

The Open Pitt



What's cooking in Linux and Open Source in Western Pennsylvania

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Third Time's a Charm?

The Free Software Foundation (FSF) has just released the draft of a new version of the GNU General Public License (GPL). Version 3 will be the first change to this license since 1991.

Hard numbers can be difficult to get, but the GPL is almost certainly the most popular license for Open Source and Free Software. The FSF has suggested that authors using the GPL specify that their code is released under "version 2...or any later version." Once version 3 of the license is done, that software will be available under the terms of either version. So this change will have a broad impact immediately, and new projects are likely to adopt it from the start.

Ah-one, and ah-two...

Version 1 of the GPL came out in 1989, a somewhat unsettled time for issues of software law in the U.S. Although it had been firmly established that both source code and object code could be copyrighted, the exact scope of protection was unclear. Patents were shakier; it would take another five years before legal precedent clearly upholding them was issued.

A second version of the GPL was released in 1991. For the most part, changes related to style were made and some parts were clarified. Newly

added was a section on patents (section 7) which made it explicit that they could not be used to restrict a user's rights under the GPL.

What's new

So what has happened in the last 15 years? The number of software patents issued in the U.S. has skyrocketed. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act and the rise of Digital Rights Management (DRM, also called Digital Restrictions Management by some) have altered the balance of power between copyright owners and the users of software and electronic items.

At the same time, the GPL and its terms have been widely accepted. The new draft builds on the foundation laid by version 2 instead of making radical changes.

The greatest change targets DRM. The new draft states that DRM cannot be used to place additional restrictions on GPL-covered code. It also provides that the software cannot be used as a restriction mechanism to protect other content. For example, if a music publisher tried to use GPL software to copy-protect files, users would be free to circumvent this without fear of the Digital Millennium Copyright Act.

Patents also get significant attention. The basic stance is the same, but

some refinements have been made. The draft explicitly says that anyone distributing GPL software also grants a license to any patents they hold that apply to the program. It also removes the right to run and privately modify software from anyone bringing a patent lawsuit that affects the software. In addition, authors are allowed to impose even stronger "patent retaliation" terms if they choose, but this is not part of the basic license.

Another change is best described by example. Imagine a web site which lets users upload a word processor document, converts it to PDF, then charges them a fee to download the PDF copy. If a GPL program does the conversion, the author of that program may (at his option) require the web site to offer the converter program for download. Since "web services" have not yet proved popular, this area is being left open for experimentation.

Next steps

The draft is not yet final. You can read it and the rationale behind it at <http://gplv3.fsf.org/>. This site allows you to make comments, and a worldwide series of meetings will be held to discuss the draft. And plenty of articles are sure to appear on tech news sites dissecting each clause. So it will still be some time before the last word is spoken.

December Roundup

Dec. 3 General User Meeting: **Vance Kochenderfer** gave an overview of the Mandriva Linux distribution. After explaining its origins and reviewing the Mandriva product line, he gave a demonstration of its administration tools and distinguishing features.

Dec. 17 Tutorial: **Mark Dalrymple** discussed the Objective-C programming language, an object-oriented layer on top of C about as old as C++ but less commonly used. Its design

makes it easy to extend, and extensions can typically be reused without further modification. Objective-C saw early use on the NeXT workstation and is now actively employed in the Cocoa environment for Mac OS X and the GNUstep environment for Linux, BSD, and Windows. Mark gave a thumbnail sketch of the basic principles of the language including examples. The topic is covered in much greater detail in his forthcoming book *Learn Objective-C on the Macintosh*.

Objective-C Book - <http://spiderworks.com/books/learnobjc.php>

Coming Events

Jan. 21: General User Meeting,
Topic: Pearl the Robot. 10AM
to 2PM, 1507 Newell-Simon
Hall, CMU

Feb. 4: General User Meeting,
Topic: Linux Demo Day. 10AM
to 2PM, 3002 Newell-Simon
Hall, CMU

Feb. 11: Linux Basics Tutorial.
10AM to 2PM, 3002 Newell-
Simon Hall, CMU

The public is welcome at all events

Links of the Month *by Michael P. O'Connor*

Welcome to the first installment of a new regular feature. In this column I hope to bring our readers interesting links from around the Internet.

Starting here at home this month, I will look at some technology-related sites in the Pittsburgh region. So let's get going!

Beginning in the weblog world, <http://www.pghbloggers.org/> is a site that aggregates many of the blogs of people living in the area. Also included are some blogs of Pittsburgh natives living in exile in different areas. If you have a blog and are a Pittsburgher you can have your site listed there as well.

Next is the Pittsburgh Technology Council <http://www.pgstech.org/>. This alliance seeks to promote and strengthen technology-related com-

panies in southwest Pennsylvania, and attract new ones here.

For you system administrators out there, the Pittsburgh chapter of the System Administrators Guild <http://www.pghsage.org/> covers topics of particular interest to you.

Last but not least, we have our own <http://www.wplug.org/>. It is your source to find out about upcoming and past WPLUG events. You can also read through the mailing list archives and, of course, back issues of *The Open Pitt*.

I'd like to close by asking you to send in any suggestions of themes or links you may have for a future column. You can just e-mail me at wplug@mikeoconnor.net and I will see about including your ideas.

Till next month, enjoy these links!

Looking Forward to 2006 *by Bill Moran*

2005 was a big year for WPLUG. After many months of hard work, the bylaws committee finally finished a new set of bylaws. And the first elected board took office.

On the surface, this may not seem to have made much of a change to WPLUG. Previous boards have generally had the interest of Pittsburgh's open source community in mind, and the new board is no different. The real change is likely to occur in how this will be accomplished. With the new board/committee structure in place, WPLUG's government is designed specifically to distribute the workload of running the group over many people.

This is a two-pronged improvement, in my opinion. First off, it should help to keep any one person from having to shoulder all the work. I'm excited to see Beth Lynn take the Vice-Chair's spot and become the "voice of WPLUG," as I feel that helping WPLUG become a more important part of the larger Linux com-

munity is something she's particularly good at.

The second prong is a structure that encourages others to get involved and help out. WPLUG has always been about openness and serving as broad an audience as possible, and we now have a structure to encourage wider participation.

That's what government is *supposed* to be about, in my opinion. It's not about political rallies or corruption. Government is about giving the community, of whatever type, a framework to accomplish the goals that are common to the members of that community.

Personally, I think this year will be even more exciting than last year. Sure, we changed the government, but this year we have to make that government work. The best days—and the most challenging—are yet to come.

Bill Moran is WPLUG's Chair.

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Editors:

Elwin Green
Vance Kochenderfer

What is Linux?

Linux is a *kernel*, the core of a computer operating system, created by Linus Torvalds. It is typically packaged as a *distribution*, which includes the extra programs necessary to make a computer functional and useful. Since 1991, it has grown from a one-man project which ran on one computer to one with thousands of contributors running on everything from personal organizers to million-dollar supercomputers.

What are Open Source and Free Software?

Open Source and Free Software provide you, the user, with the opportunity to see the source code of the programs you use. You are free to use it, share it with others, and even make changes to it if you wish. While the Free Software and Open Source communities differ in their philosophical approach, in practical terms they share nearly identical goals. Learn more at <http://www.opensource.org/> and <http://www.gnu.org/>.

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You can download titles on many Open Source subjects, such as *Linux Quick Fix Notebook* and *PHP 5 Power Programming*. If you prefer printed copies, these are available for purchase also. Details on all books in the series can be found on their web site at <http://www.phptr.com/perens/>.

—contributed by Beth Lynn Eicher