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## A chat with... Paul Jones, UNC-CH

'We're better if we share'



Paul Jones says intellectual property rules are a barrier to creativity.

*News & Observer File Photo*

By JOHN MURAWSKI, Staff Writer

When IBM announced this week that it released 500 software patents to the public, programmers in the Triangle and across the globe gained access to trade secrets from a computing giant known for zealously protecting its huge portfolio of patents.

This region is home to a major community of programmers who develop some of the world's most widely used open-source software, which allows other programmers to modify the original program and share it.

A veteran programmer, UNC-Chapel Hill professor Paul Jones, 54, has long been an advocate for loosening restrictions on intellectual property laws that keep computer code out of the public domain. A philosopher, poet and polymath, Jones has appointments at UNC's schools of journalism and library science. He spoke to staff writer John Murawski last week.

Q:What is open source and why is it important?

A:The basic idea is that we're better if we share. We ultimately end up with a better product. And if code is transparent, more people can figure out how to make it better, where the errors are, and how to make it really work.

You can sell open-source software. And people do. [Raleigh-based] Red Hat is an example. You get the source for free when you buy their package of their software. But if you want to, you can take their software and repackage it without their brand, without their guarantee, without their support, and you can sell it. Or you can make changes to it and customize it and sell it as a new product.

Q:Why would you pay Red Hat for software if you can get it for free online?

A:You can sit at home and you know how to make ketchup. You can go to the store and you can buy some tomatoes, and you can buy some vinegar, and you can make ketchup. I guarantee you that you're not doing it. You're probably walking right down the aisle and pulling off Hunt's or Heinz.  
...

Red Hat's biggest contribution is making a business out of open-source software.

What Red Hat has done is make a product that's internationally recognized as secure, safe and reliable, that you can trust your company's fortunes on. And many do -- I mean, we're talking banks and stuff.

They take publicly available software, they add value to it, they test it, they package it, they

guarantee that it works, they give you ongoing support and they give you a trusted brand. That's what you're paying for.

Q:Red Hat is a major distributor of Linux, which has become synonymous with open source. How does Linux fit in the open-source matrix?

A:They have one version of Linux. Because it's "copyleft" -- because it's open -- everyone can run the program, copy the program, modify the program, distribute their modified versions. But they don't have permission to add restrictions.

It is the most widely used software on servers in the world. We're talking about large Web servers. We're talking about super-computing clusters. We're talking about hand-held devices. Where it's not run mostly is on people's home desktops.

There are many, many versions of Linux. The Chinese government has sponsored its own version of Linux: Red Flag, as you might guess. They've customized it so it's more friendly to whatever their computing environment is.

There's one called Black Cat that's all in Russian and Ukrainian. We have one called Damn Small Linux that's so very small that it can fit on a business card CD so you can boot a computer from it if you need to in an emergency.

Q:Why is open source important to the Triangle area?

A:For one, our biggest employers here all use it. Most of the scientific labs around here -- people who do super-computing.

The reason that it's big in the Triangle is because a lot of open-source software is actually created and distributed here through IBM and Red Hat, and in the universities.

The big open-source players in the world are in the Triangle: Red Hat and IBM.

Q:Can you describe the activities of the open-source community here?

A:IBM has said that it's the largest employer of open-source programmers in the world.

We founded the Triangle Linux Users Group a number of years ago. They have a mailing list, and they have an educational meetings monthly.

Ibiblio.org [an online library based at UNC-Chapel Hill that Jones runs] started out being one of the first distributors of Linux in the world. We are not limited to Linux or Linux documentation. The open-source concept is not limited to software. We realized that copyrights, trademarks and patents are often used, not always, but moreso than not, not just to reward the creator, but to block creativity.

Q:IBM this week gave open-source users access to 500 software patents. Why is this significant?

A:It removes the fear of ever being sued for violating those over-broad patents.

If nothing else, they remove barriers that keep individuals and groups from being more creative and productive.

In the larger scheme, it signals that some things are wrong with the copyright-and-patent system. Recent developments in the past, say, 25 years have gone in the direction that is counter to creativity and production.

One of the open things about open source and sharing communities is that they are greater than local. They allow people to be creative across time, space and culture.