WRITE ACCESS

Linux Magazine in India

A friend picked up an issue of *Linux Magazine* in the US and I loved it. Here in India, *Linux Magazine* is not readily available, and shipping costs too much. Will you guys consider establishing a center for your magazine here in India? I am pretty sure your magazine would be blockbuster. India has lots of Linux users. If you guys could locally distribute the magazines in India, it really would be great.

Shashwat

LM Thanks for the feedback. We're glad to hear you liked the magazine. We deliver to many parts of the world, but the presence of *Linux Magazine* at your local newsstand might depend on external factors such as shipping costs and the wholesale magazine distribution system in your country. If you have trouble finding *Linux Magazine* in your area, you might consider signing up for a digital subscription. Digital subscribers can download a PDF version of *Linux Magazine* from anywhere in the world. For more on *Linux Magazine* digital subscriptions see:

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Patents

What's the big problem with patents on algorithms?

If I devise a new mechanism that's expressed in gears and levers, that, apparently, is fine. If it works using interlocking molecules, that's fine too. But a computer algorithm cannot be patented in the UK. You stand a better chance in the EU or the US, but the UK patent office won't look at it unless it has a physical manifestation of some sort. Why is that? What, in principle, is the difference?

I confess that I do have an ax to grind here. My company has developed a novel algorithm for solving certain important classes of simultaneous linear equations.

It took a huge amount of (privately funded) work to develop, and I really don't see why we should give it away. If it were a drug or an electronic device, we would be looking to build a successful tax-paying business around it.

A couple of weeks ago, I found myself being lectured on software patents by an academic Linux enthusiast who, it transpired, had himself filed patents on the (taxpayer-funded) work he'd done at University.

Let's be consistent here – either scrap patents altogether, or allow patents on novel computer-based algorithms.

John Appleyard

LM Although a majority of commentators in the open source community oppose software patents, I can safely say that your opinion is shared by many IT professionals. The reasons why software patents receive so much opposition in the open source community range from the metaphysical to the practical. I know a large number of open source advocates who would answer the challenge of your final sentence by agreeing that there should be no patents of any kind.

Others object for implementation reasons. As one who occasionally writes on this topic, I would say that my biggest objection to software patents is that they are often ill-defined in a way that tends to inhibit innovation. Yes, ideally software patents are "algorithm patents," but a surprising number of them are actually more like very vague descriptions disguised to look like algorithms.

Another problem is the term "novel" that you correctly state as a requirement for a software patent. Software engineering is a very complex field, and the task of evaluating software patents to determine if they are truly unique and original requires lots of time and expertise. In the US, which is known for its support of software patents, the government does not provide adequate funding to do the job well, and consequently, lots of patents are filed that shouldn't be.

A final problem is that software patents only offer protection if you invest lots of money in defending them. Some of the big companies that talk at length about the importance of protecting their "Intellectual Property" knowingly (or unknowingly) violate the patent claims of other companies routinely. Even if your company were able to secure a patent for the algorithm, you would be in position of having to defend it, which could cost millions of dollars and, in the end, you might lose.

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