

An up-to-date look at free software and its makers

PROJECTS ON THE MOVE

The recent discussion concerning the future of Mozilla Thunderbird is one example of the needs of a corporation vs. those of the user community. **BY CARSTEN SCHNOBER**

The relationship between the open source community and software vendors has always been tricky. Uncompromising supporters of free software avoid using proprietary software – especially on the operating-system front – and many community members view market leader Microsoft as an evil-doer. In contrast to this, the most widespread free system, Linux, offers a safe haven for open source advocates.

One should avoid this kind of oversimplified view of application software vendors. Some classical software manufacturers produce and sell proprietary-only applications, and their standing with the open source community is generally not much better than Microsoft's. These vendors can only expect more community acceptance if they develop products for free operating systems.

The community's opinion of companies and organizations that produce original free software or develop existing products is divided. The companies include numerous Linux distributors who commonly add major enhancements to the Linux kernel or various applications. Mozilla [1] has become popular thanks to Firefox and Thunderbird, and OpenOffice.org [2] develops the free Open Office suite.

Nobody would deny that corporations such as Red Hat or SUSE have genuinely helped advance Linux. One contribution has been making Linux

suitable for professional deployment, and even making Linux the standard product in some cases. The GPL (GNU General Public License) typically forces these vendors to release their patches to the general public. Firefox, Thunderbird, and Open Office are helping free software gradually make inroads into proprietary platforms and have been praised for propagating the idea of free software.

On the other hand, companies who earn money with free software are often accused of making a profit out of modifying volunteer development work, thus creating a product that they can sell for a profit. Cases that have become public in recent years have given rise to skepticism concerning companies that earn money with Linux; in some cases, manufacturers have used free-

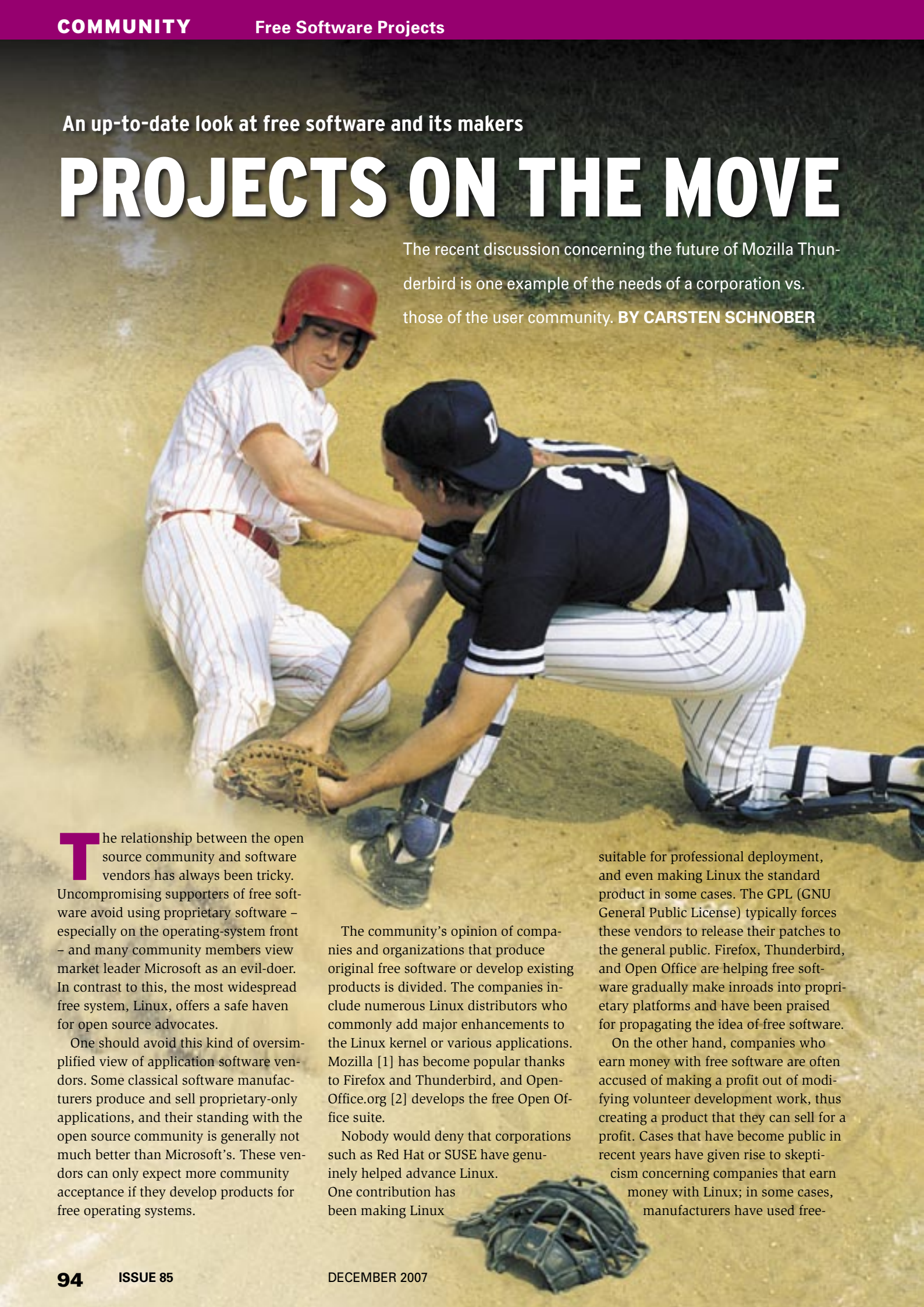




Figure 1: Mitchell Baker, the Chair of the Mozilla Foundation, wants to introduce a new organizational structure for development of the Thunderbird email client.

