

## MAVERICKS

Richard Stallman is the tech genius behind a software revolution that continues to transform the wired world. But instead of cashing in on his big idea—well, let's just say he's taken a different path. **By John Sedgwick**

# The Shaggy God



**ODD MAN IN:** Stallman in his MIT office, where he is generally assumed to live.



**L**ike most people who use computers but rarely think about them, I had not heard of Richard Stallman, and might never have if I hadn't tried to get into the Stata Center at MIT one day last fall. That's the postmodernist building, designed by Frank Gehry, that looks as if it's bursting apart at its metal seams.

Unfortunately, the front doors were locked tight.

"I can get you in," said a pleasant voice from somewhere behind me. I wheeled around and discovered a plump, wildly unkempt middle-aged man. My first thought was that he should be institutionalized. But then I remembered this was MIT, and he was probably some genius. "It will just take me a moment." He proceeded to pull from his pocket not a proper swipe card, but rather a strange gadget that looked like a miniature football wrapped in duct tape. He waved it slowly over the card reader, as if some magic were involved.

After about a minute, the doors clicked open, and he ushered me inside. We exchanged pleasantries, and then, a good 50 feet in, he turned to me and asked, "Now, why are you here?"

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I explained I was interested in the building, which reassured him. "But how about you?" I asked. "Do you work here?"

He replied that he was Richard Stallman, head of the Free Software Foundation and the co-creator of the Linux operating system. He had an office upstairs.

"Then why don't you have a swipe card?"

A pause.

"I don't like them to track my movements."

**Bill Gates and Paul Allen at Microsoft, Steve Jobs at Apple**—these are the heads on the Mount Rushmore of computing. Yet there's also a fourth, forgotten man on the mountaintop, whose contribution perhaps exceeds the others'. The most momentous product of Stallman's genius, Linux, was the first operating system to feature software that was entirely free. That is, anyone could see its code, improve upon its applications, and copy it, gratis. Stallman's role in its creation is akin to building the Golden Gate Bridge single-handed. But his greatest achievement is that Linux soon became more than an operating system, mere competition to Microsoft's Windows or Apple's Mac OS. It became a computing philosophy. Its manifestations are everywhere; while you may not know it, you interact with it every day. Lawrence Lessig, a Stanford University law professor and former board member of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit that for nearly two decades has been at the vanguard of all things digital, says Stallman is a "visionary," and thinks that, in free software, he's behind nothing less than "the most important social movement of the 21st century."

The interesting thing about Stallman—and one reason he is the forgotten head on the mountain—is that he never sought to profit from Linux. Stallman detests wealth. That's why, upon entering the William H. Gates Building at MIT, he often turns to Gates's name on the wall and gives him the finger, vigorously, really shoving it up there. (When I observed this, he recruited me, a couple of graduate students, and a man I took to be a Korean tourist to do the same.) Making people buy a product that constrains their use of it would be anathema, because to Stallman freedom

