



Bulletin

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them, we see both positive and negative impacts. We also see some parts of the community being overly solicitous of corporate support, and other parts describing even seemingly positive actions as necessarily part of a long con to eventually extinguish free software.

We need to think clearly – somewhere between these extremes – about corporate involvement, neither falling over ourselves to invite it, nor being so endlessly suspicious that we miss out on

Thinking clearly about corporations

By John Sullivan

Executive Director

For software to be considered free, its license must allow for commercial use and redistribution. Yet, free software as a social movement is to a large extent a struggle against for-profit corporate control of our lives.

Instead of telling companies they are not welcome in free software, we say they are welcome if they follow the ethical principles – the Four Freedoms. In our engagement with



LibreAdventure was an interactive virtual world created for the LibrePlanet 2021 conference. Read more on page 10.

valuable contributions and ultimately fail to change the practices of a significant sector of global society.

Clear thinking begins with seeing for-profit corporations for what they are: for-profit organizations. They are not individuals. A company's behaviors can change dramatically, not just from change in the individuals they employ, but also from changes in leadership, ownership, or business circumstances.

These are not hypothetical concerns. In free software, many eyes are now on Red Hat, to see if its behavior toward free software will change as a result of being bought by IBM. We saw Redis Labs switch some of its software from a free license to a nonfree one which ironically prohibits commercial re-use. We've seen Google in the past decide to withhold the source code for Android. We've seen Microsoft switch from publicly calling free software a cancer to saying "We are all in on open source."

Companies can commit valuable resources to actions that benefit the free software movement. They can hire developers, sponsor events, fund advocacy and education, and provide infrastructure. Individuals can convince their employers to release code under a free license, and to distribute it with their products. They can even persuade the company

to pursue certification under the FSF's Respects Your Freedom program (see: page 8).

These contributions are meaningful. The challenge is, how do we realize them while avoiding the ways corporations can hurt free software? We need to avoid financial dependency, keep our standards high, and rely on a solid legal framework rather than vague trust.

Avoiding financial dependency means making sure our operations as free software projects and organizations won't be seriously harmed by a corporation withdrawing its support due to a disagreement or an ownership change.

As an example, while we appreciate and make productive use of all the direct corporate patron support we receive at the FSF, in our last audited financial year, it was less than 3% of our total revenue.

To keep standards high, free software projects and organizations should be conservative in what we offer in return for contributions. As with any donation, specific public recognition and appreciation can make sense.

But selling conference keynotes, for example, takes the interaction out of the realm of a donation and makes it a transaction. Plus, when some events offer the moon in exchange for sponsorships, it puts more pressure on other events to do so.

Relying on a solid legal framework means relying on copyleft, and on explicit, enforceable statements about who holds relevant rights when a contribution is made by the employee of a company.

The GNU General Public License (GPL) has enabled decades of constructive engagement, because it requires companies to give back improvements they distribute, under the same terms to everyone, and its terms don't change even with new company leadership or after an acquisition. For certain GNU packages, the FSF gets additional assurances, in the form of copyright assignments and employer disclaimers, to help make sure we can effectively uphold these license terms according to the Principles of Community-Oriented GPL Enforcement, and can protect all of the program's users from patent or other ownership claims by contributors' employers.

We should stay watchful and firm on these points. Over the last year, I have seen firsthand multiple cases of Google employees encouraging projects to relax their license from the Affero General Public License (AGPL), because of Google's wrong-headed policy forbidding any involvement by employees with AGPL projects. If you receive pressure like this from any company, stay strong and

explain how copyleft is in the best interest of all contributors to the project (also, tell us your story at info@fsf.org).

A person is capable of moral commitments outside of legal agreements, but accountability for companies works differently. This position isn't based on conspiracy, or on assumptions about corporate employees. It is based on relating to for-profit companies as the kind of entity they are. If we avoid dependency, keep our standards high, and ensure the terms of our work together are copyleft, we can edge the corporate sector ever closer to fully embracing free software, which will in turn help us move all sectors of society in that direction, securing freedom and autonomy for all.

On a personal note, I'll be finishing my term as FSF's executive director before the next issue of the Bulletin is published, so this will be my last article. It's been an honor to appear here, to have had this chance to contribute to important ongoing conversations in this community. We'll be publishing details about the transition to a new executive director on fsf.org. Please continue supporting the work of the FSF's incredible staff, some highlights of which are described in the rest of this issue – and all the future issues to come! 🍷

Looking back on LibrePlanet over the years

By Ruben Rodriguez

Chief Technology Officer

With my days as FSF staff coming to an end, I find that some of my favorite memories were at the annual LibrePlanet conference. I have attended for the last nine years, and combined it with one of my other passions, photography. I'd like to share some of my favorite LibrePlanet stories and photos with you.

