Richard Stallman

Hacker, zealot, madman, genius...

At the recent CODE conference in Cambridge, John Walker sat down for a cosy chat with the godfather of free software and all-round hacker guru, Richard M. Stallman.

N one of us would be here if it were not for one man. There would be no GNU/Linux, there would be no cute and cuddly penguins, and heaven forbid, there would be no *Linux Format*. And that man is *not* Linus Torvalds.

Richard Stallman decided he was going to change the world. Many of us may have had similar naïve ambitions at one point in our lives, but very few of us can claim to have achieved it. But then very few of us are geniuses.

Genius is a very bandied about word, grossly misused and applied in the most oxymoronic ways, such as to footballers. Here there is no such hyperbole. As a hacker he is without peer. This is a man with an incredible stamina for his passion, and a dedication to a cause that is almost religious. Glyn Moody, writer of *Rebel Code*, compares him to Beethoven, due to his incredible natural ability and conviction to his work. Genius, of course, is never this simple. It is a borderline personality disorder brought about by extreme intelligence, and Stallman's personality certainly has some, well, interesting quirks.

It would not be possible to portray RMS in this interview without recounting an honest description of his actions, but it is very important to realise that his erratic behaviour is borne out his absolute dedication to living the life he preaches. It is also very tempting to make big play of the fact that mid-discussion he will get up and begin his strangely formulaic dance moves, or any of the other famous overgrown nervous ticks. But one begins to wonder whether these are part of the performance. Does he do the tricks because on some level he is expected to, or are they genuine habit?

However, all such details should not be overblown. Richard Stallman is a man with a message, and it is his message that is the star of the show. Such habits are an irrelevance to him, and hence should also be so to us.

The interview took place in the Great Hall of Queens College Cambridge, sitting around an oversized wooden table. There were a few of us there, and thanks to the extreme kindness of *LXF* – allowing a couple of people from student newspapers and the like to join us – the interview became 'open source'. Perhaps centuries of great discussions had taken place here, but I think it is safe to say that on none of these occasions would anyone have been wearing a jumper as awful as Richard Stallman's. How he got it through customs is a mystery. But perhaps it possessed some form of hypnotic property, as within a few seconds we were discussing his life-ethos.

LXF **You have an extraordinary passion for your work, and one that seems to override everything else in your life. When did you first realise the strength of these passions?**
RMS I came to these conclusions about the time I was starting the GNU project, and that's why I started it.

LXF **In your writings, the beginning of the project and the birth of your passions seem to coincide. One must have happened before the other.**
RMS Well, I had the experience first of living in a free software way of life, and I liked it. I always had a tendency to think about it in more ethical and political terms than the other people. They also liked the way of life, which is why they continued to live it. But I started to think of this as a matter of principle, and thought: "This is the good way to do things. I want to uphold this." I'm willing to fight or make sacrifices. It's something good.

And so, when that community was wiped out by a combination of various things, I was suddenly faced

with the prospect of participating in the life of using proprietary software. And it looked so disgusting, shameful, ugly that I decided I was going to build another way of doing things.

LXF Did you have that kind of wonderful arrogance from the very beginning? Were you absolutely sure that you were capable of this?

RMS I wasn't absolutely sure I was capable of it, but I was sure I had a chance, and that it was worth making the effort. Was I sure of success? No. But when you are fighting for something like freedom, it shouldn't be a question. If there's a chance that you are going to fail, is that a reason not to try?

LXF But this must have appeared as such a monolithic task in front of you? It must have occurred to you that 'wow, I'm 15 or 20 years away from achieving my goals!'

RMS Well, I was thinking that it might be five years. I

but there is something more important there. It allows you to use a computer in freedom.

LXF You have often said that if the options were proprietary software or nothing at all, you would rather have nothing at all. But part of this passion, and the fact that you understand this freedom, comes from the fact that you are a hacker. How can I explain this enthusiasm to someone who isn't involved so heavily in computers. How can I explain it to my mother?

RMS First of all you explain that programs are like recipes. Your mother has probably shared her recipes with friends. And she has probably shared theirs. Imagine if she was told that she may not change that recipe. Imagine if she was told that she wasn't allowed to share that recipe with her friends. This is a very good analogy that helps people to understand.

"It would give people
a chance to live in freedom"

didn't know how many people would help me. I didn't need to know the answers to these questions. I knew that I had found something that was worth trying to do. The other things I could have done in software were not worth trying to do. It would not have been good if I had accomplished them. This, I knew if I accomplished it, would be a good thing. It was worth trying to do because it would give people a chance to live in freedom.

