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What we're up against

By Zoë Kooyman
Executive Director

The Free Software Foundation has myriad articles stating that we are up against billions, or even trillions of proprietary software dollars. These dollars are for marketing that convinces people to use their products; they use it to develop ways to make us believe we want to cede control over software, and they use it to pay the legal fees for expensive lawyers to push the boundaries of what is legal further and further away from what is moral.

I think a financial comparison does a good job of illustrating the magnitude of the force we have to

overcome if we are to complete our mission of worldwide computer user freedom. However, what I fear is that the reality of it still does not sink in. We're talking about a reality where free software becomes more and more marginalized, where user rights dissipate into choosing between participating in daily life or standing for your rights, and where copyleft licenses are blatantly violated or read favorably for a malicious corporation to the extent that it challenges the definition of free software. This is something we should avoid at all costs.

Following a subpoena by Vizio, the FSF was recently deposited in the *Software Freedom Conservancy (SFC) v. Vizio* case. In this case, SFC is requesting that Vizio provide source code to programs on some Vizio devices that are covered by the GNU General Public License v2 (GPL) and GNU Lesser General Public License



Free as in Freedom

*Your support helps us defend the GNU GPL
and other GNU licenses.*

v2.1 (LGPL). In response, Vizio has argued that SFC cannot enforce a request for source code if it does not hold copyright to the underlying software. In support of that argument, Vizio has made reference to an FAQ published by the FSF that is captioned “Who has the power to enforce the GPL.”

They are using the FSF's own FAQ to argue against what the FSF stands for: each and every person should have access to the source code in order to run, study, copy, modify, and distribute the software.

We don't always get to bring attention to the work we do in instances like these because of confidentiality, or because we follow the *Principles of Community-Oriented GPL Enforcement*, which can make it harder to show what we do and garner support for it. However, without going into too much detail on the deposition now, it is a great way of illustrating the frustration and fear at the root of mentioning the billions of dollars we are up against.

Remember, while we are proud to defend our mission here, FSF is “merely” a witness in this case. You show up once or twice to answer questions that can be of significant value to a decision that can have a lasting impact on user freedom. In this case, Vizio questioned the FSF's encouragement for the use of any legal mechanism available to users for

obtaining complete and corresponding source code, as is their right, and enforcing full compliance with the GNU GPL, which you would think would be a fairly straightforward thing. But after FSF received a topic list, hours and hours of preparation, research, and practice with highly skilled lawyers went into getting ready for it.

Originally, this deposition was supposed to be held remotely, but Vizio did not want to learn to use a new videoconferencing platform other than Zoom, leaving the FSF with a choice of using a proprietary platform, or being physically present for the deposition. Rather than being forced to use a proprietary program, we pushed for doing it in person. The delay that this change caused meant costly additional preparation, after which we also spent roughly ten(!) hours in the deposition itself. As you can imagine, the whole endeavor cost the FSF tens of thousands of dollars (which is nothing compared to the legal cost that would come with actually being a party in the case).

Vizio's argument is that a reading of an FSF educational resource (remember, we provide no legal advice) provides them with a way out of their responsibility to provide complete and corresponding source code under the GPL. Their argument holds water only because of the money being spent behind the scenes

of this case. In any such case, tens of thousands of dollars are being poured into strategizing about ways to get away with not doing the right thing.

The FSF is a small organization with limited resources and one of our major focus points is license compliance. We are always fighting to have the financial strength to be able to take violators to task, but to do that successfully, we have to be extremely selective as to where our money goes. Or, in situations like these, we don't get to choose ourselves, and all we can decide is how we show up. It is worth noting this is not the only subpoena we received these last months. We believe this deposition in *SFC v. Vizio* will help users get a step closer to software freedom, which is why we have made the investment of time and resources for it, and we celebrate a well-prepared and strong testimony. But imagine, if a deposition in a case is such a great investment, clearly we need your help competing against billions of dollars and use the legal system to work for moral ends. 🙏

Can a license protect
against future threats to
computer user freedom?

By Krzysztof Siewicz

*Licensing & Compliance
Manager*

Software is free when you are free
to run, copy, distribute, study,

change, and improve it. The Free Software Foundation (FSF) recommends copyright holders use the FSF's GNU family of licenses to free their programs. We are the stewards of these standard free software licenses, which we designed with care and in cooperation with the community and lawyers to ensure they perpetuate software freedom. GNU licenses explicitly grant the freedoms as defined in the Free Software Definition. Our licenses include copyleft clauses which ensure that users can exercise these freedoms in derivative works, such as improvements and combinations (by requiring that such works are subject to the same license).