I had my first chance to attend in 2012, at the University of Massachusetts Boston campus. It was my first ever visit from Spain to the United States, a wonderful adventure! I finally got to meet all the FSF staff and volunteers behind the IRC nicknames, and they were incredibly welcoming. I was even asked to open up the event with a short impromptu presentation of Trisquel GNU/Linux (a project I founded in 2004), a terrifying honor.

The 2014 conference, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Stata Center, opened with a keynote by Sue Gardner, the Wikimedia Foundation's outgoing executive director. A few minutes into the keynote, I took pictures of my FSF sysadmin friends sweating over a technical glitch with the slides and projector, not knowing that one

day karma would punish me for my amusement. They promptly resolved the issue, and we enjoyed a wonderful conference.

By 2015, I felt like a regular. Attending LibrePlanet was about visiting friends. Catching up at the FSF office open house event before going for Chinese food with a side of activist chat, taking lots of pictures, and watching so many wonderful talks had become an annual (re)treat.

This routine ended when I joined the FSF staff in 2016 as a senior sysadmin, and immediately set myself to improving the recording and streaming process; the tech team also runs the projectors and slides, as well as the sound system, IRC channels, and networking setup of the venue. And it was a tall order: the opening keynote would be Edward Snowden, in conversation with Daniel Kahn Gillmor, live from Russia over an encrypted bi-directional videoconference, and recorded and published in real time via streaming. Despite weeks of testing, on the day of the keynote, karma caught up with me, and the setup refused to work during the preparation time. I had one of the most stressful experiences of my life: standing behind the podium of a large conference room with over three hundred people silently watching as I tried to untangle the problem, hearing every keyboard press echo across the room. But it all was solved, and the event was a success!



In the following years, thanks to the tech team growing in staff, volunteers and interns – including David Testé, who wrote dedicated recording and streaming software to replace the clumsy GStreamer scripts we had used in the past – the workload became more manageable, and during calm moments, I would sneak out of the control room to enjoy bits and pieces of talks, and take many pictures. Some of my favorites are a series of portraits taken in 2017 with a medium-format film camera as old as myself, featuring Sumana Harihareswara, Cory Doctorow, and Micky Metts (at the bottom of page 5).

This steady routine was broken in the 2020 edition, since very close to the event, the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to reshape the conference into a fully remote one, which sadly left few opportunities for pictures. You can read about my team's strategy for running a fully online conference at u.fsf.org/31j.

Although I will not be working on the conference next year, I'm looking forward to attending it for the tenth time – hopefully back as an in-person event – so I can see my friends and colleagues, hang out at the FSF office party, go on hackathons and workshops, and of course, take a lot more pictures. I hope to see you there! 🍷

The road towards a free ebook reader

*By Greg Farough
Campaigns Manager*

One corollary to the FSF's mission to bring freedom to all computer users is the need to bring freedom to every type of computer. While many users are not prone to thinking about it often, any device that runs software is a computer in this sense, whether it's on your lap or desk, or in your pocket. Most ebook readers run some version of the kernel Linux, and some even run the GNU/Linux operating system. This puts ebook readers a few steps closer to freedom than other devices, but closing the gap will still require a significant amount of work.

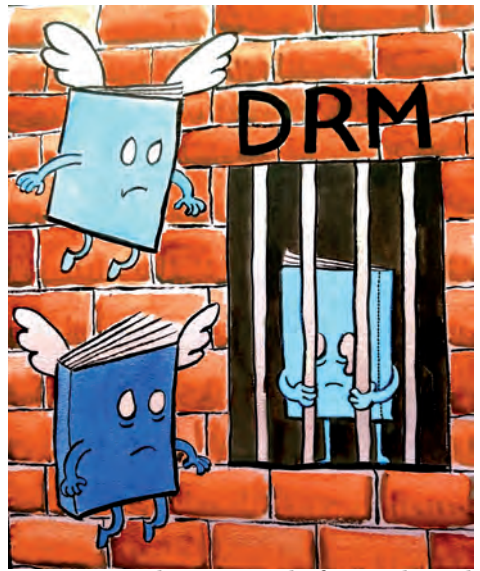
Accordingly, as we announced at the LibrePlanet 2021 conference, we've decided this year to prioritize facilitating the process for an ebook reader to reach the high standards of our Respects Your Freedom (RYF) hardware certification program, whether this means adapting an existing one from a manufacturer, or even contracting its production ourselves.

In general, there hasn't been much pressure on hardware manufacturers to hold the freedom of their devices to a high level of scrutiny. As with general purpose computers, this means that several critical components of the device will

not function without nonfree software. In ebook readers, this includes components as critical as the e-ink screen that powers the display.

