# FREE SOFTWARE FOUNDATION

Bulletin

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Building ethical software based on the four freedoms

By John Sullivan
Executive Director

One of the free software movement's most important achievements is its contribution to awareness among engineers that software development and distribution have important ethical implications. Because software can give those with the source code and the knowledge necessary to modify it power over others, the terms by which it is distributed matter greatly. Distributing software under free software terms – that is, allowing all recipients to read, modify, contribute to, and share it – avoids an immediate injustice: that of controlling how someone uses or learns from a tool they've been given. However, distributing software under free terms doesn't ensure that every possible use of that software is ethical.

We have seen an increasing number of engineers raise concerns as to how the code they write is being used. They have seen the success of free software licenses as tools to facilitate the sharing of software on ethical terms, and have sought to modify those licenses to address further social
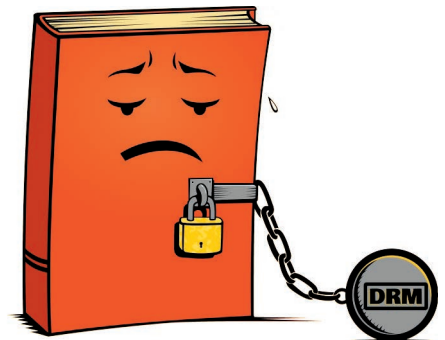
The 2019 International Day Against DRM took place on October 12, and took aim at Pearson Education's DRM-encumbered textbooks.

concerns, like labor issues (Anti 996 License – see `u.fsf.org/2xw`), health concerns (Vaccine License – see `u.fsf.org/2xx`), and general harm to others (Hippocratic License – see `u.fsf.org/2xy`). These licenses aim to leverage the legal force of a copyright license to prevent unethical uses. I see it as a success that these engineers are drawing inspiration from the free software movement.

The FSF licensing committee has not formally reviewed all of the above specific licenses, but we can broadly say that any license which restricts the first of the four freedoms (see `u.fsf.org/2cj`) – the freedom to run the program for any purpose – is a nonfree license. As a movement of ethically concerned human beings, we want to do everything we can to encourage ethical behavior, but embedding that desire in software license requirements will backfire by legitimizing fundamentally unjust power over others. While all free software licenses do use the power of copyright law, a power which is unjust in its current implementation, they use it to directly counter the ways in which it is unjust.

To allow more than this woud allow not just restrictions for good, but also unfair restrictions like, "you may not use this software to publish criticisms of Microsoft." Because software is inherently an expression of speech and knowledge, this is analogous to putting restrictions on a textbook to say, "you may only read this book if you use the knowledge to help people in ways the author believes they should be helped." Would the next step be using Digital Restrictions Management (DRM) to enforce the usage rules?

The lack of usage restrictions in licensing is key to the success of free software. A world of proliferating and potentially conflicting usage restrictions, each seeking to address a different social cause or need, would introduce so much friction that the tremendous democratic social benefit brought about by the free sharing of software – including the empowerment of individuals to effect social change in unjust institutions – would be undermined.

Just because a license is not the right place to enforce ethical software usage doesn't mean that we don't recognize the problem, or respect the people raising it. We should encourage and participate in conversations about the ethical usage of software. With the ground rules of free software as the baseline, anyone can build systems to specifically promote ethical use.

We already have some such systems. For example, the FSF's Respects Your Freedom certification program (see page 3) starts with the requirement that software in the product be free software, but its

criteria also exclude products that spy on the user, even if the software used to do so is free. One can imagine other kinds of certification programs for both products and the companies who make them. Software engineers could also develop and propagate a code of ethics, the way other forms of engineering have. And, we've seen company tech workers organize together to refuse to make certain kinds of software; they could do more of this. These are just a few ideas, but we can undoubtedly come up with more together through community dialogue.

Whatever the solutions, to be truly ethical, they should all begin with the principle that software must be free. The FSF will continue working tirelessly to make this the norm, and will seek ways to welcome and engage new generations of ethically concerned hackers. We can work together to build a free society in which software serves to empower everyone.

