

# Microsoft's embrace of open source is driven by commercial practicality not principle

February 3 2015, by Gordon Fletcher

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Beware of geeks bearing gifts. Credit: johanl, CC BY

Microsoft's part in a [US\\$70m investment in CyanogenMod](#) has raised many eyebrows: why is Microsoft investing in a popular version of the Android mobile phone operating system, when it has its own competing [Windows Phone](#) product? The firm's motivations behind investing in the most open version of the Android operating system have justifiably made open-source advocates [decidedly nervous](#).

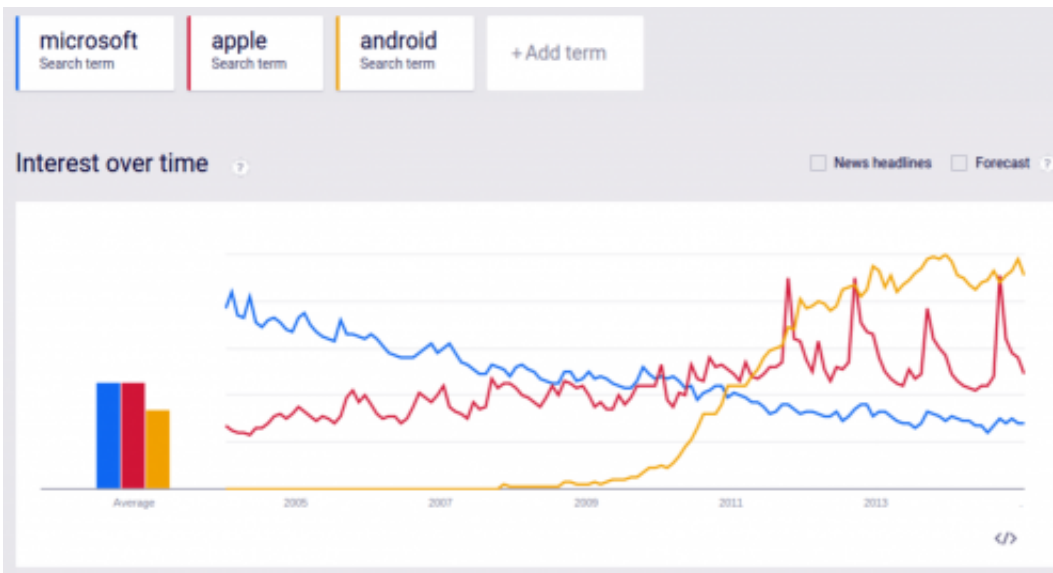
Android is an open-source project maintained by its creator, Google. Ongoing work goes into the [Android Open Source Project](#) (AOSP), from which Google develops its own "[official](#)" releases. Other developers, such as [Cyanogen](#), are free to take the AOSP codebase and produce their own variations for different devices.

There have been concerns among Android developers that [Google is taking greater control of Android](#), closing off more and more of the code. But in voicing the idea of wresting control of the project from Google one would imagine that doing so only to give it to Microsoft was not what they had in mind.

Yet this is exactly what Microsoft's investment in CyanogenMod gave its CEO the confidence to [claim](#) – freeing users, he claims, from the requirements of Google's Play Store or any of the other Google applications that are found by default on most mobile phones and tablets.

## **The Cathedral and the Bazaar**

Open-source projects conducting multi-million dollar commercial deals is a far cry from 1999 – the year open-source activist and developer Eric Raymond published his book [The Cathedral and The Bazaar](#), in which he explained how [open-source software](#) development could work commercially to a technology industry that understood only a proprietary, closed-source approach. The book provided a workable open-source philosophy for the growing bands of open-source developers – and in the years since, this approach has become more established and found fertile ground in other areas, such as academic publishing and music.



The rise and fall of Microsoft, Apple and Android's popularity. Credit: Google Trends

Raymond's "cathedral" is a thinly veiled reference to Microsoft's absolute commitment to proprietary software development – a technocratic priesthood that kept the secrets within the temple. In 1999 a closed, proprietary approach was seen as the primary – if not the only way – to profit from software. This software business model followed the lead of computer hardware manufacturers, who would strive to "lock in" buyers to the firm's ecosystem of products – compatible with each other but more often than not incompatible with those of other manufacturers.

But the industry has moved on: fledgling companies in the late 1990s such as [Red Hat](#), [Suse](#), and Google, and those that have arrived since such as [Canonical](#) and [many others](#) have become enormous open-source success stories. Industry titans such as IBM and Sun also embraced the open-source approach. Much of the suspicion and fear ([FUD](#)) has dissipated. And the proof is in the pudding: open-source software

underpins a great number of the applications and systems we use each day, and the internet's infrastructure itself.

## Opening up

Microsoft has changed too. It is still the [world's largest software company](#) – and the overwhelming majority of the world's computers at work and at home still run Microsoft Windows and Microsoft Office, despite the company [losing the prominence it once had](#) in comparison to Android or Apple.

But Microsoft's corporate website [now discusses open source](#), focusing on interoperability between their own proprietary software and a range of [open-source projects](#). Microsoft already has a number of [open-source projects](#) within the corporate fold, and its developers [contribute to many more](#). [Recent announcements](#) have even included the open-sourcing of projects developed in-house by the company. Some 15 years later, Microsoft has shifted at least part of its efforts from its cathedral to the open-source bazaar.

The announcement that the [Worldwide Telescope project](#) would be open sourced was greeted with bemusement. But creating a version of .NET, a core Microsoft development platform upon which Windows-compatible software is written, is a [significant statement](#).

## Practicality not principle

But this is for sound commercial reasons: open the new .NET Core to a wider set of developers and they will help with its upkeep against competing, flourishing open-source products. New adopters it attracts will be tied to various Microsoft plug-ins, additional services and support. This "[freemium](#)" approach – the product is free but support and

services come at a cost – is a viable business model already employed by many. However, the chance of success that this decision will bring in coming so late in the game [is debatable](#).

In the final analysis, embracing open source has become the only option for Microsoft in the face of so many smaller, dynamic competitors. For sure, this is less Microsoft taking on board the principles of [open development, sharing and co-operation](#) and more an attempt to buy its way into what has always been the dynamic world of the bazaar in order to harness the talents of developers outside the cathedral walls.

In this as with so many decisions, Microsoft's wait-and-see approach has its risks. It was late to acknowledge the internet, web, and email. With each of the products it released – Internet Explorer, Outlook/Exchange, Office, mostly through acquired technology – Microsoft infamously attempted to define de facto standards for HTML support, email, word processor and spreadsheet document formats, and more.

Open-source activists are correct to wonder whether Microsoft has more of the same planned: most of its current open-source manoeuvres such as investing in Cyanogen follow the same approach of previous acquisitions. The key difference is that software developed in the bazaar has developers and users who are passionate about the project. For them open-source software is not just a commodity to be bought and sold; whether there is any place for the cathedral in the bazaar is yet to be seen.

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