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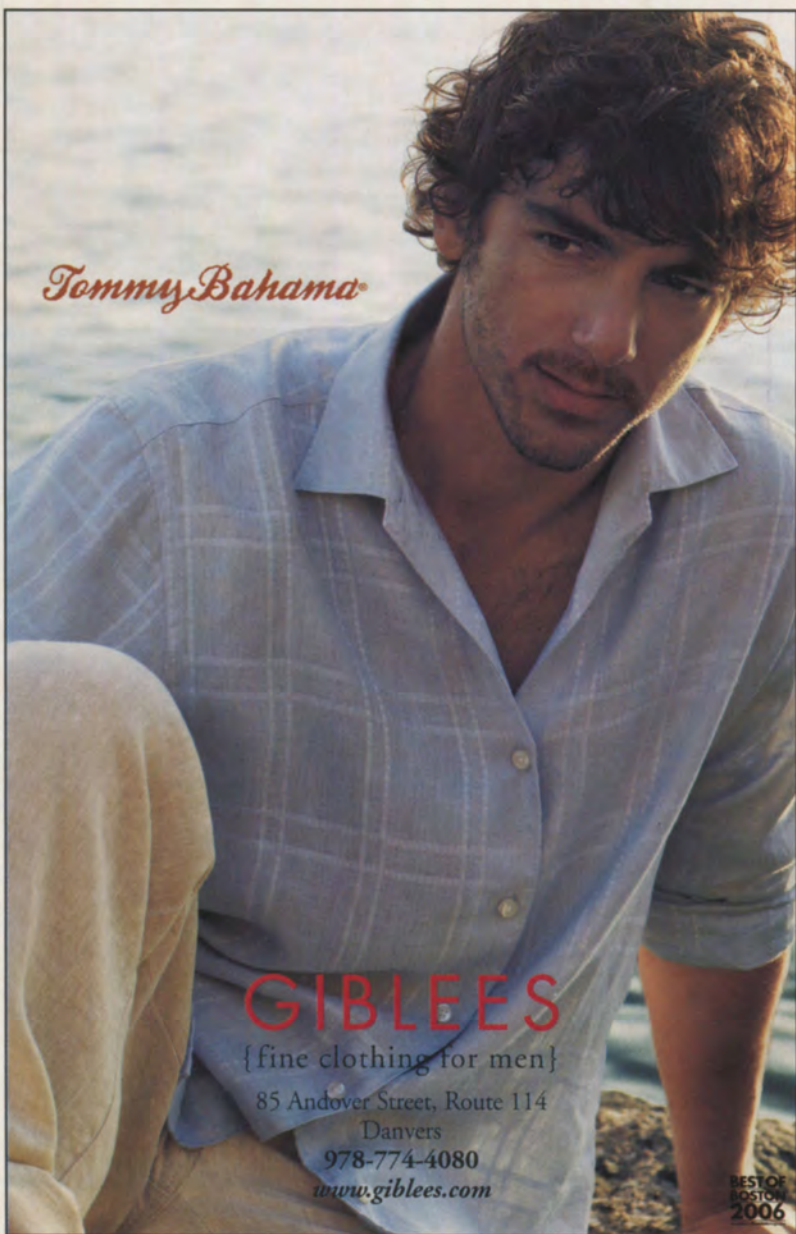
is more than an ideal; it is a code of conduct. It means being free to live outside society's norms and the government's vigilant eye, free to go where you please, without detection of any sort. Unlike the other forefathers of the computer industry, Stallman is not living off his one big idea. He is living out its ethos.

Of course, the pursuit of absolute freedom means Stallman sometimes acts a little weird, at least by any standard but his own. He travels the world as a free software evangelist for more than two-thirds of the year, and at last count had been to 65 countries. He has talked up free software at the Yale Political Union debate society, argued for it at the technology-related IADIS conference in Spain, and lobbied on

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behalf of its virtues with the president-elect of Ecuador. When on the road, he carries exactly (and inexplicably) 52 pounds in his rolling suitcase, including an air mattress (to counter any hard beds), books, chocolate, tea, and roasted nuts. He lives off the meager stipends and paltry honoraria that come with his trips. "I've avoided the big expenses in life," he says proudly. He owns no real estate, no car, no TV, not even a bicycle (which he doesn't know how to ride). At this point, his most valuable possession is probably the laptop he received for free from the One Laptop Per Child initiative that grew out of MIT's Media Lab. He is generally assumed to live in his cramped office at MIT; Stallman's homemade business card—which he calls his "pleasure card"—gives the room as his address. He has use of it, at no charge, despite his lack of any official university appointment, because of his long associations and close colleagues there.

To avoid detection by "Big Brother"—a phrase he uses without irony—he tries to pay cash for everything; avoids Amtrak now that it demands the usual photo ID that Stallman, ever on the lookout for fascism, calls his "papers";



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shuffles Charlie Cards with other people so that no single RFID (the radio-based ID system embedded in the cards) is linked to him; and, just in case, wraps Charlie in aluminum foil to mute the transmissions. Why would the MBTA care where he went? "I don't know why," Stallman replies, taken aback. "But they do. There's this philosophy of 'Let's keep track of people absolutely as much as possible.'" And once they have it, they have it forever, he observes. "The record is permanent."

Stallman also owns no cell phone, but will borrow one, if need be. He says he's leery of the always-on GPS homing signal that some believe has allowed the CIA to off any number of Al Qaeda higher-ups. "It's on even when the phone's off. You have to take the batteries out." He pauses. "I learned that from the Palestinian Information Technology Association. They have important reasons to know if their cell phones can tell where they are. They could get killed."

Of course, most of these precautions are pointless, since he outs himself every time he offers up ID to board a plane, then writes about every inch of his travels on his blog. So why bother with all the inconveniences?

"Fuck convenience," Stallman snaps. "If you won't sacrifice a little convenience for your freedom, you're going to lose it."

