A new era of collaboration

WORKING TOGETHER

Diversity within the Ubuntu community is one of its greatest strengths.

BY JONO BACON

When I first got involved in Linux back in 1998, you basically had to be a dork to get involved. If you didn't write C code, hack Makefiles, or use vi or emacs, you were unlikely to survive in the dog-eat-dog world of Linux in the nineties. It was a highly technical system, and the internals were hanging out for everyone to see. Although some people were intimidated by the coarse technical nature of Linux, others saw it as an exciting world of opportunity.

In 2011, the world is very different. Today you don't need to be a rocket scientist to participate – you can help with documentation, translations, art, design, advocacy, and a range of other areas. You can still dial the geek up to 11, but it is no longer a requirement to participate. I am incredibly proud of the work accomplished in this area in the Ubuntu community. Together we have made this community a place that is welcoming and encouraging for everyone, regardless of your technical expertise, where you live, what language you speak, or other distinguishing factors.

It took time to get where we are today. Back in the early noughties, the diversity of our community really started forming. Although few will argue the benefit of different skills aligning to produce content, services, and facilities, there was some tension in this transition. That tension mainly stemmed from the differences in how people participate.

One example is the phenomenon of RTFM – when less technical users asked for help and were told to "Read The < ahem > Manual." This example highlights two very different approaches; most end users and non-technical users don't naturally read instructions or manuals, but more technical developers often rely on manuals for important documentation to help them do their work. From a technical standpoint, it is easy to criticize someone for not reading a manual, but doing so doesn't get to the heart of the expectations and behaviors of different users. Rightly or wrongly, most people just don't read instructions (as witnessed by the reams of unopened appliance instructions in my house, for example).

As the Ubuntu community grows and takes on bigger and more audacious challenges, we will face these kinds of issues. We saw it with the RTFM wars; we saw it when the business community started taking an interest in open source. With the increasing focus and prioritization of design, we can see it there, too.

Design has become an increasingly important component of the Ubuntu world. Since the birth of the Ayatana project, design has played a bigger and bigger role in what we do. For example, the notification bubbles, messaging menu, application indicators, global menu, and the wider Unity interface all have been focused explicitly on improving and easing the end-user experience, thus opening up Ubuntu to a wider demographic of users. This work is truly valuable; designers bring a fresh eye and perspective, fueled by user testing and subtle psychological experience of how people interact with computers.

However, it would be easy to dismiss these contributions or lessen their importance compared with the nuts and bolts of technical collaboration, such as development. I have seen this in some parts of the open source community – hearing perspectives such as "sure design is important, but it's nowhere near as important as engineering." I disagree. Fundamentally, we are all working together to make an awesome free software experience, and design plays as important a role in our success as technical development. Sure, you need engineering to implement the design and make it relevant and useful, but badly designed products don't serve a useful purpose either.

In this new era of collaboration, we are creating a melting pot of skills, experience, perspectives, and approaches. This melting pot has always been one of the strengths of open source; diversity lets us prosper by dividing up projects among many people with many different skills. To succeed, we must not forget the importance of working together, and we must not let personal differences affect our ability to collaborate.

If we get this right, we can bring huge value to free software, driven by a wide range of skills that impart quality and value to every piece of the Ubuntu experience. The opportunity is clear for us to bring free software to the masses, and together we can make it happen. ■