IFSO

Irish Free Software Organisation
http://ifso.ie

What is Free Software?

Free Software is software which gives all recipients the following 4 freedoms:
1. To run the program, for any purpose
2. To study how the program works, and adapt it to your needs
3. To redistribute copies
4. To improve the program, and release your improvements to the public

So that the second and forth freedoms can be exercised, distributors of Free Software must make available the software's source code (it's human-readable & modifiable form, like blueprints or a recipe).

The cost of Free Software is usually very low or zero, but "Free" here refers to freedom not cost, as in free speech or free market.

Software which prohibits these actions is often called proprietary software, non-free software, unfree software, or black box software.

Examples of large Free Software projects include the GNU/Linux operating system, the OpenOffice office suite, the Mozilla web browser, the Apache webserver, and the GNOME & KDE desktops.

Why is Free Software important?

1. Spyware and ads are not added since they could be removed simply
2. Users can help themselves and eachother by improving the software
3. There's no limit to how many copies you can make, install, or distribute
4. Everyone can use and learn from the state of the art
5. There can be no monopolies or vendor lock-in
6. There's no technology segregation or incompatibilities between 1st and 3rd world countries, small and large businesses, or individuals
7. It can be translated into any language and adapted to any disability
8. You don't have to pay anyone for rights that cost nothing to give

How does it work?

Most software is covered by copyright (public domain software is the only exception). It's illegal to copy a copyrighted work unless you have a license to do so. Proprietary software usually comes with a license which says you can use it, but you can't modify, copy, or redistribute it. Free Software comes with a license that gives you those 4 freedoms.

Copyleft:

The most common Free Software license is the GNU General Public License (GPL). The GPL is a "copyleft" license, which means if anyone distributes a modifiied version, the modifications must also be released under a Free Software license, so copylefted will always be wholly Free Software.

What does IFSO do?

Our first role is to promote awareness of Free Software and to provide information for journalists, the public, and businesses.

Our second role is to defend Free Software from political threats at all levels: national laws, EU directives, & world trade treaties.

Although Free Software is making a lot of computer users very happy, some wealthy companies are finding it's existence incompatible with their current business models. These companies have deep resources for political lobbying. The European Parliament and similar bodies are under constant pressure to introduce directives and laws which limit peoples right to use Free Software or collaborate in it's development. IFSO tries to work within the political system to educate politicians so as to preserve these rights.

Free Software's Origins:

The Free Software movement began in 1983 when Richard Stallman announced the GNU project. The first goal was to produce an operating system entirely of Free Software. In 1985 he founded Free Software Foundation (FSF) to employ programmers to work on GNU and to provide legal infrastructure for the Free Software community. In 1988 he wrote the GNU General Public License (GPL) and created the concept of copyleft. During the 80's he also developed the GNU development tools (Emacs, GCC, GDB, Make).

While FSF employees and GNU project volunteers continued to work on the GNU operating system, others were able to use the GNU development tools to work on seperate Free Software projects. In 1991, one such programmer was Linus Torvalds who, outside of the GNU project, wrote a kernel called "Linux" which filled the last gap in the GNU operating system.

Today there are tens of thousands of software enthusiasts and paid developers collaborating on Free Software projects. FSF now has sister organisations in India and Europe and most EU states have local Free Software organisations (such as IFSO).