

Free Software Foundation

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The **Free Software Foundation (FSF)** is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization founded by Richard Stallman on 4 October 1985 to support the free software movement, which promotes the universal freedom to study, distribute, create, and modify computer software,^[4] with the organization’s preference for software being distributed under copyleft (“share alike”) terms,^[5] such as with its own GNU General Public License.^[6] The FSF was incorporated in Massachusetts, USA, where it is also based.^[7]

From its founding until the mid-1990s, FSF’s funds were mostly used to employ software developers to write free software for the GNU Project. Since the mid-1990s, the FSF’s employees and volunteers have mostly worked on legal and structural issues for the free software movement and the free software community.

Consistent with its goals, only free software is used on the FSF’s computers.^[8]

1 History

The Free Software Foundation was founded in 1985 as a non-profit corporation supporting free software development. It continued existing GNU projects such as the sale of manuals and tapes, and employed developers of the free software system.^[9] Since then, it has continued these activities, as well as advocating for the free software movement. The FSF is also the steward of several free software licenses, meaning it publishes them and has the ability to make revisions as needed.^[10]

In March 2003, SCO filed suit against IBM alleging that IBM’s contributions to various free software, including FSF’s GNU, violated SCO’s rights. While FSF was never a party to the lawsuit, FSF was subpoenaed on November 5, 2003.^[11] During 2003 and 2004, FSF put substantial advocacy effort into responding to the lawsuit and quelling its negative impact on the adoption and promotion of free software.^{[12][13]}

In 2007, the FSF published the third version of the GNU General Public License after significant outside input.^{[14][15]}

The FSF holds the copyrights on many pieces of the GNU system, such as GNU Compiler Collection. As holder

of these copyrights, it has the authority to enforce the copyleft requirements of the GNU General Public License (GPL) when copyright infringement occurs on that software.

From 1991 until 2001, GPL enforcement was done informally, usually by Stallman himself, often with assistance from FSF’s lawyer, Eben Moglen. Typically, GPL violations during this time were cleared up by short email exchanges between Stallman and the violator. In the interest of promoting copyleft assertiveness by software companies to the level that the FSF was already doing, in 2004 Harald Welte launched gpl-violations.org.

In late 2001, Bradley M. Kuhn (then Executive Director), with the assistance of Moglen, David Turner, and Peter T. Brown, formalized these efforts into FSF’s GPL Compliance Labs. From 2002-2004, high profile GPL enforcement cases, such as those against Linksys and OpenTV, became frequent.^{[16][17][18]}

GPL enforcement and educational campaigns on GPL compliance was a major focus of the FSF’s efforts during this period.^{[19][20]}

In December 2008, FSF filed a lawsuit against Cisco for using GPL-licensed components shipped with Linksys products. Cisco was notified of the licensing issue in 2003 but Cisco repeatedly disregarded its obligations under the GPL.^[21] In May 2009, FSF dropped the lawsuit when Cisco agreed to make a monetary donation to the FSF and appoint a Free Software Director to conduct continuous reviews of the company’s license compliance practices.^[22]

From 2003 to 2005, FSF held legal seminars to explain the GPL and the surrounding law.^[23] Usually taught by Bradley M. Kuhn and Daniel Ravicher, these seminars offered CLE credit and were the first effort to give formal legal education on the GPL.^{[13][24][25]}

2 Current and ongoing activities

The GNU project The original purpose of the FSF was to promote the ideals of free software. The organization developed the GNU operating system as an example of this.

GNU licenses The GNU General Public License (GPL) is a widely used license for free software projects. The current version (version 3) was released in June 2007. The FSF has also published the GNU Lesser

General Public License (LGPL), the GNU Free Documentation License (GFDL), and the GNU Affero General Public License (AGPL).

GNU Press The FSF's publishing department, responsible for "publishing affordable books on computer science using freely distributable licenses."^{[26][27]}

The Free Software Directory This is a listing of software packages that have been verified as free software. Each package entry contains 47 pieces of information such as the project's homepage, developers, programming language, etc. The goals are to provide a search engine for free software, and to provide a cross-reference for users to check if a package has been verified as being free software. FSF has received a small amount of funding from UNESCO for this project. It is hoped that the directory can be translated into many languages in the future.

Maintaining the Free Software Definition FSF maintains many of the documents that define the free software movement.

Project hosting FSF hosts software development projects on its Savannah website.