**He is, as one might imagine, not** the easiest person to get along with. Adjectives commonly used to describe Stallman include "difficult," "enigmatic," and "impossible"—and these are the printable ones. "Let's put it this way: He's not your best salesman," says Eric Raymond, a computer scientist and longtime Stallman antagonist, laughing. "Absolutely not! No! No!"

To begin with, Stallman is not especially presentable. At 55, he has long, disheveled hair, a serious potbelly, and a scraggly beard, and favors loose, baggy clothes. He has the social skills to match. In conversation, he is inclined to idly examine strands of his hair for split ends, and then pop any he finds into his mouth to suck on them. ("A nervous habit," he explains without apology.) A career single, he has made no secret of his desire for a girlfriend, even going so far as to advertise for one recently on Craigslist, which got a lot of Internet

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play among his enemies. His business card gives an accounting of his personal attributes in the style of an online dating ad: "sharing good books, good food and exotic music and dance/*tender embraces/unusual sense of humor.*" (The italics are his.)

Underneath all the hair, Stallman has the soft radiance of a guru, something that emanates from his soulful eyes. "Some people say I look like Jesus," he says, bemused. "But we don't really know how he looked." Cocksure in the manner of the very, very smart, he is given to extreme, self-righteous positions couched in the language of a jeremiad, by which his opponents are not merely mistaken but "evil." If you question his wisdom too assertively, he might exclaim, "Stop, you're making

**He is inclined to idly examine his hair for split ends, then pop any he finds into his mouth. ("A nervous habit," he explains without apology.)**

me angry," hoping to close off further discussion. After Stallman launched the Free Software Foundation in 1985, he boned up by reading, twice, Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, which many of his former admirers would argue he must have read either backward or upside down. His leadership style seems to involve alienating his potential followers.

As when, in 1998—in the free software movement's first big commercial breakthrough—Netscape agreed to reveal 30 million lines of its source code, dubbing the project Mozilla. To capitalize on this success, Stallman believed, the movement should push all the harder. User's manuals should be free, too, just like software! And traitors should be pilloried! At a software conference, Stallman seized the audience microphone and went after one of the panelists, a programmer named John Ousterhout, lambasting him as a "parasite" for marketing a proprietary version of some free software he had created.

In April 1998, when the tech book publisher Tim O'Reilly convened a much hyped summit in Silicon Valley to plot the future of free software, he



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included more than a dozen heavy-weights of the field. Only one big name was missing: Richard Stallman. The movement had exiled its leader.

**Brainy and withdrawn, Stallman** had the geek's expected interest in math and science from an early age. His mother, a substitute teacher in public schools, was stunned when her son at six glanced over a *Scientific American* brainteaser that had stumped her and instantly knew the answer. The young Richard was such a bookworm, his mother would have to shout to him nine or 10 times before he'd come to the table for dinner. As headstrong as he was brilliant, he refused to write high school papers because he considered the whole exercise stupid. He was terrified of his quarrelsome father, who worked in the printing business. (His mother had divorced him when Richard was three.) "He never screamed, but he always found a way to criticize you in a cold, designed-to-crush way," Stallman told his biographer, Sam Williams, in the book *Free as in Freedom: Richard Stallman's Crusade for Free Software*.

Stallman didn't encounter his first computer until a summer job at the IBM New York Scientific Center when he was 16. He took to programming immediately, as if his mind was hard-wired for it. It gave him a thrilling sense of power. "The idea that you could write down a program that would make a machine do things—that was fascinating," he says. Power was very much on his mind. The Vietnam War was on and Stallman had a paralyzing fear of being drafted. He wasn't afraid of getting shot; he was afraid of basic training, of having to take orders, to salute and do what he was told. Stallman didn't think he could bear any of that. He had "waking fantasies" of being taught how to fire a machine gun—then turning it on his instructors and blowing them away.

Before he arrived at Harvard in 1971, he was asked on a form to describe the ideal roommate. He wrote: "an invisible, inaudible, intangible roommate." Harvard, wisely, placed him in a single all four years. Interested in everything, he majored in physics but also took courses in ancient Middle Eastern history and Chinese. He was irked that he'd eventually be "kicked out" for accumulating four years' worth of passing grades.

