# THE DARK SIDE OF FREE SOFTWARE COMMUNITIES
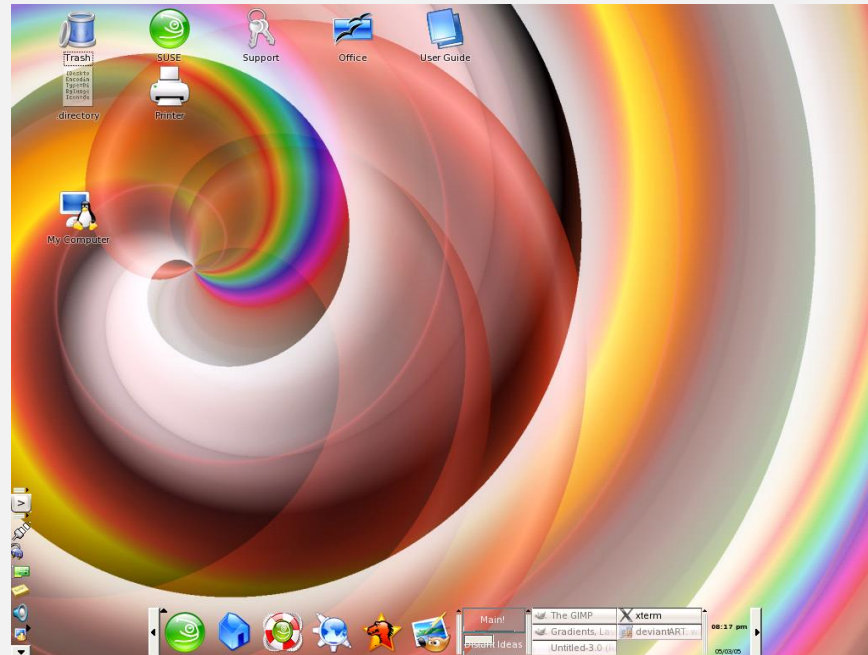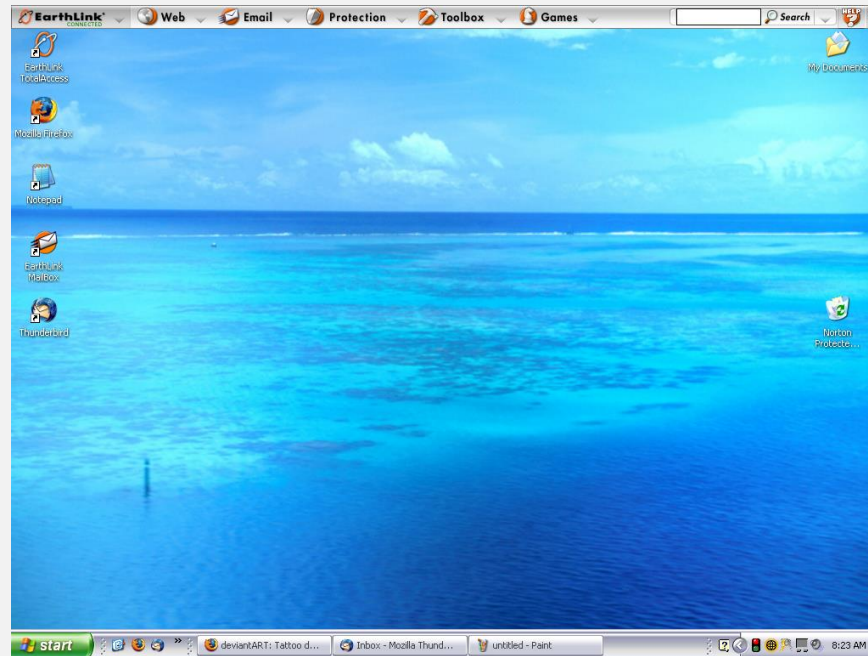
Morgan Gangwere

LibrePlanet 2018

# WHO AM I?

- Communications major at the University of New Mexico

- Long-time hacker-type

- Been using Linux (Debian, Arch, Ubuntu, RedHat, Fedora, LFS) since ~2005 or so

- Dirty Heretic

- I study *how people talk in group*.

- I've written a lot about the opensource/free software movement.

