

# Free Software: Hackers Comeback

Andy Tai  
atai@atai.org

Feb 01, 2001

Free Software, also sometimes known by the marketing name Open Source as its misnomer, is the Future. The Free Software Movement is the modern form of the **Hackers' Culture**, described in the 1984 book *Hackers, Heros of the Computer Revolution*. The moral values of Free Software are best summarized in the Hackers' Ethic:

- *Always yield the Hands-On Imperative! Access to computers — and anything else which might teach you about the way the world works — should be unlimited and total.*
- *All information should be free.*
- *Mistrust Authority — Promote Decentralization.*
- *Hackers should be judged by their hacking, not bogus criteria such as degrees, age, race, or position.*
- *You can create art and beauty on a computer.*
- *Computers can change your life for the better.*

— Levy, 1984

computing culture, where Software Sharing and Software Freedom were the basic way of life. But as more people got involved in computers, money and business motivations took over, and the values of the original hackers were lost. People began to see software as commercial products and tools of exploitation, and software went proprietary.

One of the major figure responsible for the destruction of the original hackerdom was Bill Gates. When first version of his Basic was freely passed among hackers, Bill wrote an Open Letter, declaring software should be proprietary, and asking hackers to pay license fees for each copy of his Microsoft Basic. As time went on, Bill Gates became the richest man on earth, building his fortunes on selling and manipulating proprietary software. Business became the way of life, backstabbing is common, information fell under NDAs and patents and became the subjects of lawsuits, and The Dark Age was upon the computer world.

One of the last holdouts from the original hackerdom was Richard M. Stallman, or RMS, of the MIT AI Labs, who would stay to the True Way to the end. To keep the original vision alive, and to make Free Software against the tide of privatization, he founded the GNU Project and the Free Software Foundation in 1983. He declared that he would write a complete Unix-like operating system, composed of only Free Software, so he

Thus, Free Software is the revival of the original

can share with other people who have the same dream. He began by writing free replacements of basic Unix utilities, and a free C compiler (gcc). Gradually the FSF provided most of the foundation for a Free Software/Open Source OS infrastructure. The GNU tools liberate hackers from dependence on proprietary development tools and provide the foundation which enables other Free Software projects to flourish. And by 1991, these tools enabled Linus Torvalds, a Finnish CS student, to develop the Linux kernel. This kernel filled in the last missing pieces of a totally Free OS, and by 1992 RMS's original aim was practically fulfilled.

While the proprietary software universe continued with rises and falls of companies, Bill Gates of Microsoft went on for world conquest. The Microsoft Empire destroyed or assimilated competitors, and by 1997 virtually no alternatives existed. People became subjects of Bill Gates, whose power reached far and wide. People looked toward the sky for hopes of liberation, but no one seemed answering the call.

However with the spread of the Internet, the Free Software community, composed of GNU, Linux, Apache, Perl, BSDs, etc., quietly continued to develop more Free source code and gathered strength. Finally in 1998, beginning with Netscape looking to Free Software for allies in resisting Microsoft, the New Hope is shown to the world. The vision of the original hackers, a world where the Software is **By the People, Of the People and For the People**, is coming into being. The Revenge against Bill Gates is in full swing. The war for liberation is intensifying!

**About the Author** Andy Tai has been a free software user and supporter of the GNU Project since 1995. He maintains the free software advocacy site *free-soft.org* and the GUI Toolkit and

Framework Page, the definitive reference to GUI tools on the Internet. He currently works as a software engineer in Silicon Valley and received his BS and MS degrees in computer engineering from University of California, San Diego. His technical interests include multimedia and distributed computing.

### Guido van Rossum Awarded by FSF

Brussels, Belgium, Feb 16, 2002 — The Free Software Foundation (FSF) bestowed today its fourth annual FSF Award for the Advancement of Free Software. FSF President and founder, Richard Stallman, presented the award to **Guido van Rossum** for inventing and implementing as Free Software the **Python programming language**(<http://www.python.org>)

The award ceremony was hosted at the *Free and Open Source Software Developers' Meeting* (FOSDEM) in collaboration with the Free Software Foundation Europe.

The selection committee included: Miguel de Icaza, Ian Murdock, Eric Raymond, Peter Salus, Vernor Vinge, and Larry Wall. Prior to committee deliberations, a two month open nominations process decided the list from which the committee chose these finalists.

Guido van Rossum was chosen from three finalists for the award. The other finalists were L. Peter Deutsch, for his work on GNU Ghostscript, the popular Postscript emulation program for GNU/Linux, and Andrew Tridgell, for his work on Samba, a Microsoft Windows network file system emulation program.

This was the fourth award of this kind. The prior winners were Larry Wall, Miguel de Icaza, and Brian Paul.