

and X-Window ("X Marks The Spot"), all at the same booth.

We try hard to remember that this safety-in-numbers approach might translate into more unified and standard products for end users. Cer-

tainly, it seems that UNIX is now a lot more than the annual UNIX community love-in it once was. Rather than just turning deals with other vendors on the show floor, exhibitors are also talking to true end users. That, of course, is a kind of progress we favor.

sented their case for themselves. Eventually, every UNIX user should benefit as the dollars from those new purchases get plowed back into R&D and marketing and produce new products and services and, yes, booth displays snazzy enough to help keep the market expanding.

When Free Software Isn't A Bargain

An Executive Delineates The Risks Of Using 'Public Domain' Software

BY MARILYN R. KILINSKI

Guest ★View★

K Mart blue-light specials and that "third knee-high stocking that comes with a pair" are just two spawn of the biggest fish in consumers' collective conscience: anything on sale is even better if it's free. Unfortunately, this belief floats belly-up in the case of "free" UNIX software.

"Free" software, as the name implies, carries no price tag and is not available from commercial software companies. It is developed by enthusiasts in their spare time; bug fixes and upgrades are kludged together in the same fashion. "Free" software is placed in the public domain (i.e., there are no restrictions

on copying or distributing source code) and is distributed either electronically over the net or, if some sort of organization has put itself in charge of such activities, is put onto a tape provided by the prospective user. Manuals are occasionally available, at an extra cost.

LOWER PRODUCT QUALITY

What's so bad about "free" software? The fact that it really *isn't* free! You may not be paying for the program per se, but you *are* forfeiting product quality, timely technical support, investment protection and "anti-viral vaccinations."

You see, purchases from commercial software companies don't exactly serve to pad management's wallets. A lot of dollars are funneled into functions that are important to users: research and development, technical support staffs, administrative/business assistance and quality assurance.

For example, you are Joe or Joanne User. You are calc-ing away in a public domain spreadsheet and you start getting alpha characters in cells which you *know* should contain numbers. Is this a bug, or are you doing something wrong? Since there's probably no manual to consult, you'd like to get some telephone tech support—but there's no organization that handles that either. What can you do? You can put a message on the appropriate UUCP bulletin board (if you know how to do that) and wait for someone to provide a hopefully-correct answer, or you can ask your friends. Either way, you'll end up wasting a lot of time (not to mention the frustration).

Say your company wants to standardize on this spreadsheet anyway, and your MIS director wants to keep his or her department on the up-and-up by signing a site license

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Marilyn R. Kilinski is director of marketing at UniPress, a firm that does ask customers to pay for its software.

Freedom?

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agreement. Hmmmm . . . since there's no entity in charge of the program, no one has authority to grant a site license.

And what happens if that bug gets fixed—how are you notified of the fix or an upgrade? If you'd bought a commercial spreadsheet program,

you'd have the option to buy software maintenance (as well as support). Now you've got neither.

Lastly, public-domain/"free" software is especially susceptible to pranksters and other less-benevolent virus-writers. Since there is no organization to implement rigorous source-code quality control, you never know when something taken off the net will end up wreaking havoc with your system.

In other words, "free" software

saves a few dollars up front, but you end up paying for it every time you use it. If you'd bought the program from a reputable commercial source, it would be better in the first place and there would be technical support and upgrades. Add the long-term security of knowing that the commercial entity will be around for a while, ensuring the quality and longevity of the program, and you'll be absolutely certain that "free" software isn't free—it isn't even cheap.

UNIX Today!

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