# Playability and the Search for an Open Source Economy

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You can’t compete with a monopoly by playing the game by the monopolist’s rules. The monopoly has the resources, the distribution channels, the R&D resources; in short, they just have too many strengths. You compete with a monopoly by changing the rules of the game into a set that favors your strengths.[[1]](#footnote-1)

– John R. Young, founder of SourceForge, the world’s largest provider of hosting for OpenSource development projects.

Approaching the market as a game allows us to challenge the inherent biases of centralized currency and monopolies as rules of a game.[[2]](#footnote-2) The rules are not inherent to the medium; they are agreements and impositions of laws that favor the people who put them in place. The landscape itself is tilted towards certain players and away from others, and every medium of exchange contains its biases. The biases of the market economy, which are consistently upheld by scientists, technologists, and economists, are scarcity and competition. But these biases can be addressed and redefined through the playability of the medium.

From language to Facebook to the commercial market, these tools rely on a continual agreement to the social contract of the game, i.e. acceptance of the biases and adherence to the rules. However, beyond simply strategizing how to ‘win’ in the given rule set of the commercial marketplace, players may also attain the ability to take charge of the game and rewrite the rules themselves – thus redefining the biases.[[3]](#footnote-3) This means moving beyond a culture of media production to a culture of rule production, changing roles from content makers acting within the structure to programmers acting upon the structure. It is exactly these rules of the game, who has access to them, who is able to write, to edit, to hack, to play, that make all the difference.

Play is characterized by both freedom and constraints. Players are first aware of their freedom to choose whether or not to play.[[4]](#footnote-4) Players are also aware of the guiding rules of play, including boundaries such as physical demarcations, time constraints, and behavioral procedures.[[5]](#footnote-5) From this, we can define ‘playability’ as a metric for how much play a medium or game allows, as well as a person’s or society’s capacity for interactivity and agency. Playability is comprehension of the rules of a game and freedom to participate or opt out. Assessing the playability of a medium such as the market economy allows for a new measure of access to the medium itself.

In terms of playability, the net offers people the opportunity to build economies based on different rules – commerce that exists outside the economic map that is mistaken for the territory of human interaction. Entrepreneurs can start and even scale companies with little or no money, making the banks and investment capital on which business once depended obsolete. (I have argued in talks and papers that this was the real reason for the so-called economic crisis: there is less of a market for the debt on which the top-heavy game is based.)[[6]](#footnote-6) People can develop local and complementary currencies,[[7]](#footnote-7) barter networks,[[8]](#footnote-8) and other exchange systems independently of a central bank, and carry out secure transactions with smart phones using add-ons and applications.

There were once other kinds of money with very different slopes to them. In fact, throughout history, we find some of the most highly prosperous peoples using more than one currency at a time. It’s only when they are conquered by a centralized regime, usually from a great distance, that their regional currency systems are outlawed in favor of a single coin of the realm. Then, prosperity drains from the newly conquered territory to the center, in a monolithic fiscal scheme more like the one in use today.

From about the 10th through the 13th century – the Age of Cathedrals, as it was once called – most of Europe enjoyed two main kinds of currency: centralized money, used for long distance transactions, and local currency for daily transactions.[[9]](#footnote-9) Local currency worked very differently from centralized currency. Instead of being issued by a central bank, it was quite literally worked into existence, accurately reflecting the bounty produced. And because of the peculiar bias of this money, the people who used it were among the most prosperous working classes ever.[[10]](#footnote-10)

During this time period, a farmer would reap his harvest and bring it to a grain store. The grain-store operator would then hand the farmer a receipt, indicating the amount of grain, wine, or other commodity he was storing on the farmer’s behalf. This receipt then served as money. In ancient Egypt, where this practice was first introduced, the receipt was a shard of pottery – an ostracon – that could be broken into pieces as the farmer ‘spent’ the grain stored in his name.[[11]](#footnote-11) In the Middle Ages, the money was mostly made of precious metal banged into thin foil coins – *brakteaten* – which could be torn into smaller segments.[[12]](#footnote-12) This local coinage was not saved for long periods, because it didn’t earn any interest. In fact, the longer it was kept, the less it was worth.