The free software community has made some good strides in the area of freeing ebooks. Denis "GNUToo" Carikli has composed a page on the LibrePlanet wiki documenting the components of ebook readers and other single-board computers (see: u.fsf.org/3ee); this has laid the groundwork for our investigation into releasing an ebook reader, and is one of the wiki's more active projects. Also, earlier in the year, a user on the libreplanet-discuss mailing list documented their project to port Parabola GNU/Linux to the reMarkable tablet (see: u.fsf.org/3ef), thereby creating a free ebook reader at the same time. It's steps like these that make us feel confident that we can bring an ebook reader that respects its user's freedom to the public, both in terms of hardware and the software that's shipped with the device.

Yet even when you have a free ebook reader in your hands, you will still need to be vigilant about your freedom. Many ebooks on the market are laden with Digital Restrictions Management (DRM), which prevents you from exercising the freedom to read and share the books you buy and own. Consenting to the DRM that many ebooks are distributed with is a



sure way to lose control of your digital autonomy, no matter what kind of device you have. Despite the Internet giving us the means to share textbooks or works of literature seamlessly and without cost, publishing companies still operate under old assumptions, meaning that libraries and storefronts alike ignore the "solved problem of lending" (see: u.fsf.org/3eg) and distribute books under restrictive terms.

Despite the technology behind ebooks having been with us for years, ebook DRM has only gotten more restrictive. It's common for textbooks to now require a constant and uninterrupted Internet connection, and that they load only a discrete number of pages at a time. Such requirements, especially when placed on students in the global south, where connections aren't as reliable, directly detract from the quality of their

education. This is what motivated our decision to make textbook DRM (and one of its top peddlers, Pearson) our target for the International Day Against DRM (IDAD) in 2019 (see: u.fsf.org/3eh). And though the pandemic may have prevented people from meeting, DRM was undeterred. Even libraries fell victim to "lending" services like Kanopy, putting an artificial lock on digital copies of books, the last place it makes sense for them to be.

If the FSF is successful in landing RYF certification on an ebook reader, which I fully believe we will be, we can ensure that users will have the ability to read digitally while retaining their freedom. It's up to all of us to make sure we have the right to read (see: u.fsf.org/wt), by avoiding ebook DRM in each and every case, and celebrating free (as in freedom) resources like Wikibooks and the Internet Archive, bridging the divide between the movement for

free software and the movement for free culture, empowering both readers and computer users around the globe. 🌐

Evaluating a device for freedom

By Craig Topham

Copyright & Licensing Associate

The fight for software freedom is multifaceted, and having the right devices is key. Most devices contain features which can be used to restrict their use, or even worse, for spying on the owner. This is why in 2013, the FSF's licensing and compliance team started the Respects Your Freedom (RYF) certification program (ryf.fsf.org). It encourages the creation and sale of products that will do as much as possible to respect your freedom and your privacy, ensuring that you have control over your device.

When we evaluate a device for certification, we assess four general categories: hardware capabilities, software licensing, compiling/installation, and product presentation. The first step is to open up the device and identify each integrated circuit (IC) inside, and determine its capabilities. Usually, any IC with relevant functionality will be marked and identifiable. Once these components are identified, we seek out various documentation, including

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data sheets and product descriptions. We need to understand what the IC can do, if it can be reprogrammed, and whether the secondary embedded processor exception might apply, which would allow certification: this exception is for ICs within which software installation is not intended after the user obtains the product.

Next, we move along to the software. We must make sure that all the code needed to use the device is fully licensed as free software. Although `grep` and `string` are useful tools for verifying licensing, we've increasingly been relying on license scanning programs like the `scancode-toolkit` (see: u.fsf.org/3ek). If problematic files are discovered, they will need to be removed by the retailer. This can be a very tedious process, but every removed nonfree file helps the community both upstream and downstream. Once the code is verified, we compile and install it, to make sure the customer can do so themselves.


For a device to be certified, all of the programs included with it must have accurate instructions for compilation and installation. The instructions should be practical and written for the widest audience, but may require a minimum of technical know-how from the user, such as executing programs on a command line. The evaluation process involves building from source and loading it

onto the device. For peripherals and less complicated devices, being able to install and use the device with a computer running an endorsed distribution suffices (see: u.fsf.org/1td).

Finally, we address how the device is presented to the recipient. The certification program is designed to never direct a user to anything nonfree. This includes not only the source code, but also the compiled program, advertisements, product documentation, Web pages, and product packaging. For a vendor interested in promoting software freedom, these steps may seem quite natural, and may already be in place for their products.

