If Windows were Software Livre...

SOFTWARE LIVRE

If Windows were free software, would maddog use it?

BY JON "MADDOG" HALL

Recently I did a video broadcast for a company called 4Linux in Sao Paulo, Brazil. We took some live questions and I answered as many as I could, but a few were unanswered because of time constraints. After the conference, however, the President of 4Linux, Marcelo Marques, sent me a question from a young student – Lucas Schenkel Schieferdecker – and asked me to comment on it. The question was, "If Windows was Software Livre (Free Software) too, would you use it?"

First of all, I think we have to define what I think of when I say Software Livre. In this case, it is not what has become defined as *open source*. I used open source code for many years in non-free forms of BSD Unix and other operating systems in which the distributor of the software is not required to make the sources available. A lot of the software was very good, but eventually I needed the sources of the software to fix a problem or change it slightly, and those sources were not available to me.

In order for me to consider using Windows software, my first requirement would be that the software is truly "Free Software" (Free as in Freedom), with the source code available and under a license that does not limit the way I use the software. I believe that this freedom is embodied in the GPL. Some people will argue that the GPL is more restrictive than the BSD, but Lucas asked what would be required for me to use Windows, and my first criteria is that Windows must be "Free Software" under the GPL, and not just open source.

I do not mind paying for software. I have bought a lot of software over my lifetime – some expensive, and some in-expensive. As a result of my training (and my nature), I have bought few software services because I can usually write or modify the software I need to do my job, and operating systems such as Unix and GNU/Linux gave me the tools I needed to do so. I think that the writers of software have the right to determine what they do with it, and if they want to sell their software as a product, and assuming that the software meets my needs and I feel it is of value, then I will pay for it. However, often their restrictive licenses reduce the value of their software to less than zero, and because I believe in following licenses, I can not use their product.

The second consideration for whether I would use Microsoft Windows has to do with its value. Unfortunately, Windows has very little value because it is, for the most part, just an operating system; it comes with no compilers and no really useful programs. Many of the programs that come bundled with new computers are just a way for proprietary software developers to get you to buy extensions to their "gratis" software. By the time you buy the rest of the software to make the system really useful (for example, Microsoft Office, Adobe Photoshop, and multi-media programs), you probably have spent several hundreds or thousands of dollars per computer. Assuming that these programs too were Software Livre, I would not mind buying a copy of them, but I would like the ability to maintain or extend them myself, or even make a copy to use temporarily on another computer without triggering lots of piracy-prevention software.

GNU/Linux, on the other hand, gives me all of the programs I need to do my job, with more software appearing daily. Thus, my second requirement would be that most – if not all – software that runs on Windows (particularly the software I need) would also be Software Livre.

The third consideration is more of a personal issue: I enjoy a multitude of interfaces for end users. I don't mind learning a new interface or looking up a command-line program if it will help me do my work. Many people shun the command line, preferring the "click and point" interface of operating systems like Microsoft Windows. In order for me to use Microsoft products, I would require a rich, fully featured command-line interface that was integral to the system.

A final factor for me is related to quality. I used to work for a company that produced software, and I know the difficulty inherent in creating a quality product that meets the needs of hundreds of millions of customers. I also understand the issues around analyzing, testing, and distributing security patches, and I prefer to make the decision about what patches to apply and when to apply them by myself. This, for the most part, also requires the source code.

Would I use Microsoft Windows if it was Software Livre? Perhaps in the past, but that time is now over. I have everything I need in current Software Livre products, and Microsoft would have to do something truly spectacular to get me to switch back. ∎