

The Free Software Foundation

What is free software and why is it so important for society?

Free software is software that gives you the user the freedom to share, study and modify it. We call this free software because the user is free.

To use free software is to make a political and ethical choice asserting the right to learn, and share what we learn with others. Free software has become the foundation of a learning society where we share our knowledge in a way that others can build upon and enjoy.

Currently, many people use proprietary software that denies users these freedoms and benefits. If we make a copy and give it to a friend, if we try to figure out how the program works, if we put a copy on more than one of our own computers in our own home, we could be caught and fined or put in jail. That's what's in the fine print of the license agreement you accept when using proprietary software.

The corporations behind proprietary software will often spy on your activities and restrict you from sharing with others. And because our computers control much of our personal information and daily activities, proprietary software represents an unacceptable danger to a free society.

The GNU Operating System and the Free Software Movement

What if there were a worldwide group of talented ethical programmers voluntarily committed to the idea of writing and sharing software with each other and with anyone else who agreed to share alike? What if anyone could be a part of and benefit from this community even without being a computer expert or knowing anything about programming? We wouldn't have to worry about getting caught copying a useful program for our friends—because we wouldn't be doing anything wrong.

In fact, such a movement exists, and you can be a part of it. The free software movement was started in 1983 by computer scientist Richard M. Stallman, when he launched a project called GNU, which stands for “GNU is Not UNIX”, to provide a replacement for the UNIX operating system—a replacement that would respect the freedoms of those using it. Then in 1985, Stallman started the Free Software Foundation, a nonprofit with the mission of advocating and educating on behalf of computer users around the world.

There are now many variants or 'distributions' of this GNU operating system using the kernel Linux. We recommend those GNU/Linux distributions that are 100% free software; in other words, entirely freedom-respecting.

Today, free software is available for just about any task you can imagine. From complete operating systems like GNU, to over 5,000 individual programs and tools listed in the FSF/UNESCO free software directory. Millions of people around the world — including entire governments — are now using free software on their computers.

Our Core Work

The FSF maintains the Free Software Definition - to show clearly what must be true about a particular software program for it to be considered free software.

The FSF sponsors the GNU project the ongoing effort to provide a complete operating system licensed as free software. We also fund and promote important free software development and provide development systems for GNU software maintainers, including full email and shell services and mailing lists. We are committed to furthering the development of the GNU Operating System and enabling volunteers to easily contribute to that work, including sponsoring Savannah the source code repository and center for free software development.

The FSF holds copyright on a large proportion of the GNU operating system, and other free software. We hold these assets to defend free software from efforts to turn free software proprietary. Every year we collect thousands of copyright assignments from individual software developers and corporations working on free software. We register these copyrights with the US copyright office and enforce the license under which we distribute free software - typically the GNU General Public License. We do this to ensure that free software distributors respect their obligations to pass on the freedom to all users, to share, study and modify the code. We do this work through our Free Software Licensing and Compliance Lab.

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The FSF campaigns for free software adoption and against proprietary software. Threats to free software include Digital Restrictions Management (DRM), Software Patents and Treacherous Computing. Find out more about our campaigns, and ways to volunteer.

The FSF also provides important resources to the community including the FSF/UNESCO free software directory.

Free Software Directory -

A searchable directory of over 5,000 free software packages
<http://directory.fsf.org/>

Free GNU/Linux distributions

Full operating systems that are recommended by the FSF because they are exclusively free software
<http://www.gnu.org/links/links.html#FreeGNULinuxDistributions>

Other free software resources

Links to a variety of other resources at gnu.org
<http://www.gnu.org/links>

File Formats

Information on installing and using FSF recommended file formats
<http://www.fsf.org/resources/formats/playogg>

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