

Story telling versus progress

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16 January 2005

IBM has announced (PDF from a Word document) that it will be granting free use of 500 of its over 30,000 patents to open source development. The Economist announces that it is a "bold step". Groklaw, the place for geeks who are into law, has effusive commentary about how wonderful this is, including pages of comments from people writing things like "I praise IBM for taking this bold step!" and "All I can say is Wow!".

Parade-raining time: it's nothing but PR. IBM has been vocally and actively pro-open source for a few years now; it's run the Postfix project, contributed lots of stuff to Linux, and has generally been pushing the paradigm from all directions. They sell hardware; what do they care if you paid for the software or not.

So in this context, what does this statement mean? It's a mere formal announcement of a position they've already had, which I guess may have some benefit, perhaps in talking other patent holders into switching to a more open regime as well. But look at what the announcement didn't say. It didn't say that IBM would use these patents to defend open source, meaning that if another patent holder sues an open source project over a patent, then that plaintiff would lose its right to these 500 patents. IBM won't do that.

It only specified at most three or four percent of its software patent holdings [ballpark figure; I have yet to find somebody who will make a firm statement about how much of IBM's patent holdings are software. Part of the problem is that the USPTO denies that there is such a thing as software, just 'computer-implemented inventions' of all sorts, so others need to do their own classifications.] Why not all of them? Given that it's a purely PR step, and any open source developer with his/her/its head up knows that IBM will never sue, I guess only listing a token set of patents is good enough.

One giant brain So it's nice that IBM sort of formalized this, and the press is nice for the communists as well as IBM, but it's nothing new. So why do people (heart) IBM so much more? Here's a comment somebody left on the above Groklaw page: "Just for that, the next three, maybe four servers I buy will definitely be from IBM." It's scary how often we all forget that a company has no personality of any sort.

We all know, in a rational superego kind of way, that International Business Machines does not have a unified will, and that the actions of one of its arms

has nothing to do with the actions of others. I mean, IBM killed my great grandaunt. [I'm sorry if that sounds flip.] To hold all of today's IBM employees accountable for this would be silly, and it would be equally silly to reward its server division with sales because its legal division is agreeing to a pro-free software strategy.

One more example, from the world of software patents. From this testimony: "My name is Douglas Brotz. I'm Principal Scientist at Adobe Systems, Incorporated, and I am representing the views of Adobe Systems as well as my own. [...] Let me make my position on the patentability of software clear. I believe that software per se should not be allowed patent protection. [...] The emergence in recent years of patents on software has hurt Adobe and the industry."

That was in 1994. A decade later, Adobe Acrobat's splash screen lists forty patents. These are not just defensive: they have sued their competitor, Macromedia, over and over. Adobe had one man put in prison for violating its intellectual property. So is Adobe our friend or not?

The Standard Story This is all a reminder of something you all probably know but may not pay much attention to: that trying to form a causal story is often a waste of time, if not detrimental to our actual goals.

Those books we read and stories we were told when we were kids all had the same format: person takes action, and then if that action is bad person is punished and if that action is good then person is rewarded. Often, the punishment isn't even causally linked to the initial bad action by a mechanism in the story, but in our minds it is causally linked anyway, perhaps by an omniscient overseer who directly observed the action and meted out the punishment/reward.

Now, when we read a news story, the kid in the back of our brains is constantly trying to push it into the good/bad causal story; it is emotionally satisfied only when the facts fit the story. If the bad guys see no punishment, the story is incomplete to the point of being frustrating. Worse is when the bad guy gets a good reward, because our causal expectations are so shattered—and still worse is the case where there is no causal story at all (or equivalently, one too convoluted for us to really piece together). That's where we stand with IBM: they are far too huge to be a character in a story. If they were, they would be the good guy and the bad guy at the same time, and then what sort of final payoff should they see?

Everything in our brain is wired into the standard causal story, and it's a real struggle to read news about a corporation or a person without trying to jam it into that form. But fighting the urge is worth the effort.

E.g., I think my book is better for it. On one page, Microsoft would be evil for trying to patent its DOC format, and on another, it's the hero in its struggle against Eolas, who would screw up the entire Internet if they won. Eolas wears a black hat, but is backed by the University of California, which we like. The story can't fit the Standard Form, and even if it could, Microsoft's happy or sad ending wouldn't say much about the overall questions that the book is dealing with.

E.g., George Soros made his fortune partly by single-handedly destroying a currency or two. He's got a lot of shady political dealings all through Eastern Europe. But he's also possibly the largest benefactor to the progressive side in US politics. By ignoring any stories about the person or the money and focusing on the causes he supported, those causes moved forward.

E.g., Richard "Dick" Cheney is unquestionably evil in a hundred ways, but he is the highest-ranking Republican who opposes a homophobic constitutional amendment. We can focus on the emotionally satisfying storytelling in which we declare that Cheney should get what's due (and I plead guilty of this), but we do so at the detriment of the issues we want to push forward.