

Relationship Problems in Open Source

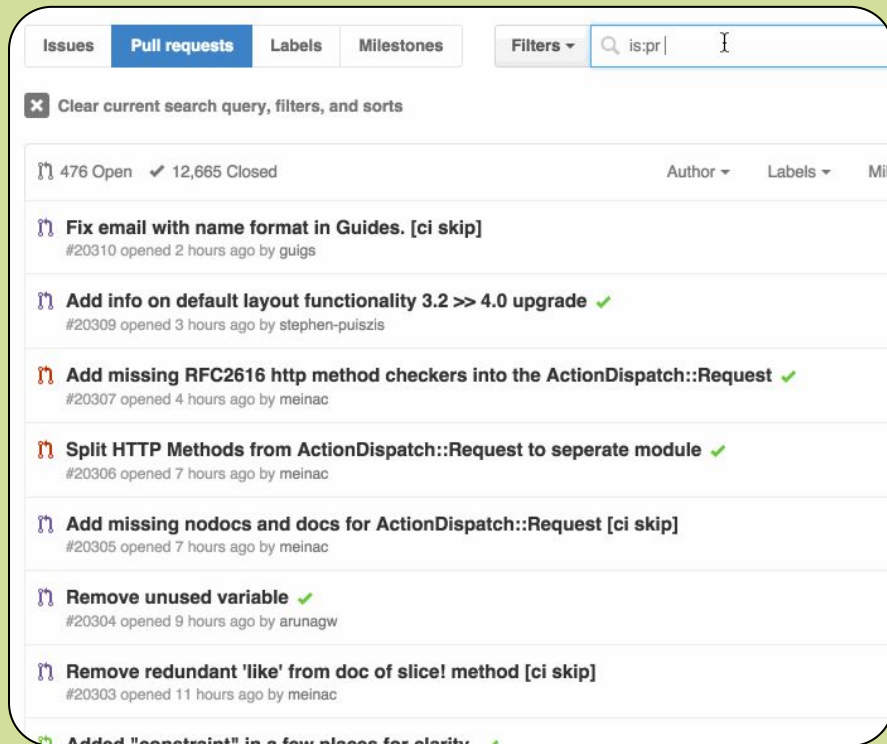
Shauna Gordon-McKeon



FOSS Backstage 2025

Why might a PR not be merged?

- the maintainer hasn't had time to review it
- the author hasn't had time to make changes
- the PR doesn't solve the right problem
- the maintainer doesn't have the expertise to review
- the PR adds too much functionality to maintain
- surprise! the project is abandoned
- the PR was submitted by AI
- there's actually multiple maintainers and they both think the other one's reviewing the PR
- the maintainer is burned out

