Freedom in computing (How I do my computing)

Camille Akmut

Abstract

Contribution to a tradition of similar texts within computer science and technology, by computer scientists and programmers, and others, in which we explain our beliefs about the tools – hardware, software, networks and programming languages – that we use as well as their socio-political, philosophical implications.

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How do I do my computing?

In freedom, of course!

This is understood as belonging to, and furthering a history of similar texts started by Richard Stallman. [1] It most likely has antecedents, and it would be interesting (but not a priority) to research them.

To formalize this tradition, I propose that :

A "How I do my computing" post should cover roughly the following : hardware and software used, Internet/Web use, programming languages, and socio-political implications of the aforementioned.

In writing this text, contributors will weigh between informing (and inspiring, and liberating) others, and their privacy.

My only addition to this tradition is that I propose it can also be alternatively named "Freedom in computing", more precisely, because this is the spirit of it. It is unlikely any of us seek anything else.

Freedom in computing, freedom in our lives!

Hardware (Computer)

I had the good luck of growing up during a time — as part of the last generation — when computers, and the rest of technology, were still unusual : a friends' house had one, or computer shops or Internet cafes; objects of much mystery, wonder, still.

(Like the forests evoked by either Bloch or Duby, where, "at every turn", either a new adventure, wild animals, robbers or death awaited… Of course, such things can barely be said of them anymore, in the West.)

If one thing is true about my attitude towards computers, then with much pride I can say that I've never loved, or adored (any of) them.

I just recognize them, in this 21st century, correctly, as a tool with which much can be accomplished. They are not going away, thus it is better to learn and understand them. What we don't know, we are dominated by — a universal rule. Be it our fears, or whatever else…

I'm strongly against the fetishism of computers. (Which I call so loosely after Marx and the "fetishism of the object", found more commonly as "commodity fetishism". [2])

I only buy my computers used (be second- or fourth-hand), 'cheap, cheap, cheap' and the kind that can be repaired easily i.e. whose components can be replaced.

This has many reasons : ethical, political, philosophical; with price a secondary, though not irrelevant issue.

For one, I don't want to contribute to a highly inequitable, inhuman even computer manufacturing industry. [3]

Secondly, having old computers keeps me from developing a fetishism of them : just tools — for now.

Lastly, I only own and use laptops due to changing living conditions.

Software

Operating system : GNU/Linux Debian.

We use "GNU/Linux" to remind of the historical and present contribution of the GNU project and free software to the existence and possibility of a free operating system.

When "the GNU operating system" - by which I mean the GNU system and a technically superior, free kernel (other than Linux) - will become available I will switch to using it; or an alternative.

I consider Linus a traitor to our cause, him and the bullshit "open source" philosophy to which he adheres :

A philosophy entirely tailored to the needs of companies.

Meanwhile, free software has the interests of users at heart, and since they are the majority, this benefits the majority.

We do not fault anyone for using Ubuntu after coming from a closed operating system (e.g. Windows or macOS), I think this is important to say, but we also cannot forget that :

- From 2012 to 2016 (version 12.10 to 16.04), this distribution's makers abused users for profit : local searches were sent remote to Amazon! [4]

- This distribution continues to practice telemetry or various researches on the user : Telemetry does not belong inside an operating system, period; no matter if "opt-in" or "opt-out". Company advertisements even less. This is a sacred place, and belongs or should belong solely to the user.

- Debian says proudly "GNU/Linux", Ubuntu doesn't : along with the rest of distributions, it has forgotten its roots, or prefers to ignore them.

- A better alternative exists, with all the advantages and none of the privacy faults : Debian so-called "unofficial non-free images including firmware packages". [5]

Internet/Web

I use Tor! [6]

Tor is for everyday traffic. Tor is for everyday browsing.

I use it for instance to read the news (as part of what I consider my "active citizenship" and participation inside a democracy) or for accessing information/knowledge on platforms such as Wikipedia.

It's really put the fun back in using the Internet and Web, for me at least.

Programming languages

I learned Python to a point where I could implement various data structures and algorithms, among other things, and to the point where I could bring myself to write and think in other languages.

It's fulfilled its role (as a first language).

Since learning Haskell, and functional programming (through it), I refuse to use anything else.

Whatever I can't implement, I (will) just write in pseudo-code. ("A hacker never finishes a program." [7])

I did like Rust, however. This is probably the only other language of its type I will look into more in the future — and possibly C, forcefully.

For Web programming, if at all, PureScript, Elm, and the like. Maybe functional JavaScript (JS === yikes!).

I never could get friendly with OOP. I was amazed when I discovered the writings of European computer scientist Niklaus Wirth, and loved reading his thoughts, positions on types. [8]

[1] https://stallman.org/stallman-computing.html

[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commodity_fetishism

[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Foxconn_suicides

[4] https://arstechnica.com/information-technology/2012/09/ubuntu-bakes-amazon-search-results-into-os-to-raise-cash/

[5] https://cdimage.debian.org/cdimage/unofficial/non-free/cd-including-firmware/

[6] https://www.torproject.org/

[7] Steven Levy in 'Hackers: Wizards of the Electronic Age'.

[8] Wirth, Niklaus. 1976. 'Algorithms + Data Structures = Programs'. Prentice-Hall. (In particular Preface and Chap. 1 "Fundamental Data Structures", and even more 1.2 "The Concept of Data Type".)

References

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