

# The gift of sharing

A critical approach to the notion of gift economy within the everyday life-world of free and open source software.

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<[devel]> it is fixed  
<user> how can i make it up to you?  
<user> beer, donation, payment?  
<[devel]> user: owe me nothing  
<user> [devel]: what then?  
<[devel]> look at the documentation  
<[devel]> spread the word
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I have just quoted a short IRC sequence which is at the end of a much longer conversation (original user nicks and timestamps has been removed by purpose). The context is within a free software project, developing source-code licensed under GNU GPL. The situation consists of a highly skilled developer ('devel') who has just helped a very unskilled user ('user') with solving a problem related to a faulty configuration file. The 'user' is new to the project, and has breached the rule not to ask for help on the projects IRC channel. 'User' has been informed by 'devel' of his lack in conduct, but 'devel' has ended up helping 'user' – it is uncommon for 'devel' to help novices. 'User' did several times in public demand that he needed help, and 'devel' had at that point in time the choice of banning 'user' from the channel. 'Devel' chose not to ban 'user', instead he took the time to help and hereby teach 'user' to edit a simple text file, via vi. The end of the session is significant; then 'devel' points out that there is no personal relationship between them – there has been left no debt to re-pay. Instead it is suggested to 'user' that he/she can do something for the project. How are we as readers supposed to understand what this implies? We are looking at the expressions of a particular form of social organization – but what kind of organization principle is here at hand?

This paper makes an attempt at answering a question. The question is direct and simple; is free and open source software (FOSS) the visible expression of a gift-economy? The answer is - or should at least be - likewise direct and simple, and normally spelled with three letters: Yes. But, what if this is not the case? What if the above answer is faulty and misleading? I believe a critical approach to the combined notion of FOSS and gift-economy is needed. Then one essential part of all forms of exchange seems to be missing - where is the transaction between partners, or agreed-upon exchange between individuals? How it is possible to define something as being a gift-economy when there is a distinct lack of exchange or transactions of products/artifacts? It is my thesis in the following discussion that FOSS practice, the organizational principle we all experience, is based on social sharing and not on processes of exchange, e.g. gift-economy. To push this point ahead I will draw a comparison between immediate-return hunter-gatherer societies and the life-world of FOSS. The

end will be a positioning of social relationships as central value in a culture based on sharing, with its political implications. The simple answer to all of this is found in the need for coherence.

Presently few questions that free and open source software (FOSS) is embedded in a gift-economy. It seems pleasing that past and present, shell-necklaces and source-code, can be, or is, two faces of the same coin. Suddenly to have things in common with roaming bands of hunter-gatherers and warrior tribes-men brings life into perspective. The basic principle of a gift-economy rests on that the giving of a gift requires the receiver to reciprocate (Mauss 1990/1950). The exchange of gifts again changes the positions of the actors, the one becomes the other and the other becomes the one. The singular situation is transformed into an ongoing social process of exchange between partners, and systems of reciprocity emerge. Establishing lasting and strong social bond, or valuable relationship, between individuals and groups. This continuing exchange of gifts underlies all our social structures and interactions. The cycling gift system is the society (Douglas 1990). Gifts are in this context likewise tangible and non-tangible artifacts/products, spanning from food to symbols and metaphysic concepts - and all have in common that they are culturally produced. Gift-economy is hereby a mechanism by which individual interests combine to make a social system, without engaging in a monetary system. Like the commodity exchange of market-economy it supplies individuals with personal incentives for collaborating through the exchange of gifts.