The Respects Your Freedom (RYF) certification process

By Donald Robertson, III
Licensing and Compliance Manager

Respects Your Freedom (RYF) is our certification program for retailers selling devices that users can trust. Gaining certification is not an easy process, so we appreciate every retailer who values freedom enough to work through the application with us. Users value the certification because finding hardware that respects their rights can be extremely challenging. We take our responsibility for verifying systems for users very seriously, and so we wanted to share more about the process.

If the online presence for the product is live, then we begin our review with checking out the Web site. We want to ensure that users can review and buy the device without having to rely on any proprietary software, such as nonfree JavaScript (see `u.fsf.org/2vd`). We also want to find out how documentation is presented online, and make sure that the retailer is not directing users to any nonfree items. RYF is about more than just a device, so we are also checking to see that the retailer is supportive of the free software movement. RYF certification is about respecting the user in all aspects of their interaction with the retailer, and that interaction begins with the Web site.

As we work through issues with the site, we also begin our review of the source code associated with the device. We want to know how this source code is provided to the user, and whether it is included with the device when shipped, or via a written offer. We also want to know what lies hidden within the source code.

Sometimes nominally free software packages can include binaries for which no source is available. They can also sometimes include source code under a nonfree license. We work with the retailers to sort out these issues, and submit bug reports upstream where applicable.

After that, we review the materials that are included with the device, such as packaging and documentation, making sure everything meets our criteria. Once the application level review is complete, we can move on to the second phase of actually reviewing the device as delivered to the user.

For this phase of the process, we require retailers to send us a sample device, delivered to us in the same form as a user would receive it. At this point, we are looking to ensure that what the user receives matches up with what we reviewed during the application phase. We review the actual packaging and included materials, and the source code as delivered to the user. We also build and install the software on the device, to ensure that users actually have the ability to get modified versions of their software up and running.

Once the review of the device is complete, we do a final last minute check to make sure we haven't missed anything. Throughout this process, we've been providing feedback about potential freedom issues, and while we want to see those particular issues resolved, we're also testing the retailer's ability to address any issues that users report to them. These systems are very complex, and something may fall through the cracks. Being an RYF retailer means that you have the commitment and capability to respond quickly to reports of freedom issues after being granted certification. So the entire process acts as a test run on those capabilities. Once we are satisfied, the retailer gains certification, and may use the RYF mark when selling the device.

With nearly fifty certified devices currently available, and another fifty devices working through the above process, our current simple Web site can't quite keep up with the program's rapid growth. Thus, we're launching a redesigned RYF Web site that will allow users to more easily search by retailer or device category. Check it out at `ryf.fsf.org`.

Love locked: Why online dating is still a free software issue

By Greg Farough
Campaigns Manager

By now, everyone has heard that Facebook mistreats its users. But a crucial part of the fight against Facebook is identifying the new ways

in which it harms us. The announcement of Facebook Dating and its disturbing implications recall to mind why all online dating services remain something that free software activists should be concerned about.

Honesty matters on a dating profile, and we're likely to give more intimate details about ourselves there than we would anywhere else. Giving this information is important in deciding how well we might "click" with another person. But being so sensitive, it is also important that this self-expression be *self-determined*. The user should be the one setting limits on how they wish to describe themselves, something only an Internet dating service based on free software could provide. Aside from any privacy violations that might be happening on the server level, the only way for users to interact with these nonfree services is through proprietary apps and JavaScript: two additional places

where our digital autonomy and privacy are at risk.

Self-determination is directly contrary to the model practiced by services like Facebook, which funnels its victims into neatly classifiable categories for advertising purposes. Facebook is not only "Facebook," and it's not only "Facebook Dating" either. The company also owns Instagram and WhatsApp, the programs many would move to after the initial contact on a dating site. Similarly, the Match Group owns Tinder, OKCupid, Match.com, and Hinge, among others. The difference between these conglomerates and the plethora of apps they offer is a mirage: providing the illusion of choice where there is none at all, consolidating power and vast amounts of sensitive user data in a single place.