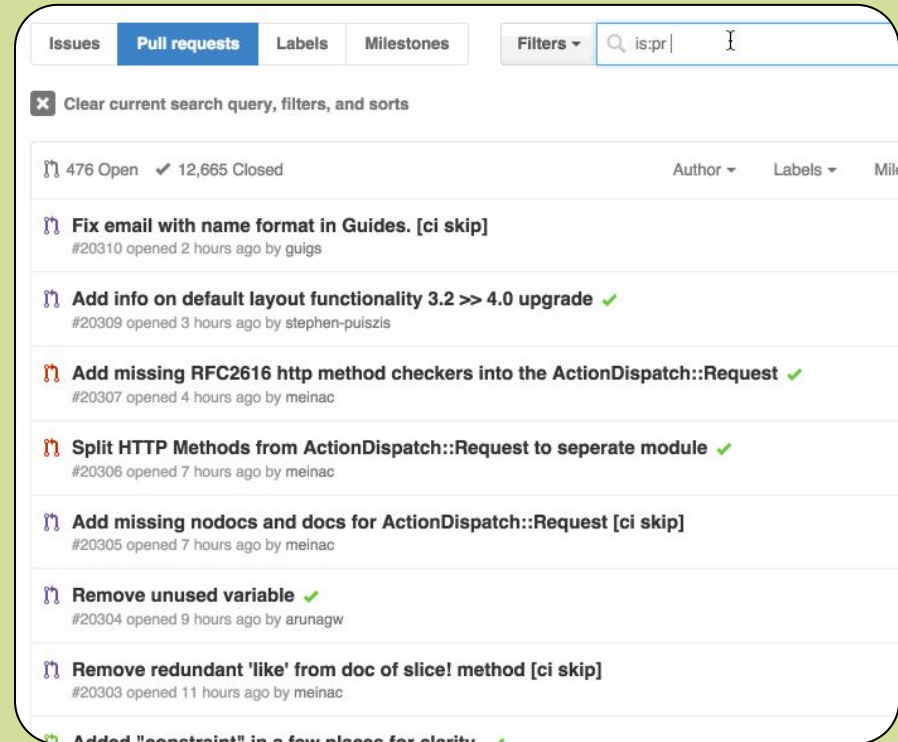


The screenshot shows the GitHub interface for pull requests. At the top, there are tabs for 'Issues', 'Pull requests', 'Labels', and 'Milestones'. A search bar contains the text 'is:pr'. Below the search bar, there is a link to 'Clear current search query, filters, and sorts'. The main content area displays a list of pull requests with the following details:

| Issue ID | Title | Status | Author | Time |
|----------|---|---------------|-----------------|---------------------|
| 476 | Open | 12,665 Closed | Author | Labels |
| #20310 | Fix email with name format in Guides. [ci skip] | | guigs | opened 2 hours ago |
| #20309 | Add info on default layout functionality 3.2 >> 4.0 upgrade | ✓ | stephen-puiszis | opened 3 hours ago |
| #20307 | Add missing RFC2616 http method checkers into the ActionDispatch::Request | ✓ | meinac | opened 4 hours ago |
| #20306 | Split HTTP Methods from ActionDispatch::Request to separate module | ✓ | meinac | opened 7 hours ago |
| #20305 | Add missing nodocs and docs for ActionDispatch::Request [ci skip] | | meinac | opened 7 hours ago |
| #20304 | Remove unused variable | ✓ | arunagw | opened 9 hours ago |
| #20303 | Remove redundant 'like' from doc of slice! method [ci skip] | | meinac | opened 11 hours ago |

These are all relationship problems.

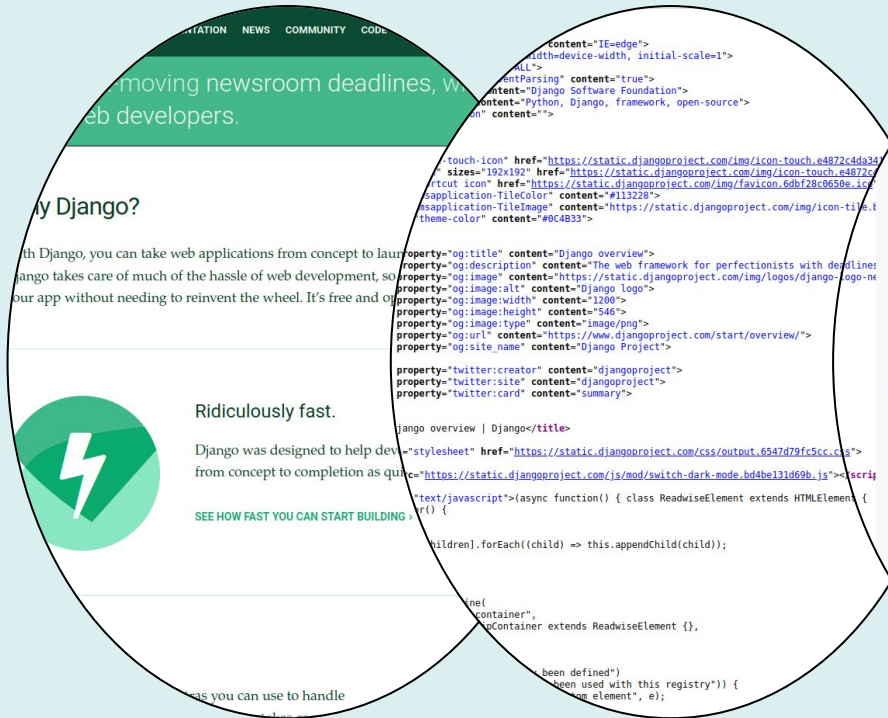
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The world is full of abstractions:



STATION NEWS COMMUNITY CODE

moving newsroom deadlines, w
web developers.

Why Django?

With Django, you can take web applications from concept to launch. Django takes care of much of the hassle of web development, so you can focus on building your app without needing to reinvent the wheel. It's free and open source.

Ridiculously fast.

Django was designed to help developers get from concept to completion as quickly as possible.

