Proposal for a Free Software Skillshare Project in Durham

By mark@aktivix.org

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Introduction

I wrote the first draft of this document back in March thinking that it'd just take a couple of weeks to get a final version together, so I sent it to lots of people and asked for input. The response has been great, to the extent that each time I tried to revise this proposal, something new and excellent made me stop and reconsider what I was about to write. That's still happening, but after many face-to-face and on-line discussions, I'm trying to heed the maxim 'release early, release often[i]', with the understanding that it'll never be finished, yet needs to be written now.

The next section is the 'why' of what the project needs to do, and the following ones present the 'how'. As you read it, keep in mind that the people who have contributed these ideas have a wide range of different beliefs and values – that is one of our strengths. But this also means that you won't necessarily agree with all of what I've gathered together here. Whilst I think it forms a coherent whole, criticism and discussion are encouraged, and you don't need to agree with all of it in order to participate. We only (ever) need to agree on what our next step is going to be, in order to take it together.

Some Problems That Demand Our Attention

1. **Inequalities.** Those of us with low incomes can be excluded from the on-line world because computers are presented to us as commodities that cost money, which we might need to spend on other things. But what if we were to view unfettered access to the internet as a right, rather than a commodity[ii]? At the moment people with less disposable income are likely to be excluded from using the internet. In the last millennium, this might not have seemed like a big deal, but as more and more information exchange happens electronically – as the web becomes ubiquitous - the effects of exclusion are amplified[iii]. Some examples of how this works are felt through difficulty applying for state benefits and applying for jobs, exclusion from social and cultural groups, limits to entertainment and other cultural activities, difficulty keeping oneself informed of current affairs and participating in campaigns, and barriers to learning. *We need to decouple internet access from wealth.*

2. **Environmental harms.** The manufacture, distribution and disposal of computers has a high environmental cost[iv]. Demand for new computers drives demand for extraction of minerals, which is unsustainable and causes harm to the environments that people and other life depends on[v]. As with most manufacturing and distribution, carbon dioxide emissions result which are rapidly pushing the globe towards a point of no return, after which catastrophic climate change will become inevitable[vi]. Not only is this climate change already causing famine and wars in the global South, those countries are also the most likely to suffer from having our toxic e-waste dumped on them[vii]. In the face of this, we all have a responsibility to reduce our consumption and disposal of computers. *We need to re-use what we can, and recycle the rest.*

3. **Social harms.** Durham's communities have a heritage which is strongly linked to mining. Mining in the UK has become much safer than it used to be[viii], thanks to the struggles of trade unionists and other social reformers. Yet in other parts of the world, conditions for miners – many of whom are children – are similar to those that a ten-year-

old Peter Lee would have recognised in the 19th century. An additional problem is that much of the extraction perpetuates conflicts, which is why the ores are sometimes called "conflict resources[ix]." The conditions in which computers are manufactured (usually in far-eastern countries) are so bad that there are very high suicide rates amongst the workers[x]. When you consider the unequal global distribution of these problems and the environmental harms mentioned above, it seems that our high-tech global capitalism uses a neo-colonial process to exploit people in less-developed countries. Corporate empires are free to exploit land and people who are less well-protected than us, in the same way that nation-state empires did in previous centuries. But because consumerism hides the effects of our purchasing behaviour from us, people who would reject imperialism are unaware that we're caught up in the same kind of dynamic. *We need to reject exploitation and imperialism by not funding it with our purchases.*

4. **Digital freedoms matter.** Proprietary, closed-source operating systems like Windows function in ways that are a mystery to its users, because however much they study the way it works, they can't read the computer code that drives it. If there was a bug that compromised your computer's security, or even an intentional "back door" to enable spying, you probably wouldn't find out until Microsoft released that information. However with free software, which is open for anyone to inspect, you can check it for yourself if you know how. Or you can look at how many people, from all over the world, are working on a project in their spare time and checking each others' work. Which would you rather trust? And would you rather be a customer, or part of a global community that supports you, encourages learning and experimentation[xi]? *You don't know what freedom is if you've never seen it, so let's show our communities what it looks like.*

5. **We are being lied to.** Computers running proprietary operating systems are designed to have a short life-cycle, in order to make us think that we need to buy a new machine every few years. This is achieved by withdrawing support for 'old' systems, introducing unnecessary incompatibility in new products, and providing software 'updates' that effectively degrade performance. Advertising bombards us with messages about how a the latest computer gimmick or shiny gadget will make us happier and more successful. The combined result of these two artifices is to stimulate unnecessary consumption. The negative consequences of excessive consumption described above are hidden from view. People discard computers that can easily be made useful again, unaware that they have a choice that is more profound than choosing which brand or colour their new toy will be; the choice to take control for themselves. By installing the right software, almost any computer bought in the last 10 years, and many older ones (barring hardware failures), can be made good enough for most people's needs. *We need to show people that there is a viable alternative, right here and now, and put the tools they need into their hands.*

A Solution

There is a free Operating System which can replace Windows on your PC or laptop, called GNU/Linux. "Free" in this sense means that it's been developed by people in an open, collaborative way, and you can share it and change it as much as you like, without having to ask or pay anyone; also it's available free-of-charge in several different varieties.