Generally, it is not easy to change a program's license. Relicensing requires consent of all copyright holders, who can be numerous given the collaborative development of free software. This is good news for users, who can rest assured that their freedoms cannot be easily revoked. But it may become a problem if the license becomes outdated, for example, when new threats to user freedoms are identified which a new license can address more specifically. A new version of the license can be drafted, but it will not automatically apply to programs released under the old one, unless it is explicitly made possible by the copyright holders.

In fact, explicit permission for

users to switch to a newer version of the license is the FSF's recommended way of applying any of the licenses in the GNU family. The license notice is a statement by which copyright holders communicate the terms of their choice in each particular source code file. If someone chooses to draft a different notice, with no explicit “or any later version” language, users have to follow the version number of the GNU GPL specified in the notice.

Allowing users to choose any later version of the GNU GPL protects them better against future threats. Another important benefit of the choice is license compatibility. Two licenses are compatible when they permit programs released under these licenses to be combined into a larger work. Different copyleft licenses are rarely compatible with each other, and this is especially the case with strong copyleft licenses. In particular, the GNU GPLv2 is not compatible with the GNU GPLv3. The problem can be solved by releasing a program under “the GNU GPLv2 or any later version,” which allows users to choose the GNU GPLv3 whenever they want to combine the program with another program under the latter license.

The FSF has strong safeguards implemented to ensure that new versions of the GNU GPL will remain free software licenses. The FSF's by-laws require a supermajority vote of 66% of the directors at a special

meeting of the board to direct the president of FSF to start a drafting process for any new copyright license or a new version of an existing license, as well as to publish them when they are finally ready. Members of the board are bound by the Code of Ethics.

To sum up, can a license protect your work against future threats to computer user freedom? Yes. Any version of the GNU GPL provides a strong level of protection. But it may be insufficient against unforeseen future threats. We believe that if you use one of the FSF's GNU licenses together with the FSF's recommended license notice that includes “or any later version” language, you will get the maximum legal protection possible for freedom.



Be sure to check out the longer version of this article at u.fsf.org/9aad!

The programs we use every day

By Free Software Foundation Staff

Did you know that at the FSF we do all of our entire computing with free software? In this interview, you can learn how the FSF staff does their day-to-day tasks with free software, which programs helped them get started with free software, and read some stories about how they came to use a specific program.

FSF: Jeanne, you're working as the membership coordinator. What are your must-use programs, and why?

Jeanne: My must-use program number one is Emacs. Why? Because of how easy it makes it to edit text and manage my life via Org mode, which enables me to keep organized notes and TODO lists.

FSF: We have another big Org mode fan: our licensing associate, Craig. Craig, how did you come to use Org mode so much?

Craig: I wanted to implement David Allen's Getting Things Done (GtD) methodology in Org mode. It was easy to find the resources I needed from the community to customize Org mode for GtD. At its core GtD is essentially a system of lists which Org mode manages in powerful and intuitive ways. I am constantly delighted to learn new features and look forward to new discoveries as I have only just begun my Org mode adventure.

FSF: Jeanne, apart from Emacs, are there any other programs you'd recommend others use?

Jeanne: Workrave! This program will save you from macular degeneration, muscle atrophy, carpal tunnel syndrome, inflammation, brain fog, general misery, and an early death! I like how it forces me to get up and look away from the screen at regular intervals. I'm currently still

stuck in the aspirational phase of my relationship with it, though. Instead of obeying its prompts to break, I reflexively turn it off, like I would close a pop-up ad. So I guess it's also a program that I'd recommend I myself use.

FSF: Michael, you're our GNU/Linux systems administrator. Maybe you can explain why you — and several other staff members — use Trisquel as an operating system?

Michael: Well, it is entirely free software. It is one of the few GNU/Linux distros endorsed by the FSF. I personally use it because it is the same environment as our servers and most of the staff machines. It is helpful to “eat our own dog food” in order to find issues and help work through issues that staff come across. In the future, I would also like to familiarize myself with Parabola.

FSF: Do you also use Emacs as your text editor, Michael?

Michael: I mostly use Vim or Neovim, because they are guaranteed to be on all of the servers I SSH into. I minimally change the config to set `background=dark` so the configurations are mostly the same everywhere. And you can highlight columns and edit them all at once. Simply press CTRL+v, navigate to highlight the text to replace, ‘c’ to remove it and edit, write a new string for the column, and then press ESC

to apply it to all lines.

FSF: And which image editor do you use?

Michæl: I use GIMP for editing a picture taken with a camera or a quick one-off resize of a raster image. For drawing raster images starting with a blank canvas, I use Krita. Inkscape, on the other hand, is the best free software tool for creating and editing vector graphics. Imagemagick can automate the same edit many times on the command line.

FSF: Many people communicate with the FSF on IRC and a lot of the communication within the teams is on XMPP. Which IRC client do you use and why?

Michæl: WeeChat with two Es because it's extensible with Python, and the logging helps me build my meeting notes faster.

