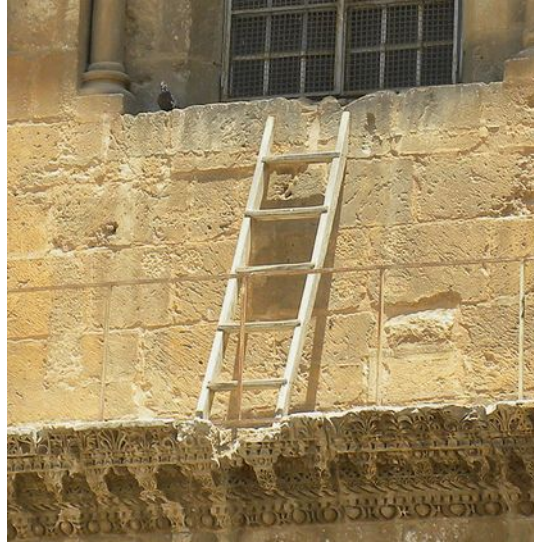


# The Freedom Ladder



**Tom Ryder**

[tom@sanctum.geek.nz](mailto:tom@sanctum.geek.nz)

<https://sanctum.geek.nz/>

# Software freedom is *important*...

- **Freedom 0:** Run the program any way, for any purpose.
- **Freedom 1:** Study and change how the program works.
- **Freedom 2:** Share the original program with others.
- **Freedom 3:** Share the *modified* program with others.



# ...but complete freedom is *hard*.

- Free applications—Do *all* your work with free software.
- Free system tools
- Free distribution
- Free kernel (no binary blobs!)
- Free BIOS (no management engine!)
- Free JavaScript (!!!)...
- **Disclaimer:** Your presenter isn't all the way there.



# Ivory tower—1/3

- The **Free Software Foundation** has led the effort for free software since 1985.
- Their approach to software freedom is very strict:
  - They try to lead by example
  - Staff run **Librebooted ThinkPad X200s**
  - Insist on terminology that fits their ideology