If we sign up to services like these, we are at the mercy of the provider: maybe hoping there is more nuance

in their gender categories than just "men" and "women," or wishing that there were easier ways to prevent creeps from messaging us. Decisions about our identities and how we can remain safe online are being made for us. The moment we register, we are signing away the ability to make important decisions like these that free software could have otherwise provided.

What is alarming here is the overwhelming imbalance in power this creates between users and developers. As with all proprietary software, we are giving our digital autonomy away in exchange for a convenience. In this case, it is an enormous convenience, but it comes at an equal price. The vast majority of online dating services are run by for-profit corporations that make money primarily through advertising, and all of them develop or utilize software that does not respect its users' freedom. Should we trust them with our most private feelings?

At this stage, there are no easy solutions. We cannot point you to an online dating service that respects your freedom, nor one in which it is you who determines the limits of how you express yourself online. From the initial contact on an app that tracks you, to the communication over a separate messaging app that retains your data, to even finding a ride to a date (via a nonfree app like Lyft or Uber), modern dating is thoroughly dependent on nonfree software. Yet if we have learned anything in the free software movement, it is that every voice raised in opposition to unjust power is a step toward freedom.

By refusing to use Facebook Dating, Tinder, or similar apps which surveil and subjugate their users, you can preserve your own freedom and have a proactive respect for the personhood and dignity of your future partner. If you would not want their rights infringed while you were in a relationship, do not let them be infringed now. Love can do better than Facebook.

The path to a free Internet
By Andrew Engelbrecht
Senior Systems Administrator

There are a growing number of Web services that do not violate your freedom. Many could benefit from your contributions, especially ones that aim to replace commonly used but problematic services on the Web. These services include social media, source code hosting, Web frameworks, technical infrastructure, and more. Notable free software systems include Mastodon, Pleroma, and GNU social, which all implement

distributed social networks, and Pagure, a Web-based Git hosting system.

One major pitfall you will commonly run into with Web services is that they often require nonfree JavaScript, code that runs on your machine via your browser. Proprietary JavaScript often spies on you, collects information, and sends it to third parties. This is generally the case for embedded advertisements, and for JavaScript served by those who benefit from selling or analyzing user data. You can learn more about the "JavaScript Trap" at `u.fsf.org/spb9`.

Occasionally, unethical Web sites try to persuade you to use a proprietary application to interact with them in order to get around rate limits and other missing features. Some sites put proprietary CAPTCHAs in the way of users, which impact the accessibility of these sites for visually impaired people, as well as those who don't want to use nonfree JavaScript.

A distinction that should be made that relates to software freedom: frontend code is delivered to users' browsers, and is executed there, while backend code runs on remote servers. Backend code tends to generate HTML, deliver JavaScript, and expose Application Programming Interfaces (APIs). APIs allow remote programs to communicate with another program or Web service. Some Web services, like distributed social networks, use APIs to communicate with each other.

If Web services with proprietary backends serve free JavaScript, using those services is technically compatible with free software, because we are not running the backend code ourselves. However, we shouldn't run proprietary backend code on our own servers. We also don't want to use those services via our browsers if there is reason to believe they are surveilling us.

Of course, software freedom is not just about security concerns. It also matters that we have control over our own computing, so we can run the code that we want on our computers and on our servers, and so that we don't have to deal with antifeatures or limitations upon further improvement.

With free software, we get to share that software with our friends, including our own changes. This is much harder to do, and often illegal, with proprietary software. SaaSS (Service as a Software Substitute) presents a similar problem: even if a Web service makes use of some free software, if it's replacing computing you would do on your local machine, you don't have the power to modify the software, so it doesn't respect your freedom. Ultimately, we want

all frontend and backend code to be free software.

With all of this said: how do you protect yourself from the perils of problematic Web services?

One tool you can use is GNU LibreJS, which protects your freedom on the Web by blocking JavaScript that isn't properly marked with a free license (see `u.fsf.org/fb6`). You can also check to see if the backend for a site is free software by looking for links to source code and its license. Many sites that run on free software share this information on their site.

If you want to take things a step further, setting up your own instance of a freedom-respecting Web service can be rewarding if you're willing to put in the time and effort to maintain and upgrade its installation. If you don't want to put in the effort, using such a Web service hosted by others will help to grow the user base and network of free software communities.

