

Paying for Free Software

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<2020-10-06 Tue 14:00>

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1 The Problem

People reading this blog are likely aware of my love for, and admiration of free software. It is with free software that we are able to exercise computing away from the exploitation and corruption of modern (often internet-connected) technology. Today, we are subjected increasingly to problems of tethering, software and device backdoors, privacy encroachment, and governments sabotaging humane interests with perpetual conflict.

There is no limit to the problem of technology, a contradiction inherent to the status of surveillance capitalism where-by we are hindered from treating programming and the fruits of technology as social fabric. Instead, we are forced into paradigms of social cooling¹ with our own personal information being used to sabotage and manipulate us into being functional consumer-grade bodies-of-meat-who-buys-stuff. There has been much written already

¹<https://www.socialcooling.com/>

on how “free” (as in price) in the age of the internet almost always means you are the intended product².

Software freedom offers an escape, and a means of resistance to this effect of surveillance capitalism, and gives us a means to return to programming and technology being an enriching, human artifact of our collective experiences. Networking with freedom is no exception. There are many warm, rewarding, and mutually enriching relationships that can be found online when you are not subjected to a matching algorithm which often is biased, racist, and revolves around manipulative tactics to construct a false sense of undesirability³.

To summarize: without software freedom, we are essentially without tools to be human. Software is increasingly being designed to make you a product, tell you how to behave, and give you a sense of right-and-wrong based on what is popular with a particular market force. Satisfy the machine, and the machine will satisfy you. This has been encapsulated quite nicely by a friend on IRC, who stated “Technological solutions will almost always be inferior to social solutions”. Software freedom is, at its core, a social movement.

2 The Rationale

Have you ever paid for free software? I mean, software which respects your freedom. Software which follows the four established rules:

- 0 - Freedom to run the program as you wish, for any purpose.
- 1 - Freedom to study how the program works, and change it so that it may do your computing as you wish.
- 2 - Freedom to redistribute copies of the original, so you may help others.
- 3 - Freedom to distribute modified copies, so you may help others.

Four Essential Software Freedoms

Putting aside the fact that freedom-respecting software is often *gratis* (free-as-in-beer), have you given money to a project that produces wholly-free software? If you have, think about what that software represents. Understanding that the act of commerce and trade in modern capitalism is largely

²<https://www.forbes.com/sites/marketshare/2012/03/05/if-youre-not-paying-for-it-you-become-the-product/>

³<https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/15/18267772/tinder-elo-score-desirability-algorithm-how-works>

abstracted away from us is part of this puzzle. We rarely (if ever) partake in direct-commerce bartering. We enact our financial motives through complicated networks of buying systems, where you really do not see where what you are bought originated.

Take the case of clothing, especially if you live in the United States. Often, clothing is produced in mass factories in under-developed countries dependent upon this form of exploitative labor. But this is not the case in software freedom. With software freedom you are given a much clearer sense of transparency about the conditions in which you are buying software.

This is not the same for most proprietary software, where these same conditions are outsourced, bought by vendors in underdeveloped countries where some large corporation has a financial stake in producing software at a very low cost to entertain the possibility of a high financial return. Yes, this even goes for companies like Uber⁴. But, note, this is not a debate about whether outsourcing jobs is bad. I am not at all saying that people in other countries do not deserve to make a living. However, do you really think it is best when we participate in proprietary software (which already exploits us) to then turn around and further exploit its labor more than it already does?

The freedom of people in under-developed countries matters too! We see the United States imposing nonsensical economic sanctions against countries like Venezuela⁵, Iran⁶, Cuba⁷, Syria⁸ wherein people are limited in their ability to use any software produced in the United States, especially software commercially traded under a proprietary license.

3 The Solution (or lack-there-of)

Software freedom, as mentioned earlier, offers a means to resist surveillance capitalism, and to resist. Taking back our freedom in computing means taking back our privacy, autonomy, and means of self-determination. It is the reverse of the climate crisis, with social cooling eroding our social fabric. So, how do we support free software?

One of the consistent questions that is raised is whether or not free software is “profitable”. There-in lies an important issue of nomenclature and terminology. If you are one of the people who likens capitalism to mean

⁴<https://www.teamblind.com/post/uber-ceo-wants-to-shift-more-engineering-jobs-to-india-sparking-intellectual-property-concerns>

⁵<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10715.pdf>

⁶<https://www.state.gov/iran-sanctions/>

⁷<https://www.state.gov/cuba-sanctions/>

⁸<https://www.state.gov/syria-sanctions/>

“free markets” rather than “control of the means of the production by a wealth-bearing class”, then no free software is not profitable. However, I will encourage you to think outside of the definition you were probably taught in your sixth grade civics class. Keeping it short and sweet, we live in a society where production is owned by a small class of wealthy land and production owners. If your goal is to become profitable in that sense, your goal is short sighted. Software freedom, an ethical and social movement, is never about creating massive returns on investments. Instead, it is about liberation!

