, even Microsoft admits that Free Software Matters.