The Importance of Community to Linux

Presentation to Melbourne Linux UsersGroup

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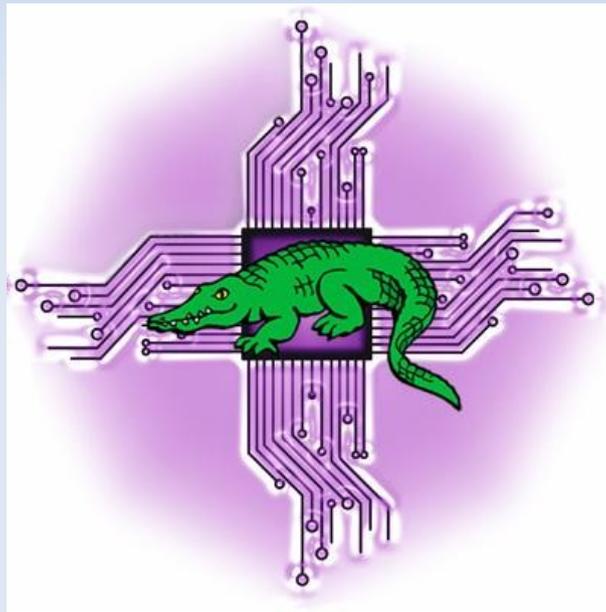
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1. Some Sociological Definitions

1.1 Societies consist of a lifeworld of meaning of personal interactions and associations and systems of institutional indirect interactions and formal associations (Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft).

1.2 Lifeworlds have ontological and historical priority over systems.

1.3 A community is an location (communitas, commune) where members of a lifeworld gather for the generation of meaning, of culture, and (nota bene) of systems. A culture is the sum of symbolic values (e.g., language, styles, etc) created within a community, as part of a lifeworld.

1.4 Systems are the institutional embodiement for the enforcement of positive and procedural rules of a society. It is expressed in a nascent model as the role differentiation in early societies with age and sex; institutionalised as the state in political rankings, and elaborated as semi-autonomous organisations in modern society with the distribution of capital.

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2.0 Society, Community, and Individual Personality
2.1 The social system and the community lifeworld are dominant in defining personality. We are products of our biological drives, our enculturation, our environment, and to a much lesser extent, our rationally evaluated positions.
2.2 Human personality is impossible outside of an encultured society; personality is represented through language, c.f., "Genie" and the critical age threshold for language acquisition.
2.3 Institutions not only have a profound effect on the individuals who interact with them; methodological individualism is a myth. The institutional environment of a person changes their behaviour (e.g., Milgram obedience to authority experiment, The Third Wave Cubberley High School experiment, Stanford prison experiment); indeed any structured content changes perception (e.g., Asch conformity experiments). This can be partially explained through the model of moral disengagement.
2.4 Because institutions are developed with systematic rules they develop autopoietically, they also develop their own pseudo-personalities.
2.5 There are notable crossover effects; the system has lifeworld influences, the lifeworld has system influences.

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3. Linux: Part of the Free Software Community

3.1 The Linux kernel as a technical artefact is an absolutely necessary, but not sufficient component of the cultural phenomenon. It is unimaginable that the Linux kernel would be as successful as it has been if it was released as a proprietary product.

3.2 Likewise it must be recognised that Linux (the kernel) is part of a family of products. Its existence requires the existence of these products as part of a mutual symbiotic ecosystem. The Free Software Foundation's call for Linux to be called "GNU Linux" has validity.

3.3 Linux is part of a wider free software community; "a technical means to a social end". With Linux it operates from the inside out (the kernel to the desktop environment). With GNU applications it colonises proprietary software from the desktop environment towards the kernel.

3.4 The successful foundation of the free software movement is based on a requisite combination of moral and technical justifications. The moral justification that software ought to be "free and open source" is matched by the technical justification that such software is easier to manage in an administrative sense is is superior.

3.5 The Free Software Community is part of the free culture movement, which promotes creative works without overly restrictive licenses (e.g., Creative Commons, Copyleft), and the smaller open source hardware movement (c.f., conflict with Makerbot's Replicator 2).

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4. Linux as a Systems Project

4.1 Because the technical success of Linux has translated into measurable business benefits, systems organisations have also seen the benefit of participating in the development of the kernel and other free software applications. In 2011 the Linux Foundation reported (conservatively) "over 75% of all kernel development is demonstrably done by developers who are being paid for their work". Major corporations that contributed to the kernel included: Red Hat 11.9%, Novell 6.4%, Intel 6.2%, IBM 6.1%, Oracle 2.1%, Nokia 1.2%, Fujitsu 1.2%, & etc. "Academia" collectively represents around 1.3%. The largest single group remains "Volunteers", "Unknown", "None", & etc.

4.2 Businesses like free software as it reduces costs. An experiment between an Linux operating environment and an equivalent Microsoft (c.f., http://levlafayette.com/node/252) shows a reduction of c$1500 per annum, primarily due to operating costs; it breaks less and is easier to fix.

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4. Linux as a Systems Project cont..

4.3 The logic of our business environment is to seek competitive advantage (c.f., Michael Porter) through business activities or product differentation. Much of Porter's theory of "competitive advantage" is actually about behaving in a monopolistic fashion. Monopolistic companies (e.g., proprietary software companies) provide "damaged goods". Free software also provides positive externalities (e.g., through reducing replicated research, generalising opportunity).

4.4 There are two major issues that confront Linux as a community with reference to the system involvement:

4.4.1 The first is the conflict between "free software" (which is a moral and technical claim) and "open source" software which is "pragmatic" to business interests, other semi-free licenses (e.g., BSD license), or hybrid licenses (partially damaged goods). Needs to be distinguished from extensions and bespoke software; technical support, education, etc.

4.4.2 The second issue is that there is an increasing conflict between the general welfare and the individual welfare in individual goods. Free software is a public good (non-excludable and non-rivalrous), which means it has an inbuilt tendancy towards a free-rider problem. Information goods will increasingly tend towards a zero cost of reproduction, but with an increasing cost to produce ("cost disease of the service sector"). Therefore, individual businesses will be prone to corporate social parasitism extracting as much as they can from the near limitless pool of free sofware and contributing as little as possible.

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5. The Linux Community in Practise

5.1 The wordwide and Australian Linux community is responsible for organising major educational and advocacy events (e.g., conferences, user-group meetings), along with making extremely contributions to the code-base. To some extent this communities are systematically integrated (i.e., through incorporated associations), through donations and funding from businesses, trust-funds etc.

5.2 Diversity is one of our great strengths; the fact that we have separate community organisations for specific technologies (e.g., Perl/Python/PHP/Ruby & etc, Drupal, Mozilla Developers, LibreOffice, the Linux kernel, various GNU utilities etc), geographies (various localised user groups), and social needs (e.g,. Ada Initiative) allows for an effective and relevant specialisation of tasks and issues.

5.3 However in order to be effective as well as diverse, especially in the face of potential threats to the core principles of the community, there has to be effective networking which provides efficiencies of scale, encourages the diversity of different groups, and ensures that relevant communication channels are open. (For that reason, MLUG should be the Melbourne chapter of LUV).