# "THAT KID"

# "THAT KID"

# THIS TALK MADE POSSIBLE BY

My friends and mentors.

We don't have an infinite amount of time, so talk with yours.

# WARNING

This talk isn't going to be kind.

```
(DEF ADVOCATE (SOMETHING))
```

- What is a free software advocate?

  - Us?

  - Other people?

  - Specific people?

- Everyone here is, and everyone can be, a free software advocate.

- Advocates help others find what free software works for them

# WHAT TIM COOK THINKS ABOUT YOU NOT USING APPLE PRODUCTS

I'LL BET SOME OF YOU ARE HERETICS, LIKE ME.
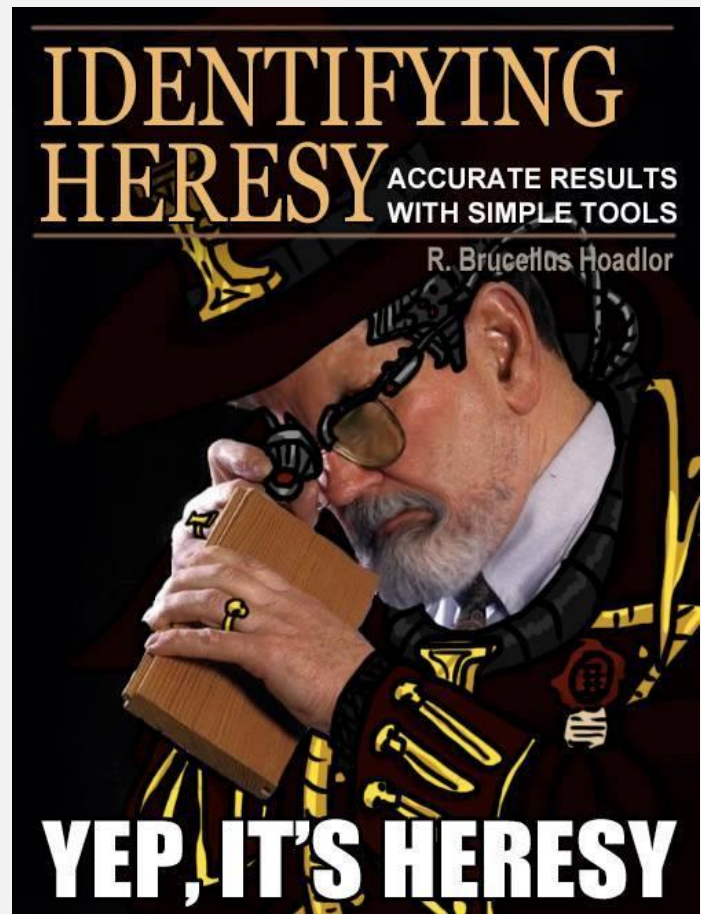
# USE ANY OF THESE THINGS?

- iOS/OSX/any Apple product
- Android (not Replicant)
- Android (with GApps)
- ARM-based routers (TP-link, etc) w/o OpenWRT*
- Raspberry Pi
- Gmail
- Chrome
- Hosted email (Google, Exchange, etc.)
- VMWare
- Facebook/Messenger

- Feature phones
- IoT devices
- Fitbit/wearables
- PXE network booting (without iPXE)
- Twitter
- Spotify
- Steam
- Telegram/WhatsApp/Signal
- Hardware that uses blobs (b43, etc)

# IDENTIFYING HERESY

**ACCURATE RESULTS WITH SIMPLE TOOLS**

R. Brucellus Hoadlor

# YEP, IT'S HERESY

# WHY SHOULD I CARE?

# SOFTWARE. IS. PEOPLE.

**kushaldas**
@kushaldas

Follow

Take a screenshot of this tweet from @jessfraz, take a printout, put it up in the wall beside your monitor. Read it everyday couple of times. #dgplug folks, do it.

> **jessie frazelle** @jessfraz
>
> As much as you think open source is all about the code, it's really about the people.

10:01 AM - 15 Jan 2018

# HOW WE TALK TO EACH OTHER MATTERS

- First impressions are hard to break

- How people encounter free software is rarely neutral and early impressions are often through media consumption

- Lots of people don't *realize* they're using free software.