The Free Software Awards: Honoring the 2018 winners

At the 2019 LibrePlanet conference in March, the FSF recognized OpenStreetMap with the 2018 Free Software Award for Projects of Social Benefit, and Deborah Nicholson with the Award for the Advancement of Free Software.

The Award for Projects of Social Benefit is presented to a project or team, and stresses the use of free software in service to humanity. The Award for the Advancement of Free Software goes to an individual who has made a great contribution to the progress and development of free software through activities that accord with the spirit of free software.

Nominations are already in for the 2019 awards – join us at LibrePlanet 2020 this coming March, in the Boston area, to find

Kate Chapman accepted the 2018 Free Software Award for Projects of Social Benefit on behalf of OpenStreetMap.

out who wins! Learn more at `libreplanet.org/2020`.

Let's help the people who are creating freedom-respecting Web services by donating resources and offering encouragement, even when opening issue reports, because they are helping us to build an ethical future in which greater amounts of software are fully free. Together, we can make freedom-respecting Web services the best options on the Web, for all purposes, and increase the use of these highly functional and continually evolving systems. 🐃

The 2020 LibrePlanet conference will be held in March in the Boston area, with the theme "Free the Future."

My global journey into free software activism

By Zoë Kooyman
Program Manager

M any people never get the chance to learn about free software. We are ruled by proprietary software companies whose business model is built around luring software users into handing over their basic rights in order to do their work or enjoy their leisure time. And this is generally accepted in society without conflict.

Thankfully, I did have defining moments in my life that helped me question my relationship to technology and realize the need for free software. In my undergraduate studies of media and culture, I was taught that the Internet was not a place where user rights were respected. Facebook could store and use any information I would upload onto it, and by doing so, I was giving them permission. Everyone started uploading as much information as we possibly could onto the Internet, a space that was unregulated, and it felt unsafe to me. But that didn't stop me from joining Facebook, partly because it was required for my work, marketing large events internationally, but also because it helped me stay in touch with friends and family overseas as I migrated from the Netherlands to Australia in 2008.

When I became a project manager for an international event company, traveling to six countries per year, working with some of the largest brands in the world, I learned about data analysis in order to sell tickets. I was confronted with the amount of information we provide every time we are online: not just what we put on the Internet, but also

how we behave, is analyzed carefully. I learned how easily accessible this data is, and how valuable it is to companies. A note is written beside your name with every move you make online, and once again, this happens without your permission in any meaningful sense.

This knowledge made me interested in recognizing what the programs involved in this process were doing, and exploring if I could change them for my own benefit. I had a basic understanding of how complex and powerful software could be, and wanted more authority over it. When my understanding of the development of software improved, the concept of free software started becoming clear. If software doesn't respect its user's freedom, then that is a conscious decision made by someone to take something away from you. Enter free software, and

my understanding of the intricacy of the concepts, the might and ability of the movement, and its history, which has been shaping itself further every day in my role as the program manager for the FSF.

The work I do as part of the campaigns team at the FSF is meant to empower people to become aware of proprietary software injustices and to then provide them with guidance and answers upon their discovery of free software. To be able to maintain their interest, we also need to be able to direct people to free software that will give them everything they need to function in our society, without abusing them.

The High Priority Free Software Projects list, a central resource that we want to highlight and update this year, focuses on which projects in the free software domain are of greatest strategic importance to the goal of freedom for all computer users. For example, in the last update (see `u.fsf.org/2f6`), it was determined that the development of a fully free phone operating system was a high priority, since people use their mobile phones as personal computers. Another high priority is the encouragement of contributions by people underrepresented in the community, which deepens the intrinsically democratic nature of free software.

We plan to keep the High Priority Free Software Projects list updated, and you can work with us. Email `hpp-feedback@gnu.org` if you have any thoughts about updating the list, and we will consider them in our process. We will closely track the work that is being done by this extremely talented community, and highlight the projects that are vital to a freer future. Because a movement without practical implementation is not a movement, just a philosophy.

Donate to the FSF with Bitcoin
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