

WHY LIBREOFFICE IS THE ONLY TRUE HEIR TO THE OPENOFFICE PROJECT

The histories of LibreOffice and Apache OpenOffice, the two forks of the "old" Sun-sponsored OpenOffice, are closely related and yet profoundly different.

LibreOffice is the project the OpenOffice community wanted, and as such it is the sole heir to OpenOffice itself, whose values of free software it elevates and sublimates, adding to them those of meritocracy, community governance and corporate independence.

Apache OpenOffice, on the other hand, was born on the initiative of IBM and those who had badly digested the LibreOffice fork, knowing that it would put them in a marginal position within a community based on meritocracy and corporate independence.

Since the last two paragraphs may be controversial, let us pick up the threads of history to clarify the reasons behind these two statements, which may sound a little exaggerated or even unfounded to the ears of those who have not followed the development of the two projects.

As a founder of the LibreOffice project and the Document Foundation, I may have a biased point of view, so I invite readers to check the information, as they should. In this way they will see which project respects the transparency that Free Software deserves, and which uses the means typical of proprietary software.

Lyon Conference (2006)

Let's go back to the Lyon OOoCon in September 2006, when Michael Bemmer - head of Sun's StarDivision, the StarOffice and OpenOffice R&D lab based in Hamburg - presented a series of slides attempting to answer some of the community's objections:

- OpenOffice grew well with the addition of modules and features, but lacked a strategic design capable of accompanying this growth with a refactoring of the source code, which was "exploding" with cross-references;
- The relationship between developers paid by the companies - Sun, RedHat and SUSE - and volunteers was clearly unbalanced in favour of the former, since the management of the development project made it very difficult for the latter to access the source code and slowed down the integration of patches (Kohei Yoshida's patch, integrated after 28 months, is famous for reasons that are still completely obscure);
- In general, the community was harder to join than the average open source project, and the management of community manager Louis Suarez Potts (who could have done everything or the opposite of everything, except community manager) kept volunteers away rather than bringing them closer.

Michael Bemmer's slides answered some of the objections. It was a pity, however, that they were completely disregarded by reality, because nothing that was written there was then implemented by Sun.

Of course, this did not satisfy the community that had grown since 2000, the year the OOo project was announced, when it was born on the wings of the enthusiasm of a small group of pioneers like Sophie Gautier, and had welcomed professionals like myself who were able to stand up to Sun on issues such as marketing and communications.

The group of volunteers, expressing the "independent" leadership of the project, then continued to work on the foundation project, announced by Sun in the same press release presenting OOo, and constantly postponed.

Beijing Conference (2008)

Fast forward 2 years and a few months, and we arrive at OOoCon in Beijing in November 2008, when IBM announces its entry into the OOo community, obviously "à la IBM", with a contract that allows it to blatantly ignore the copyleft licence and exploit the work of volunteers for Symphony, a proprietary software.

Sun owns the intellectual property of all OOo code because it requires all volunteer developers to sign a "contributor agreement" that gives it all rights to the source code, so that it can give away the source code itself in the form and manner it sees fit, without having to consult anyone.

To understand the genesis of this source code licensing, we need to go back several years to 2003, when IBM released the first version of Symphony, taking advantage of the fact that OOo 1.1 was released under a dual licence: LGPL (Lesser GNU Public License, copyleft) and SISSL (Sun Industry Standard Software License, permissive).

IBM, of course, chooses the permissive licence and turns OOo's open source code into Symphony's proprietary code (which is freeware), claiming that the permissive licence is the one that will attract dozens of companies into OOo's orbit.

An assertion that is belied by history, since the only company attracted by the permissive licence for a software like OOo is IBM itself, and not just at the time, but to this day, almost 11 years later (despite all the efforts made over the years to find partners).

This relationship between IBM and permissive licensing is a fundamental passage in the history of OOo, which explains many of the things that happened between 2011 and 2014, but is ignored by most people because it gets lost in history.

Let's go back to 2008, when IBM signs the contract with Sun that allows it to use the code of OOo 3.0, which has matured from that of OOo 1.1, which was a real anthology of bugs and practically unusable.

