



Does Cloud Computing spell the end for Open Source Software?

It's interesting to read an article by Russ Miles, an open source supporter, from Open Credo in the first edition of the Open Source Journal: <http://www.opensource-central.com/submitted-articles-open-source-and-cloud-computing.php>. Far from the utopian vision Open Source portrays, Russ paints a very dire picture for the future: *"if the current success stories in the cloud are anything to go by, the implications for open source could be very important. Even terminal, in time. You see there are very few open source Cloud success stories. Actually, scratch that, I can't think of even one!"*

The advent of the Cloud represents a fundamental shift away from servers towards services - a shift to a more flexible, on demand, access to IT. However, this necessitates a move away from owned hardware resources to shared resources. These shared resources are delivered by service providers. Why does this matter? Whilst open source thrived through the notion of communities, services by definition are delivered by a single entity, not a collective.

This small nuance has radical implications as far as the Open Source community is concerned. Whilst Open Source software can be downloaded for free and used on hardware an organisation owns or leases, this doesn't hold true in a world of services. Where a service is being provided, one organisation hosts and delivers it. They assume responsibility for the contractual relationship and for billing the customer; they monetise an instance of the software as part of a service. This exposes the often swept-under-the-carpet issue with Open Source. It is fundamentally not in keeping with human nature that one person should profit from another person's *donated* work. People don't mind working for nothing as long as it's part of a common good. Money quickly muddies this utopian vision. Services directly expose this necessity to monetise.

So what has happened to a movement which promised so much? The reality is it was overtaken by what it thought it could revolutionise - economic reality. Fundamentally open source creators are not compensated for their work. Miles explains: *"People get into Open Source for credibility, because a problem interests them, because no-one has done that thing they need/want in their day jobs, and essentially to scratch an itch"*. The problem is scratching an itch doesn't pay the bills. *"I can't think of a single Cloud Service Provider who is brave enough to risk opening up their code to the Open Source community, and I can understand why they're wary."*

The reason why they're wary is because they believe there is value in the software they own. It would be absurd to think that FaceBook would go "Open Source". Or maybe Google? Why give code away so someone else can start up as a competitor? The hundreds of thousands or even millions of man-days of development that have gone into the software both have value. Why would someone simply give this away? The fundamental problem for Open Source is it has no real business model. It's a utopian vision of the world, where people in their back rooms make a difference. However, we don't live in a world of back room enthusiasts. We live in a capitalist economy where organisations require return on investments. Sun Microsystems tried and failed to be a successful organisation on the back of Open Source. It will be interesting to see if Oracle continue to give away Sun's work when they've paid \$5bn for it?

Companies invest in research and development, and with large development budgets they will always be the ones delivering innovation. Organisations thrive on innovation. The Open Source movement will always be playing catch-up. Organisations delivering this innovation need to make money from their investments. Keeping this dirty notion of making money swept-away indefinitely is not achievable. People are becoming wise to the fact their hard work is being exploited by others. With fewer and fewer people contributing to the common good there is a real danger the movements will grind to a halt.

It's time for organisations and governments to evaluate these risks and acknowledge the fact that nothing is free. The advent of the Cloud has demonstrated this fact clearly. Software and services both have value and value doesn't come for nothing. Open Source is not a utopian vision of the future of computing. It will be looked back on as an oddity, as a small period in the history of computing where the sums just didn't quite add up.

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