FSF: Last question for you, Michæl: you store your passwords in KeePassXC. Why?


Michæl: Because it's offline and secure. It doesn't come with an online storage option by default like other password manager and it erases passwords from the clipboard after a period of time.

FSF: Krzysztof, as the FSF's licensing manager, what do you use to track changes in legal or other text documents?

Krzysztof: Meld. This is a very useful graphical frontend to diff, which helps a lot to identify all differences

between text files.

FSF: Can you tell us a story about how you came to use a specific program or feature?

Krzysztof: A few years ago, I learned the basics of 3D modeling in Blender because I wanted to arrange and decorate our flat, and the designer we worked with was delivering only very limited visualizations prepared in a proprietary format. It surprised me how fast I was able to learn it using online tutorials and how much more was possible to do with this single program. 

Be sure to check out the longer version of this article online at u.fsf.org/9aa5!

From curiosity to
commitment: a personal
adventure to freedom

*By Anush Veeranala
FSF tech team intern*

In my digital adventures, I love using free (as in freedom like free speech, not gratis) software. Many people use the term “open source” to refer to free software, but I havened that free software, with its emphasis on freedom and ethics, is the term that fits my values.

When I discovered some amazing free software projects like GNU Emacs, GNU Guix, LaTeX, and GNU R. What caught my attention was not



FSF tech team volunteers Bob Proulx and Anush Veeranala at LibrePlanet 2024.

just how well these programs worked and were documented, but that they proudly called themselves *free* software, not just “open source.” These tools became a crucial part of my daily routine, both for learning and working.

Free software adds this idea of ethics: it's focused on freedom and sharing. This led me to explore what makes open source different from free software and how free software can still be commercially viable. It's not just about the code; it's about the values that come with the software we use every day.

While delving into these specifics, I immersed myself in literature from the FSF. Despite my desire to engage in in-depth discussions with the FSF team in person, I hesitated about reaching out due to my perceived lack of technical expertise in the free software domain. However, I took the

leap and applied for FSF volunteering at LibrePlanet 2024. To my delight, Craig Topham, the FSF's Copyright & Licensing Associate, reached out, and thus began my journey with the FSF through volunteer training.

On my first visit to the FSF office at 51 Franklin Street, I had the pleasure of meeting Craig, gaining valuable insights into software licensing. Although I had only read about Craig online before, meeting him in person revealed an incredibly down-to-earth and approachable individual.

During my training, I met a co-volunteer, Jim Garrett, who uses GNU Emacs Org mode for statistical analysis in R. While RStudio is the mainstream choice for working with R, as a data scientist, I prefer Org mode as well, because it supports literate programming for multiple languages like R, Bash, Guile, and more. Literate programming involves

writing documents in plain English with embedded code and results, unlike traditional setups where code is primary and explanations are comments. This approach is becoming the standard in research and data science. When I asked Jim why he uses Org mode, he explained that GNU Emacs was the de facto tool when he started his PhD, and he never felt the need to switch to RStudio. This reaffirmed my belief in the quality of Emacs. We agreed to catch up after LibrePlanet to discuss our statistical workflows further.

The FSF organized a “Friday night open office” party the day before LibrePlanet, where I had the chance to engage in a thought-provoking discussion with Alexandre Oliva, a voting member on the FSF's board and founding member of Free Software Foundation Latin America (FSFLA). This discussion helped me contextualize some of my ideas in broader frameworks worth sharing. In my policy paper, I concluded that free software can only be sold once. I learned that this concept is related to “monopsony,” a market structure in which a single buyer substantially controls the market as the major purchaser of goods and services offered by many would-be sellers.

Our discussion also covered the concept of natural monopoly, which occurs when someone invents something truly creative and unique.

To prevent such innovations from staying hidden or being used solely for personal benefit, society established patents. However, the problem arises when companies patent non-innovative items, like certain types of software, leading to excessive monopolies.

Oliva and I agreed that making software free as in freedom could curb the issue of patenting non-innovative works. Free software would prevent companies from creating monopolies by ensuring that the end user has full ownership and control over the product, eliminating the concentration of market power.

Additionally, we touched on how companies increase their monopoly through other means, such as Digital Restrictions Management (DRM). DRM restricts the use of digital content and devices, limiting user freedoms and reinforcing the company's control. This is yet another way companies ensure that users never fully own



*Keep reading for an interview with
the main developer of Dragora GNU/
Linux!*


their products, perpetually paying the cost, whether it be monetary or in terms of time and effort.

At LibrePlanet, I had the opportunity to serve as a room monitor for several sessions, one of which was “GNU/Linux in the high school classroom” by Neil Plotnick. I was particularly impressed by Neil’s approach to seamlessly integrating software skills with lessons on privacy and freedom principles. His innovative teaching methods, such as comparing iteration in programming to real-life examples like musical chairs, provided a unique and engaging way to educate students on these important concepts.