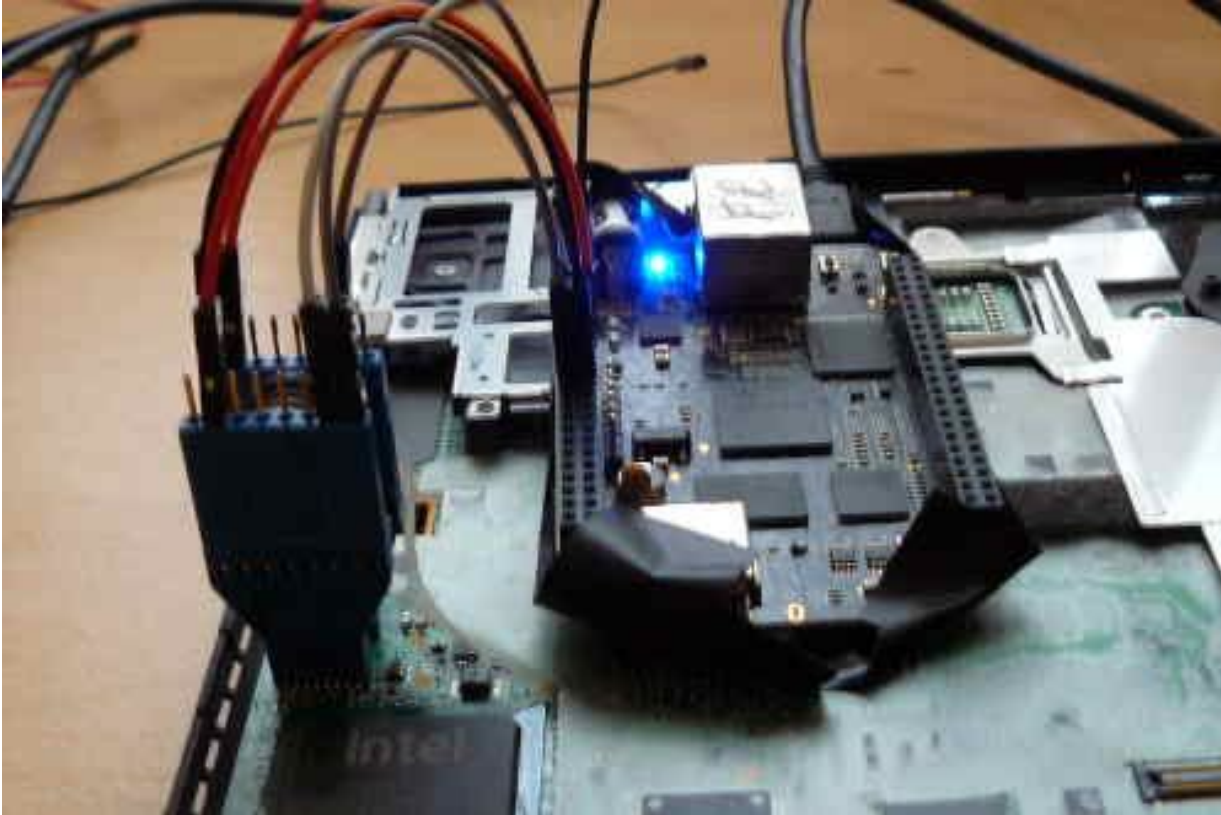
# Ivory tower—2/3

- This is **good** in some ways:
  - You know it's *possible* to use free software as a foundation for your computing.
  - You can learn *how* to do so.
  - You might even understand why it's *desirable*.
- There's a standard to which to aspire.

# Ivory tower—3/3

- But **bad** in others:
  - It's seen as **elitist**.
  - It's seen as requiring **technical** expertise.
  - It's seen as **impractical**, or even **dogmatic**.
  - It's seen as **unrealistic**.

# Libreboot install



“sgsit found out about a pin called GPIO33, which can be grounded to disable the flashing protections by the descriptor and stop the ME from starting (which itself interferes with flashing attempts). The theory was proven correct; however, it is still useless in practise.”

**Imagine a newbie trying to understand this.**

[https://libreboot.org/docs/install/x200\\_external.html](https://libreboot.org/docs/install/x200_external.html)

# Alienation from ideals—1/2

- If you think of the Free Software Foundation as ivory-tower elitists...
- ...and supporters of **free software** as ideological kooks...
- ...no wonder you gravitate to what this guy says about **open source** instead...





# Alienation from ideals—2/2

“The FSF has been acting idiotic for the last decade. Why do you think it’s called ‘open source’ in the first place? Exactly because the FSF has made a dirty word out of freedom... The people who are spoiling for a fight are not the people who are actually getting things done.”

# An unfortunate reputation—1/2

- The impression is a problem, because the FSF isn't intentionally elitist.
- This is made clear in one under-appreciated essay by Richard Stallman:

Saying No to unjust computing even once is help

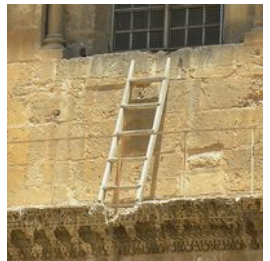
# An unfortunate reputation—2/2

“If you say no, on one occasion, to conversing with someone or some group via Skype, **you have helped**. If you say no, on one occasion, to conversing via WhatsApp, Facebook, or Slack, **you have helped**. If you say no, on one occasion, to editing something via Google Docs, **you have helped**. If you say no to registering for one meeting in eventbrite.com or meetup.com, **you have helped**. If you tell one organization you won’t use its “portal” or app, so you will deal with it by phone, **that helps.**”

—Saying No to unjust computing even once is help (emphasis mine)

# The Freedom Ladder—1/6

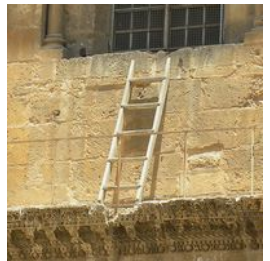
- The Freedom Ladder is a new campaign from the FSF, presently in a germinal state.
- The FSF wants to support people in taking their **first steps** into free software...
- ...and not, necessarily, by installing GNU/Linux...
  - ...at least not at first.



# The Freedom Ladder—2/6

- Instead, they suggest an actual **starting point**:

“The first step we recommend a user to take on their journey to software freedom is by replacing *one* nonfree program they use with a free replacement.”