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The only part of Harvard that Stallman didn't love was the computer science department. He found it "authoritarian," because the professors had the audacity to lock up their precious computer terminals in their offices when he wanted to use them. So he took the subway to MIT's brand-new Artificial Intelligence Lab. Stallman had heard the lab was doing interesting things, so he just showed up one day in the spring of his freshman year. "He was brilliant," says MIT professor Gerald Sussman, who is on the board of Stallman's Free Software Foundation. "He could think very fast and very clearly, cutting to the core of a problem instantly." Stallman did so well that his initials, RMS, which he took as his username, were soon the object of reverence in the computing world, and still are today. (Ask any hard-core computer geek: "RMS" carries profound significance.)

Stallman thrilled to the Hacker Ethic, that contagious spirit of festive, super-smart community that lingered about MIT. (Back then, "hack" meant "hack around," not "hack into.") On the rare occasion when an MIT professor locked up his computer in his office, hackers banded together to find a way to break in. Stallman favored popping loose the ceiling tiles and rotating the doorknob with a length of adhesive tape.

The AI Lab terminals were models of hospitality. Anyone was welcome to log on. Eventually, though, in the late '70s, after Stallman had graduated and joined the lab staff, the system began requiring passwords. Appalled, he told everybody to use the same one—a shared password, after all, being no password at all—but some hackers continued to cling to their individual access codes. Stallman feared the AI Lab was becoming a "totalitarian police state." Worse, as one of the computer system's developers, he would be the Nazi banging on doors demanding to see papers. Things spiraled downward from there. The Department of Defense weighed in with its own security concerns, threatening to eject the lab from the military's Arpanet—the precursor to the Internet—if the lab didn't properly control access to its computers. Defiant, Stallman went on to let anyone use his RMS password for about a decade. The lab administrators finally told him to cut it out. Stallman refused. He ultimately quit using the AI Lab computers altogether. It was a protest of one.

**In the early 1980s, two Cambridge** firms rose up and began offering the AI Lab hackers serious money. The first, Symbolics, was started by a former AI Lab administrator named Russell Noftsker. The other was Lisp Machine Inc. (LMI), founded by a hacker god named Richard Greenblatt. MIT struck a deal with both companies allowing them use of a programming language that the AI Lab had developed. But Symbolics eventually demanded that MIT not share its improvements to the code with LMI, and the university capitulated. Outraged by what he saw as a predatory move, Stallman clipped off Symbolics' communications link to the lab, then reportedly threatened to wrap himself in dynamite and walk into the company's offices (Stallman calls this absolutely

**Stallman worked round the clock, sleeping when he dropped, then springing up to work some more. "I thought of it as war," he says.**

untrue). He then decided to seek a different—but potentially as effective—punishment: He would reverse engineer Symbolics' precious code, creating a version that performed all the needed functions while avoiding copyright infringement. He would hand this prize over to LMI for free, making Symbolics' program worthless. "I thought of it as war," Stallman says—a war that pitted him against roughly a dozen of the best programmers MIT had produced. Stallman worked round the clock, sleeping when he dropped, then springing up to work some more. He matched the Symbolics code feature for feature, day after grueling day, for two entire years. The Symbolics programmers were astounded to be out-hacked by one guy; Noftsker, the company's president, was furious. "He calls it reverse engineering," he said of Stallman in a book called *Hackers*. "We call it theft."

"I don't know if I won," Stallman says. "But I didn't lose."

**Back in 1980, before his war with** Symbolics, Stallman was frustrated that the AI Lab's Xerox laser printer had no system to alert staff members of a paper jam. He wanted the source

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code so he could fix the problem. But one guy who had the code, a software engineer and former Xerox employee named Robert Sproull, wouldn't hand it over. "I promised not to give you a copy," Stallman says Sproull replied, referring to a promise to Xerox. (Sproull himself does not recall the incident.) "That was shocking and disgusting," Stallman says. "It was a stunning refusal to help."

It was Stallman's first encounter with a nondisclosure agreement, and it infuriated him. In his mind, he began codifying the essential traits that he believed software should possess, the ones that ultimately embodied the essential rights expressed by free software. Eminently sensible as it was to Stallman, it would be a new idea to everyone else.

To make it possible, he had to do something even more stunning: He had to build his own operating system, the program that runs every other program on a computer. After all, a free steering wheel isn't really free if you have to buy a big fancy car for it. As with Symbolics, he wouldn't create the code out of nothing. He'd find proprietary software that he could reverse engineer, tweaking it enough to claim it was materially different. By luck, an operating system called Unix perfectly suited his plans. Created by AT&T, it was widely used in academic settings, where it was prized for its flexibility. In September of 1983, Stallman announced to his Usenet newsgroup, a message board of the proto-Internet: "Starting this Thanksgiving I am going to write a complete Unix-compatible software system called GNU (for Gnu's Not Unix), and give it away free to everyone who can use it. Contributions of time, money, programs and equipment are greatly needed."