- We have some *history* to get past.

TRUST IS EARNED IN DROPS AND LOST IN BUCKETS

# BEFORE WE BEGIN: SOME TERMS AND TOOLS

- The Overton window: The bell curve of what a particular group or individual is willing to consider "normal" vs "radical" or "unthinkable" ($\pm 2\Sigma$)

- Window of acceptance: the $1\sigma$ window around normal.

- The "Three Times": The times something was created in, intended to be consumed in, and is being consumed in now.

- Creeping Normality: The process that shifts the center of the Overton window; a gradual acceptance of ideas in a larger culture about a specific idea.

- Social/Technical Friction Coefficient: how hard it is for someone to use a tool or platform, *especially* a social one (e.g. Facebook/Twitter vs. Mastodon)

# GRAVIS ASKS FOR HELP

Or, "Free Software is a Tire Fire" in 3 acts.

# "THAT WAS A MISTAKE"



Gravis!
@gravislizard

have I told you the story of the time that I asked #freebsd for help? God that was a fucking MISTAKE.

TL;DR: Gravis wants to boot off IDE in a system with only a master IDE channel.

A second IDE controller is added to host the boot drive for a bit…

# GRAVIS ASKS FOR HELP

**Gravis!** @gravislizard · 28 Feb 2017

so i went to #freebsd and asked "where is the boot process configured?" and literally nobody would answer me

💬 1     🔁     ♡     ✉

**Gravis!** @gravislizard · 28 Feb 2017

i instantly got "why aren't you using the SCSI? you should fix that instead of using this workaround."

💬 1     🔁     ♡ 1     ✉

**Gravis!** @gravislizard · 28 Feb 2017

never mind that it wasn't a workaround. i EXPLICITLY told them "I want to use the IDE for the OS and SCSI for storage"

💬 1     🔁     ♡ 1     ✉

# GRAVIS REGRETS ASKING FOR HELP.

**Gravis!** @gravislizard · 28 Feb 2017

nope, that didn't matter. they "knew" i was trying to cop out of doing things the "right" way and wouldn't drop it.

💬 1  🔁  ♡  ✉

**Gravis!** @gravislizard · 28 Feb 2017

this wasn't one dude either this was like four or five separate shitheads all insulting me to my face and calling me a liar.

💬 2  🔁  ♡ 1  ✉

**Gravis!** @gravislizard · 28 Feb 2017

one of them even declared he was NOT GOING TO WASTE HIS TIME WITH ME ANY FURTHER until I agreed to use the SCSI

💬 1  🔁  ♡ 1  ✉

# GRAVIS ASKS FOR HELP

- Asked for help in #freebsd because of a problem

- Got told his entire approach was wrong

  - The fact that this is possible boggles the mind.

- Now left with a bad experience

- Reflects this on the larger free software community

# GRAVIS' EXPERIENCE ISN'T UNIQUE

And is astonishingly typical of how we treat even experienced users.

Dear 2600:

I thought IRC was for chat, 2600 for learning, but I guess I was wrong there. Repeatedly on IRC, I have been flamed by people saying I wasn't "cool" or "l33t" because I was using Windows and mIRC (an IRC client that is considered lame by the "elitists" on #2600). My Windows computer has DSL, and my FreeBSD and Linux computers don't have Ethernet cards or internal DSL modems. I do not want to go out and buy these because I simply do not have enough money and time to configure them. So I choose to use Windows. (All this to explain to you why I don't use Linux or FreeBSD with the Internet, just so you don't think I'm a lamer.) Another thing, I have found it is now trendy to use a type of UNIX over Windows so you can flame those who don't. My friend told me he was sitting in #linux one day and he saw someone coming in. The person had a question because he was new to Linux. The question was "how do I set up PPP outside of X Windows on Linux?" He was flamed repeatedly and then when my friend tried to tell him the answer, he was kicked and, I found out afterwards, the person with the question was kicked and banned. That made me

# THE SMALLER THE KINGDOM, THE LARGER THE TYRANT

- Seen in small projects especially

  - Telegram's Android client, for example.

