

Now for some good news

Free and Open Software

With all the warnings about viruses and hackers, the questions about corporate and government online tracking, and fear of cyberwar, the future of the Internet may be regarded with dismay rather than anticipation. But that's only one side of the story for some very cool things also continue to happen.

Many of the most positive developments are occurring for the very best reasons, too. The Internet brings together hundreds of thousands of thoughtful people who are busily cooperating – often without pay or material compensation – to constantly make it better. They are developing safe, reliable software that does just what it's supposed to do, and often for free.

Efforts like this shouldn't come as a surprise: the Internet is built on **voluntary collaboration**. From the start, most of the basic tools, including the Web itself, came about in this way. And people choosing to work together is the only way it keeps functioning.

The Net began with scientists at universities and labs funded by the military-industrial complex seeking to link their massive mainframe computers together. Yet the applications did not stay limited to academia or the military, but were released into the world.

This began a "**virtuous circle**" where one good thing led to another. Before long, very clever people from all over the planet were contributing to the design of Internet protocols and the software to use them. Think how different the world might be if Vince Cerf and his team had chosen to patent **email**, or if Tim Berners-Lee had decided to limit the **World Wide Web** strictly to sharing data between scientists.

Bill Gates said, "If people had understood how patents would be granted when most of today's ideas were invented, and had taken out patents, the industry would be at a complete standstill today." As well as hindering development and distribution, **software patents** also add costs, and **copyrights** may be all that's legally necessary for protection, anyway.

The result of all this free productivity range from operating systems including **GNU** and **Linux**, countless utilities, word processing programs, blogging platforms like **WordPress**, wikis, even Web browsers like **Mozilla** and the **Thunderbird** email client.

Without this open exchange, the Internet would still exist but it could be far less fun or friendly: expensive, harder to use, with fewer cool features and cross-platform compatibility. The Net owes its freedom, and ours to use it as we choose, to the **philosophy of science** — that the free and open discussion of ideas is the best way to arrive at truth.

Cooperation and competition

About 23 years ago, this tradition led to the formal beginning of the **Free Software Movement**. While much of what members produce is "free" in the sense that it is offered without a price, the term actually means free as in liberty. Advocates of the **Free Software Foundation** (www.fsf.org) explain that "it's not free as in free beer, but free as in free speech."

The goal is to create programs whose **source code** is readily viewable by users. This is so they can not only make sure it behaves as it should, but so it's possible to adapt or alter. They think software should not be restricted in who can use it or how it can be used, and should be able to be copied and shared with others.

Of course, while we humans are good at cooperating on big projects, we dearly love to compete, too. So along with the Free Software people, there is a rival group, the **Open Source Initiative** (www.osi.org) whose focus and goals are slightly different. However, almost all of the software approved by one group meets the conditions set by the other.

While partisans claim important philosophical distinctions, to the average user the main difference is in the types of **licenses** granted which govern how the

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software may be used. The Open Source group issues licenses under strict terms, while anyone can develop Free Software programs under a less restrictive suite of licenses without any sort of official group sanction. Both groups mount public awareness campaigns to promote various causes and alternatives, too, such as education about software patents.

Cathedrals versus bazaars

A metaphor by software engineer Eric S. Raymond elegantly describes the difference between open and closed approaches to software design. Traditional programmers working for Apple or Microsoft, labor in small, isolated groups carefully crafting their lines of code like the builders of a **cathedral**. But the Free Software crowd-sourcing method operates more like a **bazaar**, filled with people dealing and competing together. When computer code is developed in full view on the Internet, it can be critiqued, tested, and modified rapidly, benefiting from the interplay of large numbers of smart people with different ideas and training.

It is important to recall that “free” may not necessarily be free, and “open” might not be all that open. Both movements allow for **commercialization**. Programs are still issued under various licenses, but the big idea is to alleviate some of the worst results of restrictive licensing and secret source codes.

There are definite advantages to free and open software, not just to home users, but commercial enterprises. SWCP relies on Apache servers, BSD, wikis, WordPress and a host of other programs. Aside from low or no cost, such software tends to be derived from commercial products but often successful free software evolves into new business versions. Reliability is high and the software does only what it should. And the competition keeps proprietary software developers being more innovative for less.

Of course, users without the ability or desire to check must rely on the word of the experts. One needs to be a real geek just to use some programs (not to mention contributing anything of value) and there may be problems integrating free and proprietary software packages. Also, with free distribution of code, one needs to be on guard. Some unscrupulous developers may sell or give away knock-off versions that can be full of malware. You should download *only* from known and reliable sources.

The Free Software Foundation lists thousands of projects at directory.fsf.org/wiki/Main_Page and Open Source projects are listed at Sourceforge, sourceforge.net.

If you're looking for **freeware**, software that costs nothing, or **shareware**, which costs a nominal fee, sites like C|NET, downloads.cnet.com, can be quite helpful. Be sure to check the editors' and users' reviews and ratings before downloading.

Mail Minder Intelligent Push Notifications for Email



SWCP is proud to introduce **Mail Minder**, an iPhone app that alerts you when important email messages come in.

Tell Mail Minder what to watch for: messages from a particular person, or location, or with certain key words in the subject. Then relax and let Mail Minder wait for them while you get on with your life. No more obsessively checking email every few minutes, wondering if the client has replied to your proposal, or your brother has emailed about the new baby, or the airline has changed your flight after you left the hotel.

The app is **free** (ad-supported) for up to 3 Minders, and can be upgraded to a paid account via in-app purchase. Paid accounts can add more Minders, get more frequent polling for new messages, and have no ads in the app.

Mail Minder works with any standard POP or IMAP account. Never miss a vital email again! Find it at iTunes: <http://mailminderapp.com/download>.

Are you nomophobic?

Mail Minder can help with **nomophobia**, the dreadful fear of being out of cellphone contact. This anxiety can be cripplingly severe, as bad as “wedding-day jitters” or trips to the dentist. A survey by SecurEnvoy, a company specializing in passwords, found that in the UK, **66%** of cellphone users are that afraid of being without their mobile phone, up from **53%** suffering from “no-mobile-phobia” 4 years ago.

Back then, it was mainly men who were anxious about losing their phones (**61%**), but now it seems to be women who worry most (**70%**). Age also plays a part, with young adults being the most worried, followed by people around 30 or over 55. And one in two nomophobes never switch off their phones.

If Mail Minder isn't enough, you may need therapy.



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