

Richard Matthew Stallman (RMS; born March 16, 1953) is a central figure of the free software movement, founder of the GNU project and the Free Software Foundation. He invented the concept of copyleft to protect the ideals of this movement, and enshrined this concept in the widely-used GPL software license. He is also a notable programmer whose major accomplishments include the text-editor Emacs, the compiler GCC, and the debugger GDB, all of which are part of the GNU project. His initiative was essential in the foundation of the ideological, political, and legal framework of the free software movement. In recent years he has relinquished his software engineering duties to concentrate exclusively on evangelizing this philosophy as an alternative to proprietary software development and distribution.

Biography

Stallman was born on March 16, 1953 in Manhattan to Alice Lippman and Daniel Stallman. He is perhaps better known by his initials, "RMS". In the first edition of the Hacker's dictionary, he wrote, "Richard Stallman" is just my mundane name; you can call me "rms".'

In the 1960s, with the first personal computer still a decade away, Stallman's first opportunity to gain access to a computer came during his junior year at high school. Hired by the IBM New York Scientific Center, a now-defunct research facility in downtown Manhattan, Stallman spent the summer after his high-school graduation writing his first program, a preprocessor for the IBM 7094 written in the PL/I programming language. "I first wrote it in PL/I, then started over in assembler language when the PL/I program was too big to fit in the computer", he later revealed (Williams 2002, chapter 3).

After that job, Stallman held a Laboratory Assistant position in the Biology Department at Rockefeller University. Although he was already moving toward a career in mathematics or physics, his analytical mind impressed the lab director so much that only a few years after Stallman had departed for college, his mother received an unexpected phone call. "It was the professor at Rockefeller", she recalled. "He wanted to know how Richard was doing. He was surprised to learn that he was working in computers. He'd always thought Richard had a great future ahead of him as a biologist." (Williams 2002, chapter 3)

In 1971, as a freshman at Harvard University, Stallman became a hacker at the MIT AI Laboratory.

Decay of the hacker culture

In the 1980s, the hacker community that dominated Stallman's life began to dissolve under the pressure of the commercialization of the software industry. In particular, a group of breakaway AI Lab hackers founded the company Symbolics, which actively attempted to replace the free software in the Lab with its own proprietary software.

For two years, from 1983 to 1985, Stallman single-handedly duplicated the efforts of the Symbolics programmers to prevent them from gaining a monopoly on the Lab's computers. By that time, however, he was the last of his generation of hackers at the Lab. He was asked to sign non-disclosure agreements and perform other actions he considered betrayals of his principles, choosing instead to share his work with others in what he regarded as a classical spirit of scientific collaboration and openness.

Stallman's philosophy was that "software wants to be free": if a user or fellow "hacker" benefited from a particular piece of software it was the developer's right - and indeed duty - to allow them to use and improve it without artificial hindrance or restrictions on their rights to pass the original or derivative works onto others. Consequently he left MIT in January 1984 to work full time on the GNU system, which he'd started in September 1983. He has worked on GNU more or less full-time since then, and did not complete a doctoral degree. He has been awarded three honorary doctoral degrees (see Recognition).

Founding GNU

In 1985, Stallman published the GNU Manifesto, which outlined his motivation for creating a free alternative to the Unix operating system. He christened this free alternative GNU, a recursive acronym for GNU's Not Unix. Soon after, he incorporated the non-profit Free Software Foundation to coordinate the effort.

Much of the GNU system - the Hurd kernel being a notable exception - was completed in 1989, the year in which Stallman invented and popularized the concept of copyleft.

In 1991, Linus Torvalds released a free kernel under the GPL. When combined with the GNU toolchain, GNU/Linux (commonly referred to as simply Linux) constitutes a fully operational Unix operating system.

Free software vs. open source

Richard Stallman's political and moral pronouncements have made him a controversial figure. Many influential programmers who agree with the concept of sharing code disagree with Stallman's moral stance, personal philosophy, or the language he has used to describe his positions. One result of these disputes was the establishment of an alternative to the free software movement, the [open source movement](#), whose aims are broadly similar, but whose proponents emphasize the practical benefits of copylefted code over the philosophical principles of [liberty](#) and [freedom](#).

Few who have encountered Stallman or read his essays would deny that he is a man of deeply held (and readily expressed) convictions; this has been interpreted in both a positive and negative light. He has been the subject (some would say the instigator) of a number of widely-publicized [flamewars](#) on the [Linux kernel mailing list](#), with [Linus Torvalds](#), [Larry McVoy](#), and other [Bitkeeper](#) advocates falling foul of his uncompromisingly anti-proprietary stance.

Additionally, Stallman has been accused of forcing the [XEmacs](#) fork of the [EMACS](#) project due to his requirement that nearly all copyright in [GNU Emacs](#) be signed over to the [FSF](#). While doing so makes it easier for the FSF to enforce the [GNU GPL](#) in court, it also means that contributors (and possibly their employers) have to mail paperwork to the FSF, and that anonymous contributions cannot be used. XEmacs was an attempt to deal with these issues, which its developers saw as a political impediment to the technical task of improving Emacs.

Recognition

Stallman has received numerous prizes and awards for his work, amongst them:

- [1990: MacArthur Fellowship](#)
- [1991: The Association for Computing Machinery's Grace Hopper Award](#) for his work on the original Emacs editor
- [1996: Honorary doctorate degree from Sweden's Royal Institute of Technology](#)
- [1998: Electronic Frontier Foundation's Pioneer award](#)
- [1999: Yuri Rubinski Memorial Award](#)
- [2001: Second honorary doctorate, from the University of Glasgow](#)
- [2001: The Takeda Techno-Entrepreneurship Award](#) ()
- [2002: National Academy of Engineering membership](#)
- [2003: Third honorary doctorate, from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel](#)

References

See also

- [Free Software Song](#)
- [Hacking](#)
- [League for Programming Freedom](#)
- [Software patent](#)

Bibliography

- Sam Williams (2002) *Free as in Freedom: Richard Stallman's Crusade for Free Software*, O'Reilly Press [ISBN 0596002874](#) (also available over the web under the [GFDL](#), see link below).

External links

- [Personal page of RMS](#)
- [GNU philosophy pages](#)
- [Original GNU announcement](#)
- *Free As In Freedom*, by Sam Williams, a biography of Stallman, licensed under the GNU FDL.
- [His Usenet posting, announcing the development of a free UNIX-like OS](#)
- [Richard Stallman's 1986 speech in Sweden](#)