- Local groups are rife with problems

  - *The Empress Has No Clothes* a prime example of localized fiefdom abuse: *https://medium.com/@marlene.jaeckel/the-empress-has-no-clothes-the-dark-underbelly-of-women-who-code-and-google-women-techmakers-723be27a45df*

- Every negative interaction someone has tints their view darker.

# LIKE MENTOR, LIKE STUDENT

- Mentor emulation: perceived successful individuals are looked up to by younger members of the community

- These mentors are often seen for

  - abusive behavior <u>sensationalized by the media</u> (e.g. Torvalds)

  - radical ideas and writing (e.g. Stallman)

  - (in)famy/name-cult (e.g. ESR)

  - abusive behavior among contributors (e.g. De Raadt)

- These behaviors self-perpetuate because their actions get results. Punching someone gets a lot more conversation than being nice.

# MENTOR PERCEPTION EXPRESSION IN MEMES



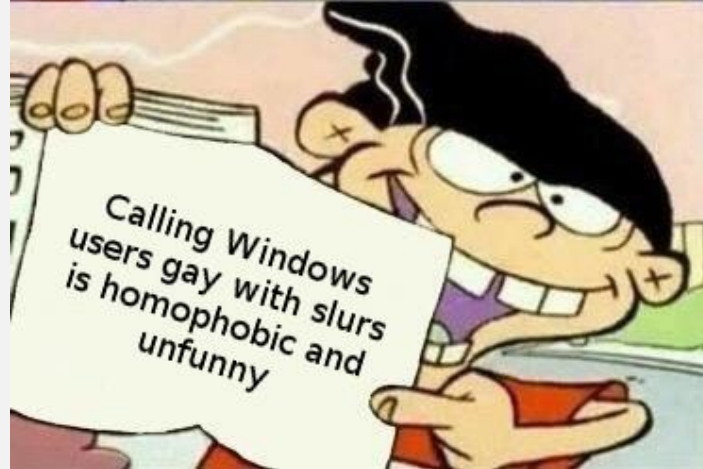Comrade Stallman Sends Dirty Bourgeoisie to the GNUlag

# CONTEMPT FOR WINDOWS USERS IS A PROBLEM

- Windows users told "ditch windows, use linux" or given a table of "forget $PRODUCT and learn $OTHERTHING"

- Most users don't have that ability/knowledge/skillset/time

  - "install an operating system" might as well be "Perform open-heart surgery on yourself" to many people.

- FSF contempt is idolized…

(The next slide isn't nice.)

# THIS TRICKLES DOWN

# HOW MANY OFFICE SUITES TO DO MY HOMEWORK

- Libere office suites seem to be a dime a dozen

- LibreOffice, SIAG Office, KOffice, OpenOffice, OnlyOffice

- Students use word because *their grade often depends on it.*

  - Sometimes, Word 95 VBA macros are what makes the difference between passing or failing.

  - Schools *do not give a shit* that LibreOffice didn't handle that obscure ActiveX control. *They provide Word, students should use that.*

  - Simple rendering differences can mean a grade difference.
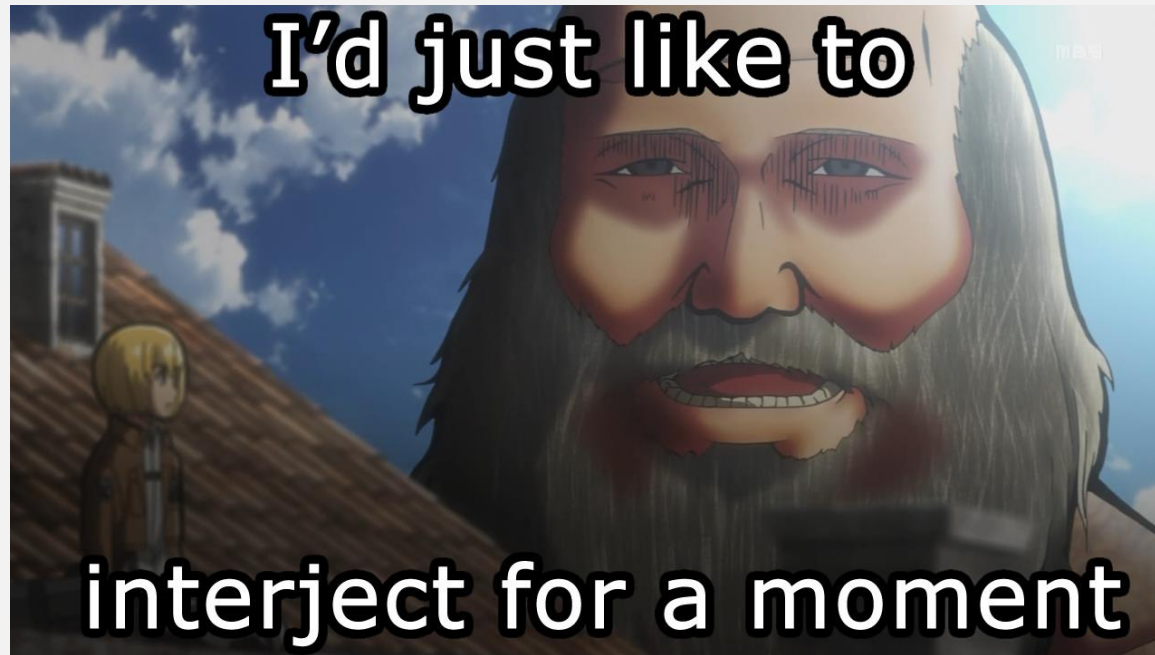
- ODT is great, except when it's not

