

Fork history does not favor OpenOffice.org

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The conversations about OpenOffice.org and LibreOffice these past few weeks have put forks on my mind lately.

There are two long-standing opinions about forks in the FLOSS community: they weaken projects or they strengthen projects. There are interesting arguments on either side of the debate, but if history is any judge, there is a strong trend: the project that forked away from the mainline project tends to be the ultimate survivor.

If that trend holds true, then it will be LibreOffice that will last, not OpenOffice.org.

Take, for instance, GCC and its fork EGCS (commonly pronounced "eggs"). For those of you not familiar with these technologies, GCC is the GNU Compiler Collection, a free compiler developed by Richard Stallman in the mid-80s for the GNU Project. GNU has been described as everything an operating system needs except a kernel, so it was a perfect fit for young Linus Torvalds' Linux kernel project in 1991. Like Reese's peanut butter cups, ("you got my kernel in your libraries!"), it was two great tools that went together to form the operating system known as Linux, or GNU/Linux, depending on who you ask.

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