FREE SOFTWARE & COPY LEFT

Free software is software that respects our freedom. To use free software is to make a political and ethical choice asserting our rights to learn and to share what we learn with others. Usually software we buy denies us these rights, because we don't actually buy ownership of the software. Instead, we receive a license to use the software, and this license binds us with many fine-print rules about what we can and can't do. 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 if caught be fined or put in jail. That's what's in the fine print. Free software program involves 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. It allows everyone be a part of and benefit from this community even without knowing anything about programming. It is so because they were doing anything illegal.

The Free Software Movement

The free software movement was started in 1983 by Richard M. Stallman, when he launched a project called GNU, which stands for "GNU's 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 non-profit with the mission of advocating and educating on behalf of computer users around the world.

Today the number of people who are not computer users is declining all the time, as technology seeps around the globe. It takes knowledge to make this technology work. People who hoard this knowledge, punishing and threatening others who try to obtain and share it, are not doing so in order to preserve it, despite what they may claim. Instead, they are preserving power for themselves at the expense of others' freedom.

Recognizing this, millions of people around the world— including entire governments—have made the commitment to use only free software on their computers. The fact that so many people are willing to make and stand by this decision in the face of cheaper and cheaper "deals" from Microsoft, Apple and other proprietary software companies proves these companies wrong—we don't need them or their fine print (the small print, or mouse print is less noticeable print smaller than the more obvious larger print it accompanies that advertises of otherwise describes or partially describes a commercial product or service) to make software. The movement calls for "We can do it ourselves. We are doing it ourselves".

Copy Left

Because the copyright laws covering software are often used to take away our freedoms, Stallman and the FSF developed a specific legal document called the GNU General Public License (GPL) to protect them. Instead of restricting what we can do with software the GPL encourages us to learn and share, so it is called a "copyleft" license. Thousands of people and businesses—from hobbyists to big companies like IBM and Novell—are now authoring and distributing free software using the GPL. But which software to use is a political choice for all of us, not just the people who program and sell it. One can click his freedoms away by signalling OK in the Microsoft or Macintosh window after looking through their thirty pages of restrictions, or can click CANCEL, and see instead if there is a piece of free software that does what he needs.

One should click CANCEL when he could because that's the more ethical choice. This means one should have to learn a new program, and sometimes the free program might not work as well. The ethical choice is not always the easy choice. Copyleft is a general method for making a program free software and requiring all modified and extended versions of the program to be free software as well. The simplest way to make a program free is to put it in the public domain, un-copyrighted. This allows people to share the program and their improvements, if they are so minded. But it also allows "Uncooperative people to convert the program into proprietary software. They can make changes, many or few, and distribute the result as a proprietary product. People who receive the program in that modified form do not have the freedom that the original author gave them; the middleman has stripped it away.

In the GNU project, its aim is to give all users the freedom to redistribute and change GNU software. If middlemen could strip off the freedom, there might have many users, but those users would not have freedom. So instead of putting GNU software in the public domain, they "copyleft" it. Copyleft says that anyone who redistributes the software, with or without changes, must pass along the freedom to further copy and change it. Copyleft guarantees that every user has freedom.

Copyleft also provides an incentive for other programmers to add to free software. Important free programs such as the GNU c++ compiler exist only because of this. Copyleft also helps programmers who want to contribute improvements to free software get permission to do that. These programmers often work for companies or universities that would do almost anything to get more money. A programmer may want to contribute his changes to the community, but his employer may want to turn the changes into a proprietary software product. When it is explained to the employer that it is illegal to distribute the improved version except as free software, the employer usually decides to release it as free software rather than throw it away. To copyleft a program, they state initially that it is copyrighted; then they add distribution terms, which are a legal instrument that gives everyone the rights to use, modify, and redistribute the program's code or any program derived from it but only if the distribution terms are unchanged. Thus, the code and the freedoms become legally inseparable. Proprietary software developers use copyright to take away the users' freedom while FSF use copyright to guarantee their freedom. That's why the movement reverse the name, changing "copyright" into "copyleft." Copyleft is a general concept; there are many ways to fill in the details. In the GNU Project, the specific distribution terms they use are controlled by the GNU General Public License. The GNU General Public License is often called the GNU GPL for short. One can also read about why the FSF gets copyright assignments from contributors. An alternate form of copyleft, the GNU Lesser General Public License(LGPL), applies to a few (but not all) GNU libraries. This license was formerly called the Library GPL, but now changed the name, because the old name encouraged developers to use this license more often than it should be used.