We can reframe this analysis in the language of media ecology,[[13]](#footnote-13) that is, by studying these transactions as carriers of meaning, with impact and influence on a larger, more complex and shifting media environment. By doing so, we see why the bias of local currency was not toward saving but toward spending. Hoarding money meant losing value, so everyone sought to get rid of his money before the next recoinage. Capital meant nothing if it wasn’t actively invested. People put their money to work maintaining their equipment, building windmills, improving their wine presses, and so on. The fact that the currency cost money encouraged people to think of other ways to create value over time. In the Age of Cathedrals, even small towns invested in tremendous architectural projects to generate tourism spending by pilgrims. Cathedrals were not funded by the Vatican Bank, they were local, bottom-up investments made by farmers and other laborers on behalf of future generations.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Like their Middle Ages forebears, the founders of the open source movement were looking primarily to set standards through which a community could invest in its own future. At its most fundamental, open source simply requires that the code on which software runs be freely available to anyone. This transparency invites innovation and growth by allowing anyone to build upon existing software programs. ‘Open Source began as an attempt to preserve a culture of sharing and only later led to an expanded awareness of the value of that sharing.’[[15]](#footnote-15) Open source did not invent these behaviors but it seeks to maintain them in a way that benefits the individuals involved in creating value, those benefiting off their creations, and the greater good yet to be defined.

The open source model was developed at the close of the 20th century by computer software engineers, motivated by genuine fears that innovation would be hindered as increasing commercial capital was invested into the development of their science.[[16]](#footnote-16) The creativity that was necessary to drive growth in their fairly young field of inquiry could be definitively and swiftly cut short if it had to take place within the closed, competitive climate of proprietary commercial software development. Instead of seeking standards, sharing innovations, and building on each other’s successes, engineers in a proprietary scheme would be required to keep secrets, to re-invent one another’s advancements, and be denied the benefit of working together on the same problems.

For the programmers, open source served as a code of business ethics. While individual people and companies could still package and sell the fruits of open source labor, the underlying code was a shared resource that anyone could utilize. So while the Linux operating system might be free to anyone, an individual developer could create a particularly simple installation disk for it, and charge whatever he pleased. The Linux operating system itself was developed in a culture that combined collaboration with independent, autonomous development.[[17]](#footnote-17) Many technologists and businesspeople alike were awed by the technologies and the profits this seemingly new model of collaboration engendered – from Linux to Mozilla and Redhat to Firefox. It was not long before open source was acknowledged as ‘the natural language of a networked community’[[18]](#footnote-18) which ‘nobody owns, everybody can use and anybody can improve.’[[19]](#footnote-19)

The success of open source as a programming methodology became the inspiration for its application across a wide number of fields. How many other cultural institutions might benefit from engaging their communities in collective, shared production? My own books, from *Open Source Democracy* to *Nothing Sacred: The Case for Open Source Religion*, looked at the application of the open source ethos to government and religion, which I believed to be suffering from insider cultures and lack of access. Even pro-corporate *Wired* magazine ran pieces such as ‘Open Source Everywhere’[[20]](#footnote-20) and ‘Collaborative Culture’, suggesting that the proprietary way of doing things may have run its course.[[21]](#footnote-21)

However, open source ideology is most practically aligned with economic theory. Open source means more people creating and contributing value and ultimately invested in the resulting outcome. It creates new markets by competing against under-consumption and non-consumption. And as seen in the case of Netscape/Firefox vs. Microsoft Explorer, open source can be used to break up monopolies while still allowing individuals to participate in a system of value exchange. It reflects a business more concerned with sustainability in the long term, treating its users as equivalent stakeholders, as investors, rather than prioritizing short term or exponential growth. As Eric Raymond eloquently argued, open source is the ethos of the bottom-up bazaar.[[22]](#footnote-22)

For now, however, we must acknowledge the fact that what playability the net might offer in this regard is not generally embraced or acknowledged. Yes, bloggers and YouTubers have had many successes, particularly against government. They have brought down a Republican senator, an attorney general, and even made headway against the repressive net censorship of the Chinese. WikiLeaks has released thousands of documents much to the consternation of the US government, and the people of Egypt and Syria have utilized technologies as corporate-driven as Facebook to organize resistance to repressive regimes. YouTube not only embarrassed then-candidate Barack Obama about his minister’s race-toned rants; it also exposed political repression in Myanmar and FEMA incompetence in New Orleans.