He started in with the compiler, the internal translator for all the code streaming through a computer. Stallman thought he'd lucked out when he found a Dutch system called the Free University Compiler Kit. Unfortunately, it wasn't free; its university was—it belonged to the Vrije Universiteit, or Free University, in Amsterdam. He next tried a compiler from the Lawrence Livermore National Lab, at the University of California, but it proved unworkable. He decided he'd have to build his own.

In the meantime, he wanted to create a GNU version of his Emacs editor,



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which helps computer programmers edit text. For that, he hoped to incorporate the innovations of a grad student named James Gosling at Carnegie Mellon. But Gosling had already sold the rights to a software company called UniPress, which threatened to sue if Stallman went ahead. So Stallman had to reverse engineer the student's alterations to his own program. Completed in 1985, it was the first piece of GNU. Stallman celebrated by sniping at the Goslings of the world in a manifesto

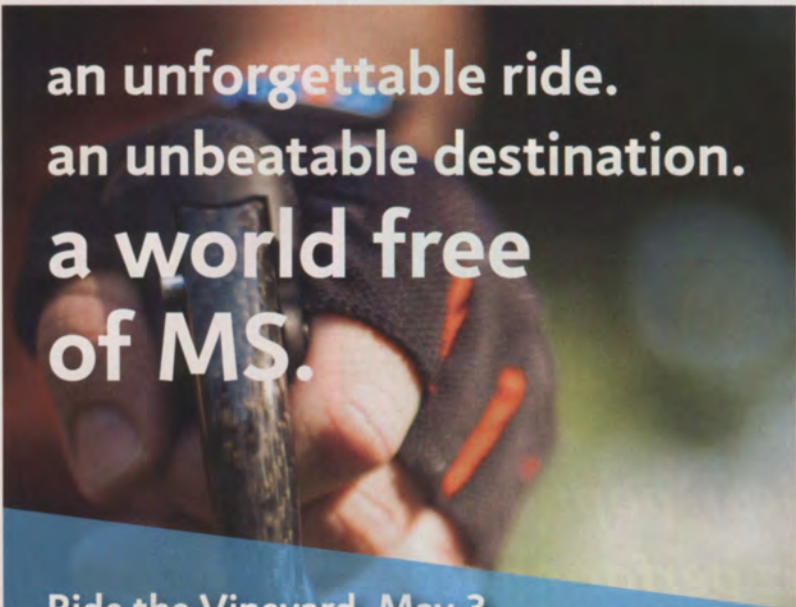
on that same message board: "If programmers deserve to be rewarded for creating innovative programs...they deserve to be punished if they restrict the use of these programs." To advance the cause, he set up his Free Software Foundation in 1985, appointing himself the unpaid president, and established the General Public License, also known as "copyleft," which is the movement's bill of rights for users and creators of free software. It was around this time that Stallman started referring

to himself as "St. GNUicious of the Church of Emacs," donning ministerial robes and a computer-disk halo. It was not entirely a joke.

In a frenzy, Stallman went on to create a "debugger" for his operating system, and then returned to the pesky compiler—a massive 110,000 lines of code—in 1987. And on and on, piece by piece. "There were lots of times when I thought it couldn't be done," he admits. "I'd encounter some bug, and I'd try two, three tries to fix it—or I couldn't fix it and I'd think, I'll never get this done, and I'd start screaming."

In 1991, all that was left was the kernel, the brain within the brain of the computer, and thus the most essential component of any operating system, and the hardest part to create. Before Stallman could finish building his, an ingenious young Finnish computer scientist named Linus Torvalds—who was initially inspired by a Stallman speech at the Polytechnic University in Helsinki the year before—played off a Unix-like operating system called Minix to develop a free software system of his own. Incomplete in other respects, it had the kernel that Stallman's lacked—one that meshed so beautifully with the GNU system that it seemed destined for it. Strictly speaking, the complete operating system should have been called GNU/Linux, representing the combined contributions of Stallman and Torvalds. Stallman always insists on the term, pronouncing it "GNU slash Linux." But in the popular mind, it came to be known as only Linux. Stallman has never gotten over that.