The problem for IBM is that since the announcement of version 2.0, OOo has only been released under the LGPL licence, so without a contract with Sun it would be forced to abide by the dictates of the copyleft licence and share its contributions with the community.

At OOoCon in Beijing, Michael Karasik – head of the local IBM research lab – presents the development strategy for Symphony, with a number of new modules (such as Dandelion for collaborative editing) that will eventually be integrated into OOo.

As in the case of Michael Bemmer's presentation, the announcements made by Michael Karasik are still resting on his slides.

Sun and Oracle (2009)

Towards the end of 2008, Sun entered into merger negotiations with IBM and another company, without success. On 20 April 2009, Oracle announced the agreement to acquire Sun, surprising all but the most attentive observers, who were aware of the two tactical motives of

the operation: to prevent the SparcStations on which the Pentagon's Oracle databases were running from falling into the hands of IBM, and to keep the development of MySQL under control so that it does not become a threat to Oracle's databases.

At the time, when I was asked to comment, I answered that it was the worst thing that could possibly happen to OOo because Oracle's business model was not compatible with that of free software and even less so with that of OOo, which did not exist because of Sun's absolute inability in marketing.

Unfortunately, I could not have imagined that Oracle's divestiture of OOo, which was widely expected, would lead to the catastrophic event of the donation of the code and the brand to the Apache Software Foundation, inspired by IBM by virtue of the contract signed with Sun in 2008.

But let us take things in order. Oracle's acquisition of Sun is scrutinised by the European Union's antitrust commission because of the potential monopoly created by the combination of Oracle and MySQL, and this is delaying the completion of the negotiations until 27 January 2010.

Meanwhile, the OOoCon in Orvieto in November 2009 confirmed Oracle's total disinterest in the OOo project. In fact, the company is represented by an official without a budget, whose task – apparently – is to manage the transition.

The signal was so strong and clear that the leaders of the OOo community decided to take matters into their own hands and accelerate the process leading to the fork and the birth of the independent foundation.

The genesis of LibreOffice (2010)

The activity starts in February 2010 and plans to get to the announcement by the end of the year, as Oracle's closure of OOo is expected to take place in late 2010 or early 2011. In reality, the announcement comes in April 2011, at the end of a process which, in 12 months, turns OOo and the entire Hamburg StarDivision into a cost that can be eliminated to the applause of analysts.

During the spring and summer, the work of the Community Leadership Group continues apace on all fronts, with new elements being co-opted to complete the team in some areas, not least because some of the original members are no longer involved in the business (and will be the first to speak out against the fork).

The aim of the group of "active" founders, which will eventually consist of 16 people, is to arrive at the OOoCon in Budapest with all the elements in place, so as to be able to discuss all the details of the announcement in one single meeting.

During the conference, the group members participate in the proceedings in a completely normal way, without raising the slightest suspicion among the developers or the volunteers. I made the usual comments about marketing and the Italian community.

The Founders' Meeting takes place on 2 September 2010 in a restaurant in the centre of Budapest, while the rest of the conference participants are attending the "social" event on a boat for a mini-cruise on the Danube.

During the meeting, the founders decide about the date of the announcement at the end of

September, the members of the Steering Committee (whose task it is to guide the project) and the strategy towards Oracle and IBM, who will be proposed to join the project.

Obviously, the latter is a "political" proposal, as it is clear to everyone that Oracle and IBM have no intention of joining the community, which they would very much like to kill, in some cases even physically.

Saturday 11 September is the first conference call of the Steering Committee, during which the name of the Foundation and the name of the software are decided: The Document Foundation and LibreOffice.

IBM's strategy for Apache OpenOffice

IBM persuades Oracle to transfer the OpenOffice brand and application source code to the Apache Software Foundation in the secret hope that the majority of the LibreOffice community will switch to Apache OpenOffice, thus "killing" LibreOffice and blocking the formation of The Document Foundation.

