

Talking about freedom

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The GNU project was set up in 1984 by Richard Stallman after he began to realise that what had once been a community of Free software users and programmers based around an emerging Internet had disappeared and had been replaced by an anti-social and unethical crowd of people who had all signed a non-disclosure agreement so that they could work on computers and operating systems such as the original VAX systems, which at that time were the latest thing. Things had to change. When RMS lectures about how the concept of the GNU project came to him he explains that Free software is about the following:



kind of greed and avarice that you can expect from the proprietary model. As such it is seen to be somewhat more desirable and a good deal more forgiving of its end users – both from the point of view of the licence and from the point of view of what you can actually do with it once you have installed Free software. The goal of the GNU project was to give the end user freedom. It does that through the use of something called copyleft, which is a reference to copyright law.

Strong foundations

The Free Software Foundation (FSF) came into being around 1985 after the EMACS project was started and it was realised that interest in the GNU project was growing. The FSF came into being as a tax-exempt charity, which could accept donations for Free software development. The EMACS project was eventually extended to include other Free software end eventually FSF books were produced to generate greater interest and further funding. In the present day both the FSF and the GNU project are such an amazing success that when IBM came to the conclusion that they would take a serious interest in GNU/Linux they asked the FSF to look after their licence for them into perpetuity.

In more recent times Bradley has taken an interest in the DMCA (Digital Millennium Copyright Act) and the European Union directive to introduce the same legal structure within the EU. We are entering a world of digital media where you can get your books, music and movies digitally and the media companies want a leak-proof pipe from their media to you – without this you can make perfect verbatim copies of all the things they send you. Bradley quickly points out when asked about digital rights issues the FSF is not interested in supporting the pirating of copyrighted material, it's all about questioning the freedom of the individual. In a similar way the DMCA assumes that you are a criminal and that without any real evidence you may be found to be guilty or not guilty.

- You have the freedom to run the program, for any purpose.
- You have the freedom to modify the program to suit your needs. (To make this freedom effective in practice, you must have access to the source code, since making changes in a program without having the source code is exceedingly difficult.)
- You have the freedom to redistribute copies, either gratis or for a fee.
- You have the freedom to distribute modified versions of the program, so that the community can benefit from your improvements.

It's precisely this kind of morality that has shocked the present day proprietary software manufacturers and distributors who have all followed the non-disclosure model, which conspires to lock in the end user and make sure that they will never be able to make a choice over which type of software or program they will run on their computers at some time in the future. The proprietary software model generates vast sums of money for one person or for a very small group of people. The Free software model can actually help to make money for a business or an individual but it doesn't generate the

Bradley teaches, hacks and provides documentation about Free software. In February 2001 he was appointed as the full-time Vice President of the FSF. He took a little out of his busy schedule to talk with Richard Ibbotson about the FSF and what they set out to achieve

Info

Free Software Foundation:
<http://www.fsf.org>
GNU Project: <http://www.gnu.org/gnu/thegnuproject.html>
Patent issues: <http://www.patent.gov.uk/about/consultations/conclusions.htm>

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/intermarket/en/indprop/comp/02-277.htm>