

It's e-business, not charit-e

NOT content with bringing the centre of London to a standstill, the anti-capitalism movement is also alive and well in the world of software.

The socialist software movement goes by the innocuous name of 'open source', but just the mention of its name causes City analysts and finance directors across the globe to go pale with fear, string garlic around their necks and thrust crucifixes in its general direction.

For, like Bram Stoker's blood-sucking creation, 'open source' is regarded by many to be just as capable of draining the lifeblood from many of the world's largest software corporations.

So, what is it? Well, in its simplest form, open source is merely a way of distributing software which allows other programmers to change it, enhance it and pass it on — for free. It is at this last point

that the City goes apoplectic.

Imagine Microsoft giving Windows away for free. Billions of dollars of annual revenues would instantly dry up and hundreds of billions would be wiped off the value of Bill's company. Find this unthinkable? So do I and so does Bill. Microsoft stated last week, "the 'free software' movement poses a fundamental threat to commercial software and corporate intellectual property." And yet, this open source movement is gaining significant momentum.

A bunch of programmers calling themselves The GNU Project started the ball rolling 18 years ago but it really took off in 1991 when Linus Torvalds, a 21-year-old Finn, created an operating system called Linux and distributed it free on the Web.

Ten years on, with the support of programmers around the world, Linux now powers millions of Internet servers across the globe.

A whole new industry has



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emerged selling support, consulting and implementation services around the free Linux system — sort of like giving a car away for free and making your money out of the maintenance and driving lessons. One of these new companies, Redhat (www.redhat.com) rang up sales of \$102million last

year, so there is definitely money to be made.

In recent years, major players such as Sun and IBM have jumped onto the open source bandwagon.

Sun's java, the hottest programming language on the Web, is open source, and Sun has made a fortune selling computers to run it.

That's all fine and dandy, but none of the above is a pure software company. For a pure software company, releasing its core software as open source would be commercial suicide.

Yet there is a strong groundswell in the software industry advocating precisely that.

The software industry has become caught up in an evangelical crusade bordering on religious fanaticism. You either worship the Great God of Open Source or you are labelled as a blasphemous infidel and can fully expect excommunication or a Salman Rushdie-style fatwa

to be imposed on you at any moment.

I'm not saying there aren't any benefits to open source — software is developed in a fraction of the usual time, at a lower cost, with fewer bugs and it stays up-to-date.

These are persuasive arguments and I started off down this route with one of my company's products. However, these benefits are just a smoke screen.

The real driving force behind open source is the simple ideal that software should be free. That's it.

The open source fanatics believe companies should, such as Redhat and Sun, make their money on peripheral products and services, but not on licensing software.

Try telling McDonald's they have to give away their burgers for free and can only make their money on the fries, and see how far you get.

But, like the clashes between the establishment

and protesters on Tuesday, the open source movement is in direct conflict with the capitalist system that feeds them.

Wanting to create free software may be a cool thing to do if you are a programmer, but getting paid isn't bad either.

I may be an eVangelist, but I just can't see the value in a software company giving its core software away for free. And until the likes of Bill Gates decide to turn their companies into charities, I have a distinct feeling that my view may be the one that prevails.

● *As some of you may have heard, I am restructuring Bright Station to focus on our Smartlogik subsidiary, after which I will be stepping down as CEO. The new company will have a great future under Stephen Hill, CEO of Smartlogik. Whatever I personally end up doing in the future, you can be assured it will be worth reading about.*