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Free Software

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Do you like freedom? I'm sure you do. We all do. Do you feel free when you're using your computer? Chances are, if you're not using free software, you might change your mind after reading this weekly letter. I'll tell you about free software, what it is, how it is different from other types of software, and why it's superior in many ways. This is not a technical article; it's intended for everyone, so you keep reading, and I'll keep it simple.

I'm sure you already know what software is. A piece of software is a program that runs on your computer. It's that simple. Now, what is *free software*? Is it software I don't have to pay for? Not quite... the 'free' in *free software* is not like 'free' in 'free beer', but more like 'free' in 'free speech'. In other words, it means 'libre', not 'gratis'. Most *free software* is free of cost (gratis), but the most important thing is that all *free software* must give you, the user, freedom.

So, what type of freedom? The concept *free software* was invented by Richard Stallman, who created the Free Software Foundation back in 1985. According to Stallman, *free software* should give the user four basic freedoms:

First, there's the freedom to run (use) the program. "Alright", you might think, "all programs give me that freedom". Yeah, you would think. Many

programs have special protections preventing you from using certain functions, depending on how much you paid, what country you're in, etc. Many applications even refuse to run under certain conditions, even if they could technically run.

Also vital to *free software* is the freedom to study and modify the program. That is, if you're a programmer, you can delve into the program's source code and make your changes. If your company needs a modified version of a program, you can hire a programmer to do that job, and you'll have a program that's suited to your specific needs.

Next, we have the freedom to "copy the program so you can help your neighbor". If your neighbor, friend or relative asks you to give them a copy of a program, and that program's licence prevents you from copying it, you just got yourself a dilemma: you can give them a copy, thus breaking the program's licence (which would be illegal), or you can say no, which will upset your friend. With *free software*, this is no problem.

Finally, it must be possible to improve the program, and release your improvements to the public, so that the whole community can benefit from your improved version. In most cases, the program you release must also be *free software*. You have to give others the same amount of freedom you were given.

Any piece of software that is not *free* is called *proprietary software*. Many programs you probably use in your daily routine, such as Windows, Office, Internet Explorer, MSN Messenger or Skype are all *proprietary software* and deprive you of your freedom. In some cases, you have to pay unreasonable amounts of money to obtain just one licence; if your friends ask for a copy, you're not legally entitled to satisfy them. In some other cases, though free, these programs are tying you down, making you use (and purchase) software from the company that made these programs. For example, MSN Messenger is free of charge, but you need Windows to use it, which costs money. And you can only communicate with other MSN Messenger users. In other words, you're not free.

Despite what you might have heard, most *free software* applications are easy to use. In many cases, they're technically superior and perform better. They're also less vulnerable to attacks and viruses, and therefore more secure.

"Okay, I'm convinced. The concept *free software* sounds great, and it sounds like most of the

software on my PC is evil. What can I do to start using more *free software*?"

You have a number of options. For example, you might start replacing many common programs with free alternatives. In many cases, you will find that these alternatives are faster, work better, and protect against viruses more effectively, which is always a great plus. Here are the changes I would recommend you to do (these programs are all downloadable, free of charge):

1) Say goodbye to old Internet Explorer and get yourself [Firefox](#). [Firefox](#) is a web browser, just like Internet Explorer. Not only is it *free software*, it's also better than Internet Explorer by orders of magnitude. Get it at <http://www.getfirefox.com>. While you're at it, you might also want to check out [Thunderbird](#), a great e-mail application, which makes Outlook Express blush.

2) If Microsoft Office is too expensive for you (unless you're rich, that is) or if you got it for free from a friend and I've convinced you that that's not the right way to go, download and install [Openoffice.org](#), a complete office suite that's not only libre, but also gratis. For the average user, it is just as good as Microsoft Office; it only takes a little getting used to, as some things are different.

3) If you feel MSN Messenger is tying you down to using Windows and having all your contacts in the MSN network, then try [Gaim](#). [Gaim](#) is a free instant messaging application that lets you have contacts from many different networks (MSN, Yahoo, Google Talk, IRC, etc.).

4) Finally, if you're feeling adventurous, you can replace your whole operating system (which is probably Microsoft Windows) with a truly free one. GNU/Linux, or just "Linux", is a free operating system for your computer. Linux comes in many flavors, known as distributions or 'distros', many of which are oriented to the average computer user, which means they're easy to install and similar to Windows in usage. I recommend [Ubuntu](#), one of the easiest Linux distros out there. [Ubuntu](#) comes with hundreds of applications, so you don't have to get software from elsewhere to have a fully functional system on your PC.

Some people say this is some crazy communist's idea, and that it just doesn't work in today's market-oriented world. The truth, however, is that there is an increasing amount of successful businesses in the *free software* world. Big software companies such as IBM or Novell are gearing a great percentage of their software strategy toward *free software*, and even Microsoft is rolling out certain

free licences for certain programs (though god only knows what their real strategy is behind that). Other companies specialize exclusively on *free software*, and they make money. How? By charging for technical support and for personalizing an application for a clients' specific needs. They could charge for the program itself, but that's not usually the case. In other words, they provide a service, not a product.

Some governments are switching to *free software*, in most cases with remarkable success. One of the best known cases is the Government of Extremadura, in Spain, which has migrated all their computers to using exclusively *free software*. They've even switched all public schools. With the money they saved on Windows and Office licences, they were able to purchase more PCs, and now they have a PC for every two students. That's Europe's highest rate. Yes, Extremadura. Seriously. Other examples include the government of Brazil and the city of Munich, Germany.

Last but not least, *free software* looks like the only alternative for third world countries to keep up with technological advances and the so-called 'information society'. For example, there's the [100\\$ laptop project](#), which aims at creating and distributing fully equipped, modern laptop computers that cost just \$100. Needless to say, this could only be done with *free software*, since a Windows licence alone costs more than that.

By the way, Weeklyletter.com was made using *free software*, and runs on a free operating system.