But this activity is occurring on a platform that has almost nothing to do with the commons. The internet may have been first developed with public dollars, but it is now a private utility. We create content using expensive consumer technologies and then upload it to corporate-owned servers using corporate-owned conduits, usually for a fee. More significantly, we are doing all this with software made by corporations whose interests are embedded in its very code. Maybe this is why governments, and rarely corporations, are the ultimate targets of most internet activism.

While examples exist, most resistance to corporatism still occurs on the bigger stage, created and dominated by the corporate players, themselves. The unique potential of interactive technologies to undermine the dominance of the single, ‘closed source’ reality of the corporate-sponsored spectacle is left untapped. Instead, the media environment informing resistance and would-be extra-corporate activity is that of television and other closed source, top-down media. Speaking ‘truth to power’ seems more important than sharing truth with one another.

Meanwhile, the decentralizing effect of new media promised by the likes of Tim O’Reilly and John Batelle in prominent essays such as ‘Web Squared’[[23]](#footnote-23) has been met by an overwhelming concentration of corporate conglomeration. New web companies are purchased by giants like Google, Facebook, and Microsoft as much for the programmers working within them as for whatever decentralized technologies they might be developing.[[24]](#footnote-24) As a result, whatever visions or agendas these programmers may have had for starting their companies in the first place are subsumed by the conglomerates who acquire them, and their programming abilities are applied to wholly different projects.[[25]](#footnote-25)

As a result, when a potentially destabilizing and decentralizing technology or principle such as shareware, viral media, or open source emerges, this half-true and half-hearted style of inquiry follows the story only until a means to arrest its development is discovered and new strategies may be offered. Like a radical garage band discovered by a record label, anything radical is neutralized before the CD gets to the mall.[[26]](#footnote-26)

The open source ethos, through which anyone who understands the code can effectively redesign a program to his own liking, is repackaged by culture guru Jeff Howe as ‘crowdsourcing’[[27]](#footnote-27) through which corporations can once again harness the tremendous potential of real people acting in concert, for free. My own concept of ‘viral media’[[28]](#footnote-28) is reinvented by Malcolm Gladwell as ‘social contagion’, or Tim Draper as ‘viral marketing’ – techniques through which mass marketers can once again define human choice as a series of consumer decisions. My other main contribution to culture studies, the notion of ‘social currency through which people develop non-monetary value’,[[29]](#footnote-29) is now the name for an American Express Card rewards program: ‘The Social Currency’. The decentralizing bias of new media is thus accepted and interpolated only until the market’s intellectual guard or hired marketers can devise a new countermeasure for their patrons to employ on behalf of preserving business as usual.

Indeed, the internet might pose a threat to both centralized media and centralized value creation. But the dominance of the corporatist system, the triumph of the corporatist spectacle, as well as the legacy of a central currency operating system, has limited the thinking of most net theorists and economists. In short, without a media ecological framework, these practitioners remain woefully unaware of the contexts defining their activity.

The self-styled revolutionary ‘net economics’ of these internet authors are in fact reactionary responses well within the boundaries defined by their corporate patrons. Instead of imagining genuinely participatory or peer-to-peer possibilities, they simply offer new ways for companies and individuals to participate in the status quo corporatist economy.

The muting of the net’s greater potential for playability reduces it from a peer-to-peer medium back to something more like a broadcast medium, at least insofar as its potential to shift the relationship of people to the corporations with and through which they transact and make meaning. True playability involves access to the playing field itself, and even the ability to rewrite those rules or transcend the game altogether.

The crucial capacity of the internet to introduce increased playability to the corporatist system will depend on the public’s willingness to embrace the new demands of the internet environment. On the internet, this means learning the languages through which rules of interaction are written, protocols are established, and technologies are either opened or closed to participation. By extension, this applies as well to the cultural software and operating systems defining our participation in the public sphere and marketplace alike. The public must not only achieve a base level of computer and media literacy, but we must also become aware of the way that media and technology create environments, and how we can participate in this process – or at least become more conscious of the media ecology in which we are functioning as a first step toward an alternative to corporatism.

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16. For the history of Open Source, told by an assortment of its early participants, see DiBona, Ockman and Stone, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As well as a central, overseeing arbiter meant to stand in for the user and judge the contributions of the many. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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