During a Saturday night walk around Boston, I had an insightful discussion with Chris (Krzysztof Siewicz, Licensing and Compliance Manager at FSF) about his PhD journey and his support for the cause of free software. He shared his insights on the licensing issues surrounding neural networks systems, in particular large language models. Chris pointed out that training data could, for example, be subject to various exclusive rights other than software copyrights, or even not subject to any rights at all.

LibrePlanet 2024 had a number of other highlights for me. I had the chance to meet FSF founder Richard Stallman in person and, of course, got a photo with him! I made some great

friends and we agreed to stay connected via a Signal group and IRC. Recently, I was also hired as an intern at the FSF and I’m looking forward to working closely with some of its best minds, Ian and Michaël!

Be sure to check out the longer version of this article online at u.fsf.org/9aax! 

Interview with Dragora developer Matías Fonzo

By Jing Luo, GNU webmaster

This interview was conducted between Jing Luo (JL), a GNU webmaster, and Matías Fonzo of the Dragora GNU/Linux project. Dragora GNU/Linux-libre is urgently struggling to find enough funds to continue its work, and could use your support.

Hi, I’m Matías Fonzo, a developer from Argentina. Many people call me “selk,” and you may already heard of me for my contributions to popular free software like the Trinity Desktop Environment, Midnight Commander, Man-db, GNU Texinfo, SysV init and the Lzip LZMA compressor. I’m currently the sole maintainer of Dragora GNU/Linux-Libre.

JL: Matías, tell us about Dragora GNU/Linux-Libre. When did you start working on the Dragora project?

MF: I started the development of Dragora in 2007. The first version was released on June 13, 2008, containing the basic GNU toolset, boot scripts, a packaging system, and an

installer. While the intention from the beginning was to achieve a 100% “free as in freedom” GNU/Linux distribution, this very first (beta) version was not completely free, as all parts were free software, except for the Linux kernel due to blobs or nonfree parts. Fortunately, the Linux-libre project appeared in the same year, which removes or cleans up the nonfree parts of the Linux kernel. This led to the second beta of Dragora on September 18, 2008; completing the freedom of the distribution by replacing the kernel, and becoming the first release available to the public. Ongoing work to provide a more complete distribution would lead to the stable release of Dragora 1.0, achieved on March 13, 2009.

JL: What made you start such a project?

MF: I was introduced to GNU/

Linux in 1997, testing and using several distributions until I became familiar with the concepts of free software. Most of the upstream distributions did not emphasize full user freedom, but only partial freedom. When I found out in the 2000s that a project from my country called Ututo had been released and recognized as 100% libre, I was very excited. It took some time before I could decide to do something of my own. At that time, I was unemployed and a brother of mine motivated me to do it. I didn't know exactly how I was going to do it, but I knew that I had gained experience since then and wanted to learn more, with the intention from start to finish to make something 100% libre that respected the user's freedom. Instead of making a derivative distribution and saving myself a lot of work, I decided to start



FSF staff and volunteers at LibrePlanet 2024.

from scratch, also to learn more. I realized that this way, you have more control over what is included in the distribution. For example, you can create a better and more secure technical scheme than other distributions.

JL: Are you the only developer or is there a team behind the project?

MF: Today Dragora is continuously improved and innovated by an enterprising team: Lorenzo L. Ancora is our webmaster, Jing Luo the sysadmin, Tiberiu Turbureanu handles the communication side, all guided by me as the lead developer and maintainer. People from all over the world have joined the project over the years, freely giving their contributions and encouragements, and to them goes our deepest gratitude.

JL: Dragora is an independent distribution. What are the advantages of developing an independent distribution?

MF: The biggest advantage is having complete control over the project: we actively protect our userbase by not being tied to purely commercial interests. Another advantage is that bugs and ethical issues common to mainstream distributions can be easily managed if not entirely prevented, granting great serenity to our users.

JL: What does the philosophy of free software mean to you and what

motivates you to develop free software?

MF: For me and my team, the essence of free software is sharing and solidarity. It also means respecting your own freedom and the freedom of others, an uncommon attitude in the modern world, matured through a gradual learning process and a warm community. Dragora is developed for the greater good and our philosophy is that free software is a key ingredient to a better society.

JL: What are your plans regarding the future of Dragora, are there going to be changes?

MF: Nobody knows the future but our team is focused and optimistic, spurred by the awareness that the citizens of many countries, mine included, are in difficulty and that free software has now more than ever a key role in preserving the freedom of both small enterprises and individuals. Our project is sustained by volunteers and our arms are always open to welcome donors, testers, writers, artists and anyone interested in being part of our community. The best way to start is to download and try Dragora! 🐧

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