

# Friday Morning Assembly Speech: Free Software

Good morning,

you might have seen me around your school a few times, and wondered: Who is this guy, and why is he here? It is time to answer these questions.

The first one is answered quickly: My name is Joachim Breitner, I am a student of Mathematics and Computer Science in Karlsruhe, Germany, and I am what you can call a Computer Geek.

The second question does not take much longer: I volunteered to come to this school to promote the use of Free Software, particularly Linux.

But what is Free Software, and why do we need it?

Now, don't worry, this is a non-technical talk...

The modern society into which this school will eventually release you is heavily based on computers, and computers are controlled by – users? – no, the Software on these computers! In that sense, software has become an integral part of our society, whether we want it or not. It is not too much exaggeration to consider control over the computer as similarly important as the control over the paper, that is, the ability to write.

When it comes to writing, you have basically the freedom to write what you want, where you want, to whom you want, quoting what others wrote and so on. This is mostly what you have been learning to do the last eight to eleven years.

When it comes to computers, though, things are a bit different: The software you use, you have no right to share it with your friends, you are not allowed to study their inner workings or write your own variation of these. You can't even know if the software is not doing something you don't want, like spying on you!

Compared to writing, this would mean that the poems you write are actually fill-in form, that you raise your political opinion by answering multiple choice questions, and that your love-letters over the hostel's wall are one of a few pre-fabricated to choose from. Scribbling something between the lines is illegal, and if you pass the newspaper to your neighbor, you'll go to jail. This would not be accepted, but in the IT world, it is the standard!

But there is another way. A large world-wide movement of students, professional, companies and others have been spending their free time to create a different kind of software: “Free Software”, with the same “free” as in “free speech,” not “free beer”.

This software explicitly allows, no, encourages you to share the programs with your friends and families. It is meant to be studied and to be modified to your needs, and you can share your improvements. This is not a crime, it is a service to your fellows, and thus, a large community has evolved that includes millions of people from all around the globe.

Free Software is, for the most part, created by people for the benefit of themselves and others, and not for money, so the decisions made when creating these programs are not based on “does this help us make more money,” but “is this good for me, the users, everyone.” And even if you don't want to program, you can still contribute by suggesting improvements to the programs, and since you don't deal with large anonymous companies, people will probably actually listen to you! You also make friends world wide by joining this large community of programmers and users, and – as you can see – you get around.

Free Software can also play an important role in the IT development of countries like Ghana, as instead of paying large amounts of money to some foreign companies for software – and you just heard how much money Microsoft makes off you – you can build your IT economy on local skills, based on Free Software, and you can more easily adopt the software to the needs of a developing country, for example, by translating it to indigenous languages.

And if this did not convince you yet, you should still give Free Software a try. It is also just plain better, some say...

This does not have to stop at software. Inspired by the Free Software ideas, the community-based online encyclopedia “Wikipedia” was founded, this enormous collection of human knowledge, inviting everyone to add more information. The Creative Commons movement applies these ideals to content, that is music, videos, texts, encouraging re-mixes and deriving new content from present.

I'm looking forward to some discussion about Free Software, so if you have a comment or a question, please do come by, I'm located in Maslino's office.

Thank you for your attention, and enjoy your mid term break.