

INTERVIEW

RMS

We were lucky enough to ask RMS, founder of the GNU project and author of Emacs, a few questions about his work



Richard M. Stallman – Campaigner

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At the recent FOSDEM conference in Brussels, Richard M. Stallman was good enough to give up a few moments of his time to answer some questions about the GNU project, GNU/Linux and the freedom to know your code.

Linux Magazine - Did you find the people at FOSDEM enthusiastic?

Richard M Stallman - Yes

LM - Do you prefer this type of event more than an expo?

RMS - Absolutely. The expo is more commercial and can be useful to spread GNU ideals to additional people, but even at a meeting like FOSDEM it's necessary to do that. People come to FOSDEM because they like the atmosphere of development, being coders, and that's good. But it is also important to come here to hear political and ethical issues we have. To get them to organise against software laws such as the new European software patents.

LM - Do you feel passionate about hardware specifications?

RMS - If the specifications for hardware are secret the Free Software community cannot support that hardware and this is a serious problem. Hardware vendors that produce products with no Free drivers is a very bad thing – people should not buy that hardware – they should tell the manufactures that they insist on hardware that can be run with Free Software. Should hardware vendors think that it is better for them to attack our freedom then it is they who should suffer.

LM - Rich countries are donating hardware complete with non-free software. Is this good or bad?

RMS - When Microsoft do this it can be thought of as Microsoft colonialism. Microsoft is trying to colonise the world, which is true for first world countries as well as third world. They should not be able to dominate anyone. They are not satisfied with a market share, they want to dominate that share, and they want that share to be the whole. There are those that argue that it serves the economy. They are wrong, it only serves a few people in that economy. It is the nature of non Free Software that it creates

domination: the owner of the software dominates the users.

LM - Marketing plays a vital role in their stronghold. How can the Free Software community challenge that?

RMS - Word of mouth. The more you talk about the ethical importance of Free Software the more people will see that there is something really important at stake rather than short term convenience and expense.

LM - Do you have a term for 'the opposition'?

RMS - I refer to them as Software hoarders or Software privateers. Privateers, originally, were authorised by governments to attack the shipping of another country. In this context, they have been known to refer to their enemies as pirates, so it's only fitting that we can call them privateers.

LM - What are you most proud of?

RMS - The Free Software movement. With it I have found a way to stand up for freedom. Before that I cared about freedom, but I had never found a way to stand up for it. And that, of all the things a person can do is something to be most proud of. The heroes I most admire have stood up in tremendous ways for freedom. So now I've found a certain, smaller, way to stand up for freedom. Now I feel I've done something good with my life. Just developing software is good, but not as good, not nearly as important.

LM - Has the GNU project gone as good as you would have hoped?

RMS - I didn't know how much to hope for, I always imagined success and total failure. We have achieved a substantial lot, but, at the same time there are still real problems in the community, both internal and external. In the community we have a weakness that many people appreciate Free Software, but as an ethical principle: they like having freedom, but they are willing to use proprietary software for short term convenience. Those people help in various ways but they can be easily lost to us. It easy to tempt them to leave our community and not support it. They are not likely to fight hard to overcome an obstacle. Then, externally we face dangers such as software patents, DMCA, EU copyright directive and the Cybercrime treaty. If we want Free Software we have to fight against all of these things.

Another danger comes from the manufacturers who don't publish specifications. It prohibits us from writing Free Software. So all of these things are external threats to our community. So what we have are threats and at the same time a lack of resolve of many of the people in our community. That is why I focus my efforts on showing people how to gain and keep this resolve. If a person appreciates Free Software that may be enough to convince them to contribute to the community with code, but it may not convince them to act politically to protect the community from prohibition.