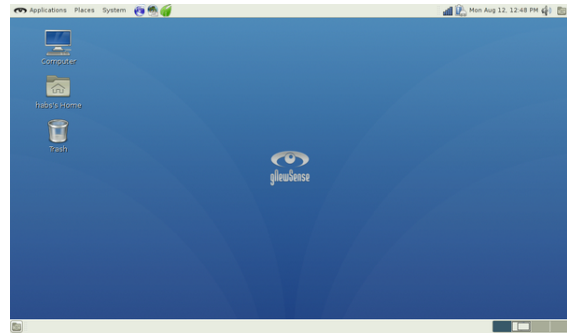
h-node This is a listing of hardware and device drivers that have been verified as compatible with free software.^{[28][29][30]}

Advocacy FSF sponsors a number of campaigns against what it perceives as dangers to software freedom, including software patents, digital rights management (which the FSF and others^[31] have re-termed "digital restrictions management", as part of its effort to highlight technologies that are "designed to take away and limit your rights,"^[32]) and user interface copyright. Defective by Design is an FSF-initiated campaign against DRM. It also has a campaign to promote Ogg+Vorbis, a free alternative to proprietary formats like MP3 and AAC. FSF also sponsors free software projects it deems "high-priority".

Annual awards "Award for the Advancement of Free Software" and "Free Software Award for Projects of Social Benefit"

3 High priority projects

The FSF maintains a list of "high priority projects" to which the Foundation claims that "*there is a vital need to draw the free software community's attention*".^[33] The FSF considers these projects "*important because computer users are continually being seduced into using non-free software, because there is no adequate free replacement*."^[33]



gNewSense is a distribution officially supported by the FSF

Current high priority tasks include reverse engineering proprietary firmware; reversible debugging in GNU Debugger; developing automatic transcription and video editing software, Gnash, GNU Octave, Coreboot, drivers for network routers and creating replacements for Skype, Google Earth, OpenDWG libraries, BitTorrent Sync and Oracle Forms.^[33]

Previous projects highlighted as needing work included the Free Java implementations, GNU Classpath, and GNU Compiler for Java, which ensure compatibility for the Java part of OpenOffice.org, and the GNOME desktop environment (see Java: Licensing).

The effort has been criticized by Michael Larabel for either not instigating active development or for being slow at the work being done, even after certain projects were added to the list.^{[34][35]}

4 Hardware endorsements (RYF)

See also: Open-source hardware, Coreboot, and Libreboot

The FSF maintains a "Respects Your Freedom" (RYF) hardware certification program. To be granted certification, a product must use 100% Free Software, allow user installation of modified software, be free of back doors and conform with several other requirements.^[36]

Currently, a total of eight products have been granted the certification, including three laptops, a 3D printer, a wireless router, and a USB interface wireless adapter.^[37]

The eight certified products are:

- The Libreboot X200 laptop
- The Libreboot X60 laptop (formerly known as the Gluglug X60)
- Aleph Objects, Inc. LulzBot 3D printers
- The ThinkPenguin TPE-NWIFIROUTER Wireless-N Broadband Router

- The ThinkPenguin TPE-N150USB Wireless N USB
- The ThinkPenguin TPE-N150USBL Wireless USB adapter
- The Tehnoetic wireless USB adapter for GNU/Linux-libre (TET-N150)
- The Taurinus X200 laptop by Libiquity

- **Kat Walsh**, copyright and technology attorney, free culture and free software advocate, and former chair of the Wikimedia Foundation^[41]

Previous board members include:

- **Lawrence Lessig**, Professor of Law at Stanford University (served from March 28, 2004 until 2008)
- **Robert J. Chassell**, Founding Treasurer,^[38] as well as a Founding Director (served from inception until June 3, 1997)
- **Len Tower Jr.**, Founding member,^[38] (served until September 2, 1997)
- **Miguel de Icaza** (served from August 1999^[42] until February 25, 2002^[43])
- **Eben Moglen** (served from July 28, 2000^[44] until 2007^[45])

5 Structure

5.1 Board

The FSF's board of governors includes amongst themselves professors at leading universities, senior engineers, and founders. A few high-profile activists, and software businessmen are admitted as well. Currently on the board there is one high-profile activist, and one world-class, software-campaign strategist (Windows 95, *et al.*). There was once a majorly contributing programmer (Mono and Gnome) and businessman who lost favor badly. Founders are also major software developers of the free software in the Gnu Project.

John Sullivan is the current FSF Executive Director. Previous members that occupied the position were Peter T. Brown (2005–2010) and Bradley M. Kuhn (2001–2005).