When it became clear that this would never happen, IBM transferred Symphony's proprietary source code to the Apache Software Foundation and hired five former StarDivision developers to give the project the illusion of taking off and delay LibreOffice's growth.

Shortly afterwards, the fake news based communication strategy against The Document Foundation and LibreOffice begins, aimed at weakening the FOSS project in its most delicate phase - that of structural consolidation - in the hope that it will fail and make way for Apache OpenOffice.

Around LibreOffice, a tough and decisive battle is being fought for the freedom and independence of free software on the desktop. The proponents of AOO were playing IBM's game (and indirectly Microsoft's, and we will see why later), even if in some cases they thought they were playing the users' game.

In reality, the nefarious goals of the IBM free software project have been perfectly clear since 2011 (and it is no coincidence that 99% of the OOO community that switched to LibreOffice then stayed with LibreOffice), so those who supported Apache OpenOffice did so knowing - or pretending not to know - that it was a project that would die after three years (and \$15 million of IBM investment).

LibreOffice's journey begins

Let's go back to 28 September 2010, the day of the official announcement of the project that would give OOO's a new home representing the community and a new name representing freedom and independence: The Document Foundation and LibreOffice. The project is backed by Google, Novell and RedHat, and will soon be joined by Canonical and the Free Software Foundation.

Oracle is invited to join and donate the OpenOffice trademark. In response, it demands that all members of the Community Council involved in the LibreOffice project resign due to a rather obvious conflict of interest.

LibreOffice starts with just 20 developers, who quickly grow to more than 100 within a month thanks to the simple hacks mechanism, driven by the enthusiasm of the announcement. They have continued to grow until today, reaching more than 900 units, of which about 300 are

active on an annual basis and about 100 on a monthly basis.

The developers began the cleanup of the source code that had been expected for over 5 years, leading to the removal of obsolete libraries, the translation of comments from German to English (allowing non-German speaking developers to find their way around the code), and the removal of methods that had been abandoned for years. All in all, within a full year and a couple of problematic releases (due to the cleanup), this represents a significant improvement in quality.

On 25 January 2011, LibreOffice 3.3 is announced.

Oracle abandons OpenOffice

As planned, Oracle announced its intention to abandon OOo at the beginning of the second quarter of fiscal 2011.

However, the termination of the OOo project could not take place without the agreement of IBM, which is strongly committed to the contract that ensures access to the OOo source code until at least 2014 (unfortunately, it is unclear whether the contract signed in 2008 was for 3 + 3 years or more, but this is of marginal importance).

Seeing an opportunity to get its hands on the OOo project, IBM convinced (forced?) Oracle to transfer the OOo trademark and source code to the Apache Software Foundation.

IBM gets its beloved permissive licence, which allows it to hold the community hostage thanks to the sword of Damocles of converting the software from open source to proprietary, and to control the project thanks to the governance characteristics of the ASF, which rewards corporations over individuals.

IBM's Apache OpenOffice project is born

On 1 June 2011, Oracle announced the transfer of the OOo trademark and source code to ASF with a meagre blog post, while IBM - theoretically not involved in the operation - announced its strategy of attacking The Document Foundation and LibreOffice with a post by Rob Weir.

For those of you who don't know him, Rob Weir is an engineer IBM took over from Lotus and is a standards expert on the ODF standard. He is certainly a competent person in this area. The problem is that IBM put him in charge of communications, and in that area Rob Weir is a disaster.

Rob Weir summons all the contributors to LibreOffice and asks them to shut down the project and switch to Apache OpenOffice. Of course, he overlooks the fact that he doesn't understand the open source community, so the call falls on deaf ears (except for a handful of people who switch to Apache OpenOffice).

At this point, Rob Weir tries to prove that LibreOffice's growth is meaningless by providing invented data about Apache OpenOffice, and when it becomes clear that LibreOffice wins even with fake data, he makes Apache OpenOffice's embarrassing numbers worthless by adding the source code to the website and wiki code, making it impossible to tell how many active developers there are.

