Software Licences - Getting Agitated

Unlicensed software, not to be confused with open source, has been costing the big players millions. Now, with the switch to the cloud, the pirates will be the ones getting agitated, notes Adena Schutzberg.

I got pretty agitated some months ago when several writers (who should know better) and their editors at technical publications (who also should know better) published articles that stated that open source GIS software has no licence. This, the authors argued, made the software superior to software that has a licence.

Open source software does carry a licence. Per the Open Software Initiative, open source software carries an open source licence that meets specific criteria. One of those criteria, and the one I think the writers I noted above wanted to highlight, is that the licence does not require payment of a royalty or other fee. That means a user can have 1 or 10 or 100 licences for the same price: free. That's indeed a big deal, but it does not mean the software does not have a licence.

Pirated Licences

I'm not the only one getting agitated about licences. As I write in March there's word that Autodesk is making plans to address users of its software that do not have legal licences. Why? The company did not meet revenue estimates and lost a good deal of money (US$171 million) this past quarter. Why? The company, like many others, is moving its user base from perpetual (forever) to subscription (per period of time) licensing. To help fill the coffers during the transition, the company plans to track down and request payment from some of its six million unlicensed software users. Per Co-CEO Andrew Anagnost, 1.2 million of those licences are in accounts "that we know and have worked with in the past."

Will the unlicensed respond positively to Autodesk's overtures to "get legal?" Decades ago Autodesk joined the Business Software Alliance (BSA), now known as the Software Alliance, to encourage companies to pay for their software. The charge, led by Microsoft, included some heavy-handed efforts and had limited success. Today, the growth of low-cost work-alike and free tools that read and write Autodesk's DWG format give users more options to "get legal." Open-source CAD solutions haven't matured as quickly as GIS ones, but they, with their open licences and $0 price tags, are an option, too.

Changing Licences

When I started in this industry users bought a box of software and in that box were the installation media, the manuals, and a paper licence. As internal software networks evolved, vendors offered licences that could be shared. One popular option was called concurrent licensing. An organization paid for a pool of licences, say five, to run the software. The first five users got the available licences and went to work. When the maximum number of licences was in use, the next requestor, number six, would need to wait until a colleague finished with the software and "freed up" a licence. As more software ties itself to the cloud and provides privileges based on identity, software vendors (SAP, Microsoft, Oracle, Esri among others) are implementing named user licences. That means, one named individual can use the licence, sometimes on multiple machines, with specific privileges. Software users are agitated as they learn about and work to navigate these new licensing waters.

Change is Hard

The one thing these three situations share is that they involve learning about licences and accepting, like everything else in life, that they change. The authors of the articles I noted grabbed on to one aspect of licensing that was exciting to them (free!) but didn't do enough homework to understand that a licence was still in force. Autodesk is returning to a concern it had back in the days of selling boxes of software: pirated licences. Now, however, pirates can be tracked more easily via the Internet and serial numbers. Pirates, once they pay Autodesk for past offences, have more CAD licensing options than ever to continue on the straight and narrow. Software users accustomed to concurrent licensing are scratching their heads as they think through named user licensing and how it maps to their needs. Being agitated, while sometimes uncomfortable, encourages exploration and decision making.

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