[SEE HOW FAST YOU CAN START BUILDING](#)

as you can use to handle

```
content="If wedge">  
width=device-width, initial-scale=1">  
LL">  
entParsing" content="true">  
content="Django Software Foundation">  
content="Python, Django, framework, open-source">  
n" content="">  
  
touch-icon" href="https://static.djangoproject.com/img/icon-touch_e4872c4da3a  
sizes="192x192" href="https://static.djangoproject.com/img/icon-touch_e4872c  
tcut icon" href="https://static.djangoproject.com/img/favicon_6dbf28c9650e.ic  
application-TileColor" content="#113228">  
application-TileImage" content="https://static.djangoproject.com/img/icon-tile.  
theme-color" content="#0C4833">  
  
property="og:title" content="Django overview">  
property="og:description" content="The web framework for perfectionists with deadlines  
property="og:image" content="https://static.djangoproject.com/img/logos/django-logo-n  
property="og:image:alt" content="Django logo">  
property="og:image:width" content="1200">  
property="og:image:height" content="546">  
property="og:image:type" content="image/png">  
property="og:url" content="https://www.djangoproject.com/start/overview/">  
property="og:site_name" content="Django Project">  
  
property="twitter:creator" content="django project">  
property="twitter:site" content="django project">  
property="twitter:card" content="summary">  
  
 Django overview | Django</title>  
  
stylesheet" href="https://static.djangoproject.com/css/output_6547d79fc5cc.css">  
ce="https://static.djangoproject.com/js/mod/switch-dark-mode_b44be131d69b.js"><scri  
text/javascript">(async function() { class ReadwiseElement extends HTMLElement {  
  {  
  
    children].forEach((child) => this.appendChild(child));  
  
  use(  
    "container",  
    "Container extends ReadwiseElement {,  
  
    been defined")  
    been used with this registry")) {  
      e element", e);  
    }  
  }  
})
```

```
/views.py |  
  
from django.http import  
from django.template  
  
from .models import  
  
def index(request  
latest_questio  
template = loa  
context = {  
    "latest_ques  
}  
return HttpResponse
```



BURNOUT

Common FOSS Problem
#1

Burnout happens when needs aren't being met.

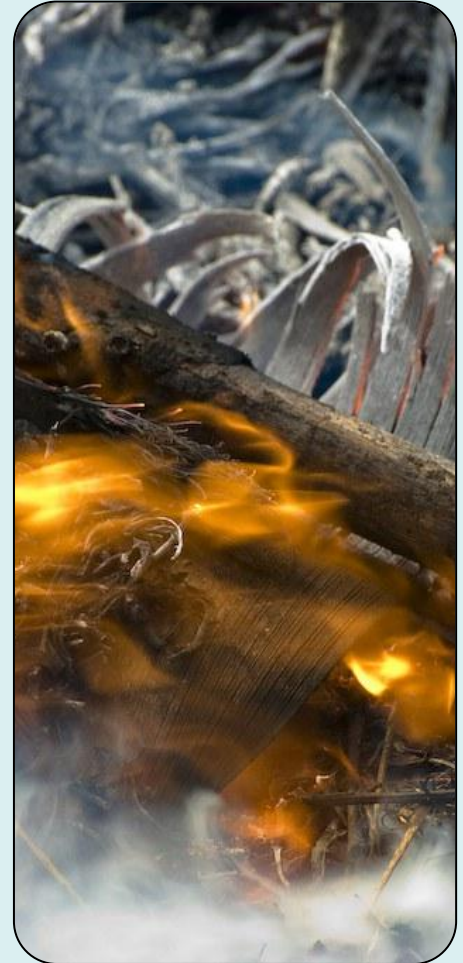
entitled/impatient requests = need for gratitude and respect

never hearing from users = need to feel like work has meaning

lack of other maintainers = need for socialization, need to be able to take a break

no financial support = need for material security

*The feeling that your needs aren't being met *and no one cares*? Is like throwing gasoline on the fire of burnout.*



ONBOARDING

Common FOSS Problem #2

I've worked with hundreds of first time contributors.

Most of them show up with an image in their head of what that means:

- a code contribution
- a small feature addition or maybe a bug fix
- in a few hours, or maybe a few days

But this is actually hard! Like, really really hard!