# The Freedom Ladder—3/6

- Could be big, fundamental programs:
  - Microsoft Office → LibreOffice
  - Microsoft Edge → Mozilla Firefox
  - Slack, Discord → Mattermost Team Edition



# The Freedom Ladder—4/6

- Could be smaller programs:
  - Notepad → [Notepad++](#)
  - Windows Media Player → [VLC](#)
  - f.lux → [Redshift](#)



# The Freedom Ladder—5/6

- Could be artistic programs:
  - FL Studio → [Ardour](#)
  - Adobe Photoshop → [GIMP](#), [Inkscape](#), [Krita](#), [Darktable](#)...
  - Autodesk Maya → [Blender](#)
- Could even be games:
  - Minecraft → [Minetest](#)
  - Civilization → [FreeCiv](#)





# The Freedom Ladder—6/6

- The next steps become more **general**:
  - Encryption (including **email encryption**)
  - Mobile phone freedom (or lack thereof)
- And finally, of course:
  - Replacing proprietary operating systems with a **fully free GNU/Linux distribution.**



# IRC meetings—1/3

- I participated in some of the IRC meetings about this.
- There were a few recurring themes:
  - Suitability for free software varies massively from person to person, especially depending on their job.
  - Certain replacements are easier sells than others; VLC and LibreOffice are both successes, GIMP thus far is not.
  - Going the “whole hog” is hard, even for technical people.
  - Pacing is important; it takes time to get used to new programs. Rushing ruins things.
  - Be realistic.



# IRC meetings—2/3

- **On recommended replacements:**
  - FSF staff won't recommend GNU/Linux distributions that include non-free software in their repositories.
  - It *does*, however, seem that they might acknowledge that using a non-free GNU/Linux distribution is better than using a fully proprietary OS.
  - Sometimes replacing one nonfree program requires more than one free program.



# IRC meetings—3/3

- On **documentation** and **getting help**:
  - Finding documentation is hard.
  - Telling good documentation from bad is harder.
  - Documentation for really hard stuff (e.g. a free BIOS) is scattered and confusing even for technical people.
  - The technical people encouraging others can't be around all the time; some independent motivation is needed.



# The 'why' before the 'how'—1/5

- Before the user switches, the Freedom Ladder aims to communicate the free software **ideas**.
- New users may not be starry-eyed idealists...
- ...but most people have had the experience of being mistreated by software.



# The ‘why’ before the ‘how’—2/5

- We want to find a reason for new users to care.
- For **programmers**, it’s really easy: we want to be able to *read* the code we’re using. Slam-dunk.
- For **techies in general**, we just plain don’t like being told what to do with our own computers. Easy sell.
- But that’s *not* valuable to non-programmers, except in the abstract.
- That part of the philosophy doesn’t mean as much to them as it does to us.



# The ‘why’ before the ‘how’—3/5

- But users *do* understand frustrations like these:
  - **“Why does the program cost that much money?”—a particularly easy sell.**
  - “It’s my computer. How come it can do this, and doesn’t let me stop it?”
  - “Why do I have to upgrade my computer’s hardware just because Microsoft/Apple says so?”
  - “Why do I have to update my operating system just because Microsoft/Apple says so?”
  - “Why do I have to keep turning off all these creepy privacy settings?”
  - “Why is it illegal for me to share this program with my friend?”
  - “Why do I have to pay Adobe just to make my art?”
  - “Why do I have to pay Adobe just to *help someone else* with their art?”



# The ‘why’ before the ‘how’—4/5

- You may object: “Not everyone is like that—you’ll end up preaching to the choir a lot.”
- You’re right.
  - The IRC meetings drove that home for me. One participant derailed the conversation talking about the virtues of Amiga computers...
- But everyone deserves the chance to get some of their freedom back.
- It may be a minority of people we reach this way...
- ...but that alone is worth it.





# The 'why' before the 'how'—5/5

- Free software and free culture is a **philosophy**, and it's hard for a philosophy to stand up to massive marketing budgets.
- But the people who are interested in this stuff are out there, and they need to be encouraged, and not made to feel alienated by elitism...
- ...intentional or not.



# Aside: PLUG Secretary's Position

- The announcements for meetings are always:
  - Sent by email to the list
  - Posted on the website
  - Posted on Mastodon (thank you, NZOSS!)
  - Linked in the IRC channel topic ([#palmylug](#) on Libera.Chat)
- I'll put them on Facebook, MeetUp, Twitter, and other nasty platforms...
  - ...but I never want any of these to be *required* for PLUG.



By the way, of all of those, Facebook's web interface for groups and group events is by *far* the hardest to use—it's so bad that it's kind of shocking.

I thought they had a huge UX budget...?



# Questions? Discussions? Rants?

- I know not everyone feels the same way about free software vs open source, or the FSF...
- ...but I think there's a good core message here to think about.

**Email:** [tom@sanctum.geek.nz](mailto:tom@sanctum.geek.nz)

**Website:** <https://sanctum.geek.nz/>

**Fediverse:** [@tejr@mastodon.sdf.org](https://mstdn.social/@tejr)

