Richard Stallman's Disjoined Realism And Frozen Belief System

Confronting the Free Software Foundation's ideology with mainstream technical illiteracy and modern anti-capitalist populism

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The Two Problems With Stallman's Approach

Since my early days of discovering the world of free software, I have been led to be aligned with the views of one man. Gradually shifting my will and readiness to organize my life around a code of principles, seemingly at odds with the way the world functioned around me. And it was no deceptive trap I fell into, while knowingly acknowledging the Free Software Foundation as a force fighting for freedom in a world of privatized self-maximization and exploitative ethics, Richard Stallman, a movement of seemingly high intellect and concrete action being taken, coalesced with my anti-establishment world view, within the software and technology world. I was to be proven wrong.

Evaluating the Free Software Foundation's effectiveness since their inception is a depressing story. Closed proprietary systems gracefully have achieved a stranglehold [1] on the public as their inability to understand and retaliate against the powers that be is as apparent politically as it is in the world of technology. This makes attempting to facilitate large scale change a massive challenge.

Yet there is seemingly nothing principally wrong with the FSF, and it's views on Free and Open Source software [2]. It's values expressed, with regards to societal ethics, morals and human rights, are indisputably legitimate. The following examines a cursory review of Richard Stallman's character, expectations and world views, which hinder the progress of his arguably good intentions.

An interesting modern source to consider, aside from Richard Stallman's personal website, for much of his contemporary views, originates from a rare interview [3], performed by Matthias Schüssler on the 9th of February 2016 in Zürich. In this discussion, which slowly ramps up, allotting Stallman the time to recollect his beginnings at MIT and how he came to be, Schüssler carefully attempts to position him to convey his core values on subjects ranging from public tech illiteracy to his views on Capitalism. Combined with Stallman's atypical, almost religious, anti-social, behavior towards Schüssler, in which he rarely lets Schüssler finish formulating his questions and responses, feeling assaulted in his views, Stallman's outlook on aforementioned critical prospects paints a picture of a frozen world view, and a socially isolated or detached perspective of society.

The Incentive Problem

Preface – My Perspective Of The Argument

My views are centered around the scientific notion of system's theory, utilizing technological application in the furtherance of the most efficient allocation of resources possible, ultimately arriving at the abundance of a truly functional economic system. One proposition for such a system, labeled an NLRBE, can be found in the 2014 released document 'The Zeitgeist Movement Defined' [4], as an algebraical foundation, or in the work of Jacque Fresco.

In short, I am a sustainability advocate, urging for the proper application of scientific understanding to societal concern. This world view stands at odds with the market system, underpinning the incentive structure at work today, leading me to seek out alternatives for the arrangements I encounter in my life. With an active interest in technology, one quickly encounters the FSF.

The Fatal Fallacy

With no shortage of quotes depicting Richard Stallman stating a positive affection towards sharing and collaboration in the form of an unspoken duty inherent to all good citizens [5], mentions of a distortion of favorable ethics in regards to what could be labeled 'restricted access' [6], one quickly discovers a description of a man fighting for human rights in the modern software world. Amidst his central contribution revolving around the creation of the GPL, the rules of which explicitly prohibit the exploitation and proprietization of it's governing source code, he claims to be supportive of capitalism, in a seeming utter disjointment of understanding of the primal incentive structure deep-rooted into it: Self Maximization [7] [8]. This lack of perspective underpins a major contrast in his work, and is akin to one swimming up-stream in a river, never truly making progress, as the powerful current will always overpower any good intentions one has. The built in system effect of capitalism's motivational construct, will always ensure the corruption of values against collaborative ethics proposed by the FSF, yet Stallman seems quite oblivious to this fact.

Another fatal aspect in regards to his alignment, one likely shared by large portions of left populism, is the belief that intense legislation can manage or control the understood negative retro-actions of capitalism, in an effort to socialize the state and boost governing power structure. While there is short term relevance to this, as demonstrated by northern European countries such as Sweden, over time these measures will fold to the underlying profit structure inherent.

> *"Show me an incentive system, and I will show you the outcome"*
> – Max Keiser, Financial Analyst

This isn't to imply a lack of concern or good intentions on Stallman's part. What it demonstrates is a lack of ability, through the inadequate understanding of economics and behavioral economics, currently employed in the world today.

