

SourceForge drifting

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Over the past few months the SourceForge development facility, which hosts a large number of Free Software projects, has changed its policies. Features for exporting a project from SourceForge have been removed. The implementation used to be exclusively Free Software but is now based on non-free software. Finally, VA Linux ¹ has become rather underhand in their attempts to grasp exclusive control of contributors' work.

SourceForge did a lot of good for the Free Software community, but it's now time to break free.

1 Locking users in a non-free software world

SourceForge brought to Free Software a unified and standard development methodology based on modern tools. Before SourceForge, such tools (bug tracking, cvs, web, support, forums, polls, news, etc.) were available individually, but few developers used many of them together, because they had to set up the combined facilities on their own. SourceForge made the combination conveniently available for both new and experienced developers.

Because of the convenience of SourceForge, many Free Software developers have come to take this collection of features for granted, and would be reluctant to go

¹VA Linux is the owner of the SourceForge domain name, provides and owns the hardware, pays for the bandwidth, hire people maintaining SourceForge. VA Linux is also the owner of most OSDN sites, the largest concentration of Free Software related resources in the hands of a single company.

back to the old way of doing things. Unfortunately, this means that when SourceForge itself takes a turn for the worse, it tends to pull Free Software developers down with it.

The second important thing SourceForge did was to provide this environment based exclusively on Free Software. By doing this, SourceForge not only provided a powerful methodology for the Free Software community, it also demonstrated what Free Software could do, and promoted the use of Free Software. And since the special software for SourceForge was itself free, anyone could set up a similar site. The SourceForge software became permanently available to developers everywhere. Developers in (say) India who can't afford the bandwidth to use the SourceForge site could have the benefit of the same features on their own server.

In August 2001, VA Linux reversed those policies and introduced non-free software on the SourceForge server. In announcing this (the original document was removed or moved shortly after the publication of this article), Larry Augustin (VA Linux CEO) claims that SourceForge.net users will "see virtually no changes". That may be true if they narrow their vision and consider only what job the site does and how to operate it. But when we consider the implications, things are very different now. Instead of a showcase for Free Software, SourceForge is now a demo site for non-free software. There is a danger that the many thousands of people registered on SourceForge will become increasingly hooked on the SourceForge site and on features implemented by proprietary software.

As a Free Software developer, you are still free to use

the SourceForge server, but you won't have the freedom to copy, modify, study and distribute the software it runs; you won't be free to set up a similar site yourself, or adapt it to your own needs. The last published release of the SourceForge software is one year old.

The move to non-free software was the culmination of a series of steps designed to lock users in. There never was a way to fully extract projects from SourceForge, but efforts were made in this direction — then this year they were removed. At present the only things you can get are the CVS tree and tracker data `/export/sf_tracker_export.php`. Few people are aware of the later because it is undocumented. The export page explains how to use scripts that don't exist anymore; implementation of facilities to ease project extraction was stopped. The developer community is exclusively made of VA Linux employees and a few people who are asked not to disclose the current code.

The mailing lists archives, a major service of SourceForge recently became unmaintained. Will it be replaced by a non-free software based solution ?

2 Contributors' work appropriation

Here is what happened to me shortly before the announcement that SourceForge would use and develop non-free software. Because I'm listed as a contributor (in the sources and documentation) to the SourceForge software, I received a request from VA Linux to assign copyright to them. I was not surprised or unhappy with this; many Free Software projects ask contributors to assign copyright of their changes to the main author. Assigning copyright to a single holder is a strategy for defending the GNU GPL more effectively, and I would have been happy to cooperate in that regard.

But when I read the details of their copyright assign-

ment, I saw major problems. I was asked to assign copyright of my work that "is, or may in the future be, utilized in the SourceForge collaborative software development platform". The assignment was not limited to my contribution to the SourceForge code, it potentially covered all my past and future work if it was of some interest to SourceForge.

I was also expecting a promise that my work would be released under the GNU GPL, but the assignment said nothing about Free Software. VA Linux would be allowed to release the software I wrote under a non-free software license and not let the community have it at all. But I wasn't sure at the time if this was a real concern, because VA Linux only produced and used Free Software. Two weeks later they decided to introduce non-free software on SourceForge and that cast a different light on the question.

VA Linux told me that they only sent the assignment to two people, in the hope to refine it. We started a long discussion that lasted two months. I assumed this discussion was to make the copyright assignment more palatable to the Free Software community, so I worked hard to give constructive feedback. Finally I was sent the version of the copyright assignment produced by the legal department. I quote it here in its entirety:

SourceForge Copyright Assignment

Thank you for your interest in contributing software code to SourceForge.

In order for us to include the code in our product, we will need you to provide us with the rights to the code.

By signing this agreement, you, the undersigned, hereby assign to VA Linux all right, title and interest in and to the software code described below, and all copyright, patent, proprietary information, trade secret, and other intellectual property

rights therein. You also agree to take all actions and sign all documents (such as copyright assignments or registrations) reasonably requested by VA Linux to evidence and record the above assignments.

This was even more of a power grab than the first draft. “You give us total control; we promise nothing”. At this point, I knew that the attempts to clarify the copyright assignment were a waste of time; VA Linux clearly wasn’t collecting copyright assignments in order to enforce the GNU GPL.

3 Escape entrapment

It’s time for people who value freedom to escape from SourceForge. It has become a tar pit from which escape will become increasingly difficult. Development hosting platforms based completely on Free Software flourish all over the world. You can create your own, join an existing one or help write the underlying software. Some months ago I helped to launch Savannah for the GNU project because I felt the need of a collaboratively run platform. With friends and co-developers we are now re-writing and packaging distributed development hosting software. The idea is to be able to install and operate a SourceForge-like site within hours. Savannah will run this software at the end of this year. At first it may have less functionality than SourceForge, but it has a bright future because it is rooted in a cooperative effort of people sharing Free Software.

SourceForge is free as in free beer because it was designed this way. It was a very expensive and ephemeral gift to the Free Software community. We could resent VA Linux for such a poisoned gift. On the contrary I think we should thank them. They brought us methodology, and taught us that a development hosting facility must be built in a distributed and collaborative way, not by a single company controlling everything from top to bottom. Of course that

means everyone needs to spend a little time developing and maintaining these hosting facilities. We’ve finished our beer, it’s time to win our freedom.

About the Author Loïc Dachary will not be satisfied until he saves the world, though he didn’t say that explicitly. In 1987, a friend introduced him to Emacs, and he distributed GNU tapes in France and then finally started an association to do that. He met Stallman in the late 1980s. Stallman was visiting Paris and Dachary was distributing GNU tapes with the kind of gusto he now applies full time to spreading the philosophy behind Free Software. Philosophy is the operative word. It is the philosophy that, according to Dachary, constitutes the difference between Free Software and Open Source. What Dachary misses most about his childhood in the Middle East is going to the sea every weekend. There they would spend hours in the warmth of the sea looking at fish and diving to turn over rocks on the ocean floor.

Now Loïc Dachary is an active volunteer for FSF-Europe, FSF and APRIL. He could be reached by email: loic@gnu.org

[Debian GNU/Linux 2.2r5 released] January 10th, 2002 — This is the fifth revision of Debian GNU/Linux 2.2 (codename ‘**potato**’) which mainly adds security updates to the stable release, along with a few corrections of serious bugs. Those who frequently update from *security.debian.org* won’t have to update many packages.

Upgrading to this revision online is usually done by pointing the ‘**apt**’ package tool (see the **sources.list(5)** manual page) to one of Debian’s many FTP or HTTP mirrors. A comprehensive list is available at: <http://www.debian.org/distrib/ftplist>