# GATEKEEPING

- Goes with contempt, but applied to our own members

- "Install Gentoo"

- Just another variant on the No True Scotsman argument in many cases

# RIGHT-SPEECH

- The idea that there should only be one way of describing something or expressing ideas

- "Open Source" vs "Free Software"
  - Learn from Cyberpunk: Language evolves quickly and you don't own it.

- Linguistics would like to mention
  - English is a minefield of a language
  - We suck at talking
  - Humans err.
  - Language is evolutionary

# ELITISM

- Goes hand-in-hand with the contempt

- Sees criticism as a reason to disregard

- A form of inculpability

- Generally the result of mentor emulation

# WHAT DOES THIS TELL US?



Gravis! @gravislizard · 28 Feb 2017
This experience is universal. Everyone who runs this software is either self-taught through agonizing repetitive trial and error>

Gravis! @gravislizard · 28 Feb 2017
> or tried to get help and got insulted and told they were doing everything wrong and gave up long ago. For good reason.

Gravis! @gravislizard · 28 Feb 2017
Not just FOSS, it's everything computery online. Every forum has always been completely packed with sneering fuckheads who spit insults.

Gravis! @gravislizard · 28 Feb 2017
They're never helpful. They're never sympathetic. They don't care about your goals or interests. They see everything as academic.

Gravis! @gravislizard · 28 Feb 2017
They approach these projects that should be labors of love and often nostalgia with scowls and a workmanlike demeanor

In closing, we must rethink our approach to answering questions on forums and in chat clients. I challenge each and every single one of you to think about your responses to new users or those limited in knowledge. Helping these people to attain knowledge in different capacities can make or break their will and create a friend of open source for life…or through not helping, a foe.

# GRAVIS, ETC. ARE EARLY WARNING SIGNS

- Free Software communities need to be helpful.

- Fiefdoms lead to tyrants

- Perceived reasons for success are more important than the actual reasons for success.

- Newcomers don't have a good view of us as a community

  - Perception is formed early
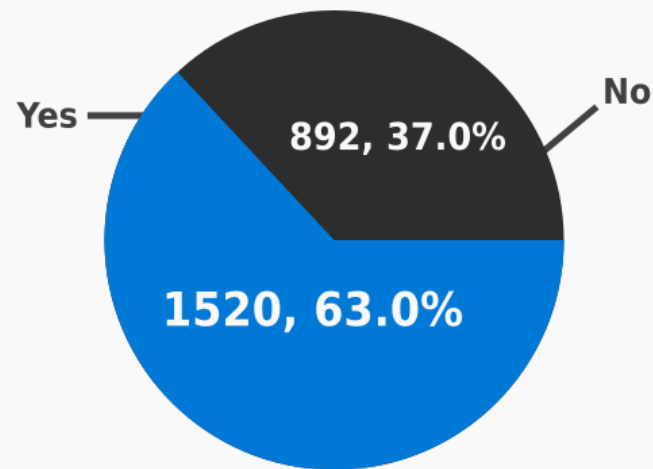
# NOT ALL IS TERRIBLE

