

Diabologic: An Open Source Christmas

by Frank Dolinar

As the holiday season nears, we all have too much to do and too little time to do it.

It has taken longer than I would have liked to find a topic for this month's column, not just because of the season, but because I had too many possibilities to choose from. After days of organizing notes and hoping something would present itself as a likely candidate, I decided to stop for an evening and have some coffee and conversation with my brother. I found my topic during that conversation.

He has an old, slow Intel486 computer that is in need of some refurbishing and some upgrading. I believe the operating system is Microsoft's Windows 98 and the rest of the software is equally ancient. Though the computer once belonged to me, I haven't actually seen it in years.

We discussed possibilities. There are a number of folders of electronic documents that my brother wants saved for ongoing and future use, but the rest of the contents of his disk are history. Beyond that he wanted to spend as little money as possible and isn't yet interested in buying a new computer.

That made the choices easy. The answer is open source — as opposed to proprietary software.

And I hear you asking, "What's open source?"

Open Source Software (aka OSS) is basically a labor of love. Each program or system developed as OSS can have as many people working on it as have interest in it — although there will typically be a core of people who decide on the fundamental approach and ultimate goals of the program. In addition, all open source projects are available with complete source code — that's the programming language statements that the programmers write to make it do its magic. Finally, open source software is free. Yes, you read that correctly. That's free as in zero cost.

If you're using a computer running a Microsoft (MS) operating system like WindowsXP, you know you didn't get that free. You may, reasonably, be wondering what free software can actually do (a lot), whether it comes with any documentation (manuals in electronic form), where you get it in the first place (you download it), whether it's reliable (very), and how to deal with problems (the manual will indicate where & how to get support — which is also free).

What's my brother going to get?

An operating system to actually run the computer. In this case, a version of the Linux operating system called Ubuntu (<http://www.ubuntu.com>), which has proven itself over a number of years to be extremely easy to install, capable, versatile, and easy to use. It comes with dozens of features and applications that would be costly from a proprietary vendor. Better yet, it will run quickly on this old computer, providing productivity that the current setup cannot deliver.

An office productivity suite, Open Office (<http://www.openoffice.org>), which includes the necessary software for word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, graphics, databases, and more. Open Office has its own format for its files, which are typically much smaller than the equivalent files generated by MS Office, but it can also read and write files in MS Office formats when you need to. Better yet, Open Office is also available for Windows and the Macintosh.

In 2008, it's unthinkable to have a computer and not access the Internet. I'll install a web browser (FireFox) and an email client (Thunderbird). I use both of these programs (workhorses, actually) on my computers that access the Internet (yup, also available for Windows and the Mac). Available from Mozilla (<http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/>). Preliminary testing of the soon to be released FireFox 3.1 suggests that it runs rings around Microsoft's Internet Explorer.

My brother has his own website. To date, he's hand coded the HTML statements that make it functional. I'll supply him with KompoZer (<http://kompozer.net>), a lovely program I've used to create my own website. It lets you see each page as it develops as HTML source code, preview mode (as it would look in a browser), or preview with tags so you can see how changes affect the appearance of the page.

Open source provides access to a plethora of programming languages, database systems, industry specific applications, games, etc. and a website, SourceForge (<http://sourceforge.net/>), that lists literally thousands of open source projects in dozens of categories — almost all of which are available to download to your system at no cost. If you can't find something to do what you need on SourceForge — you may want to rethink your criteria.

Christmas upgrades to my brother's computer will be inexpensive, but will provide him with a capable, versatile, and productive machine.