Current board members:

- **Hal Abelson**, Founding member,^[38] Professor of Computer Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (served from inception until March 5, 1998, and rejoined circa 2005)
- **Geoffery Knauth**, Senior Software Engineer at SFA, Inc. (served since October 23, 1997)
- **Henry Poole**, Founder of CivicActions, a grassroots campaign technology consulting firm (served since December 12, 2002)
- **Richard Stallman**, Founding President, launched the GNU project, author of the GNU General Public License (served as President since inception)
- **Gerald Jay Sussman**, Professor of Computer Science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (served since inception)
- **Benjamin Mako Hill**, assistant professor at the University of Washington (served since July 25, 2007)
- **Bradley Kuhn**, Executive Director of the Software Freedom Conservancy and FSF's former Executive Director (served since March 25, 2010)^[39]
- **Matthew Garrett**, software developer (served since October 16, 2014)^[40]

5.2 Voting

The FSF Articles of Organization state that the Board of Directors are elected.^[46]

The bylaws say who can vote for them.^[47]

The Board can grant powers to the Voting Membership.^[48]

5.3 Employment

At any given time, there are usually around a dozen employees.^[49] Most, but not all, work at the FSF headquarters in Boston, Massachusetts.^[50]

5.4 Membership

On November 25, 2002, the FSF launched the FSF Associate Membership program for individuals.^[51] Bradley M. Kuhn (FSF Executive Director, 2001–2005) launched the program and also signed up as the first Associate Member.^[52]

Associate members hold a purely honorary and funding support role to the FSF.^[48]

5.5 Legal

Eben Moglen and Dan Ravicher previously served individually as pro bono legal counsel to the FSF. Since the forming of the Software Freedom Law Center, legal services to the FSF are provided by that organization.

5.6 Financial

Most of the FSF funding comes from patrons and members.^[53] Revenue streams also come from free-software-related compliance labs, job postings, published works, and a web store. FSF offers speakers and seminars for pay, and all FSF projects accept donations.

Revenues fund free-software programs and campaigns, while cash is invested conservatively in socially responsible investing. The financial strategy is designed to maintain the Foundation's long-term future through economic instability.

The FSF is a tax-exempt organization and posts annual IRS Form 990 filings online.^[2]

6 Criticism

Linus Torvalds has criticized FSF for using GPLv3 as a weapon in the fight against DRM. Torvalds argues that the issue of DRM and that of a software license should be treated as two separate issues.^[54]

On June 16, 2010, Joe Brockmeier, a journalist at Linux Magazine, criticized the Defective by Design campaign by the FSF as “negative” and “juvenile” and not being adequate for providing users with “credible alternatives” to proprietary software.^[55] FSF responded to this criticism by saying “that there is a fundamental difference between speaking out against policies or actions and smear campaigns”, and “that if one is taking an ethical position, it is justified, and often necessary, to not only speak about the benefits of freedom but against acts of dispossession and disenfranchisement.”^[56]

7 Recognition

The free software movement has become recognized as a global cultural movement, and the Free Software Foundation has become recognized as an industry player in software, publishing, economics, jurisprudence, politics, and other cultural realms.

Key players and industries that have made honorific mention and awards include:

- 1999: Linus Torvalds for Open Source Computing^[57]
- 2001: GNU Project received the USENIX Lifetime Achievement Award for “the ubiquity, breadth, and quality of its freely available redistributable and modifiable software, which has enabled a generation of research and commercial development”.^[58]
- 2005: Prix Ars Electronica Award of Distinction in the category of “Digital Communities”^[59]

8 See also

- Defective by Design
- Digital rights
- Electronic Frontier Foundation
- Free software movement
- Free Software Foundation Europe
- Free Software Foundation of India
- Hardware restrictions
- League for Programming Freedom
- LibrePlanet

9 References

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- [43] The FSF annual filings with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for 2002 (“2002 Annual Report for Free Software Foundation, Inc.” (PDF). The Commonwealth of Massachusetts. 2002-12-17. Retrieved 2007-08-11.) show that De Icaza has left the board. Changes to board composition are usually made at the annual meeting; which occurred on February 25, 2002.
- [44] The FSF annual filings with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for 1999 and 2000 show that Moglen was not on the board on 1999-11-01 and was as of 2000-11-01, so he clearly joined sometime between those dates. Those documents further indicate that the 2000 Annual meeting occurred on July 28, 2000; usually, new directors are elected at annual meetings.

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- [46] Article II, Sec. 1 - Number, Election and Qualification: The present members of the corporation shall constitute the voting members. Thereafter the voting members annually at its annual meeting shall fix the number of voting members and shall elect the number of voting members so fixed. At any special or regular meeting, the voting members then in office may increase the number of voting members and elect new voting members to complete the number so fixed; or they may decrease the number of voting members, but only to eliminate vacancies caused by the death, resignation, removal or disqualification of one or more voting members.
— Amended By-laws, Nov. 25, 2002, Free Software Foundation, Inc.
- [47] In addition to the right to elect Directors as provided in the bylaws and such other powers and rights as may be vested in them by law, these Articles of Organization or the bylaws, the Voting Members shall have such other powers and rights as the Directors may designate.
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10 External links

- Official website
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