

If you love your data, set it free

Open standards are the key to ensuring you always have access to your data, argues Quentin Stafford-Fraser

"YOU KNOW YOU'VE reached perfection in design", said Antoine de Saint-Exupery, "not when you have nothing more to add, but when you have nothing more to take away".

Certain engineering disciplines have actively embraced this philosophy; the more you pay for a racing bicycle, for example, the less hardware you are actually likely to get. But software engineering has long been driven by software marketing, which demands a never-ending stream of new features. When you sell somebody a software upgrade, it replaces their old package, and they are unlikely to be overjoyed if they end up with 'less'. Qualities such as robustness, elegant simplicity and compactness must therefore make way for talking paperclips and multi-CD installations.

It is refreshing, then, to look at the history of Sun's StarOffice, one of the most talked-about software packages of the moment.

StarOffice was created by a German company, StarDivision, and by version 5.2 was an accomplished office suite which ran on several platforms and included wordprocessing, spreadsheet and presentation components along with several bits that, quite frankly, almost nobody wanted: a web browser, calendar, email program and integrated desktop complete with its own 'Start' menu. Although these 'extras' were reasonably competent, most users had a preference for some alternative so the built-ins just got in the way.

In 1999, Sun Microsystems acquired StarDivision and within a year made three dramatic decisions which would transform StarOffice's future, and may have far-reaching consequences for the software industry as whole.

The first was to throw out the excess baggage. In a move that Saint-Exupery would have applauded, the browser, calendar, email and much-reviled desktop were all discarded, allowing the team to concentrate on the core office components, now worthy competitors to Microsoft's, and to improve dramatically the handling of Microsoft-format documents.

The second was to release an Open Source version, OpenOffice.org, so that users of Windows, Solaris, Linux and many other operating systems now had a choice when selecting



"IN SUCH A WORLD, IT'S WORTH ASKING YOURSELF WHO ACTUALLY OWNS YOUR CREATIVE WORK."

an office suite: they could pay lots of money, or pick up a perfectly good one for free, transforming the viability of minority platforms on the corporate desktop.

But the most important decision was the least visible one, and to appreciate its significance we need to step back for a moment and look at two industry trends.

Microsoft and others are moving towards a subscription-based licensing scheme for their software. At present this means that if corporate users don't pay the subscription, they won't be entitled to cheap upgrades to the next version of Windows or Office; they'll have to pay the full price.

Meanwhile, Intel and other manufacturers are developing TCPA, the Trusted Computing Platform Alliance, which will make it a little harder for viruses to spread and for spies to snoop on your data. This is, undoubtedly, their chief motivation. By a happy coincidence, though, it also allows Hollywood to stop illicit copying of movies, software licensing schemes to be enforced, and software piracy to be eradicated. It is, in other words, the 'Untrusted User' Platform Alliance.

Combine these and you have a world in which *you may not be able to use tomorrow the software you are entitled to use today*, if you haven't maintained your subscriptions. This is a perfectly reasonable way of running the IT economy, but it has an important implication. If your data is stored in a proprietary format tied to one software package, as much of it probably is today, *you may not have access to it* if you don't keep paying. Do you want to finish working on that book you started a few years ago? Sorry, that will cost you. In such a world, it's worth asking yourself who actually owns your creative work...

All of which brings us back to the most important new feature of OpenOffice - the file format. OpenOffice documents are in fact ZIP archives, containing standard XML files. *Content.xml* contains the basic content, *styles.xml*, the formatting, and so on. (Complete details are in a 500-page document freely available from www.openoffice.org.) This makes it trivial, for example, to create a search engine which indexes all of your company's documents, and above all ensures that you will always have access to your data, whether or not you continue to use OpenOffice.

Microsoft, in response, have announced XML support in their upcoming Office 11. Those familiar with previous 'support' for open standards may be skeptical, remembering the degree to which HTML files, for example, were laden with Microsoft-specific baggage. But who knows? Perhaps, just once, Microsoft may follow Antoine's excellent advice.

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