

Exim and PCRE

How free software hijacked my life

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In case you don't know what Exim and PCRE are...

They are both free, open source software written by me

Exim is a Mail Transfer Agent for Unix-like systems (GPL)

- Drop-in replacement for Sendmail
- Runs on over 20 operating systems

PCRE is a C/C++ regular expression library (BSD licence)

- Supports regular expressions that are compatible with Perl
- Runs on Unix, Mac, Windows, ... (anything with C or C++)
- Used by open-source software: Exim, tin, Apache, PHP, ...
- Also in some commercial software: e.g. Mathematica

Why did I write Exim?

In 1995 we were running Smail 3 as our MTA

I liked it, but

- 7-year old code, not standard C, much hacked
- Unwanted legacy support for UUCP addressing
- Changing requirements
 - Virtual domains
 - More checking
- Difficulty of extending the code
- Decision: implement a new MTA

What were the original aims for Exim?

- To keep Smail 3's general approach
But lose the historical baggage
- To extent the capabilities
 - More controls (sender/receiver checking)
 - More reporting (logging, debugging features)
 - More generality (e.g. virtual domains)
 - More flexibility (e.g. in retry rules)
- Expect permanently connected hosts with good connections
- Assume “modern” OS and Standard C

How did Exim get released?

- Exim never had a formal “first release”
- Computer Science Dept begged an early copy
- They started running it, and told others
- We started running it on central servers
- I put the source on an FTP site
- Bug reports started arriving
- Requests for enhancement soon appeared
- Version went from 0.57 to 1.58 at one point
- Requests for a mailing list
- Planet Online (now Energis) put up a web site
- Mirrors volunteered themselves
- I started receiving T-shirts...

Why did I write PCRE?

Until 1997 Exim used imported code

- Original Henry Spencer library (1986)
- Simple regular expressions
- Perl's regular expressions were much more powerful
- But cannot disentangle Perl's code
- In the summer of 1997 I wrote PCRE
 - It provided Perl-style regex patterns for Exim
 - But I wrote it in C as a standalone library

What's the subsequent history of PCRE?

- I put it on an FTP site with a very liberal licence
 - People found it...
- Bug reports and requests for enhancements arrived
- Some upgrades to keep up with Perl
 - The biggest change was adding support for UTF-8
 - Not sure what will happen with Perl 6
- Now used by a surprising amount of software
- Development still ongoing
 - Unicode property support in Release 5 (September 2004)
 - Google contributed a C++ wrapper in Release 6 (June 2005)
 - Alternative matching function in Release 6 (June 2005)
 - New features from Perl 5.10 in Release 7.0 (December 2006)
 - Automake build system in Release 7.1 (April 2007)

What have been the main problems?

- A one-man band has plusses and minusses
For a long time I was the only person working on Exim code
- Documentation takes a lot of time, but is worth it
- The Exim FAQ should have been done earlier
(The FAQ has now evolved into a wiki)
- Less knowledgeable folk are now running MTAs
- The Exim books were a huge amount of work
- Debian's slow development cycle kept Exim 3 alive too long

Technical issues

- Variations in operating systems and shells
 - Signals – default restarting or not
 - Load average finding
 - Local interface finding
 - IP options
 - OS and architecture names
 - Argument types for library functions
 - Compiler pickyness
 - Things the C standard doesn't tell you
- Some OS keep changing rapidly (4 different IRIX configs)
- Testing an MTA is difficult (testing PCRE is easy)

Good things happened

- I have had strong support from my management and colleagues
- Exim and PCRE are an open-source contribution by
The University of Cambridge Computing Service
- The Exim community has been very supportive
Website and mailing list support (hardware and people time)
Mirrors for FTP and website
Many code contributions for Exim, some substantial
- Moving towards less dependence on me
CVS is in use for Exim development
Several regular comitters
- PCRE is in a SVN repository
But I'm the only comitter at present
- We now have a development system in Cambridge
It hosts the website, mailing lists, and CVS/SVN repositories

What should I have done differently?

- There have already been several rethinks
 - Memory handling
 - Lookup handling
 - Negative matching options
 - Merging of directors and routers (no special domains)
 - Use of ACLs for input control
- Use less C I/O
- More radical changes to the Smail 3 conception
- Think bigger and more generally

Would I do it again?