

For the liberation of cyberspace, we need you to join us



Interview with Richard Stallman (RMS) by Silke Helfrich (S.H.)

Richard Stallman was the first to develop free licenses for software and other content. As the founder of the Free Software Movement he talks about the achievements of the movement as well as the challenges ahead. Free Software is a new commons built from the bottom up.

S.H.: Richard, You have been a key player in the GPLv3 process...

RMS: ...well, that is such an understatement that it is almost misleading. I wrote version 3 of the GNU General Public License (GNU GPL), with help from lawyers, just as I wrote version 2 and version 1. I take responsibility for all the decisions, whether they turn out to have been good or bad.

S.H.: The GPLv3 license is now out, and free software projects are beginning their migration to it, so it seems to me, that practice will prove how details turn out. But, what's new in GPLv3, in layman's terms? Is there anything revolutionary in there, which everyone should be aware of?

RMS: The original GNU GPL was revolutionary: for the first time, a copyright license was designed to defend everyone's freedom to cooperate. It does this by giving everyone the four essential freedoms¹, and forbidding the methods by which intermediaries might take them away from you. This practice is known as "copyleft".

Nothing in GPL version 3 is revolutionary, because its goals are the same as those of GPL version 1 in 1989. We made GPL version 2, in 1991, to respond to changes in the circumstances and a new threat to freedom: software patents. The changes in version 3 are larger and more numerous, but each of them is meant to address a change in circumstances or handle some specific aspect better.

S.H.: It is obvious, that as a legal instrument, the license bears technical meaning. But its effect goes beyond its immediate consequences in courtrooms: the licence also bears a message to society as a whole. What is the essence of this message?

RMS: The GPL's message is that freedom is important. You deserve freedom, and you must respect others' freedom.

S.H.: Actually, the free software community have started, over the last couple of decades, to develop worldwide organization, which enable people from all over the world to participate in global debates and activities for more freedom in an independent and constructive way. One of the thesis of the free software community is, that we need to propagate free software for a more just world, yet, it is not the most intuitive one. How does the free software movement's discourse link political freedom and social justice?

RMS: The free software movement takes for granted certain ideas of freedom and justice: namely, that people should control their own lives and should be encouraged and permitted to cooperate. Formulated in negative terms, it means that people should not have power to divide and subjugate others. I don't try to prove this, because I don't know if it is even possible to prove such a basic ethical position, and because the point is to win freedom rather than theorize about what it means.

¹ Freedom 0: The freedom to run the program for any purpose; Freedom 1: The freedom to study and modify the program; Freedom 2: The freedom to copy the program so you can help your neighbor; Freedom 3: The freedom to improve the program, and release your improvements to the public, so that the whole community benefits.

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S.H.: But how does the free software approach concretely enable emancipation and bring us closer to Utopia?

RMS: I have no basis to claim that a perfect world is possible. My campaign is for a world in which we have freedom to cooperate and to control our own computers. To call that "utopia" would imply it is unattainable; but in fact it exists today. We have developed enough free software already that rejecting non-free software is possible at the cost of an occasional inconvenience.

S.H.: Both the free software and the commons discourse are very much centered around individual freedom and around collective rights as a mean towards a free society. This includes freedom from meddling by private or state actors. Freedom, however, always entails responsibility, in particular the individual's responsibility towards the commons, towards knowledge and information as well as towards natural resources. In the case of free software, the common pool resource is embodied in a large body of code. So, who must take responsibility for what in free software?

RMS.: As software developers and distributors, our ethical responsibility is to respect the freedom of others. When we develop and release software, our responsibility is to release it as free software -- because to release it in any other way is to subjugate its users. When we install and use software, our responsibility is to reject non-free software, because accepting it grants it an air of legitimacy and often pressures others to use it as well. As a community of software users, our responsibility, and that includes you) is to carry out, or to fund, the development and maintenance of the software we want to use. If we don't do it, it won't get done.

