

Free Software for your Computer

Presented by Marcio Teixeira

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What is Free Software?

Perhaps you know people who use the Mozilla or Firefox browsers to surf the web or you know people who use the Linux operating system on their PCs. All of these are examples of "free software," a type of software that is developed by volunteers worldwide and provides many advantages over traditional software. In this handout you will learn why "free software" does not have anything to do with price and the advantages free software has over the non-free software you may be using.

Free as in speech, not as in beer:

Software that is available at no cost has been around for decades, often under the name of Freeware. It has never really caught on because, well, Freeware really wasn't very interesting and often it wasn't very good either (as they say, sometimes you get what you pay for!)

So why is the computing world suddenly abuzz with "free software"? To understand, we have to know what is meant by "free software" today. In the English language, there are two different meanings of the word *free*: one is related to price, while the other is related to rights. When we say that America is the "land of the free," it does not mean that we can walk into the convenience store and grab a bag of nachos without paying for it, rather it means we enjoy certain liberties which people in other parts of the world may not have¹.

People who make a big deal about "free software" aren't just talking about software that you can download for free, they are

talking about software that gives you freedoms and liberties that you don't get with other types of software. To make this distinction, advocates of free software have coined the catchy phrase "free as in speech, not as in beer."

Freedom in software and how it can be taken away from you:

Most of the software you have on your computer comes with restrictions on its use. These restrictions are spelled out in the End User License Agreement, or EULA, which is that annoying screen that most of us don't read when we install a piece of software.

Knowing about these restrictions is the key to understanding why "free software" is such a big deal. The EULA is a contract and by clicking on "I Agree" you are agreeing to waive certain rights and not do certain things with the software. Not all EULAs are the same, but here is a list of the types of things that you may have to agree to:

- ✓ You agree that you do not own the software you purchased, but rather that



Tux, the chubby little penguin that is the mascot of Linux, a popular free operating system.

¹ The word "gratis" is a more precise way of saying "no cost," but sadly kittens would go homeless if put under a sign that said "Gratis!"

you are paying for a license to use it. This license can be revoked at any time by the software company if it feels it has cause to do so.

- ✓ You agree not to make modifications, changes or improvements to the software, nor to hire anyone else to make such changes for you.
- ✓ You agree to install and use the software on only one PC, even if you routinely use many different PC or have multiple PCs in your home.
- ✓ You agree that the software company can collect certain information about you and your computer and use it in ways it finds appropriate. Often, you agree to let the software company share that information with others.
- ✓ You agree not to share the software with others or to give it away.

From this list it is clear that the EULA is phrased in a very negative language. It forbids you from doing many things with the software that you may otherwise want to do with it. This is why this type of software is called "non-free" software: cost has nothing to do with it, many Freeware programs, although free in cost, restrict your freedom in the same way.

What Makes Software Truly Free:

Now that we know what "non-free" software is, it is much easier to see what "free software" is and why it is important. Free software is software that grants you the freedom to do whatever you might want to do with it. Rather than being written in the negative language of restrictions, the EULA in truly free software is written in the positive language of freedom. The Free Software Foundation (www.fsf.org), a non-profit organization serving the needs of the free software community, defines the freedoms software must grant you to be called "free software":

- ✓ The freedom to run the program, for any

purpose.

- ✓ The freedom to study how the program works and adapt it to your needs.
- ✓ The freedom to give away copies so you can help your neighbor.
- ✓ The freedom to improve the program, and release your improvements to the public, so that the whole community benefits.

What Kinds of Free Software Can I Get?

Good question! There are hundreds of software packages that are free in the sense described above, but that are also available at no cost to you. OpenOffice is a complete office suite that is compatible with Microsoft Office. This handout was written entirely with OpenOffice! You can get OpenOffice at www.openoffice.org. The GIMP is an advanced photo editor you can download from www.gimp.org. For a great web browser, try the Firefox browser from www.mozilla.org.

If you are using Microsoft Windows, there are compact discs which are specially made for you and can help you get started with free software right away. If you did not get a copy of TheOpenCD with this handout, have a friend that is computer savvy burn a copy for you from www.theopencd.org. Another good free software collection for Windows is available at gnuwin.epfl.ch. Programs from that site are ready to download and run!

About The Author:

Marcio obtained his degree at CSU and is a certified PC technician. He enjoys helping people with their computers and teaching technology classes. For information on training at your organization, call 970-215-7140 or e-mail marciot@yahoo.com.

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