- Good communities exist. I'm sure yours is one of them

- Communities like /r/LaTeX and /r/unixporn are great examples of Doing Things Right™

  - /r/LaTeX sees people from all backgrounds, has a clear set of guidelines. Rarely sees bans or deletions

  - /r/unixporn encourages really technical stuff, still is OK with "my first rice"

# /R/UNIXPORN: WE RUN WINDOWS.

# WHAT DO WE DO, THEN?

# CREATE GOOD MENTORS

- In your own communities, seed the land with mentors who are encouraging

- Call out behavior which is abusive, nip it in the bud
  - Witch-hunting
  - Contempt
  - Gatekeeping

- Encourage positive behavior: Give praise when praise brings good people to light.

# RE-EVALUATE YOUR COC

- What's its story? Has it been used?
- Does it actually do anything or does it hang over the community like a Sword of Damocles?
- Good CoCs are clear, concise:
  - Clear about what is/isn't OK
  - Clear about what happens when it's violated
  - Don't include "what ifs" until you need them.
- Good CoCs define scope: Your project. *Nothing else.*
- See also, SE LinuxFest talk "Your Project Needs A Code Of Conduct, OR ELSE" https://youtu.be/mrmOtSzQ_VI

# GIVE YOUR MODS POWER, KEEP THEM CULPABLE

- Moderators should be able to handle immediate problems
  - Spam is a problem everywhere.
  - Sometimes an individual needs to be removed then and there *temporarily*
  - Your conversation channels should be project-related. Keep free discussion to a minimum or otherwise benign
- Actively avoid those who seek power

- Moderators must be culpable
  - No permanent removal should come from one person
- "Go to sleep angry"
- Remove moderators who abuse
  - This is where witch hunts live.
- Listen to dissent: dissent is an expression of oversight or miscommunication on your part.
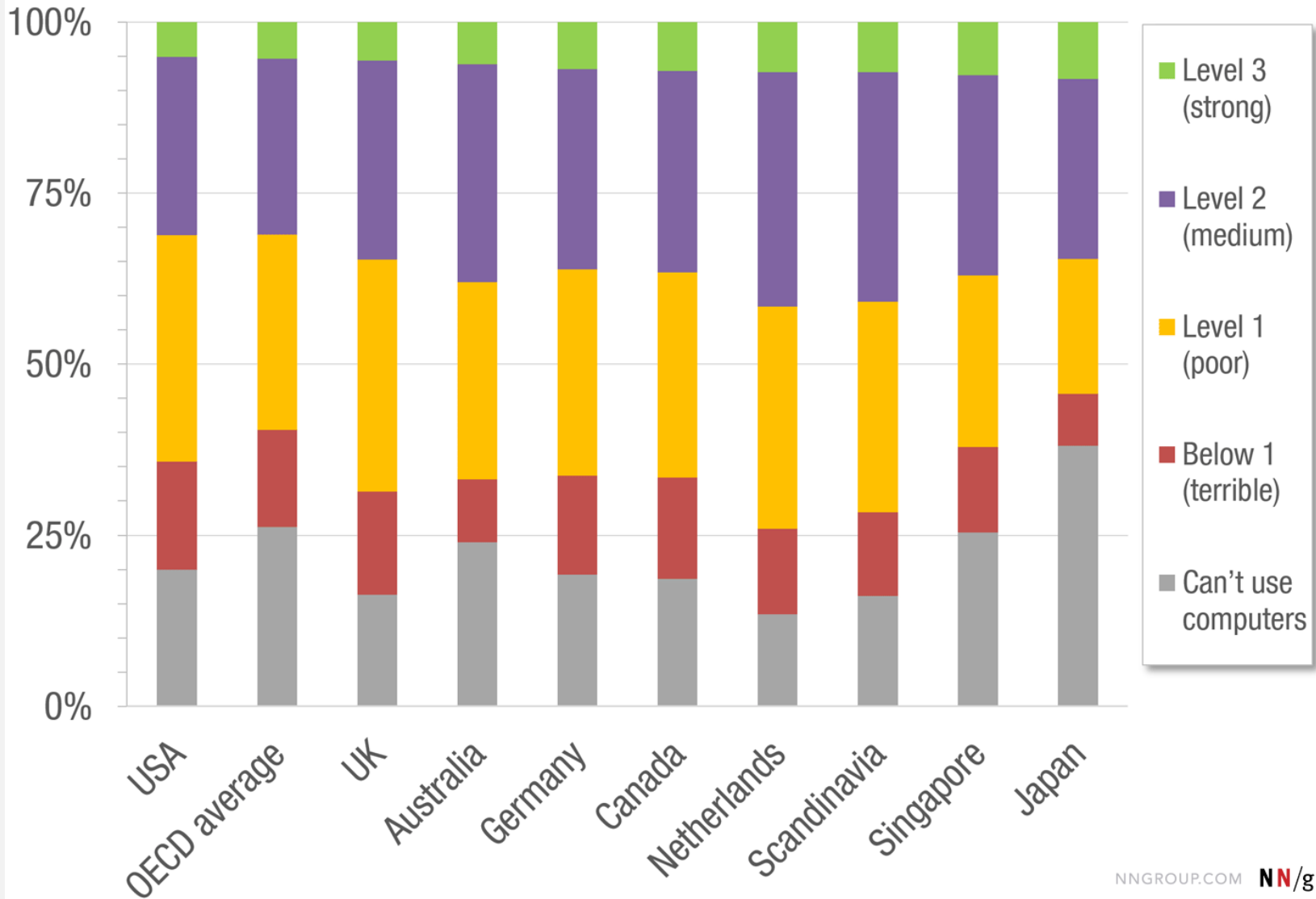
# ASSUME GOOD INTENT