But, and this is an underlined but, there are no free gifts. When someone gives a gift they expect something in return from the recipient. Bourdieu (1977) has emphasized the elements of strategy, calculation and self-interest which are common to both gift and commodity exchange. This having-in-common and inter-mingling of economical systems does in itself contain parts of the problem. The dominant interpretation weighs the two words of the concept of gift-economy differently. This might not be a problem if the term is placed solitary within strict ethnographic analysis of "primitive pre-economic societies", though as soon as it enters modern realms 'gifts' are translated into 'commodities'. Commodities are by nature different from gifts, then they are valued in terms of singular monetary transactions and not as representations of relationships. Market-economy relies on the inherent anonymity of transacting commodities for money. A gift-economy is about creating and maintaining relationships whereas the commodity-economy aims at individual maximization of profit. Gift exchange underwrites social relations and is concerned with social reproduction - commodity exchange establishes relations between things and ensure their reproduction. It would not have been a problem if these two systems could be kept separate, but they are presently competing. The domination of the economic market forces is constantly converting tangible and non-tangible cultural artifacts/products into commodities (Strathern & Hirsch 2004). When money is first introduced the stability is shaken, as Humphrey and Hugh-Jones (1992) writes:

".. Money is not just wealth, it is also a threat to power legitimated in a particular social organization...".

It seems a plausible thought that the cool of FOSS already would be under conquest, but this is not the case. The productive activity which takes place appears to thrive just because it bears no resemblance to economics, let alone to the production of commodities. This is a return to the position that FOSS production is clearly apart from standard economics. Ghosh (2005) expands on this non-economic aspect, and notes the fact that the transactions of the system is implicit to the point of being practical nonexistence. As noted above, a gift-economy is based on personal relationships, which may exist before and/or after a gift is given. Though for most people involved in FOSS, the code itself is as anonymous as a product can be.

".. I'm not transacting with you, I'm not giving you anything or getting anything from you, as an individual..." (Ghosh 2005)

The obligation to return the gift (reciprocity) is an abstract reality. This indicates that the using of FOSS creates no obligations for the individual user - there is seldom a relationship between the original hacker and the present user. Held together with the comment by Ghosh, there is no exchange of gifts, and thereby there are no processes of exchange. Concluding that FOSS is not embedded in a gift-economy is not difficult. The thought ends at the point where calling the particular form of FOSS social organization a gift-economy is wrong, or faulty - but, what is it then? There are other forms of social organization than the gift cycle system, and these are neither gift nor market.

Parts of the answer to the question is best found in related debates. Ghosh (2005) places the model of the tribal 'cooking-pot' as a solution. A shared cooking-pot where the tribal group members combine their inputs and hereby create a more valuable product to each individual. Another approach is proposed through the networked discussions of the project Oekonux.org, managed by Stefan Merten. The point of departure, is the clear view that FOSS is not a gift, neither a commodity nor just a simple hobby. The answer to these premises is the stressing of the importance of a peer-to-peer (P2P) based model of production (Bauwens 2005), as a direction towards an understanding of the FOSS culture. The P2P production mode takes place through the free cooperation of producers who have access to a common distributed capital. The product is not exchange value for a market, but use-value for a community of producers. Each individual contributes according to his capacities and willingness, and each takes according to his needs. There is, as such, no obligatory reciprocity involved.

Both answers are viable, and they likewise point at sharing as being central to the understanding. Still, the models suggested are filled with dependencies - If you don't know where the cooking-pot is, and you are unable to add anything to it, unable to be a producing peer amongst peers, then your locked out. It is required that you give something away before you can receive, or take,

something of a higher value. I find it difficult to ignore the hierarchical elements and the continued dependencies, despite them being not directly reciprocal, the emerging relationships are based on transactions taking place. A continued emphasis on complex strategies, individual goals and the weighing-out of increase in value. The mentioned approaches both focus on the producer – some what ignoring the hacker vs. user reality.