S.H.: Let's take a look at the processes behind free software, both software development and the GPLv3 process. Eben Moglen once said that both these processes are nothing else but the construction of community. Do you agree with that?

RMS: That is a rather vague statement; I'd rather say that both of these activities are part of building a community in which we can live in freedom...

S.H.: ... and what kind of citizens do we need to construct communities in which we can live in freedom?

RMS: We need citizens who consciously appreciate freedom and recognize the folly of sacrificing freedom for convenience.

S.H.: What are currently the largest challenges and dangers for the free software idea and their implementation, both within and outside the community?

RMS: Our biggest practical challenge is to overcome social inertia. Most computer users and most institutions use Windows, and their activities pressure and lead others to use Windows. It is a self-perpetuating problem which consists of people giving in to the pressure of social inertia by adding themselves to it. A similar pressure, known as the "network effect", encourages use of non-free software such as Skype or RealPlayer.

To overcome social inertia, we need to resolve not to give in to it--in other words, to resolve that we will not act in ways that encourage others to use these non-free programs no matter what argument may be offered for doing so. Thus, schools should not teach students to use Windows even if the students ask them to.

At the deeper level, our biggest challenge is to be heard at all. The companies that distribute versions of the GNU/Linux² system do not describe it as free software, and they do not call it GNU/Linux. They prefer to describe it as "open source", a term which was promulgated to disconnect free software from our ideas of freedom. And they call the system "Linux"--in fact the name of one important system component--thus giving all the credit to a man who has never been

² The GNU Project was launched in 1984 to develop a complete Unix-like operating system which is free software: the GNU system. Variants of the GNU operating system, which use the kernel called Linux, are now widely used; though these systems are often referred to as "Linux", they are more accurately called GNU/Linux systems. <http://www.gnu.org/>

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an advocate of freedom for computer users. The ideals of freedom and social solidarity are never even mentioned. In effect, our work has been co-opted and disconnected from our values.

When you see an article that describes me as the "father of open source", or that talks the "Linux" operating system, you can help protect our work from co-optation. Talk about free software and freedom; talk about GNU. And above all, when discussion focuses shallowly on short-term practical convenience, bring in deeper values of freedom and social solidarity.

S.H.: Furthermore: we are discussing in this book several strategies of commons enclosure: economical, technological, political and legal ones. Am I mistaken in the impression that GPLv3 is a wonderful example of how resistance to the enclosure of a commons can be enacted within the framework of current legislation?

RMS: Yes, it is a good example -- but it also shows the limits of such strategies. For instance, no software license can protect a free program from a patent holder that seeks to suppress it entirely. The most we can do, and do in the GNU GPL, is make it difficult for a patent holder to extract money from distributors of the program.

S.H.: Many campaigns for freedom have met limited success, if at all, yet the free software movement seems poised to provide a healthy exception to the rule. What makes this movement so successful?

RMS: The free software movement doesn't oppose corporate power in general. Instead it aims at eliminating the practice in which software developers subjugate software users. That's painful for the software megacorporations which use that practice, but good for software users, which include individuals, corporations and even megacorporations. As a result, while the software megacorporations sometimes try to crush us, many others partly support us. That may be part of what has enabled to get this far.

S.H.: And how far have you got?

RMS: In absolute terms, free software is quite successful, with tens of millions of users. But we also have far to go. Most people still use proprietary, user-subjugating operating systems such as Windows and Mac OS. These systems are designed to restrict and control their users; and in case you find a way around the restrictions, the owners can forcibly install new software to reimpose their control at any time. Every non-free program imposes the developer's power over the developer, and the only way to be free is to stop using it. We have a long way to go to achieve the liberation of cyberspace, and Microsoft has lots of money to buy the support of states, schools, standards committees, computer manufacturers, Original Equipment Manufacturers(OEMs), and whoever can help pressure the general public to remain under Microsoft's control.

We cannot count on blind forces of history to liberate us. "Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never has, and never will." (Frederick Douglass) For the liberation of cyberspace, we need you to join us, by demanding freedom for yourself and others.