From “Computer Info” to “How I do my computing” : a foundational text’s history.

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Abstract

History of “How I do my computing” by computer scientist and free software activist Richard Stallman : a seminal text at the beginning of a long tradition of similar texts within computer science and technology. But, when did computer scientists start considering the software and hardware they used as an object of both personal and public preoccupation? (Many open questions remain.)

Introduction : a closed question opens many others

In the following, we provide elements towards a history of this text, and simultaneously tradition of almost 15 years of similar publications within computer science and technology.

“How I do my computing”, originally published in 2006, was in fact first called simply “Computer Info”.

History helps us break with the myth of heroes : it makes them all the more human, and admirable.

But, along with Michel Foucault, him with his own topics of research in mind¹, we cannot help but ask : when did computer scientists start considering the software and hardware that they used as an object of both personal and public preoccupation (both spaces merging together)?

What antecedents did this publications have? Who did Richard Stallman have for predecessors when he decided to published text?

Unfortunately, we were not able to answer these questions, and the many others, sufficiently.

A closed question, like a door, opens many others.

November 7th 2006 : “Computer Info”

The earliest recorded occurrence of this text comes to us in the form of an unceremonious, surprisingly short entry on his personal website, <https://stallman.org/>, entitled just “Computer Info” :

Here, in its very first version, “How I do my computing” was structured like so :

1. (Descriptions of the) operating system;
2. desktop environment or more generally interface with the computer;
3. editor / e-mail client;
4. web browser and more generally Internet/Web access or use.

We note however that the notion of computing – and hence this was about more than mere description of one’s computer – was present : it resided inside the URL, which has remained unchanged since :

<https://stallman.org/stallman-computing.html>.

It was also part of the title from the start :

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<title>Computing Info</title>
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We can go further in our descriptions of this text by providing the following additional information :

¹We think while writing this of his series of books on *The History of Sexuality*, and in particular volume 2. Volume 1, contrary to a most sellable title, is in fact on the history of science : a history of the sciences of the mind, including psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis, which all filled the space, so our reading still, left vacant by religion and the practice of confession, replaced by various techniques of interviews of the patient (so-called “anamnesis”, etc.).

Computer Info

1. I use [Ututo GNU/Linux](#). I chose that distro because it has the policy of rejecting non-free software.
2. I occasionally use GNOME, but mostly I use a text console.
3. I spend most of my time editing in Emacs. I read and send mail with Emacs.
4. I have several free web browsers on my laptop, but I generally use my own machine only to talk with a few sites operated for or by the GNU Project, FSF or me.

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Figure 1: <https://stallman.org/stallman-computing.html> on 07-Nov-2006.

UTUTO GNU/Linux is an Ubuntu-based distribution (Gentoo-based before version 2017) developed by at the Universidad Nacional de Salta in Argentina. Named after a fidgety local lizard that pokes its nose into every hole²

Note also the lack of information on hardware (a category that would later appear).

It lacked the more complex structure of its present form, but such was the beginning of “How I do my computing”.

There are no further recorded changes or modifications in the year 2006 we could establish. This would remain so for at least another half-year.

²<https://distrowatch.com/table.php?distribution=ututo>

Mid-2007 : first changes, modifications (new OS and “programming languages”)

By May of 2017, at the latest³, Richard Stallman had decided the text needed some updating, and had changed his mind on a few things including the choice of his operating system :

Computer Info

1. I use [gNewSense](#), a GNU/Linux distro. I chose that distro because it has the policy of rejecting non-free software. There are two other installable distros that are entirely free: Ututo and BLAG. The FSF sysadmins prefer to maintain gNewSense because it is familiar to them, being similar to Debian, which is what we used to use.
2. I occasionally use GNOME for tasks that need graphics, but mostly I use a text console.
3. I spend most of my time editing in Emacs. I read and send mail with Emacs.
4. I have several free web browsers on my laptop, but I generally use my own machine only to talk with a few sites operated for or by the GNU Project, FSF or me. I will fetch web pages from other sites by sending mail to a program that runs wget.
5. The programming languages I use are Lisp and C. They are also my favorite languages. However, since around 1992 I have been very busy with free software activism, too busy to do much programming. As a result, I have not had time to learn newer languages such as Perl, Java, Python or Ruby.

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Figure 2: <https://stallman.org/stallman-computing.html> on 23-May-2007.

Here a new category, “programming languages”, makes an appearance

³There are no prior recorded changes in our sources we could find.

while (information regarding) hardware remains absent.

Notably, we learn here that before using or settling on Utoto first and then gNewSense, Richard Stallman had used Debian. A fact that makes sense if one considers that Debian has long, and perhaps always, advertised itself as “GNU/Linux” – it continues to do so as perhaps the last major distribution of its kind.

