

Welcome to the world of Open Source Software

This letter introduces you to the world's fastest-growing and current best-practice method for developing and distributing computer programs, or "software". We hope to explain to you how it works, to make your first experience with it more rewarding and fulfilling, and to leave you confident and knowledgeable about Open Source Software.

What is Open Source Software?

Traditionally, a company making computer software would hire a team of experts, cloister them away somewhere for months or years and pay them lots of money to write a program which works the way the company thinks it should, and then selling that software either for a lot of money, or to a lot of people, or both.

Open Source software involves individuals putting together enough of a program to be useful to someone, and then publishing the plans to make that program so that others can use it, and extend it for them. The person or group who first wrote the program get it extended for free, and the people who are extending it get a head-start on what they wanted to do anyway.

As a side-effect, many people get access to useful, high-quality computer software essentially for free. However, it's a chore to hunt down and install, and if you have only a dial-up Internet connection or no connection at all it can be difficult or slow to get. We've selected some of the best and packaged it for you in this convenient collection.

The software is completely free of charge to use, and completely legal to copy and distribute, although we recommend that you obtain copies from a reseller because they are able to professionally produce the disk and booklet, and because they will keep their "image" of the disk up to date.

Because the source code (the plan, as it were) is also freely available, anybody in the world can take these programs and change them to make new or improved ones.

Some software requires that any modifications also be published; this subset of Open Source is called "Free" or "Libre" Software, because the software itself remains freed.

A common abbreviation of the phrase "Free and Open Source Software" is FOSS. FOSS can be sold in the same way that a free man can be hired.

What kinds of computers does it work with?

FOSS generally works with more kinds of computers than you would believe exist, but the disk which this letter comes with contains software packaged for MS Windows (versions 95, 98, ME, 2000, XP and 2003).

You will need some space on your hard disk (also called "HDD") to install software to. If you install absolutely everything on this disk, you might need a gigabyte or so. If you install just one or two games, maybe only a handful of megabytes. You can click (not double-click) on each of your hard disk letters (C:, D: and so on) in "My Computer" to see how much space is available.

Some larger programs may run very slowly if your memory (also called "RAM") is limited.

If you have a Macintosh running OS X, we recommend visiting Fink (<http://fink.sf.net/>) for similar FOSS products. We are considering putting together a disk for Macintosh users.

If you are running Linux or FreeBSD, your system should already have a suitable packaging system with "RPM", or "deb" or "pkg" in its name. There will also be graphical tools to manage these packages. For example, Mandriva Linux uses "rpm-drake", SuSE uses "YAST", Red Hat and Debian use Synaptic.

What do I do with this disk?

Insert the accompanying disk into your computer's drive, usually by pushing a button below a tray about 12cm wide to open it, placing the disk gently on the tray, shiny side down, and pushing the button again to draw the tray back in.

A web browser should open up and allow you to browse around and choose software to install. Because the original disk "image" has been put together on computers which essentially can't get viruses and spyware, if you have an original, it is safe to say "Yes" to any "do you really want to run this?" prompts.

How do I get support?

Start at <http://www.opensource.org.au/support> (open up a web browser and type "opensource.org.au/support" into the Location bar) to find people and businesses near you to help with any problems you may have.

The store you bought this from is not obligated to provide you any more support than large corporations typically offer with their products, typically none.

Many of those participating are highly service-oriented and will get you pointed in the right direction, or offer you discounted support for the first little while.

Others may offer to install the entire software suite for free or a very low fee (they have a special technique for doing this efficiently) if you buy it with one of their computers.

Regardless of what actual support the store itself offers, there are many people in the same position as yourself, and many others just a step or two ahead, who are ready and willing to help you because others helped them.

What is on the disk?

Here is a brief summary of each package, what it does, and what it doesn't do.

OpenOffice.org

Firefox

Thunderbird

GAIM

ClamAV

The GIMP

Blender3D

Dia

TuxPaint

PDFcreator

7Zip

Audacity

Celestia

Notepad2

SciTE

Sokoban

Battle for Wesnoth

LBreakout

[Others]