The RYF process does not end there: the price of freedom is eternal vigilance, and so the community is invited to point out any issues we may have missed. A key criterion is a commitment by the retailer to correct any freedom issues in the device, so if a package, firmware, or hardware component is found to be nonfree or violates the user's privacy, we invite reports to be sent to report-nonfree@fsf.org and to the retailer directly.

Now that you have an idea of how the program works, if you come across a product that might meet our criteria, please encourage the vendor to apply at ryf@fsf.org. For vendors wishing to sell a product in a manner that respects the rights of

its customers, and that comes with only freedom inside, this program is for you. You can learn more about the RYF certification program and view currently certified devices at ryf.fsf.org. 

Updates from the FSF Tech Team

By Andrew Engelbrecht

Senior Systems Administrator

Over the last six months, the four-person FSF tech team has been hard at work maintaining, upgrading, and repairing the infrastructure that supports the FSF, the GNU Project, and many other free software projects.

Knowing in advance that the LibrePlanet conference would be remote this year allowed us to plan for many technical improvements. We hosted our talks on BigBlueButton for the first time, and streamed them via Icecast, which helped us with the reliability of our video streams. Our experimentation with continuous video streams via Open Broadcaster Software was also a major success, ensuring that our audience didn't miss a beat.

Our team worked overtime to make the remote conference as special as we could, with many interactive elements. The conference site launched at libreplanet.org/2021, with an updated IRC page embed, and a very nice theme, created with the help

of a designer who uses exclusively free software.

Many participants interacted with our conference via an instance of LibreAdventure (LA), an AGPLv3-licensed codebase for socially-interactive maps. This allowed them to explore the event virtually, with the ability to video chat with other attendees. People listened to and watched sessions, visited our exhibitors, and gathered to see DJs play music for LibrePlanet attendees. We're hoping to improve our LA codebase (at u.fsf.org/ladv), so if you're looking for a fun project to hack on, let us know at info@fsf.org!

LibrePlanet attendees worked together on our Minetest instance, adding floating logos for many GNU packages, including Guix. A train cart network that traveled underground from the surface was discovered near the main point of activity. We packaged up the world at the end of the conference, and it's available for you to download at libreplanet.org/2021/fun. Let us and other free software gamers hear about what you're up to on our #libreplanet-gaming IRC channel on Libera Chat.

In other news, the version of Plone and Python on fsf.org is now upgraded, bringing many improvements and patches. We're planning for the future direction of

our main online presence, and may use Transmogrifier to convert fsf.org into a static site. This would allow us to create a git repo to which anyone could send patches, making it easier for volunteers to help with site improvements.

Our bootable credit-card-shaped USB membership cards are from a new batch, with a much higher capacity, a newer version of the fully-free Trisquel operating system, and pre-loaded free software-related media for your offline enjoyment. This card is a membership perk, so if you want one and you're not already an associate member, I encourage you to head over to my.fsf.org/join as soon as you can!

Our Piwik server is now upgraded to Matomo, for improved recording of site visitation statistics. We continue to honor people's privacy settings, so if your browser is set to "Do Not Track," we will not use JavaScript to record your visit. We don't track with cookies via Matomo, to help with our European Union General Data Protection Regulation compliance, and to protect your identity. We also anonymize this user data by removing the last sixteen bits of visitors' IPv4 addresses, and the last eighty bits of IPv6 addresses, which allows us to see general Matomo statistics, while storing less identifying information.

Our CiviCRM instance was upgraded to stay on top of security patches. We're also excited about the self-hostable Bitcoin and Litecoin payment processor code that our tech team intern wrote for our CiviCRM instance, and we look forward to deploying it soon!

The storage capacity of our main backup system is now upgraded, while increasing redundancy on RAID1 arrays. This has allowed us to continue growing our network while ensuring that our data is not lost in the event of accidental deletion or a natural disaster. We also migrated and audited the security of some of our internal infrastructure.

The FSF tech team thanks you for your support, and for each of your contributions to the free software community. Our mission relies upon your commitment to bring that freedom to a growing number of people around the world. Thank you for putting that goal within reach. 🐼

The FSF has switched to Libera.Chat!

Friday Free Software Directory IRC meetups and other moderated public discussion are moving from Freenode to Libera.Chat. Learn more at u.fsf.org/3ep.



Donate to the FSF with Bitcoin:

15QXo6MqmTAp9wSt
6ugeCejcAh2c6Bii9Q

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Associate Membership:

Become an associate member of the FSF. Members will receive a bootable 16GB USB card, email forwarding, and an account on the FSF's Jabber/XMPP server. Plus: participate in our members forum at forum.members.fsf.org! To sign up or get more information, visit member.fsf.org or write to membership@fsf.org.

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