

Richard Matthew Stallman

Richard Matthew Stallman (known by his initials “rms”) is a programmer, software engineer and activist for many issues, most of which involve technology, its advancement and integration into the modern world. He can be particular in the way he wants terminology to be used, which I will touch on later, so I will try my best to adhere to his standards throughout this piece.

Stallman is a major advocate for software freedom and copyright reduction relating to digital rights management. I think his work is a major contributing factor in how children and teens can begin programming so easily today and how students do not need to rely on expensive software to make functional real world applications from their bedroom.

He is the man behind the GNU Project - a mass scale collaboration of free software including a Linux-like OS formed purely of free software. Some components included will have been used by the majority of computer scientists - GCC (GNU Compiler Collection), Emacs and the GNU Debugger.

Beginnings

Stallman was born in the early ‘50s in New York into a Jewish family, although he describes himself as an “atheist of Jewish ancestry¹”. He was always interested in computers and showed signs of potential in the field as well as in biology.

His first experience with an actual computer was when he was taken on as an intern for a Summer job at IBM. He completed his numerical analysis program in a few weeks but swore never to use FORTRAN again as he quickly grew to despise it.

He went on to attend Harvard and studied physics where, for the first time in his life, he “felt at home²”. By the end of his first year he was programming in MIT’s AI Laboratory and was a regular in the hacking community (where the moniker “rms” began life).

¹ "Full text of "The Basement Interviews" - Internet Archive."

https://archive.org/stream/The_Basement_Interviews/Richard_Stallman_Interview_djvu.txt. Accessed 2 Oct. 2019.

² "Richard Stallman - Michael Gross."

<https://mgross.com/writing/books/my-generation/bonus-chapters/richard-stallman-high-school-misfit-symbol-of-free-software-macarthur-certified-genius/>. Accessed 2 Oct. 2019.

'Hacking' is primarily built on the ability to view and edit the backend of computer programs as well as engineering specific input to achieve a goal based on the viewable backend code. This hacker culture that Stallman cultivated and thrived in began to fall victim to manufacturers who were becoming more protective of their product and code.

Stallman railed against this believing blocking the user's freedom was "a crime against humanity"³. Later on he, and other MIT hackers, were refused access to a new printer's source code - Stallman had added a message sending service to the previous printer so one would be notified when one's job was printed. These are just some of the incidents which led Stallman to quit MIT and work full time on the GNU project.

GNU Project

GNU, a free operating system, is a recursive acronym - 'GNU's Not Unix'. Stallman decided to make it compatible with Unix for portability and so that current Unix users could easily switch to it.

Stallman started building it by himself and contributed Emacs, GCC, the GNU Debugger and the GNU Make system to the project - OS components which have stayed useful and relevant to this day.

At the same time as he began building, he published the GNU Manifesto which outlined what the GNU Project was and why he had decided to start the project. Stallman aimed to improve many aspects of Unix but, predominantly, the goal was to provide an alternative Unix-like OS free of proprietary and closed-source software.

A couple years after the initial release of GNU, Linus Torvalds made use of GNU's toolset to produce a free monolithic 'Linux' kernel. This led to one of the longest standing naming controversies in the field with most users using the name 'Linux', while Stallman and co. using the name 'GNU/Linux' as they believed leaving GNU out of the title diminished its value and importance in the system - I mentioned Stallman's appetite for terminology debates earlier.

Another controversy which sheds light on Stallman's proclivity to not pull punches is the Emacs vs vi debate. Hardly showing any overprotectiveness of his

³ "Free as in Freedom: Table of Contents - O'Reilly." <https://www.oreilly.com/openbook/freedom/>. Accessed 2 Oct. 2019.

own product, Stallman decrees via “the editor of the beast” while life in the “Church of Emacs” is pure but “does not require celibacy (a sigh of relief is heard).”

Stallman depicts a common trait among elite programmers - a steadfast stubbornness and brutal honesty, “refreshing in a world of spin-meisters and multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns” according to technology journalist Andrew Leonard.

In a time where paywalls are being erected everywhere around us, all forms of entertainment are steadily being split between a handful of main players, shutting vast majorities out of services, Stallman and his peers play a vital part in preserving some sanity and fighting for basic freedoms in the online realm.

Activism

As mentioned, Stallman is outspoken about the issues of software freedom. He regularly gives talks and has written many essays which are available from his website. He set up a free online encyclopedia, GNUpedia, but retired it in favour of Wikipedia which was rapidly accruing a dedicated base of contributors.

Stallman boycotted Apple products for seven years after Apple sued Hewlett-Packard in a “look and feel” lawsuit. Stallman felt this was a slippery slope which threatened to “put an end to free software that could substitute for commercial software”, basically what he had done with GNU, created a free, alternative software package. Apple, a nefariously closed-software company, was never liked by Stallman and he termed Steve Jobs “a malign influence” on computing.

Copyright is also crucial to this debate. Stallman has pushed for a kind of reduced copyright lasting ten years where, instead of restrictions, creators are supported through a tax evenly distributed by popularity - so “fairly successful non-stars” are compensated for their work without needing to hide the program or the source code behind paywalls.

The concept of ownership in modern times is an issue Stallman is wary of. Ebooks is an example he uses. Using a Kindle, if Amazon so wished, they could remove all traces of an ebook you ‘bought’ without recourse. The concept of ownership is changing. A leasing model gives companies more leeway. Apple employ this strategy with iTunes, only leasing the songs and albums bought through iTunes, probably another reason for Stallman’s dislike of Jobs.

Stallman has no phone or “portable surveillance device”, he accesses the web through proxies or using Tor, but I imagine Richard Stallman knows exactly what the conglomerates are using us for, and can most likely picture the scale of the vast swathes of information rushing through big data programs better than the rest of us, so I give him a pass for his paranoia. Maybe it will pan out that his extreme views should have been adopted by more of us and sooner, before large companies dictated how the internet would be used, before it was too late to turn back.