LXF You joined the world of computers through this free system. It was free, and then this freedom was taken away from you?

RMS Indeed. I didn't have to speculate what this way of life would be like. I had experienced it first hand, and I knew it was good. If I had not had the chance to experience it, if it had been up to me to imagine what it would be like, it would have been hard to be so sure. Maybe I wouldn't have had the certainty that it was worth striving for.

LXF But how do you provide a similar enthusiasm to someone who hasn't had your experience?

RMS But nowadays you can all have this experience. The free software community today is the same kind of community as it was before. But now there are a hundred thousand people contributing. Anyone can get hold of an old PC for little money, and have this experience.

What we can do is talk to people more about freedom. Point out to them that this isn't just a matter of convenient, powerful, reliable software. Yes, GNU/Linux is powerful, yes it's reliable, yes it's cool. Yes you can get it at a low price if you want,

LXF But the difference lies in that everybody is capable of cracking an egg, but not everybody is capable of reprogramming a piece of code.

RMS But the point is that the analogy should help people to understand, and if they've ever used a computer program that frustrates them and they have been unable to change it, then they can begin to understand. They may begin to assume that this is no use to them because they personally cannot change it. You have to show them that they can pay somebody else to change it for them, or they can go to a family member and ask them to change it, or they can go seduce a programmer and ask them to change it for them. You become a part of a community, and you soon realise that people can and will do things for each other.

The community is one of the key elements for Stallman's ideologies to be successful. There has to be a sense of belonging – and a real contact with those who people are putting the effort in for. When there isn't an enforced financial transaction for your efforts, there is an increased necessity for praise and feedback from those who are benefiting from the product. And as a reasonably recent convert to all things GNU/Linux, the atypical friendliness of this community is striking.

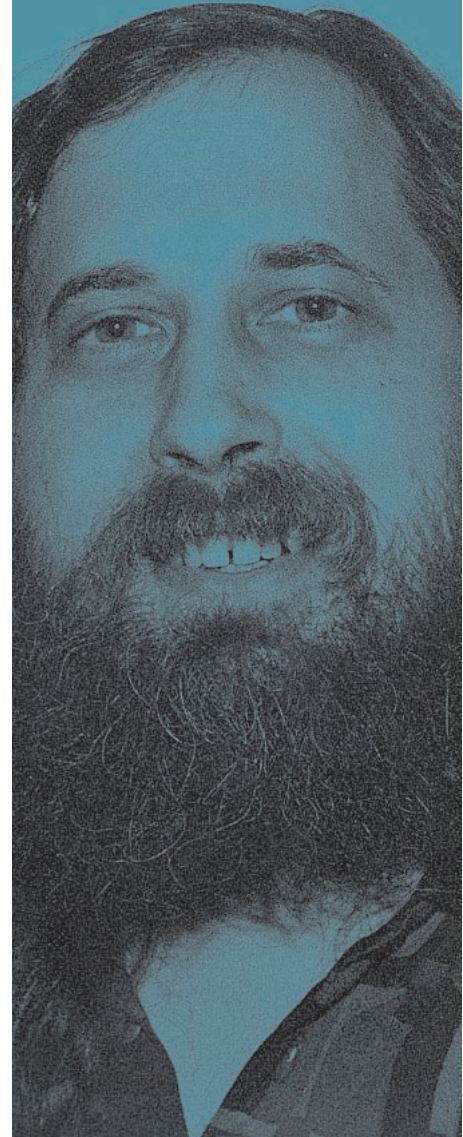**LXF It is quite surprising once you are in this community, quite how willing people are to** »

LinuxFormat**Interview**

« help. People can go out of their way to improve things, and help you out if you request it. The willingness to be told about bugs and to help solve problems is remarkable.
RMS Absolutely. This is a thing that many people don't understand. People have a tendency to complain about bugs in a program to everybody except the one person that they should be telling, which is the developer of the program and the person who may be able to do something about it. And he is the person who needs to know. And yet people find all sorts of ways to avoid thinking like this. So in the GNU project we have a policy: when somebody reports a bug, unless he is totally callous and stupid about it, you thank him, because he is doing something helpful. Without bug reports from the users, you cannot get it right. Without feedback, you cannot learn. So reporting bugs is part of the users responsibility. It's the way they contribute to our community, the way they help to build it. So we thank them. "You showed me this fault in my program, which was there already, but because you showed it to me I can now fix it."

