WRITE ACCESS

Software Patents

I am writing in reply to John Appleyard's letter (Issue #83, August 2008) regarding software patents. In his letter, Mr Appleyard is concerned about the impossibility of filing patents for algorithms in the UK.

Algorithms (and by extension computer programs of any kind) are series of exact instructions to achieve an objective. Computer programmers issue these instructions in a computer language (C, Perl, or even Visual Basic) not because it is the best way to describe an algorithm, but because it is the only way we can explain these steps to a machine.

Any computing algorithm is perfectly representable by using a natural language (English, Swahili, Russian…), so a software patent is tantamount to limiting freedom of speech. Software patents stop people sharing and expressing ideas, which is the very foundation of culture and the scientific method.

I, and many other people that know more about this than me, equate software patents with cultural barbarism. There are many people out there without any scruples who file patents with such vague language that it becomes literally impossible not to infringe. This situation, rightly, gives pause for thought to legislative bodies in which unrepentant political lobbying is not corruptly widespread.

There is no question that the work of professional programmers and software engineers should be protected, but this is done perfectly well by the abusive, anti-consumer copyright legislation we have in place.
J. Martinez

LM Thank you for your thoughts. Software patents are definitely a contentious issue throughout the greater world of IT, and even within the open source community, opinions can vary widely.

Although we have gone on record on several occasions with our objection to software patents, we do support a free and open discussion of the topic. John Appleyard's letter in Issue 93 represented a valid viewpoint (held by many) regarding the significant investment companies make in developing and maintaining software systems.

As we stated in our reply (and as you mention above also), the biggest problem with software patents is that they are too vague, and they don't really do what they are supposed to do. As for the free speech point, that argument would seem to apply equally to all patents, not just to software patents, since any patent can be described in natural language. Some free software advocates do indeed take this "no patents anytime" approach, however, this strategy seems risky because it plays into the hands of those who believe that software patents are just like any other patents.

I'm sure we'll get more mail on this pertinent topic as the situation evolves.

Distros and DVDs

I love your magazine, but I have one minor complaint. I've been a subscriber for just about a year. I figured with as many Linux distros as were out there I would seldom see the same one twice. I was hoping to get a greater exposure to what's available. However, in my short time as a subscriber I've received: 2 Fedoras, 2 SUSEs, 3 Ubuntus, 2 Mandrivas and a couple of others.

I really would like a lot more variety. I'm still looking for a good distro. I haven't been happy with one since Caldera self destructed. If this keeps up, is there anyway I can subscribe without receiving the DVD?
Jon

LM The fact is, a majority of our readers continually express a preference for the latest updates of the most popular Linux distributions. We have included other distros in the past year, such as Sabayon (Issue #84) and PCLinuxOS (Issue #89), and we will continue to do so in future issues.

We do offer a no-DVD subscription options for readers who like to get there Linux elsewhere. To change to a no-DVD subscription, readers in the US and Canada (Linux Pro readers) should contact us at:
cs@linuxpromagazine.com or phone *1-866-247-2802*.
Readers in the UK and elsewhere can visit our website:
https://www.linux-magazine.com/ subscribe/iframe_changesubscription

Please send your comments and suggestions to letters@linux-magazine.com