In fact, the number is easy to determine because it is so small that it could be mistaken for a school trip, even if you include those who only write HTML. Moreover, since all lies have short

legs, Rob Weir's "trick" means that AOO is written less than 50% in C++ and more than 40% in HTML.

As I have said before, the goal of IBM, which created the Apache OpenOffice project with the complicity of the Apache Software Foundation, is not to invest in open source software, but to kill the free open source LibreOffice.

Obviously, such a project has a clear lifespan, which in the tradition of large US corporations is three years (and a fixed amount of money): if at the end of the time and the money the goal of killing LibreOffice and the Document Foundation has not been achieved, IBM will withdraw from the Apache OpenOffice project.

The situation is clear to anyone with a basic knowledge of the software world, to the extent that I described it in detail three years in advance, so those who argued that AOO was a solid project because of IBM's presence, and suggested migrating to Apache OpenOffice instead of LibreOffice, were doing so for nothing more than hostile reasons.

The Apache OpenOffice community

IBM is supported by some fairly well-known people in the OOO community:

- the OOO Community Manager, who thinks he is entitled to the same role and will never be able to accept the concept of meritocracy (even if meritocracy within the Apache Software Foundation is peculiar and influenced by the corporate orientation);
- the Mexican who, for unknown reasons, was put in charge of the Spanish language project and turned it into a kind of oligarchy with a group of subordinates, to the point of depressing the Hispanic community to the point of almost causing the disappearance of OOO from Spanish-speaking countries;
- the Frenchman in charge of the MacOS port, who manages to quarrel with everyone, and finally with the management of the Apache OpenOffice project, because of his incompatibility with the other developers (with some of whom he even manages to come to blows during the Lyon conference).

In addition, IBM unleashes a "buy" campaign similar to that of professional football, but only manages to rally around Apache OpenOffice a real Argentine developer, out of friendship with one of his five employees, and a series of folkloric characters who love the "permissive" Apache licence beyond any reasonable consideration.

They flank Rob Weir in the crusade against TDF and LibreOffice, which reaches its most virulent tones in 2012 and 2013, as time inexorably passes and the difference in vitality between the two projects grows.

From the beginning of 2012, with the official birth of The Document Foundation, it is clear to everyone that the project is very solid and is also beginning to grow in terms of user adoption. In other words, there is no hope of it closing down, and no hope of it shrinking with an exodus to Apache OpenOffice.

The short history of Apache OpenOffice

The project was born in June 2011, but the developers needlessly wasted a year getting rid of the copyleft-licensed code that worked but was hated by IBM.

The first release of Apache OpenOffice, 3.4, arrives in May 2012 and contains nothing new apart from bugs and regressions introduced to replace perfectly working LGPL code. Free fonts are even replaced with fonts released under the Apache permissive licence.

However, IBM's copyleft "witch hunt" does not prevent compromises when necessary elements such as the spell-checker engine and the dictionaries are released under a copyleft licence and there were no alternatives, making it impossible to replace them. In this case, the copyleft licence also becomes "acceptable" to IBM as an "external" licence.

The second and third new releases of Apache OpenOffice take advantage of features developed by IBM for Symphony: sidebar and accessibility. Other than that, they offer nothing new, but the mere fact that they exist creates confusion in the marketplace and leads many users to view AOO as an active project with an evolving future.

Of course, Rob Weir is aware of the fact that the Apache OpenOffice project will close down after "consuming" Symphony's source code because it does not have enough developers and cannot attract new ones.

Moreover, it has failed in its business objective, as The Document Foundation and LibreOffice are in excellent health and have won a place in the history of free software.

Slowly but steadily, contributions to the AOO began to dwindle, until the day IBM abandoned the project, exactly three years after the launch. At the same time, Rob Weir leaves the OASIS technical committee for ODF standardisation, confirming that IBM does not care at all about open source software and open standards.

If the goal of the IBM project was to support the development of Apache OpenOffice, as the project's supporters were still telling the world, the developers would have had to continue working regardless of the success of TDF and LibreOffice.

