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Interview with Richard M. Stallman

Mr. Stallman, creator of the GPL, FSF and GCC, shares his thoughts on a number of topics.

By Colin McGregor

Richard M. Stallman has been a pivotal, and sometimes controversial figure in the free software movement. Mr. Stallman's accomplishments have included, but are not limited to, the creation of the GNU Public License, the Free Software Foundation, and the GNU C compiler. Here Mr. Stallman shares his thoughts on a number of topics.

Free software people: Richard M. Stallman

In September 1983, Richard Stallman announced the plan to develop a free software Unix-like operating system: GNU. In 1985, he set up the Free Software Foundation (FSF) to carry out that goal. By 1991, GNU was complete except for the kernel. When the Linux kernel became free software in 1992, the combination of GNU and Linux formed the first modern free operating system: the GNU/Linux system (often referred to as "Linux").

Richard Stallman wrote the GNU General Public License (GNU GPL) as part of developing GNU.



Richard M. Stallman

CM: Could you explain why new free software users should think “free” as in “free speech”, not as in “free beer”?

RMS: If they want to understand the concept of “free software” correctly, this is the way to do it. The idea is that software should respect the user's freedom. Free software means software that gives you four essential freedoms:

- Freedom 0: the freedom to run the program as you wish.

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- Freedom 1: the freedom to study the source code, and change it to make the program do what you wish.
- Freedom 2: the freedom to redistribute copies of the program when you wish.
- Freedom 3: the freedom to distribute copies of your modified versions when you wish.

These freedoms give you control over your own computing, and make it possible to be part of a community where people help each other. They also bring about democracy: free software develops under the control of its users. Proprietary (non-free) software places the users under the power of its developer.

These values of freedom and social solidarity are the basic ideals of the free software movement, ever since its founding in 1983. These ideals were my motive for launching the development [of] the GNU operating system. They are the reason our community exists.

It is worth making these efforts for free software because freedom and community are important. Gratis software is not worth such an effort, because price is usually not an ethical issue. Paying isn't wrong, and being paid isn't wrong. Trampling other people's freedom and community is wrong, so the free software movement aims to put an end to it, at least in the area of software.

CM: Most free software is released under version 2 of the GPL. What issues and concerns does the new GPL version 3 address?

RMS: The basic idea of the GNU General Public License is to assure that all users of the code have the four freedoms. It does this through the legal technique of copyleft, which forbids middlemen from taking those freedoms away from you. Copyleft turns out to have other benefits, and people who endorse the practical values of "open source" rather than the ethical ideals of free software have often used the GNU GPL.

In 1989, when I wrote GPL version 1, we knew of two ways middlemen could try to do that: by adding restrictive license terms, or by concealing the source code. GPL version 1 was designed to prevent those two methods. GPL version 2, in 1991, was designed also to prevent patent holders from using their patents to impose licenses on redistributors in a way that would make the software non-free.

Since then, other methods of restricting free software have been developed. For instance there is the method of tivoization, where the machine detects modified versions and shuts down. Then there is the Novell-Microsoft deal, where Microsoft uses its patents to threaten everyone except Novell customers. We designed GPL version 3 to block these two attacks on our freedom. In addition, we designed it to give results more uniform from country to country, and extended compatibility to some other free software licenses.

CM: Which of your projects are you most proud of?

RMS: Of the various programs I've written, the most challenging was GCC, but the one I love most is Emacs. However, when I think of what makes me proud, it isn't any specific program. I'm proud of campaigning for freedom. There are many other things I could have enjoyed doing, but none as important as this.

CM: Why is DRM ("Digital Restrictions Management" or "Digital Rights Management") unethical?

RMS: Digital Restrictions Management means software or hardware designed to restrict us and control our use of published works. The result is to deny us any or all of the shreds of freedom that copyright law leaves us. That's basically unjust.

Meanwhile, many countries including the UK have adopted unjust laws that forbid the distribution of free software that could access these digitally restricted works. Thus, all DRM is also an attack against free

software.

We should never buy products that have DRM unless we have the means to crack it. Thus, don't buy a DVD unless you have a free program to play it with—and never buy HDDVD or Blu-ray!

CM: What else would you like readers of Free Software Magazine to know about you?

RMS: What I want them to know is that I launched the operating system most of them know as “Linux” (although not including the kernel, which Torvalds did) specifically for my freedom, your freedom, and their freedom.

It is important to know this because we will always face pressure, from those who are powerful and would like to take away our freedom, to surrender our freedom—and they frequently offer us something attractive in exchange. For instance, B'liar wanted to abolish the Rights of Englishmen, and to serve his American master, Bush, faithfully; so he offered Britons “protection” from this or that, plus the imagined idea that he influences his master on their behalf through the “special relationship”.

The same thing happens in our field, too. Companies making consumer electronics products want to impose DRM on us; they want to do this in programs that they receive as free software, then pass them on to us in such a way that we do not have the freedom to change them. So they invite us to allow our software to be tivoized, and offer us, as an inducement, that our software will be “more popular” if we cave in.

The only way to keep our freedom is to have the steadfastness to reject those tempting offers. We have to move to a license like GPL version 3 that will stop these tempters in their tracks.

CM: Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions.

Note from the author: the goal behind these interviews is to introduce important people in the free software community, and just let them tell their story. In e-mailed discussions before the interview Richard Stallman insisted on certain wording choices in the introduction and in the questions, which has been respected.

Biography

[Colin McGregor](#) (/user/44155" title="View user profile.): Colin McGregor (www.mcgregor.org) works for a Toronto-area charity, does consulting on the side and has served as President of the Toronto Free-Net. He also is secretary for and occasional guest speaker at the Greater Toronto Area Linux User Group meetings.

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