At this point it becomes inspiring to push ahead and look in another direction. The typical hunter-gatherer lifestyle, in both the present and past, is characterized by people living in small mobile groups, roaming through an extended landscape (mainly in tropical or desert environments). These cultural groups are highly egalitarian, their social organization is based on immediate return (demand) sharing and there is a visible lack of private/individual property. There are two dominant characteristics of these cultures (Hadza,!Kung etc.). First; this particular form of social organization is based on the demand that you share all resources acquired - e.g. game-animals killed or crops gathered - to such an extent that there are no personal possessions. Secondly; it is not possible in any way to manifest continued ownership over one specific resource, then as soon as it is shared (added to the network) the channels of re-distribution are outside of control. The typical example, of how this system of social sharing works, refers to the situation when a hunter has killed game (meat) and what then guides the practice of sharing. The following bullet-points highlights embedded logic:

- Meat does initially belong to the hunter, and this entitles him to ownership.
- Sharing is not a product of practical need to dispose of meat before it rots.
- The hunter has very limited control over who gets the meat.
- Receiving meat does not bind the recipient to reciprocate.
- Generosity is not stressed.
- Success in hunting provides little insurance for the future.

In this sense, and as Woodburn (1996) writes; the obligation to share cannot be said to enhance significantly the access of successful hunters to meat or other resources. Their overall access to meat of their own and other kills and other resources would be greater if they were permitted to control the use of the meat of large animals they kill – to decide whether to use it fresh or to dry and store it, to decide whether to exchange it for other goods or services or to use it to pay off past debts or to establish future claims. They are prevented from doing all of these things by the obligation to share, which is a product of a system of values, indeed a political ideology, backed by sanctions positive and negative. There is a clear notion of property rights, with its implications in respect to political relations, with a focus on the single (individual) ownership to a kill (meat). But, only as a means of identifying who the 'donor' is, not as a system to ensure any continued rights or control.

Turning the gaze towards source-code and the basic principles of GNU GPL does create a pattern of reflection. I am here making an attempt at following the thought that meat equals source-code. The GNU GPL license requires that all additions or changes in the existing code, in this sense new resources, are shared without demands, and the re-distribution is uncontrolled and free. James Leach (2005) explains, while referring to the development of the Linux operating system, how:

“.. each contributor's work is individually owned; they are identified with that work, and retain ownership. However, the work of one person is only coherent and valuable as a combined work that is *multiply owned* by all contributors...”.

This states that; people do own ideas and images, but these are not owned in terms of neither objects nor commodities. Similar to the solitary hunter, the individual hacker can choose to hide in the “bush” and gorge him/herself on the “kill”. Though, this happens very infrequently – then there is no coherence if source-code is not freely shared, and given away without restrictions. Anything released onto the Internet, or converted into a digital form, is uncontrollable. To distribute and re-distribute does not require more than a few simple typing strokes, or clicks with a mouse.

If the individual hacker (author) wants coherence in his/her work source-code has to be released. Though, this is not the same as handing-out a gift and expecting more in return – who is the chosen recipient of this “gift”? By unconditional sharing the hacker creates the potential of entering into valuable relationship with peers and create personal 'gift cycles' – but the demand is to share all you have and know. The essential clue to all of this is that: if you don't there is no coherence. A sharing culture places personal alliances in a secondary position. The political ideal is free public sharing, which then establishes a sociality for individual cycles of gift exchange. But, sharing is demanded. The free flow is about potentials and creativity. If flow is hindered, keeping knowledge hidden, consequences emerge. These are strongly acted-out in terms of public shaming and isolation from the sociality – and I believe this made 'devel' share upon demand then if he had not, it could have been shameful to him.

FOSS as a culture of sharing, instead of being a gift-economy, is slowly emerging. I hope the reader finds the threads of the answer. If the world of FOSS is to be understood in terms of social sharing, as the primary organizational principle, it becomes critical to recognize the cultural politics unfolding. A model of social organization based on mutual aid, collaboration and egalitarian decision-making challenges the dominant paradigm of the economic market. There is a confrontation between how property relations are negotiated and re-produced. On the one hand; the commoditification of the capitalist market – opposing this is new structures build on collaborative ownership. This conflicting state requires a continued attention to how the world of FOSS is to be understood, and I believe a critical approach to the notion of gift economy is needed.

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