Open formats, what for?

What is a format?

When you save a document on your computer, it is stored in a computer file. Whether it is a text file, a picture, a video or any other kind of work, it is saved with a specific coded structure, known as the file format.

To be able to share data, software programs must be able to communicate with each other. It implies that no barrier whatsoever may hinder the exchange of data and the related write or read operations. For such a seamless exchange to be possible, software programs are required to be "interoperable".

Interoperability is guaranteed when it relies on open standards, i.e. public technical specifications, freely usable by everyone, without restriction nor compensation, and maintained by an open decision-making process. File formats based on these open standards are "open formats". Where software interoperability is set aside, or if a program editor does not give access to the key information for interoperability or if the file design recipe is kept undisclosed, file formats are considered to be 'closed' and do not allow interoperability. For a software user, choosing between an open file format or a closed one has a deep impact on the access to his/her own data and their availability over time.

What are the benefits of open formats?

• Documents are readable and writable, by oneself or by third parties.
• Documents readability is guaranteed over time.
• Open formats have the advantage to be freely usable in any software program and thus make these programs interoperable.
• They support freedom of choice as they do not promote the format of any company in particular. They help avoid the monopolistic position of software editors who aim at locking users in the use of the formats they developped.

What are the drawbacks of closed formats?

• They give no choice but to buy a specific software program to read or write a document.
• They exclude Free Software programs.
• They may turn your documents unreadable after some years.
• They prevent users to opt for the software of their choice, above all when a closed format becomes a de facto monopoly.

Free Software and open formats, the perfect duo!

Free Software are programs that offer four freedoms to users: the liberty to copy and to distribute the software to friends, the right to use it for every kind of use, the right to study it in order to know its functioning, the right to modify in order to improve it. Free Software designers usually favour existing open formats. Furthemore, as Free Software developpers publish their source code (the software design recipe), recording methods and format descriptions used are de facto distributed with the software.

Open formats and Free Software share the same goals: to be at the service of eveyone and to ensure users the control over their data as well as data pereniality.

Why is it important to use Free Software?

By using a proprietary software to read data locked in a closed format, you help its community of users grow and, by doing so, force other users to buy the software. You give more weight to the dominant position that some companies established in their area by preventing access to their file formats.

How to proceed?

First, get more information on the existing open formats that may be used for the types of documents you would like to exchange or store at:

www.april.org/open-formats

Then check that your software allows you to save your files in the chosen format. Free Software usually favour existing open formats; feel free to test them in order to check that they match your needs.

Quiz !

Are you a regular user of computer programs? Test your knowledge about formats by ticking the answer to the following questions:

Is the MS Word text format (.doc) an open format? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Is the Open Document text format (.odt) an open format? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Is the HTML hypertext format (.html) an open format? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Is the MP3 audio format (.mp3) an open format? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Is the Ogg Vorbis audio format (.ogg) an open format? ☐ Yes ☐ No
Is the RealAudio audio format (.ra) an open format? ☐ Yes ☐ No
To see the answers, check:
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