Instead, the developers – including the release manager – disappeared from the project from one day to the next, confirming – even if it was not necessary – what had been known since 2011 and what everyone had understood for some time.

Apache Software Foundation, Microsoft and IBM

Some may wonder why the Apache Software Foundation, which had major problems with IBM in the past because of the Harmony project (same end, i.e. developer abandonment), would be at it again, knowing in advance how it would end, and advocating a hostile strategy towards another free software project.

Unfortunately, the explanation is quite simple: at the time, ASF was heavily influenced by Microsoft and IBM. The president of the ASF was a Microsoft employee named Ross Gardler (and as a true free software advocate, he used a Microsoft Surface running Windows 8). Also, the founder and former president of the ASF, Jim Jagielski, was president of the Outercurve Foundation, a Microsoft offshoot.

But that's not all: Gianugo Rabellino, a prominent figure in the ASF, was also a Microsoft employee.

Microsoft drew heavily from the ranks of the Apache Software Foundation, because the Foundation is – in reality – ideologically closer to proprietary software than to open source, as evidenced by the "permissive" licence designed to protect the rights of big business.

At this point, the meaning of my statement about the battle for freedom and independence of free software on the desktop, fought around LibreOffice, should be clear. Of course, winning that battle has had a number of positive consequences for LibreOffice and a number of negative consequences for Apache OpenOffice.

LibreOffice's journey continues

LibreOffice is one of the leading free software projects and the most important on the desktop, as confirmed by the results of the Future of Open Source research, which put it in third place behind the OpenStack and Docker cloud projects and on a par with the Drupal CMS.

This recognition comes four and a half years after the project was announced and four years after the first release, and is a testament to the quality of the developers' work (and therefore the founders' ideas). This quality is demonstrated by the Coverity Scan results for source code quality, which show that LibreOffice is the free software project with the fewest defects per 1,000 lines of source code, relative to the size of the source code itself.

The LibreOffice community is preparing for the release of version 5.0 at the end of July, with major new features such as 64-bit Windows support and the first phase of the user interface and usability redesign. In the last quarter of 2015 or the first quarter of 2016, LibreOffice will also arrive on Android – where there is a first version of the viewer – and in the cloud.

The end of Apache OpenOffice

LibreOffice's successes confirm that the criticism of the Apache OpenOffice community's choice of copyleft licence and copyright assignment was deeply flawed, as was the definition of "experimental software" attributed to LibreOffice.

There were also those who claimed that IBM's support guaranteed the future, stability and quality of Apache OpenOffice. About the future and stability we have already said, and about quality – unfortunately – there is much to be said, especially in this last part of 2015.

In fact, Apache OpenOffice 4.1.1 is affected by a security problem that can only be solved by manually deleting a file, as there are not enough developers to provide a source code patch. Despite this, the software can be downloaded regularly from the website, where there is no mention of the problem – except in the "announcements" mailing list archive – so users are exposed to a vulnerability without knowing it.

Worse still, there are some 100 million Windows users whose only exposure to free software is the installation of OpenOffice or Apache OpenOffice.

Not only have these users not seen much innovation in the last four years, they are now being exposed to a vulnerability without this fact being mentioned on the download page to enable them to make an informed choice. The vulnerability was even hidden from the organisations that migrated to Apache OpenOffice because LibreOffice was "experimental" and Apache OpenOffice was a "guarantee".

The future of LibreOffice

Fortunately, LibreOffice no longer needs Apache OpenOffice, because everything of interest that IBM developed – the sidebar and accessibility features – has been integrated, as well as the very few features developed specifically for AOO.

So those who wisely decided to switch to LibreOffice for its obvious advantages over all other open source office suites, and for the characteristics of the project – dynamism, independence, meritocracy, community governance – can rest easy.

LibreOffice 5.0, LibreOffice for Android and LibreOffice Online are just around the corner.

DISCLAIMER: All opinions expressed in this document are those of Italo Vignoli, the author of the whole text, and do not represent those of The Document Foundation and of its members. This is especially true for the catastrophic opinions about both IBM and the Apache Software Foundation.

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