

Affero GPLv3: Why It Exists & Who It's For?

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A Brief History of Affero GPL

- Imagine the turn of the century.
- The so-called Application Service Provider loophole.
- In early 2001, someone said to me at an event: - “I won’t release my web application code at all, because the GPL is the BSD license of the web.”

Was this a loophole?

- Well, it wasn’t *really* a loophole
- GPLv2 didn’t (couldn’t?) foresee web applications.
 - client/server barely existed when it was written.
- Copyleft’s copyright hack centered around distribution.

The Catalyst

- Henry (sometimes Henri) Poole forms Allseer.
 - Which becomes Affero.
- Web service company to encourage non-profit donations.
- Henry points out: we have no copyleft.

Public Performance?

- Is it defined for software?
- If it were, would it be enough of a copyleft hack?
- I've long supported it as an “at best, a no-op” addition.
 - I've been unable to persuade anyone else.

The idea

- The classic Computer Science ouroboros:
 - the program that prints its own source
- I suggest this in the GPLv2.2 discussions in mid-September 2002, as GPLv2.2§2(d)
- Henry is excited; lawyers draft text based on my idea.
- Affero GPL v1 is born.
- GPLv2.2 draft includes the provision.

The Stalling, 2002–2006

- For various reasons, GPLv2.2 is never released.
- Affero, Inc. (the company) goes bankrupt.
- For various reasons, the “FSF team” forks.
 - And I fall into a long distraction.
- GPLv3 process begins.

Wait, What?!?!

- By the time I realize what's happened:
 - Affero clause is gone from GPLv3 draft.
- Henry insists on license upgrade.
- AGPLv3 is born.
 - Not released until 19 November 2007

What happened in the meantime?

- The rise of:
 - Ruby on Rails
 - AJAX (remember that it was once called that)
 - “Release everything but your secret sauce” (cf: Preston’s *Open Source (Almost) Everything*)
- Web developers didn’t pick copyleft ...
 - ... maybe because we hadn’t given them a copyleft.
 - permissive MIT license & 3-clause BSD rules the web.

The Application

- Today, most new applications deploy online ...
 - from infrastructure-level like OpenStack ...
 - to *even* developer tools like GitHub/BitBucket (!) ...
 - to end-user applications: FaceBook, Twitter, GooglePlus.
- The dark ages are coming!

Dark Ages? Really?

- The developers (monks) have the source code (books).

Dark Ages? Really?

- The people (users) trust the power of the church (Facebook).

Dark Ages? Really?

- We cloistered few shall have freedom:
 - source code haves and have-nots ...
 - ... (again!)

Generational Change

- Has today's developer chased a bug from the top to the bottom?
- Will tomorrow's developer ever need to?
 - Is the complexity too much anyway?
- Will tomorrow's developer care?
 - The past cloistered missed Free Software entirely, after all.

Hindsight

- Maybe this was inevitable?
 - Even if GPLv2.2 came out in mid-2002 ...
 - Generational disconnect was the primary factor.
- Who's AGPLv3 for today?

The Great Abuse

- Proprietary relicensing (by holding all copyright).
- license enforcement with profit as its primary (and only?) goal.
- MySQL would shake down GPL users to buy proprietary licenses they didn't need.
- More copyleft means more shakedowns.
- Most common use of AGPLv3 today.
- It makes me sick.

Community Development

- AGPLv3's intended for community development.
- Lots of copyright holders: + all bound to each other by copyleft.
- The great trust of copyleft.
- Sadly, few are writing this code.

The Great Marketing Challenge

- The Free Software Twitter exists ...
 - ... StatusNet; it's AGPLv3'd
 - ... but it's a ghost-town compared to Twitter.
- The Free Software tumblr/flickr exists ...
 - ... GNU Mediagoblin; it's AGPLv3'd
 - ... but it's a ghost-town compared to tumblr/flickr.
- We're back to catching up to proprietary software:
 - Like GNU had to catch up to Unix.
 - That took almost 20 years!

More Info / Talk License

- URLs / Social Networking / Email:
 - Conservancy: sfconservancy.org & @conservancy
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