

Open Sourcing

There's good news for speaker builders and also for anyone who does chassis layout. I have been increasingly intrigued of late with Open Source software. Many of you have doubtless already discovered the joys of Open Source. If not, you have a treat in store. The Open Source movement is a well-organized cooperative effort by thousands of interested people all over the globe. This includes some large companies as well such as IBM, and Sun Microsystems.

The philosophy behind this movement is basically that software ought to be free. It might seem strange that when you go to a website to download such software, you must agree to a set of usage rules. All true Open Source software is copyright protected. The agreements generally require you to post the copyright notice with your downloaded copy. You are free to modify it for your own use if you document the changes clearly within the code.

Open Source groups have just won a highly important case in federal appeals court in Washington. A commercial software company had appropriated, without notice, pieces of an Open Source program for control of model railroads and sold it as part of their own product. This decision essentially validates the license almost all Open Source software providers use. If you don't honor the license, you lose the use of the software. And pay a penalty for infringing the copyright protection.

I have been enjoying one of the prime examples of Open Source work in the form of Open Office from Sun Microsystems. This is a six-module of-

fice suite which includes a word processor (Writer), a database manager (Base), a spreadsheet, a presentation program, a math unit, and a drawing program. I consider the word processor the best I have ever used and I have tried most of them. It has every bell and whistle anyone could want and is quite capable of producing a professional scholarly manuscript with all the features a student could need to achieve one. I see no reason why an author could not produce the text, footnotes, references, index, and formatting for a scholarly book. At the same time it is simple to write a one-page memo with it.

The drawing program is a big surprise. You may draw objects in two or three dimensions, and scale them absolutely accurately. The program allows you to draw lines of any weight, and allows you to locate them exactly from any starting point you choose. If you draw a line, the program keeps track of how long it is and where it is. If you choose to add a visible measurement, just draw the measuring line with arrow-ends and the distance will be supplied for you midway in the object. And all this is editable. Objects may be moved to a chosen location, or they may be moved by using the arrow keys. Like any new program this drawing facility takes a bit of time to learn. The help files are very clear and extensive.

I have yet to find the time to use the other four modules. However, I have converted Excel files with Open Office's spreadsheet, which OO does perfectly. It also converts the other pieces of Microsoft's Office for use in OO. Writer allows you to switch to any of

the other five programs with a mouse click. Font selection is quite good and the color management for Writer and Draw are extensive and wide ranging.

These programs are constantly being upgraded by thousands of volunteer programmers—who receive no pay. Their motivation is a passion for quality and reliability—and the freedom from any domination of the software market. Open Source also offers operating systems, based on the Unix and Linux operating systems. I have had great fun with Ubuntu, which originated and is supported by an open source firm in South Africa. It has all the functionality of Windows without the glitches and sudden failures. It also has a beautiful presentation with a crisp, minimalist desktop which is pleasing. It can also reside alongside Windows on the same computer, offering dual booting which takes a bit of extra attention during boot up.

If you decide to download Open Source software, you will find you may do so with no immediate obligation. It is nice to be able to try the product first. However, nothing in this world is free. I make it a practice to forward modest payments once a year to those who provide the products I use. This includes Mozilla, Thunderbird, and Sun Microsystems. I believe strongly in freedom of choice for the consumer and certainly it is only right to support such efforts by putting your money where your mouth is. I plead guilty to preferring the underdog and always put AMD processors in machines I build. Underdogs always seem more interesting, somehow.—**E.T.D.**