ONBOARDING

Common FOSS Problem #2

Barriers and challenges:

- lack of knowledge of the codebase
- lack of knowledge of the underlying language(s)
- lack of knowledge of the infrastructure
- lack of knowledge of the domain
- lack of knowledge of community norms and culture
- don't know who people are, who to ask for help or review
- shyness, intimidation, etc



ONBOARDING

Common FOSS Problem #2

There are ways to address this:

- “good first tasks”
- my suite (context-building tasks, FRAMED tasks, onboarding-related tasks, contributor expertise tasks, pairing)

But...what if the most important thing newcomers contribute is their presence?

What if their relationships with other members of the community was enough?



Are these the same problem?



"What you can do is more important than who you are."

The maintainer succeeds where the newcomer often fails, but *both* need to be valued for more than just what they can do.

Both need to be able to ask for help and to receive it.

Both need good relationships.



FUNDING

Common FOSS Problem #3

Are FOSS users selfish?




The world is full of abstractions:

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...moving newsroom deadlines, w...
...web developers.

...y Django?

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...<!-- ALL -->  
...entParsing" content="true">  
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...touch-icon" href="https://static.djangoproject.com/img/icon-touch_e4872c4da3a...  
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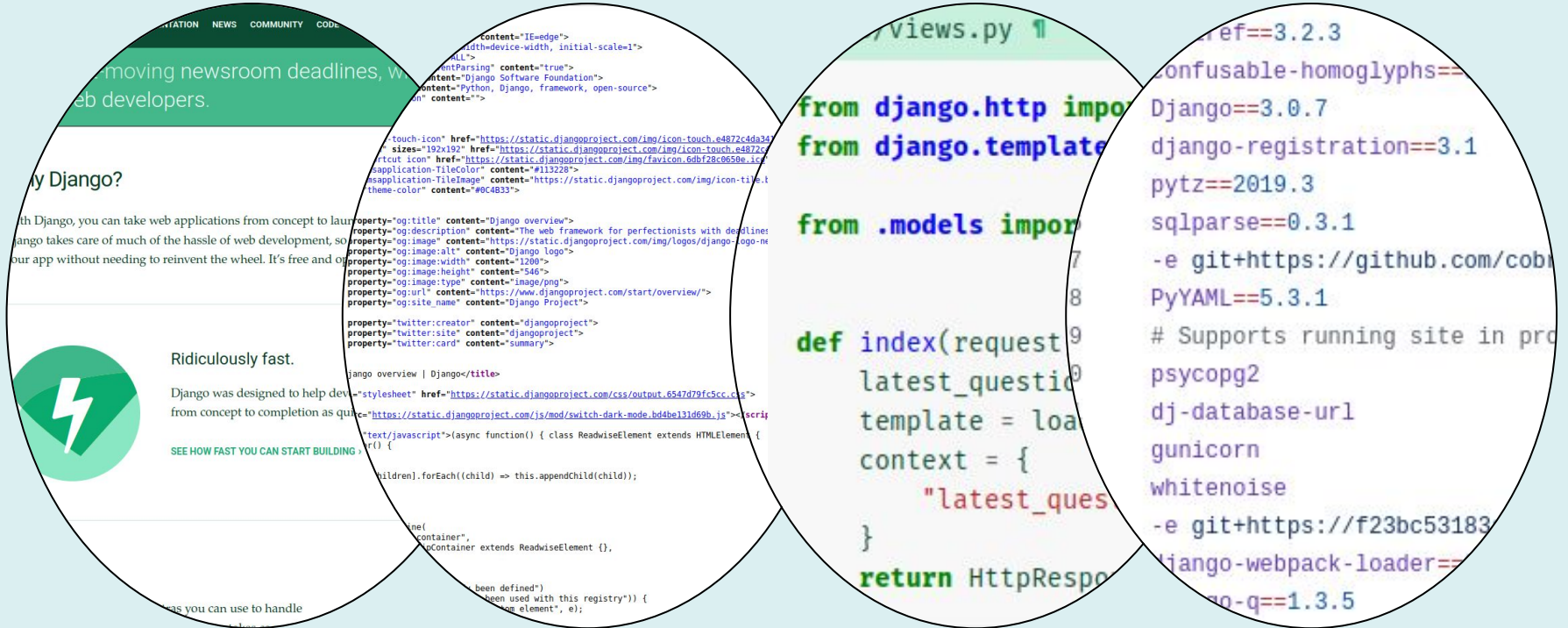
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...<text/javascript>(async function() { class ReadwiseElement extends HTMLElement {  
...  { }  
...  children].forEach((child) => this.appendChild(child));  
...  use(  
...    "container",  
...    ReadwiseElement extends ReadwiseElement {}),  
...  been defined")  
...  been used with this registry")) {  
...    ReadwiseElement, e);
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A large group photo of many people, likely Django community members, posing together outdoors.

