

Software ethics and self-respect



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Boring—1/3

- First of all: thanks for humouring me.
- I know: ethics—and ethics talks—are *boring*.
- You don't want to talk about software licenses.
- You don't want to argue about user rights.
- You want to *get to the tech*, so you can *build things*.
- All that other stuff just gets in the way.



Boring—2/3

- This guy agrees with you.
- To him, it's all about *better software*:

“When a project is opened up, there is rapid and continual improvement. With teams of contributors working in parallel, the results can happen far more speedily and successfully than if the work were being conducted behind closed doors.”

—Linus Torvalds—*Just for Fun*



Boring—3/3



- But I know *this* guy just bores many of you.
- Or maybe *worse* than bores.

"Free software is based on ethical principles and user freedom, while open source focuses on practical benefits without promoting moral values."

—Richard Stallman—*Open Source Misses the Point*

We know the way—1/5

- However, I am sure you, like me, actually do care about user rights, even if only **your own**.
- Every time someone abuses us with software, we get *angry*.
- Most of us are at least somewhat technical people.
 - We know how software *should* be.
 - We know how it *can* be, when people *care*.



We know the way—2/5

- Software should do what *you* tell it to.
- The program's author should have *no* say on how *you* use it on *your* hardware.
- Once it's on your computer, you should be able to run it:
 - how you want,
 - for as long as you want,
 - on as many computers as you want.



We know the way—3/5

- Your data should always be available/exportable in an open format.
- You should be able to run it on a free operating system.
- Things that worked should continue to work.
- Decisions should never be forced.
- The program should be designed to serve the users' interests, not the developers'.



We know the way—4/5

- No ads, no sales pitches, no manipulative UI, no sudden kneecapping with a “premium version”, no bloat, no pointless feature creep, no LLM misfeatures, no *stupid bullshit nobody wants*.
- Does that ring more true?



We know the way—5/5

- But even so: when the Free Software Foundation tells you *all software should be free*...
- ...and that *proprietary software is inherently antisocial, even immoral*...
- ...well, that sounds a little extreme.
- Even if you do believe it, it's a *hard sell*.



Gnu on your shoulder—1/3

When you folks talk to me about cool new software, who here has heard me say as my *very first question*:

- “What’s the license?”
- “Is it fully free software?”
- “Is it copyleft?”



Gnu on your shoulder—2/3

- And then when you go to find that LICENSE file...
 - ...and you can't...
 - ...and there's no Git repository...
 - ...and the website has a “Premium” section...
- ...you see me *shake my head*.
- And you think: “*Why is he like this?*”
- After all...



“You can just
download it for free!”

“The server is open
source, even if the
client isn’t!”

“It’s just the way the
industry is going!”

“I trust the company
that makes it!”

“I’ve got a free
lifetime license key!”

“The open source
alternative isn’t as
good!”

“It’s just a simple
tool! I can replace it
if I need to!”

Gnu on your shoulder—3/3

- I'm not trying to be your conscience.
- I'm not trying to talk down to you.
- I know it seems boring, or frustrating.
- But if you don't respect the *abstract philosophy*, or the *user rights*, can I suggest another angle?



Do you respect
yourself ?

Self-respect—1/6

- Software is eating the world.
- It's replacing entire industries, and is unlikely to stop.
- The people who control it regularly *abuse* that control.
- Forget the ethics of it for a moment:
- Are you, *personally*, tolerating abuse?



Self-respect—2/6

- Since Bill Gates' *An Open Letter to Hobbyists*, we've gradually come to accept this is *just how things are*.
- It's just something we have to tolerate.
- Sometimes your software gets messed up, you get locked out, you get restricted, you get controlled.
- But why do we accept that?





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Self-respect—3/6

- It might seem absurd to say software can be abusive.
- But if it's not *free*, then it can be used as a tool of abuse.
- Not just annoyance, or frustration.
- Safety, privacy...
- Personal property...
- Sometimes livelihoods...