We can also add for context that this distribution is not, and was never in this recorded history⁴, recommended by the FSF / GNU as part of both sister publications “Explaining Why We Don’t Endorse Other Systems” and “Free GNU/Linux distributions”⁵.

A parallel history of the present text, and these other ones, provide light on both.

End of 2007 : DRM’s

To find more changes, one must wait for the end of that year : in December, at the latest still, Richard Stallman had added a new category, to cover a new aspect (danger) of computing : DRM’s.

It retained its original title of “Computer Info”.

Mid-2008 and beginning 2009 : hardware and “I refuse to install non-free software”

The last major change came in May of 2008⁶, when information on hardware used was given for the first time.⁷

In January of 2009, the hardware was replaced :

1. I stopped using the OLPC because the OLPC project made their machine act as a platform for running Windows. Now I use a Lemote machine which has a free startup program and all free software. Since the processor is a variant of MIPS, Windows does not support it.

Another category, 6., appeared :

6. I firmly refuse to install non-free software or tolerate its installed presence on my computer or on computers set up for me to use.

However, if I am visiting somewhere and the machines available nearby happen to contain non-free software, through no doing of mine, I don’t utterly refuse to touch them.

⁴Going as far back as 2009 on archive.org.

⁵See our references for further details on (digital) archival sources.

⁶Between May 9th and May 17th.

⁷There were no further recorded changes in 2008.

Computer Info

1. I use [gNewSense](#), a GNU/Linux distro. I chose that distro because it has the policy of rejecting non-free software. There are two other installable distros that are entirely free: Ututo and BLAG. The FSF sysadmins prefer to maintain gNewSense because it is familiar to them, being similar to Debian, which is what we used to use.
2. I occasionally use GNOME for tasks that need graphics, but mostly I use a text console.
3. I spend most of my time editing in Emacs. I read and send mail with Emacs using M-x rmail and C-x m. I edit the pages on this site with Emacs also.
4. I have several free web browsers on my laptop, but I generally use my own machine only to talk with a few sites operated for or by the GNU Project, FSF or me. I will fetch web pages from other sites by sending mail to a program that runs wget.
5. The programming languages I use are Lisp and C. They are also my favorite languages. However, since around 1992 I have been very busy with free software activism, too busy to do much programming. As a result, I have not had time to learn newer languages such as Perl, Java, Python or Ruby.
6. I believe that one should not buy any product with [Digital Restrictions Management](#) unless one personally possesses the means to break the DRM. I do not have a copy of DeCSS, so I do not buy (or accept as gifts) encrypted DVDs..

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Figure 3: <https://stallman.org/stallman-computing.html> on 21-Dec-2007.

Computer Info

1. I currently use an OLPC XO, with its normal Fedora-based GNU/Linux system. I switched to this machine because it has a free BIOS. I decided to run the machine's usual distro because I was not sure how much trouble it would be to get another distro, such as [gNewSense](#), to run on it.
2. I occasionally use X11 for tasks that need graphics, but mostly I use a text console.
3. I spend most of my time editing in Emacs. I read and send mail with Emacs using M-x rmail and C-x m. I edit the pages on this site with Emacs also.
4. I have several free web browsers on my laptop, but I generally use my own machine only to talk with a few sites operated for or by the GNU Project, FSF or me. I will fetch web pages from other sites by sending mail to a program that runs wget.
5. The programming languages I use are Lisp and C. They are also my favorite languages. However, since around 1992 I have been very busy with free software activism, too busy to do much programming. As a result, I have not had time to learn newer languages such as Perl, Java, Python or Ruby.
6. I believe that one should not buy or tolerate any product with [Digital Restrictions Management](#) unless one personally possesses the means to break the DRM. I do not have a copy of DeCSS, so I do not buy or rent encrypted DVDs, or even accept them as gifts. You shouldn't do so either.

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Figure 4: <https://stallman.org/stallman-computing.html> on 17-May-2008.

Conclusion

By then, we argue, “How I do my computing” had taken the form – though not the title – that we know today : hardware, software, Internet/Web, programming languages, miscellaneous, and socio-political implications.

On April 6th 2010, the latest, it appeared under its canonical title :

How I do my computing

1. I use a Lemote machine which has a free startup program and all free software.

...

Meanwhile, the title section of the source code holds : “How I do my Computing”. It still does.

Such was the history of “How I do my computing” in the first 2 or 3 years of its existence.

The start of a tradition of similar texts.

Birth of a category, and affirmation of beliefs.

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“Explaining Why We Don’t Endorse Other Systems”

<http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/common-distros.html> (archives going back to 2009)

<https://www.gnu.org/distros/common-distros.en.html> (archives going back to 2012)

“Free GNU/Linux distributions”

<https://www.gnu.org/distros/free-distros.html> (archives going back to 2009)