

No FOSS for Palm app catalog says Netscape pioneer

by David M Williams
Thursday, 01 October 2009

It appears Palm is seeking to follow Apple's footsteps in gaining a reputation for inconsistent and spurious rejections and removals of iPhone and iPod Touch applications. In this case, Palm has resisted including a free application because the source code is attainable elsewhere.

The Palm Pre smartphone launched just several months ago along with the Palm App Catalog which, like the iPhone App Store, makes available commercial and free software for the device which can be downloaded over the air.

You need not look far to find developers upset with Apple's handling of their applications. We know about Google Voice being pulled, about the Commodore 64 emulator being rejected, about the sheer uncertainty as to when updates will be made available and so forth.

iPhone developers might take small comfort to learn things might not be rosier in the Palm Pre world, according to the experiences of at least one developer.

Jamie Zawinski — of original UNIX Netscape Navigator and Netscape Mail and News client fame — produced two Palm Pre programs just days after the unit was available, namely a restaurant Tip Calculator and a port of Dali Clock, a digital clock whose digits melt into their next shape.

Zawinski submitted the apps to Palm for inclusion in the App Catalog. He signed up online, signed and returned the necessary legal documents but to this day still finds his programs absent.

Palm, Zawinski says, made him jump through dozens of hoops. First, Dali Clock 2.31 was rejected because Palm claimed it had a policy all App Catalog applications use version numbers lower than his 2.31 port.

Zawinski says Palm's policy required version numbers "less than 1.0.0" but I think it would be very odd for Palm to reject v1.0 applications. I am guessing he meant "less than 2.0" or "less than 1.1". In any case, the surprising decision was made by Palm to reject his program solely because of its version number.

Nevertheless, Zawinski complied with all the obstacles Palm put in his way. Until finally in mid-August he was told "you can only distribute your app via the Palm App Catalog. Do not make your app available on your website or anywhere other than the App Catalog."

This objection referred to the fact Zawinski published the source code and binary executables for these programs on his own personal web site. However, he was not profiting from them and cutting Palm out of a slice of the action. Rather, he had licensed his programs under a permissive open source license.

{mosloadposition david08}Zawinski replied arguing he found Palm's protestation to be unacceptable and even offensive.

Palm agreed to discuss the matter but only on condition of a signed non-disclosure agreement. Zawinski refused to sign.

In September Zawinski was called by Joe Hayashi from Palm, formerly Senior Director of Product Management for Yahoo!. Despite the treatment from Palm over this matter Hayashi said "We aren't asking that you remove the binaries or source of your apps from your web site, and we aren't restricting anyone from distributing their source code, open source license or otherwise."

This was at odds with Zawinski's experience but nonetheless he was pleased the roadblocking policy in question appeared to no longer apply.

However, nothing has transpired since. Neither Tip Calculator nor Dali Clock have been posted to the App Catalog. Zawinski's last correspondence with Palm requested he now sign up with a PayPal verified account and pay a \$99 fee.

Given the applications are intended to be freely given away Zawinski, understandably, also objects to these latest two hurdles drip-fed by Palm along his route.

Nevertheless, even if Zawinski did cough up the money Palm's software development kit license still maintains the clause prohibiting App Catalog software from appearing anyone else.

Given the nature of open source is that the source code is, well, open, this means in practice that open source is not welcome at Palm.