Jared Henderson—<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwU5xkXj7Kw>

Self-respect—4/6

- Is the convenience of streaming and online media libraries worth handing over your freedom?
- Are you actually OK with this, or are you simply *resigned*?
- Is it “just how things are”?





Your device needs the latest security updates

Microsoft can't install important security updates on your PC until you install the most current version of Windows 10.

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Windows 11

****Internet and Microsoft account required***

Don't trust Windows 11's Recall feature? A new report will only harden your resolve to never use the AI-powered search

News

By Darren Allan | Published 5 August 2025

Calling out Recall on its sensitive data filter



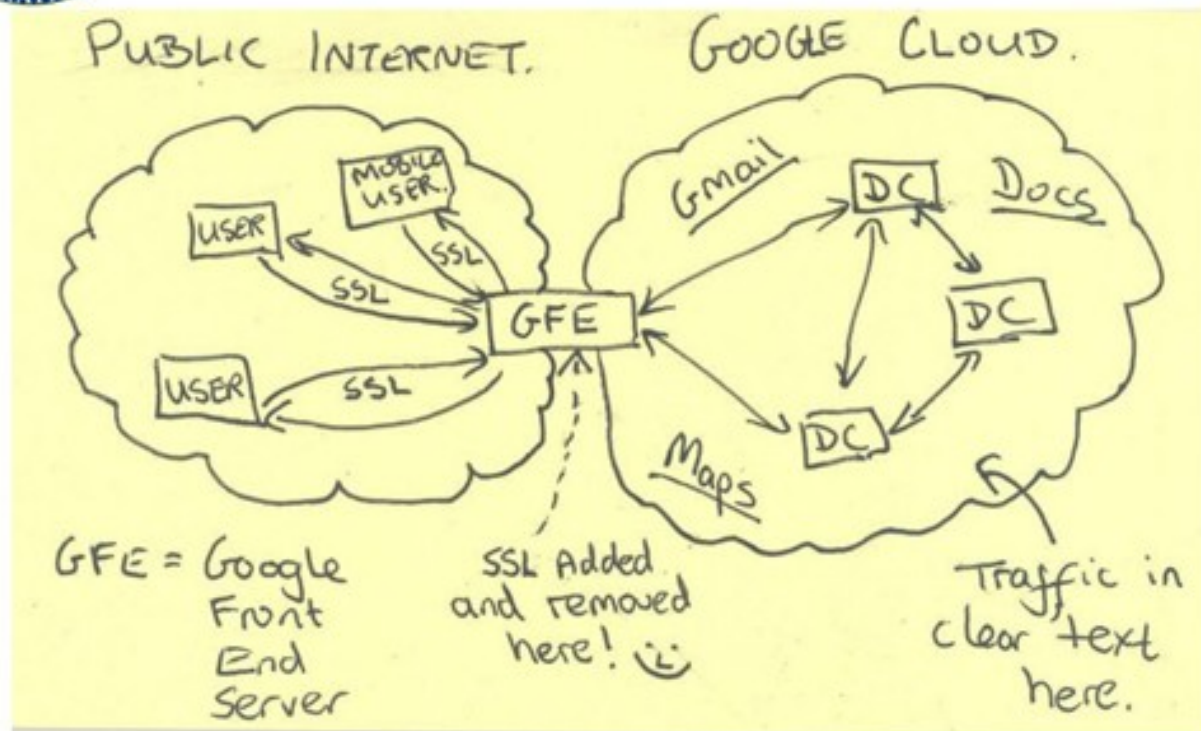
Self-respect—5/6

- Is your reaction to abusive Windows features:
“Oh, I know how to turn that off!”
- Does doing so involve a registry hack, or running third-party scripts?
- Do you think you should have to do that?
- Are you just *tolerating* it?





