

Freedom or Power?

GNU philosophy

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Freedom or Power?

The love of liberty is the love of others; the love of power is the love of ourselves.

—William Hazlitt

In the free software movement, we stand for freedom for the users of software. We formulated our views by looking at what freedoms are necessary for a good way of life, and permit useful programs to foster a community of goodwill, cooperation, and collaboration. Our criteria for free software specify the freedoms that a program’s users need so that they can cooperate in a community.

We stand for freedom for programmers as well as for other users. Most of us are programmers, and we want freedom for ourselves as well as for you. But each of us uses software written by others, and we want freedom when using that software, not just when using our own code. We stand for freedom for all users, whether they program often, occasionally, or not at all.

However, one so-called freedom that we do not advocate is the “freedom to choose any license you want for software you write.” We reject this because it is really a form of power, not a freedom.

This oft overlooked distinction is crucial. Freedom is being able to make decisions that affect mainly you; power is being able to make decisions that affect others more than you. If we confuse power with freedom, we will fail to uphold real freedom.

Making a program proprietary is an exercise of power. Copyright law today grants software developers that power, so they and only they choose the rules to impose on everyone else—a relatively small number of people make the basic software decisions for all users, typically by denying their freedom. When users lack the freedoms that define free software, they can’t tell what the software is doing, can’t check for back doors, can’t monitor possible viruses and worms, can’t find out what personal information is being reported (or stop the reports, even if they do find out). If it breaks, they can’t fix it; they have to wait for the developer to exercise its power to do so. If it simply isn’t quite what they need, they are stuck with it. They can’t help each other improve it.

Proprietary software developers are often businesses. We in the free software movement are not opposed to business, but we have seen what happens when a software business has the “freedom” to impose arbitrary rules on the users of software. Microsoft is an egregious example of how denying users’ freedoms can lead to direct harm, but it is not the only example. Even when there is no monopoly, proprietary software harms society. A choice of masters is not freedom.

Discussions of rights and rules for software have often concentrated on the interests of programmers alone. Few people in the world program regularly, and fewer still are owners of proprietary software businesses. But the entire developed world now needs and uses software, so software developers now control the way it lives, does business, communicates, and is entertained. The ethical and political issues are not addressed by the slogan of “freedom of choice (for developers only).”

If “code is law,”¹ then the real question we face is: who should control the code you use—you, or an elite few? We believe you are entitled to control the software you use, and giving you that control is the goal of free software.

We believe you should decide what to do with the software you use; however, that is not what today’s law says. Current copyright law places us in the position of power over users of our code, whether we like it or not. The ethical response to this situation is to proclaim freedom for each user, just as the Bill of Rights was supposed to exercise government power by guaranteeing each citizen’s freedoms. That is what the GNU General Public License is for: it puts you in control of your usage of the software while protecting you from others who would like to take control of your decisions.

As more and more users realize that code is law, and come to feel that they too deserve freedom, they will see the importance of the freedoms we stand for, just as more and more users have come to appreciate the practical value of the free software we have developed.

¹ William J. Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Place, and the Infobahn* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995), p. 111, as quoted by Lawrence Lessig in *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace, Version 2.0* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2006), p. 5.