ware as device firmware but refused to disclose their code modifications. On several occasions, the courts have enforced GPL compliance. The GPL Violations page [3] documents these cases and lists GPL violations by brand name, such as D-Link, Lidl, Aldi, Gigabyte, Sitecom, and Asus.

Even some completely free Linux distributions are regarded with skepticism by open source proponents. Critics view Red Hat's Fedora and Novell's SUSE, both of which are free distributions, as experimenting grounds for the corporations's commercial products.

The Mozilla Issue

Mozilla actually has a good reputation with the open source community's anti-Microsoft lobby. The project was a result of the browser competition between Microsoft and Netscape in the 1990s. After losing the battle for browser-market leadership, Netscape published its browser source code, and the Firefox browser, which was based on this code, has since become one of the most popular open source programs of all time. The email component of the former Mozilla Internet Suite gave birth to the popular Thunderbird mail client.

Recently, conflict has been brewing between the Mozilla Foundation and Thunderbird users. The Mozilla Foundation uses contributions to sponsor the ongoing development of Firefox and Thunderbird and pays programmers to work on both open source projects. Of course, this system helps development to progress more quickly and effectively

than it would if the foundation relied on voluntary hackers.

The main problem with symbioses between paid programmers and volunteers is that the "employer" – the Mozilla Foundation, in this case – defines where the project is headed, which patches make their way into the official code, and which new features have top priority. These decisions might not always be what the users and the developer community prefer.

The current bone of contention centers on an announcement by the Chair of the Mozilla Foundation, Mitchell Baker (Figure 1), that Thunderbird development was being completely reconsidered [4]. Thunderbird is not nearly as successful as Firefox, which is why most of the Mozilla Foundation's energy is directed into developing the browser. Compared with the browser, Thunderbird is a wallflower, and Mozilla has long since ditched the original roadmap, which envisaged synchronizing updates and version numbers of the two programs.

Baker has listed three options for the future development of Thunderbird. The first would be an independent Thunderbird project, which would be financed by a separate foundation on the lines of the Mozilla Foundation and promote the mail client as its objective. Baker views this model as one that would give Thunderbird the most leeway, and at the same time, it would mean the biggest organizational changes to consume resources.

Baker's second suggestion – setting up a subsidiary of the Mozilla Foundation to handle Thunderbird development – would mean less administrative effort, but it would mean less freedom. The third option would convert Thunderbird to a genuine community project with volunteer developers who would be assisted and advised by a small company.

Many users feared that the Mozilla Foundation might use reorganization of the Thunderbird project as an excuse to devote even less time to the mail program. Baker refutes these claims in her blog. Instead, she says a new organizational structure would ensure committed, ongoing development of Thunderbird by protecting the project against the danger of funds being transferred from Thunderbird to Firefox development should Mozilla's powerhouse product need more resources [5].

Asa Dotzler, who mainly takes care of community issues for the Mozilla project, turned the tables by referring to one of the principles of free software development in his blog, saying that free software only works if users do not act like classical consumers and instead make contributions themselves.

Dotzler asked Thunderbird users whether they bothered to report bugs to the developers, or tested pre-release versions, or wrote patches to fix the bugs they had discovered. If people really wanted to help Thunderbird, they should also promote the client to their families, friends, and colleagues or on their own home pages, he said [6].

Diplomacy

The Mozilla Foundation has demonstrated a flair in the past for marketing open source software without exploiting community contributors, so the Thunderbird conflict is unlikely to escalate. Transparent, blog-based communications also help to establish trust, while demonstrating the challenges in the relationship between the open source community and corporate business.

Many corporations are far less than exemplary in their dealings with the developer community. Some companies that regularly receive patches from volunteers still tend to ignore user requests and present changes without waiting for community input. On the other hand, people tend to forget that free software development can only work if users share their abilities rather than just make demands. ■

INFO

- [1] Mozilla: <http://www.mozilla.org>
- [2] OpenOffice.org: <http://www.openoffice.org>
- [3] GPL Violations: <http://gpl-violations.org>
- [4] Mitchell Baker on the future of Thunderbird: http://weblogs.mozillazine.org/mitchell/archives/2007/07/email_futures.html
- [5] "Thunderbird and the Mozilla Mission," by Mitchell Baker, http://weblogs.mozillazine.org/mitchell/archives/2007/07/thunderbird_and_the_mozilla_mi.html
- [6] "Firefox and More," by Asa Dotzler, http://weblogs.mozillazine.org/asa/archives/2007/07/thunderbirds_no.html