Current Efforts - Google





SSL Added
and removed
here! :)



Self-respect—6/6

- Not all of us have the skills to avoid this.
- But most-to-all of this audience *does*, and it's easier now than ever before.
- Reject proprietary software not because “open source software is just better”...
- ...but because using free software *is just as much a mark of self-respect.*



What to do?—1/3

- Check the licenses for any new software:
 - GPL, MIT, Apache, are proper free software.
 - “Source-available” software is *not free*.
 - Check [FSF](#) (or [OSI](#)) approved licenses.
- [Is it really FOSS?](#) (very useful site)



What to do?—2/3

- Stop using Windows, macOS, or iOS everywhere you can *possibly* avoid it.
- Use open, royalty-free formats wherever possible.
 - ODT, OGG/OPUS, WebM...
- Keep your own local backups of your data.
 - Don't just trust cloud services.



What to do?—3/3

- **Pass it on:** where you can, write and release free software of your own.
- Help others who care to switch to it and to use it.
- Document it, talk about it, build with it, contribute to it.
- Focus on the *freedom* angle for software, not just the software *quality*.



Back to sanity—1/2

- You can read how the software works for yourself.
- You can fix bugs yourself (or pay someone to).
- If software misbehaves, you can take out the bits you don't like.
- You can switch to a fork if it gets really bad...
- ...or if it goes proprietary.



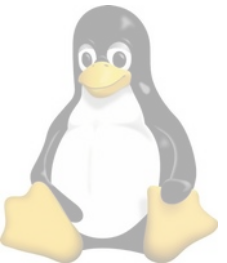
Back to sanity—2/2

- You need nobody's permission to do any of this.
- And why would you?
- Remember: we have simply got used to this being the way things are.
- *It doesn't have to be like that.*



Parable—1/3

- Back in 2002, Linus switched kernel development to version control software called BitKeeper.
- This was very controversial, because BitKeeper was proprietary software.
- This did not matter to Linus. BitKeeper was the best thing available, and he hated CVS and Subversion.
- Richard Stallman **warned this was a bad idea:**



The spirit of the Bitkeeper license is the spirit of the whip hand. It is the spirit that says, "You have no right to use Bitkeeper, only temporary privileges that we can revoke. Be grateful that we allow you to use Bitkeeper. Be grateful, and don't do anything we dislike, or we may revoke those privileges." It is the spirit of proprietary software. Every non-free license is designed to control the users more or less. Outrage at this spirit is the reason for the free software movement. (By contrast, the open source movement prefers to play down this same outrage.)

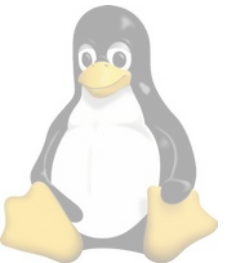
Parable—2/3

- The BitKeeper CEO gave a free (as in *no cost*) license to the Linux community to use it.
- Things soured in 2005, when Andrew Tridgell tried to reverse-engineer the BitKeeper protocol.
- This angered the CEO so much that he *revoked the license*, and the kernel was left without a version control system.



Parable—3/3

- Linus had to make a new version control system *from scratch* to accommodate the way the community was now accustomed to working.
- And so Git was created, and the *entire project moved to it*, through great effort.
- Linus may have (quietly) learned his lesson here: Git, of course, is proper copyleft free software (GPLv2), like Linux itself.



Нет!—1/3

- If it can happen to Linus, it can happen to you.
- **Don't accept it.**
- Insist upon and work towards software freedom wherever you possibly can.



HeT!—2/3

- Where you are *forced* to use proprietary software, keep as much control as you can.
- Don't *use* it when you don't have to.
- Don't *trust* it with more of your data than you need to.
- Don't *depend* on it more than you have to.
- Think of it as a liability—which it is—and make a plan to **get rid of it.**



HeT!—3/3

- Do all this, if not out of ethics, and philosophical right and wrong...
- ...then out of *respect for yourself*, so nobody can take advantage of you...
- ...and you stay in control of your world.



Questions?

- Why Open Source Misses the Point of Free Software
- Frequently Asked Questions about the GNU Licenses
- Bitkeeper outragem [sic], old and new

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