However, if your question is whether or not creating free software is able to sustain your personal life and perhaps a lucrative business? Absolutely! This has been done many times, already. There are examples of software developers working full-time on free software projects⁹, including game engines¹⁰. How are they able to sustain their livelihoods by creating free software? With your support!

This is, hence, the subject of this blog post. How can we sustain free software in an economic system that revolves around currency? By giving some of that currency to the people who create the software! If you are using Github without paying for it (or even if you are paying for it), you are the product. Instead, use an alternative that is both free software, and reinvests in other free software projects – Sourcehut.

If you have never contributed financially to a free software project, have you ever looked into your favorite projects and seen if they take donations? Yes, the donation model is imperfect, but it is often the closest thing that project maintainers can do without having to register themselves as a private business, filing taxes against contributions, or declaring themselves a non-profit (all of which are difficult, require a lawyer, and can be costly).

So, great! I can make free software and survive! Where do I sign up? Well, unfortunately the terrain here is still quite uncharted and speculative. Do not go quit your job (yet), and do not throw your family or personal savings into your awesome idea. People working in creating free software *truly* represent the people that use their software. That is not to say you are a slave to the people who support your livelihood, however you must create a trusting, compatible and secure network of people who are ready (as individuals) to invest in your work. This is not easy work, and requires a lot of social networking.

In this sense, working (full-time or part-time) on free software which is able to sustain your livelihood is harder than just getting a job at x-

⁹<https://drewdevault.com/2020/01/21/Stress-and-happiness.html>

¹⁰<https://godotengine.org/>

company making the newest and lamest proprietary webshit application. In capitalism, this means that free software must rely on word-of-mouth and limited marketing. This is both a boon (as current practices are an evil on our society), but also means that those softwares without a corporate backing (or the backing of wealthy investors) will necessarily struggle. However, caring for free software was never a low-friction task.

4 The Possibilities

There are currently many options for accepting donations on your free software project. Liberapay boasts its ethical, non-competitive model of funding incredible projects. There are platforms with some ethical problems like Stripe which have public APIs which you can use to integrate payments into a web-service, or to create your own single-use donation platform.

As noted earlier, this is largely uncharted terrain. We will not find out what works and what does not until we have more people and projects trying methods to support free software. But, more importantly, is that **you** support free software projects! This is the great thing about free software, if you really can not afford to invest money because you are on a fixed income with debts, you are **not** limited from using the software **at all**. However, if you can support free software, acting as an agent to promote the continuation of your favorite project only results in positives for everybody.

We need a society which takes pride in ethical solutions to our daily problems, beginning with our computing practices. Overcoming social cooling, and engaging in humane cooperative projects starts with free software. When we participate in free software, either as a financial contributor, or by helping the project with code, documentation, etc. we are acting as people with the agency to determine those ethical solutions. No matter how you, personally, feel about this or that free software organization you can still engage with pride about your decision to support free software.

Undoubtedly, there curve to be able to create a liveable income creating free software needs to be eased. But, we must first navigate the terrain and understand what the problems are before we can create the appropriate solutions. With time, we will prevail.

5 Projects/Foundations Worth Supporting

- Ardour

- coreboot
- darcs
- Debian
- freenode
- Free Software Foundation
- GNU Guix
- GNU Octave
- GNU Toolchain (Emacs, GCC, GLIBC)
- GnuPG
- Godot
- Harvey
- Libreoffice
- Mercurial
- musl
- OCaml
- Org-mode
- Outreachy
- Parabola
- PeerTube
- Qemu
- Racket
- Reproducible Builds
- seL4
- Software Freedom Conservancy

- Software Heritage
- Sourcehut
- Trisquel
- Vim (*Do NOT support through Amazon, as their ads suggest*)

6 Projects/Foundations NOT Worth Supporting

- Amazon
 - Google
 - Microsoft
 - Mozilla
 - Oracle
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Have a response?

Responses and discussion pertaining to any of the blog entries on my website are welcome! Start a discussion on the mailing list by sending an email to ~brettgilio/blog-discussion@lists.sr.ht.

Errata:

- *<2020-10-06 Tue 18:00>* Correct some grammar and spacing.
 - *<2020-10-06 Tue 18:35>* Work around paywall issue.
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