

Richard Stallman, “The GNU Project”

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Background

In the early days of computer programming, programmers freely shared their source code and worked in cooperation with each other. As the software industry progressed, companies began using nondisclosure agreements that prevented programmers from sharing their code. Stallman rejected this change on moral grounds, and devised the concept of free software as a response. GNU is an operating system based on the free software philosophy. As a free precursor to the open source, and eventually, the open education movement, Stallman’s concepts influenced the development of open educational philosophy and the development of open educational content.

Key Points

- It is unethical to stop people from sharing and changing software.
- The concept of free software relies on assumptions that the authors disagrees with, such as:
 - Software companies have an unquestionable, natural right to own their software and as a result have power over the people that use the software.
 - The only important thing about software is what tasks it can do and as a result computer users shouldn’t care what society we have.
 - Nobody would create usable software if companies could not own it – obviously not true as evidenced by the free software movement.
- Copyleft uses copyright law to allow users to do whatever they want with the software except make it proprietary.
- This really is a moral code “Unix was (and is) proprietary software, and the GNU Project’s philosophy said that we should not use proprietary software. But, applying the same reasoning that leads to the conclusion that violence in self defense is justified, I concluded that it was legitimate to use a proprietary package when that was crucial for developing a free replacement that would help others stop using the proprietary package.”

Discussion Questions

1. What motivated Stallman to create a replica of an existing operating system?
2. What motivates people to pay for software (or anything else)?
3. Why would Stallman claim that only caring about what tasks software can do is equivalent to not caring what kind of society we have?



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