

FOSS: Free and Open Source Software



What is FOSS?

- It means you own your software – you decide what to do with it forever
 - Free to: run, study, modify, and share code
- “Open-source” is a similar but not identical term (will talk about this later)
- Opposite of “proprietary software”
 - Often times only “licensed” to you as a “service”
 - Code is hidden from the public and modifying it is often illegal

History of Freedom

- “Hacker culture” from the earliest days (ARPAnet and Unix) relied on a spirit of devs sharing and reusing code
- The 1998 DMCA made it illegal to modify your own property in ways the manufacturer disapproves of
 - This reshaped what people took for granted surrounding technology
- The internet gradually became more gated, companies would grant communities “API access” to create tools when growing
 - But then would pull it away when they became entrenched

Why Freedom Matters

- It's not just about ricing your system or custom icon packs
- Owning your software means companies can't screw you down the line
- More transparency/control means less surveillance and censorship
- Think about how much you use a computer
 - How much valuable information and your life that is dependent on that machine
 - Companies know this and they'll screw you over to extort every penny

Example: Adobe Animate Fiasco

- Adobe Animate (formerly Flash) was a program many artists and game developers relied on for their processes
- Every project made in Animate uses the proprietary .FLA format, meaning that even if you wanted to switch, you can't – those files only work with Animate
 - It'd mean giving up on all of your work
- A couple weeks back, Adobe randomly decided they didn't think Animate was worth keeping around and would shut it down anyways
 - All the people who were loyal would end up getting screwed anyways



FOSS and Linux



- Linux is free-software, released under the GPL
- Pioneered the “bazaar” model of FOSS development
 - “Many eyeballs” approach
 - Releases were put out rapidly and a core community of enthusiasts would test, contribute features, and submit bugfixes
- Challenged existing notions about “who” could make good software quickly
- All the cool stuff we can do on Linux today is thanks to its commons-centric, open approach

How FOSS Gets Made

- The most notable projects often depend on corporate or nonprofit grants
 - Tend to be “infrastructure” – things companies can use
- But are we really more free if Netflix is running on open-source Apache servers?
- We need user-end applications too – most of these are held up by solo devs or community teams

Example: The Fediverse

- As we all know, big social media platforms love to screw over their users
 - The “Fediverse” is a network of booming decentralized FOSS social media-platforms that share a protocol
 - Mastodon, PeerTube, PixelFed, Lemmy, etc.
- Seen a lot of growth in recent years, very community-driven
 - Volunteers maintain various tools, front-ends, and instances in their spare time
 - Often times they struggle with scaling and are in dire need of assistance

FOSS Organizations

- You need FOSS organizations to:
 - Act as “the face” of FOSS: setting definitions, developing theory, and connecting activists
 - Help support and invest in promising projects and spaces
 - Run campaigns and come up with strategies to promote FOSS
- In practice, they begin to resemble “parties”
 - People form different camps depending on their preferred strategies and philosophy

The Big Debate



- Takes an *ideological* approach – believes in “door-to-door” approach
- Tends to favor copyleft licenses
- Big figurehead is Richard Stallman
- Responsible for GCC, Emacs, etc.
- Was big in the ‘80s, less so now



- Takes a *pragmatic* approach – believes in a “corporate” approach
- Tends to favor permissive licenses
- Big figurehead is Eric S. Raymond
- Android, Firefox, etc.
- Was big in the ‘00s, less so now

The State of FOSS Organizations

- The big orgs have lost their relevance over time
 - The FSF has increasingly isolated itself whereas the OSI's been trapped by its corporate reliance
- Highly fragmented
 - Most momentum in advocacy has either come from local groups or specific niches (Fediverse, Right to Repair, etc.)

The State of the Tech Industry

- “Platforms” have become normalized, and users have become the product
 - Tech companies feel little hesitation in doing whatever they want to users
- Companies make use of open-source infrastructure (i.e. Apache) and community support, but release non-free products

How This Impacts FOSS Projects

- Projects have benefitted from modern tooling but also being “modern” has become a lot more complex
- “Software as a service” has normalized a lot of unfree practices in the public mind
- Support tends to centralize around a handful of “big” projects which benefit industry
 - Projects without corporate use or sponsors are often left to dry
- Companies offer “too good to be true” deals, giving FOSS developers steeper competition
 - Once users are locked onto platforms, harder to get them off

EXAMPLE: Kbin



- In 2023, Reddit began restricting API access
 - This screwed over many users and communities
- User backlash led to surge of interest in FOSS alternatives, including Kbin
- Kbin was a solo-dev effort, was seeing huge success
 - But it was too much for the dev to keep up with
 - He was losing sleep over dealing w/ bugs and traffic issues and burnt out
 - He gave up, killing the project right at the height of its success

How This Impacts Communities

- LUGs across the country are dying out
 - Most local tech groups are either professional or networking-centric
- Silicon Valley poaching new, young talent
 - Culture shifts away from genuine hobbyism to startups and looking for ways to make profit

What Needs to Be Done

- Mobilize the actual community from the bottom-up
 - Revive in-person chapters and open debates surrounding strategy
- Educate people on the ideas surrounding FOSS, not just the software itself
- Perform the “supporting” work to developers and infrastructure

Join us!

Reach out to us (@freesoftwarecaucus@fosstodon.org) if you have any questions.



Official Website
(<https://beyond40.codeberg.page>)



Interest Form
(linked on website)



Group Calendar
(linked on website)