

Translations of this page**15 Years of Free Software**by **Richard M. Stallman**

It is now just over 15 years since the beginning of the Free Software Movement and the GNU Project. We have come a long way.

In 1984, it was impossible to use a modern computer without installing a proprietary operating system, which you would have to obtain under a restrictive license. No one was allowed to share software freely with fellow computer users, and hardly anyone could change software to fit his or her own needs. The owners of software had erected walls to divide us from each other.

The GNU Project was founded to change all that. Its first goal: to develop a Unix-compatible portable operating system that would be 100% free software. Not 95% free, not 99.5%, but 100%—so that users would be free to redistribute the whole system, and free to change and contribute to any part of it. The name of the system, GNU, is a recursive acronym meaning “GNU's Not Unix”—a way of paying tribute to Unix, while at the same time saying that GNU is something different. Technically, GNU is like Unix. But unlike Unix, GNU gives its users freedom.

It took many years of work, by hundreds of programmers, to develop this operating system. Some were paid by the Free Software Foundation and by free software companies; most were volunteers. A few have become famous; most are known mainly within their profession, by other hackers who use or work on their code. All together have helped to liberate the potential of the computer network for all humanity.

In 1991, the last major essential component of a Unix-like system was developed: Linux, the free kernel written by Linus Torvalds. Today, the combination of GNU and Linux is used by millions of people around the world, and its popularity is growing. This month, we announced release 1.0 of **GNOME**, the GNU graphical desktop, which we hope will make the GNU/Linux system as easy to use as any other operating system.

But our freedom is not permanently assured. The world does not stand still, and we cannot count on having freedom five years from now, just because we have it today. Free software faces difficult challenges and dangers. It will take determined efforts to preserve our freedom, just as it took to obtain freedom in the first place. Meanwhile, the operating system is just the beginning—now we need to add free applications to handle the whole range of jobs that users want to do.

In future columns, I will be writing about the specific challenges facing the free software community, and other issues affecting freedom for computer users, as well as developments affecting the GNU/Linux operating system.

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