- Don't toss a community member because they give a bad answer

  - Be a model example

  - Reword bad answers as good answers

- Don't disregard a newcomer for not being an expert

  - Especially important in user-facing support channels

  - Rephrase and confirm. It might be a known thing

- Hanlon's Razor is in effect at all times.

# WE ARE THE 0.05%

- Neilson Norman Group organized OECD data about computer usage skills

  - https://www.nngroup.com/articles/computer-skill-levels/

- The top 5% can perform more than basic tasks

- Troubleshooting of most any kind is possibly outside reach

Distribution of Computer Skills Among People Aged 16–65

Legend:
- Level 3 (strong)
- Level 2 (medium)
- Level 1 (poor)
- Below 1 (terrible)
- Can't use computers

Y-axis: 0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, 100%

X-axis categories: USA, OECD average, UK, Australia, Germany, Canada, Netherlands, Scandinavia, Singapore, Japan

NNGROUP.COM    N N /g

So why do some newcomers walk away from Linux/BSD decrying open source operating systems and calling the community members highfalutin? Mostly because they failed to work through what Seth Godin identifies as "The Dip" and proceed to misconstrue community values and attitudes. To experience the best things Linux/BSD have to offer, users must reorient themselves and learn to think about computing a little differently. For a user accustomed to GUIs, the command line can seem daunting and trivial, but after becoming more familiar, the user will recognize that the command line interface is an elegant, if not zen-like experience. The same goes for building software from source. So what the wounded newcomers sometimes interpret as condescension is actually more along the lines of teaching someone to ride a bicycle. It's not difficult to do, but it can only be done if the rider pushes through the initial doubt and confusion in order to experience the benefits.

# AS A LARGER COMMUNITY

- Rebuild bridges we burned earlier
  - *Did someone say "Hanlon's razor"?*
- Celebrate small victories *like we did in the 90's and 00's.*
- Be more lenient of others
  - We are still on the edge of the overton window
  - Not everyone can handle being in a purely FOSS environment
- Sometimes… Free software *sucks.*
  - Ask me about DarkTable some time.
  - Watch Micah Elizabeth Scott (@scanlime) try to use FreeCAD

# IT'S TIME TO GROW UP.

- The broader Free Software/FOSS community is immature and/or abusive.

- Phrases like "Micro$haft" and the like aren't becoming
  - It's what you expect high-school bullies to do
  - It's *literally* playground tactics. Name-calling is *literally* childish behavior.

- It's our job to be model citizens of the Free Software world

THANK YOU