LXF And hopefully, when one is reporting a bug in free software, one reacts differently than perhaps they would when reporting a bug in proprietary software. If I have paid hundreds of pounds for an application, and it is riddled with bugs, then I am going to be rightly cross. But if I have acquired a piece of software freely, made by someone for the betterment of the community, then I am hopefully going to be more forgiving in my reaction to problems. To be all tetchy and cross about it, you'd have to be a bit evil.
RMS Well, there are people who are like that, and of course it's not fun when they do it, but as producers of software we have to learn that the reporting of a bug is a very important part of our community. The users have to learn this so that they will report bugs to the software producers. For example, if you had bad breath, and I smelt it, would you want me to tell *you*, or would you want me to tell all our friends. That's a harmful way to treat someone. If I have bad breath, I want you to tell *me*, preferably privately, and then I will fix the problem with a toothbrush and toothpaste. And then nobody else would have to smell it. Whereas if you told my friends, and didn't tell me, that would be the nastiest possible thing you could do. Think of that whenever you find a bug in a free software application.

LXF It all seems very friendly and helpful for such a dangerous and radical group as you are so often portrayed.
RMS People often make an assumption that freedom is the opposite of responsibility. That's not true here. Here you have freedom and responsibility on one side, and being dominated and divided on the other side. Remember we are talking about the freedom to co-operate with other people, the freedom to be a responsible person in a socially

responsible way, and contribute to your community. The Free Software movement and community encourage people to help each other. We don't just say: "you should have the freedom to tell other people to go to hell", we say: "you should have freedom to help other people." We encourage people to work together and co-operate.

But within this community there are, of course divisions. The most significant of which is the split between the Free Software community, and the Open Source community. Such a divide is not at all helpful to the cause, meaning that people who really should have been reaching for the

same goal are now working at cross-purposes. But in Stallman's eyes, this is not merely a case of two rival groups working for the same thing – in his view the Open Source community are missing the whole point. One of the key offenders in this split is book publisher Tim O'Reilly. He proclaimed to be very much against the powers of proprietary software, and then began publishing manuals for all manner of non-free software. And more importantly to Stallman, he publishes them as 'non-free'.

LXF So you think that Tim O'Reilly is going about things the wrong way then?
RMS Absolutely. O'Reilly presents himself as a supporter of our community, while mostly refusing to contribute to it.
By publishing most of those manuals as non-free he is acting against the interests of our community. We need to have free documentation to go with our free software. There are many programs that don't have free documentation, because O'Reilly has convinced program writers to publish non-free.
He is very clever, and very good at subtly shifting the service.

So why was there the splitting of the community. The term 'Open Source' was originally invented to be a kind of dis-ambiguator of the word 'free'. Well, that was one of the goals. But another of the goals was to avoid using a phrase less likely to make

business uncomfortable. And of course there was Eric Raymond, one of the most vocal supporters of the Open Source movement, and probably the man who has been more personally abusive to Stallman than anyone else working within free software.

LXF Open Source, and its more business-friendly appearance was something that Eric Raymond encouraged, so what was his angle?
RMS He simply doesn't agree that people are entitled to the freedom to share and change software. He likes having that freedom, but he rejects the idea that people should be entitled to it. So he rejects the idea that non-free software is wrong.

"Without feedback
you cannot learn"

He wrote an article suggesting that Open Source is merely a very clever move to con big business into making free software without realising it.
He proclaims to agree with all my principles, but he is trying to mislead people about where I stand. He is trying to spread his views. I am more or less an articulate spokes-person for my views. If he can give people the impression that I really stand where he does, it will boost his views.
I feel it's somewhat disrespectful that he attempts to misrepresent my views.

LXF There was certainly a divide between the two communities, and they didn't appear to want you to be a part of it.
RMS They coined this term [Open Source], and I saw that it was going to be used to separate our community's activity from the philosophy that we have in the GNU project, and I realised that I'd better not go along with that. They wanted me to not make a fuss and to allow them to take the lead as to what philosophy to present to people. They have a right to have and promote their views, but they cannot expect me to support them.

LXF There is undoubtedly confusion about the use of the term 'free'. A Swedish speaker at the CODE conference gave a talk on why the dot.com industry was doing so badly because of the approach that everything should be free. He had unfortunately completely misunderstood the use of the word 'free' due to the language barrier and it's numerous interpretations. This ambiguity cannot be a positive thing?
RMS There is no good word to use in English.

