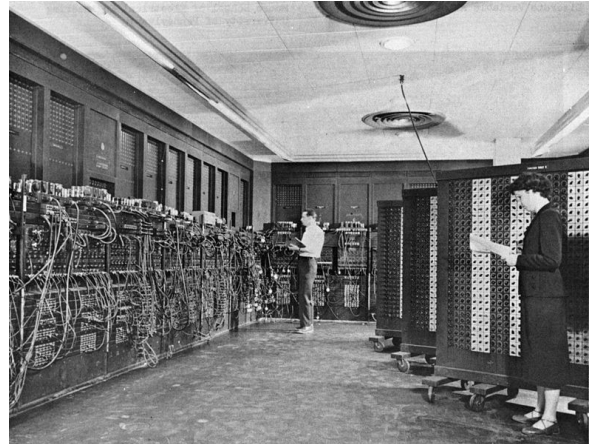


An Introduction to Software Freedom

What is Software Freedom?

Many years ago, when computers were just being invented, people really didn't care about computer software. If a company or organization was lucky enough to own a computer, it would find or create a piece of software to use on it afterwards. Other companies or organizations with computers would be nice enough to give away the software they had written, because it really didn't mean that much to them. People had all the freedom they could want with this system. They had the freedom to give away their own software, and to receive software from others. They had the freedom to change any piece of software to accomplish the task at hand. They even had the freedom to give their modified version of a piece of software away to someone else in need.



ENIAC - One of the first computers

Since then, the times have changed. Now, many pieces of computer software are locked down in a way that prevents people from making changes, just so that the software can be sold for a profit.

What is wrong with most software?

The reason companies lock down their software is because they know they can make money off something that should be shared among everyone. Under normal circumstances, there isn't any problem with people trying to make money. There is a problem when people want to make money so badly that it interferes with progress and innovation.

Different companies and individuals had to keep reinventing the wheel in order to sell their software; they couldn't just change someone else's software to fit their needs. Lots of people spent a lot of time writing computer software that somebody else had already written. If these people had shared the software they wrote with everybody, all of the time spent duplicating an existing program could go to improving it.

Another problem with not sharing software is the fact that one company or individual maintains complete control over what that piece of software does. More often than not, that person or company will be interested in making money instead of making the software as powerful and useful as possible. Therefore, the program's creator is free to put obtrusive or unobtrusive advertisements into

the program.

Obtrusive advertisements are pop-ups, nagging screens asking you to buy the “full version”, and other advertisements that ask you to spend your money in a certain way. An example of an obtrusive advertisement that you may be familiar with is the MSN icon (the butterfly) on the bar at the top of Windows Media Player. Another example of obtrusive advertising is when the Apple iPhone adds the text “Sent from my iPhone” to the bottom of all emails sent.



The Windows Media Player toolbar

Unobtrusive advertisements are certain features or the lack thereof that force you to use software from a certain company again in the future. Unobtrusive advertisements are far more common than obtrusive ones. An example of unobtrusive advertising is the fact

that Microsoft Word saves in Microsoft's “.doc” format instead of the international standard, “.odt”. This forces you to use Microsoft Word again in the future if you want to view or edit that file. It also forces anyone else who wants to view or edit that file to use Microsoft Word.

The History of Software Freedom

One of the first people to realize a problem existed was Richard Stallman. In the 1970s, Stallman became frustrated when he couldn't make an improvement to a piece of software he had received at no cost. This made him start to think about the computer software market. He was talented at creating software himself, and he knew several other people who were as well. They decided to create all of the software that a computer needs to run, and then share it with anyone who wanted it. It would be free of cost, but more importantly, anyone would have the freedom to change and redistribute it.

Stallman wanted to make sure that, if modifications were made to his software, other people would be able to benefit from those modifications as well.

Therefore, he put a modest requirement on his software that stated, “If you make changes to this software, those changes need to be shared as well.” He called this collection of software “GNU”. In 1991, another component was added to GNU to complete it called “Linux”.

Therefore, the complete system was called “GNU/Linux”.



Richard Stallman promoting Software Freedom

What is is called?

Stallman called this form of software “Free Software”. Most people incorrectly call any software that is free of cost “Free Software”. In true Free Software, the “Free” part refers to freedom, not cost. While it is true that most Free Software

is free of cost, not all software that is free of cost can be called "Free Software". Many times, applications that are free of cost are marketed as Free Software. There have been other names given to Free Software to help differentiate it, including "Freedomware", "FOSS", and "FLOSS". Often, it is also called "Open Source Software", or "OSS" for short. (Open Source Software has a few very minor differences from Free Software, but for our purposes, they are the same concept.)

Stallman also called any piece of software that wasn't Free Software "Proprietary Software". He carefully chose not to use the term "Commercial Software", because he knew that some companies have indeed found ways to make money off Free Software. Calling freedom-subtracted software "Commercial Software" would give the impression that Free Software can't be used in the industry, which is far from the truth.

Why Free Software is great

Free Software is generally much higher quality than Proprietary Software for several reasons. Many of the people who create Free Software do not get paid for doing so; it is created completely in their free time. These people obviously have a passion for creating software, since they are willing to do it in their free time. This gives the free software community the cream of the crop developers. There isn't anyone working on Free Software who just does it just for the paycheck.

In addition, all software is shared. This means that, unlike proprietary software, the wheel is never reinvented. Let's say an German developer spends several years of his life creating a computer program that does the user's yard work, and decides to make it Free Software. Now let's say that a Russian software developer wants to create the same program, but in Russian. All that Russian developer has to do is go through and translate the existing piece of software. In the world of Proprietary Software, that Russian developer would have to start from scratch and recreate the whole application. Free Software just saved this person years of work. After a while, you can see everyone's hours, days, and years start to add up to a considerable amount of time saved. This time saved directly translates into quality and progress

Free Software won't always do *everything* people want, but it is guaranteed not to do the things people don't want. If there is anything that the world as a whole does not like inside a piece of Free Software, it will eventually be removed by someone who feels strongly about its removal. This system of checks and balances is one of, if not the best, system of quality control ever created.



An imaginative variation on the GNU logo

Final Comments

Free Software is any software that gives people the freedom to do what they want with it. Proprietary Software is any piece of software that is not Free Software. Free Software offers a massive number of advantages over Proprietary Software, because it is created by people, for people. Features are not added to or subtracted from Free Software based on how much money they will generate, but instead on how useful they will make the software.



The OpenOffice logo

To help promote the spread of Software Freedom and the advancement of technology, try using some pieces of Free Software instead of Proprietary Software. Two very well known pieces of Free Software you may want to try are the Firefox Web Browser (<http://mozilla.com/firefox>) and the OpenOffice Productivity Suite (<http://openoffice.org>). There are Free Software applications to replace most Proprietary Software. Two good sites to go to to find more free software are Osalt (<http://www.osalt.com>) and the Free Software Foundation Directory (<http://directory.fsf.org>). Together, we can help spread Software Freedom.

One of the reasons not many people know about Free Software is because Free Software projects usually don't advertise. The creators of software usually prefer to use all of the money available to them to improve the software. The only advertising these projects get is word of mouth.



The Firefox Logo