The Problem With The Masses

Another instinctive problem, derived from an increasingly decreased ability for apathy towards tech illiteracy as one's own ability and understanding of the subject increases, are the methods deployed by the FSF to formalize their vision.

Examining mainstream technological proficiency

As technology continues to saturate our lives, slowly being led by corporate interests into oblivion, it's declining useful application, demolishes any need for general technological literacy. Observing the development of the World Wide Web, arguably humanity's single greatest achievement to date, one notes a trend in the entertainment industry's shift to the Internet, bringing about a proprietary and specialized transformation to *channels* of streamlined content, all accessed through a walled off, spoon fed and easy to operate gateway. Most people do not utilize, or are even aware of, more than a few websites, and resort Facebook as the primary *source* for their news. The Internet is becoming the new television, the thought police for the masses. As user interfaces become less and less practical and hardware becomes a highly specialized and fetishized fashion, as opposed to a pragmatic multi-purpose tool, the overall effect is a severe drop in the mainstream's ability to understand and grapple with the realities taken up in the tech world today.

Against all odds, Stallman maintains adamant on the necessity of the masses to manage and choose their technology in accordance with the FSF's guidelines. This attempted proliferation is being undertaken without any consideration towards marketing or general awareness, with seemingly ideological reasons prohibiting them of making use of popular social media and video sharing platforms, which would likely give their ideas any audience at all. While there is certainly a foundational reasoning behind avoiding the use of certain services such as YouTube or Facebook, the FSF only stands to gain from such prima facie immoral acts.

Critical Mass And Collaboration

If the FSF's goal is to reshape the way in which software is distributed, whilst also maintaining certain values of intrinsic collaboration, as with many such arguably activist oriented movements, the most effective way is not to modify the current system, by means of attempting to oppress certain built-in system effects, but to reshape the status quo, arriving at a self-regulating system of new values.

> *"You never change things by fighting the existing reality.*
> *To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."*
>
> – R. Buckminster Fuller

This would eliminate the need for mechanisms of external system oppression, such as the GPL, which are actively *swimming upstream* against the very foundational values and incentive structures of the system itself.

As touched upon before, most issues the FSF concerns themselves with today, are a byproduct of the market-system's inherent incentive structure of Self-Maximization. Because of this, collaboration with groups that actively work to educate the public about the economics relating to these problems is key.

Only slow and gradual re-education will solve these issues, mediated by platforms to raise awareness and garner a following outside of the highly devoted.

Linus Torvalds' Disposition Towards the FSF

As a final note, portraying the contrast of character between the two, but also highlighting the EFF, the comments made by Linus Torvalds at the 2014 Deb Conference regarding his bias against the GPLv3 prove insightful. [9]

Torvalds' characteristic variation on his views of software distribution, whilst supportive of GPLv2, reside in the fact that his social contract is a symbiotic, mutually beneficial agreement of two parties, regardless of both party's further intentions.

> *"[…] I give you source code, you give me your changes back – we are even."*
>
> – Linus Torvalds, Deb Conference 2014

This creates an environment where the functionality of the software itself benefits above all, disregarding ethical use or misuse of the software.

It is to my understanding that this classifies a large debate of ideological differences between Linus's side and Stallman's FSF. Torvalds' implicates that it is up to society and it's values to decide on the software's application. Similar to the aviation industry's early dilemma of military development, contrasting with humanitarian interests of the time.

Stallman seems to be compelled to instill a forced moral purgative concerning the software's usage scenario, regardless of the user's personal moral intentions, as a priority over software fidelity.

To this end, the EFF is mentioned by Torvalds as a preferred alternative institution to be supported by people who, prior to having heard Torvalds' opinion on the matter, may have been aligned with the FSF, feel a moral imperative to do *good*.

> *"The FSF did some downright immoral (stuff) in my opinion [...] So if you want to give money to an organization, that does good, give it to the EFF. The FSF is full of crazy, bigoted people."*
>
> – Linus Torvalds, Deb Conference 2014

Regardless of Linus' pragmatism on the matter, the intended values issued by Stallman are a respectable cause for action, but inquire into problems much further rooted into our culture and economic system.

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