LXF Can we invent one?

RMS No! No we can't. In theory it would be possible to invent one, but to do so and to switch to it would not work. In a different situation, if people all wanted to do it, then we could. But in the current situation, where the Open Source movement are working so hard to take people away from the Free Software movement, to make such a change would be to lose the share of the attention that we've still got.

LXF The speaker went on to say that the attitude was causing people to make no money and to fail.
RMS Well, the worst that can happen is that they can get new jobs. They're not going to starve to death. But those are secondary issues. How much money programmers make, or how many people can have jobs as programmers, is not as important as the freedom of all computer users.

LXF Do you feel that as a result of the fracturing of the two movements, that they have the better term?
RMS Well, yes. But there is nothing that can be done about it. In fact, there is no good term for this in English. Open Source wouldn't be good for us. It's very effective for them because it avoids raising issues. 'Open' is a warm fuzzy term. It sounds like there's something good about it, and it is very vague about what it is.

LXF Would it be possible to perform some sort of linguistic appropriation, perhaps in the same way as homosexual groups have taken the word 'queer' and completely appropriated it, completely subverting it. Can you subvert 'Open Source'?
RMS No. For one thing it would be disrespectful. They have a right to promote their views, and a right to say what they stand for, make up a name for themselves, and use it. And the other reason is that there are so many companies that use the term, and agree with they way they use it.
There are too many people standing by the use of the term in its current meaning, and by comparison we would be insignificant. We would simply lose people's respect because we would be acting in a less upright fashion.

He remains this honourable always. Despite his erratic behaviour and temper, this is a man of his words. He won't be drawn into slagging people off, not even those who make a living out of mocking him. He will tell you the truth, as he sees, and lives, it. It's actually rather unnerving, but I think only because it is quite so unusual.
    His powerful principles lead him to some strong opinions. One area he is very opinionated in is patenting. They are of critical relevance to the success of the Free Software Foundation.

LXF You are very passionate about the misuse of patents. When and where, if ever, do you think they're appropriate?
RMS Patents should simply be excluded from software and anything else that isn't specifically physical. Patents affect different fields differently, and there is no fundamental reason why there should be a uniform patent for all fields. But what I

so much more complicated than mechanical and technical designs typically are. So the result is, people develop very large software packages, and because of this, a lot of ideas are used in it. A word processor has a lot of ideas in it, if it is to be competitive. But a lot of those ideas may already be patented, and if they are, how are you going to develop a competitive word processor? If you want to develop a better one, you will probably have a few new ideas, but you have to use lots of well known ideas that have already been used by others. And if those ideas are patented you can't develop your product, even if it is an interesting and superior word processor.
    It is explicit in the US constitution that the purpose of patents is to promote progress. It is the same in the UK. They are not an entitlement, they are not a natural right for inventors. They are an artificial government system to promote progress. So the question is, does it promote progress? In software, patents obstruct progress. I'm not against patents in a field of manufacture, but I am not an expert on this. But when you are talking about big companies, they don't have any inherent rights. Only people do. Businesses cannot complain about injustice. They try to claim this right, which is why it is so important to reject these claims whenever they appear.
    Software is not just a concern for large companies, because software patents restrict individuals in the use of their own computers. They restrict individuals from working together in groups. This means that the effects of patents in software is very different from that in, for instance, the automobile industry.

LXF People claim that free software prevents people from making money.
RMS I don't care. I don't care. Free software respects our freedom. It is important because it enables us to use computers and have freedom.

"Patents should be
excluded from software"

can see is that software is at one extreme, and say at the other extreme is pharmaceuticals. The amount of expense it takes to develop something of any given complexity in software is very low, and in pharmaceuticals is very high, and everything else is in between them. Software is so low because you are dealing with mathematical entities, abstractions, and any in any other kind of engineering you are dealing with matter. And matter is perverse.
    Since the intelligence of people working in both these fields is basically the same, if you're working on something hard, you do smaller systems, and if you are working on something simple you do more complex systems. That's why software packages are

And so it always comes back to this. This is the key statement for Stallman. No matter what the subject, if it gets in the way of freedom,it is irrelevant. And it is undoubtedly this central message that has enabled him to be driven so hard, and to have achieved so much.

LXF Finally, is there anything to you that is more important than the principle of free software?
RMS Well, the survival of humanity I suppose, but in the world of software, no. **LXF**