**Although Stallman was not invited** to the big 1998 conference where Silicon Valley honchos officially convened the "freeware" movement, Linus Torvalds did attend. As co-creator of GNU/Linux, he was entitled to a heavy measure of respect. And because he was jovial and easygoing, he was liked, too. For his part, Torvalds was tiring of Stallman's relentless anticapitalism. At the meeting he slyly pointed out that, in English, "free" had two wildly different meanings—free as in no charge, and free as in freedom. Wasn't this confusing to people? The attendees murmured their assent; businesses instinctively recoiled at the thought of giving stuff away. Brainstorming, the group came up with two other



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possible names: "sourceware" and "open source." The issue proved so momentous, it was put to a vote. Of the 15 attendees, nine voted for the second option. Stallman's movement was officially rebranded. When *Forbes* wrote about the nascent free software trend in August 1998, it put Torvalds's face on the cover.

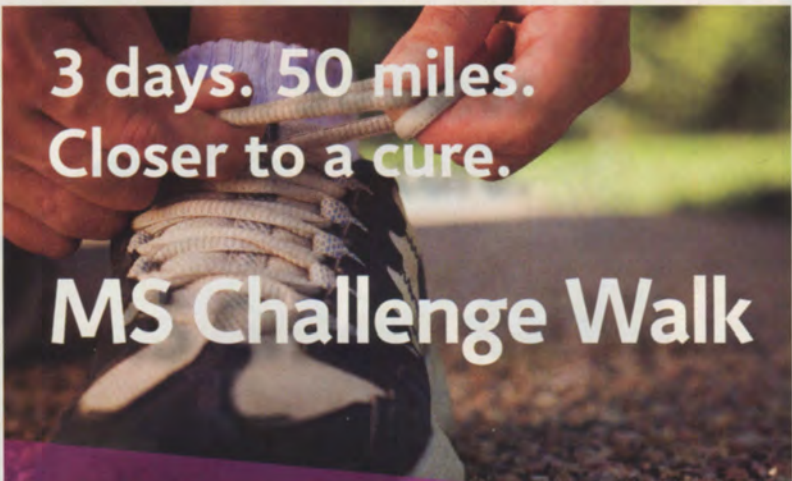
"I couldn't call them spineless," Stallman says today of the open sourcers, "because they threw out the idea there ought to be a spine." Eric Raymond, who long ago helped Stallman with one of his projects but turned against him to become the Open Source Initiative's first president, is more measured. "The free software movement was not advancing the interests of the community it was supposed to serve," he says. "They were waving all this idealistic stuff around that basically just frightened the people we needed to convince. Most people don't respond to idealistic musings. You have to change their behavior first. But Richard just screams when I say these things to him. It threatens his world view." The two men are so distrustful that they routinely copy each other on any e-mail that mentions either by name, in the spirit of full antagonistic disclosure. So Raymond's first e-mail to me about Stallman prompted a lengthy retort from Stallman, and then it went Raymond-Stallman-Raymond for several more rounds, until finally they started battering each other directly, leaving me out of it. This must have continued for some time; many days later I received a plaintive e-mail from Stallman with the subject heading: "Did you find me offensive?"

Despite the feeble squalling, Stallman, a decade after being snubbed by his peers, has left his mark on the world, in ways greater than his former allies. Many of the principal Internet languages—like Perl and Python, for example—utilize free software. Indeed, the Internet itself, where so much is available for free, operates according to its spirit. Sendmail, one of the most popular computer programs on the planet, is free software; so is BIND, the system by which those impossible numeric IP addresses are converted to names like YouTube and Amazon. The Web browser Firefox—second in popularity only to Microsoft's Internet Explorer—uses free software. It was to catch some of the free software audience that Microsoft made a \$44.6 billion

lunge for Yahoo's "zero dollar" customers this winter, and Google, with its acres of servers, could not exist without the stuff: The company would otherwise be unable to pay for the countless copies of operating systems it relies on. And Apple's iPhone 2.0 this spring will offer a raft of free applications; the move is seen as revolutionary, the latest sign of Steve Jobs's genius.

Then there's Richard Stallman. His own personal territory is pretty much as it was when he first arrived at MIT—only that

cramped office, no more. His ideas, like his travels, have had their reach, but his solitude remains profound. When we went to lunch one day, he led me up the sidewalk to an Asian place he liked, and he strode purposefully 10 feet ahead of me the whole way. Stallman is clear on where he wants to go, and how to get there, but not so good at bringing others along with him. Way up front, he is free to chart whatever course he wishes, but it's just him up there. Freedom, it turns out, is a lonely place to be. **B**



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