Some of the advantages of using GNU/Linux are:

1. It can extend the life of old-ish computers that would otherwise go to waste

2. By doing so, it reduces excessive consumption and waste, with all the problems they cause.

3. You can get a few-years-old computer for free from someone who doesn't want it anymore, install some free software, and you've got a useful computer even if you've no cash to spend.

4. Because the software was developed openly, you can be more confident that it doesn't contain "back-doors" which enable people to spy on you. There are also far fewer problems with viruses and other malware.

5. You get access to a vast amount of free software that runs on GNU/Linux – everything from web-browsers to games to music-making and graphics.

6. You become part of a friendly, global community who are happy to help you if you get stuck with something – you won't need to pay for technical support (unless you want to).

7. Because of its open nature, Linux actively encourages you as a user to learn about its internal workings, so you can learn how to fix it yourself just like you can learn to fix your own bicycle.

The Proposal

Some people can figure all of this out for themselves, but most of us could use a bit of support when we take our first steps in a new way of doing things. And even if you can do-it-yourself, doing-it-with-others can be more fun.

We have been offered the use of a large room at the Durham Miners' Hall, and have planned to hold our first skillshare session there on **Saturday, July 26th 2014 from 10am to 3pm**. Hopefully this will be the first of many – whoever turns up and joins in will get a say in what happens next.

Draft Programme for July 26th

9.30	Facilitator and volunteers arrive and set up space, power and networking
10.00	Participants arrive. Welcome and introductions.
10.15	On a whiteboard or flip-chart, write a list of what every participant wants to achieve today. Examples might include "get linux installed on this laptop", "find a free alternative to program x", "get program y to perform function z", "learn how to encrypt my emails", "get my free software to work with this printer", etc.
10.30	Volunteers *and all participants* look at the list and pick tasks that they are able to help with. Facilitator aims to ensure that all tasks are covered, and that everyone gets a chance to contribute something if they want to.
10.45	Morning work time. People form small groups of 2 or 3, to work on each task separately.
12.30	Picnic lunch (bring your own) in the grounds
13.00	Afternoon work time, opportunity to work with different people / on other tasks, still in small groups.

14.00	Feedback session: someone from each small group says what they did. If they have unresolved problems, other people might suggest solutions. People who've learned new skills might say whether they could show someone else how to do it next time.
14.30	What next – discuss what we want to do next month, planning, room booking, share out tasks to make it happen.

Suggestions so far include:

1. "Install-fest" - a session aimed at getting new users up and running by helping to install and configure free software on their computer.
2. "Free Software Clinics" - anyone who has a problem with their free software (especially beginners) can come and get help and guidance from people who are either experts, or just know how to solve a particular problem because they've done it before.
3. Themed skillshares: participants choose a topic they want to know more about, study it and present their findings to the group as a talk or demonstration, also make use of any expertise within the group. |
| 15.00 | Finish |

Next Steps

In order to make this happen, here are some things that need to be done now:

- Recruit volunteers – you don't need to be an expert; for example, as long as you've managed to install GNU/Linux once, you can show someone else how to do it. Experts of course will be very welcome, to help the rest of us when we get stuck...

- Design posters/fliers (David has volunteered, need to work on content together)

- Advertise the session online and to people without internet access, by suitable placement of posters, fliers, word of mouth, through other groups.

- Set up an email address, phone number, mailing list and blog (I'm working on this – announcement to follow)

- Social media???

- Introduce participants who need a computer to people who have old ones to donate

- Devise a 'booking' system so we know how many people to expect on the day

i   Raymond, Eric (1997) *The Cathedral and the Bazaar: Musings on Linux and Open Source by an Accidental Revolutionary*. http://www.catb.org/~esr/writings/cathedral-bazaar/cathedral-bazaar/ar01s04.html (retrieved 1.5.2014)

ii As advocated, for example, by the World Wide Web Foundation, http://webfoundation.org/

iii Gibson, William (2003) "The future is already here– it's just not evenly distributed." cited at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Gibson#Visionary_influence_and_prescience (the original is behind a paywall, ironicallly)

iv For example, http://www.carnegiecyberacademy.com/facultyPages/environment/issues.html

v   For example, http://www.savethesantacruzaquifer.info/Chemicals.htm

vi The largest and highest quality collection of data on this threat has been collected in the reports of the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, http://www.ipcc.ch/

vii Vidal, John (2013) *Toxic 'e-waste' dumped in poor nations, says United Nations*
http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2013/dec/14/toxic-ewaste-illegal-dumping-developing-countries (retrieved 3.5.2014)

viii Durham Mining Museum *"Disasters" http://www.dmm.org.uk/mindex.htm* (retreived 3.5.14)

ix See summary at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conflict_resource

x   For example, management at one Chinese factory concerned about its poor image have forced workers to promise not to kill themselves: http://idle.slashdot.org/story/11/05/04/1511253/chinese-ipad-factory-staff-forced-to-sign-no-suicide-pledge

xi A good starting point for learning more about the benefits of free/libre/open-source software ("FLOSS") is the Free Software Foundation Europe: https://fsfe.org/. A good starting point for reading about digital rights and freedoms in general is the Electronic Frontier Foundation: https://www.eff.org/