

Beyond the Cloud: The Comprehensive Flexibility of FOSS May Bring Clearer Skies

Last week's [InformationWeek](#) has a good article on [cloud computing](#), [Cloud ROI: A Grounded View](#). It seems that even with all the hype (or because of it?) most are not "running blindly" to adopt "the cloud". I must admit the cloud metaphor has a powerful poetic charm to it. That is probably why it has grabbed the attention of so many over the past few years. Everything in our world is ephemeral, so there is an aptness to the concept of a "cloud". Moreover, I too like and use cloud analogies. But I am now looking for clearer skies! Here is a short list of my gripes about "*the cloud*":

- What does "cloud computing" mean? It isn't at all clear! Here is some data: [CIO](#) magazine cites a [Forrester](#) report that says "[the number one challenge in cloud computing today is determining what it really is](#)". CIO also reported on a [McKinsey](#) study that "[found 22 separate definitions of cloud computing](#)"! And that leads to my second point:
- The word "cloud" is so ... vacuous and amorphous ... "A cloud: it looks like Zeus!" only to transform in shape before your very eyes "Wait, now it looks like Aphrodite!" ... and then its gone! Is this the kind of model people should entrust with their business data? It has no structural stability: inherently: it is just rapidly moving gases ... far out of reach ... away in the sky. What kind of business model is that?
- Although [RADLab \(Reliable Adaptive Distributed Systems Laboratory\)](#) has put out some interesting papers, I was a little surprised when I read their acknowledgements in the [CACM](#) article [A View of Cloud Computing](#). It reads like a who's who in cloud computing: Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Sun, eBay, Cloudera, Facebook, and so on. The [original Berkeley paper](#) has a shorter list of cloud companies funding their work. I'm sure they are maintaining their academic integrity, but it does show that they are not wholly independent. Remember what Kitty Foyle said:

I've taught myself a lesson, or I hope I have: when I find myself thinking something I stop a minute and ask myself, Now who had it all figured out beforehand that was the way they wanted me to think?

— From [Christopher Morley's](#) novel "[Kitty Foyle](#)"

- Although the Berkeley papers raise a number of very interesting issues, none of them requires vacuous meaningless jargon to further obscure the subtleties and complexities of emerging technology trends! So my final gripe is that the name "cloud" tends to obscure what is really important even when I agree with "the cloud thinkers".

Perhaps the most important issue "the cloud people" are missing is what might be called **comprehensive flexibility**. As a user of software technology, I want my computing functionality everywhere ... in every imaginable format. For example, I'd like to be able to use the software that I've invested the time to learn to be available on my desktop (32-bit, 64-bit, Mac, Windows, or Linux), and I'd like it to work whether the Net is working or not, on my cell phone and other portable devices (again with network or not), in the data center (clustered or not), in the [WAN](#)

(Wide Area Network, note that the [Internet](#) is our shared, global WAN), perhaps distributed among several hosting providers, and perhaps even provided by “utilities” (to save the trouble of maintenance and scaling costs). But I think software should be so flexible that it can live in each of those environments. Talk about [*utility computing*](#): wouldn’t software have so much more utility if it worked everywhere instead of being beholden to whatever your software provider offers or what hardware you happen to have in front of you right now?

Fortunately this type of flexible software does exist. It is called [**Free and Open Source Software \(FOSS\)**](#) and it is becoming ubiquitous. In fact, whether you know it or not, you are using FOSS software: [Apache](#), the FOSS web server, runs this web site and indeed the majority of all web sites. [WordPress](#), the blogging software we use here is also “everywhere” and you can purchase it from “cloud” utility providers or install, run, and modify it yourself. The list of important FOSS software goes on and on and this blog is dedicated to helping elucidate its importance as well as the issues involved in managing it.

So I would argue that instead of letting our heads go to the “clouds” we need to ask **how can we make software that works in all environments, on all hardware, and for all people? ... how can we make software that is *comprehensively flexible*?**

Posted by CJ Fearnley in FOSS Community, 0 comments