The world is full of abstractions:



A brief digression



FUNDING

Common FOSS Problem #3

Are FOSS users selfish?

When **people we are in a relationship with** need help, we want to help them.

When **people we are in a relationship with** give us something valuable, we want to reciprocate.

Hypothesis: FOSS projects are underfunded because they are not in relationship to their users.



BAD UX

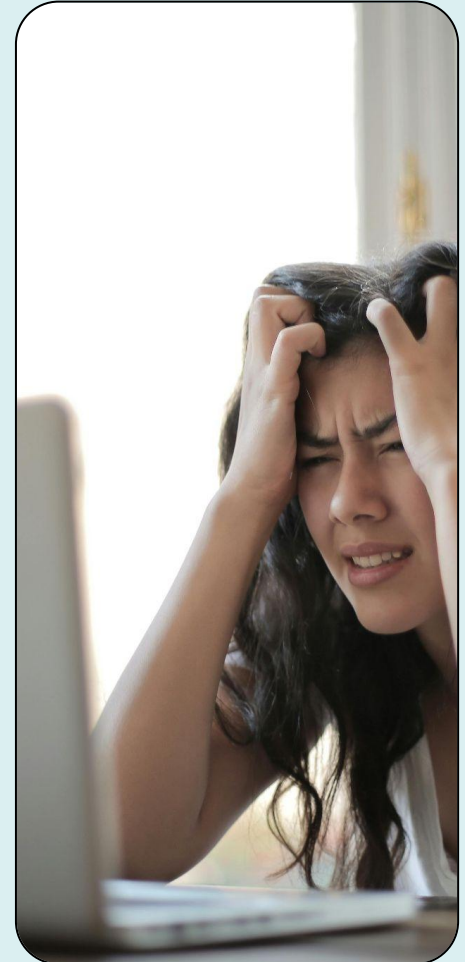
Common FOSS Problem #4

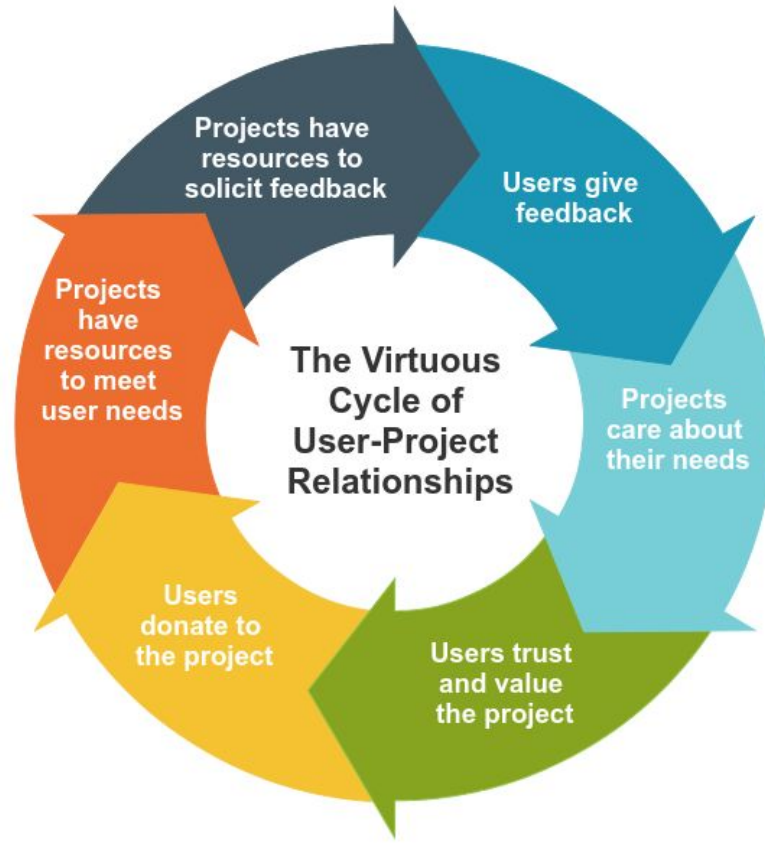
FOSS UX has...a reputation.

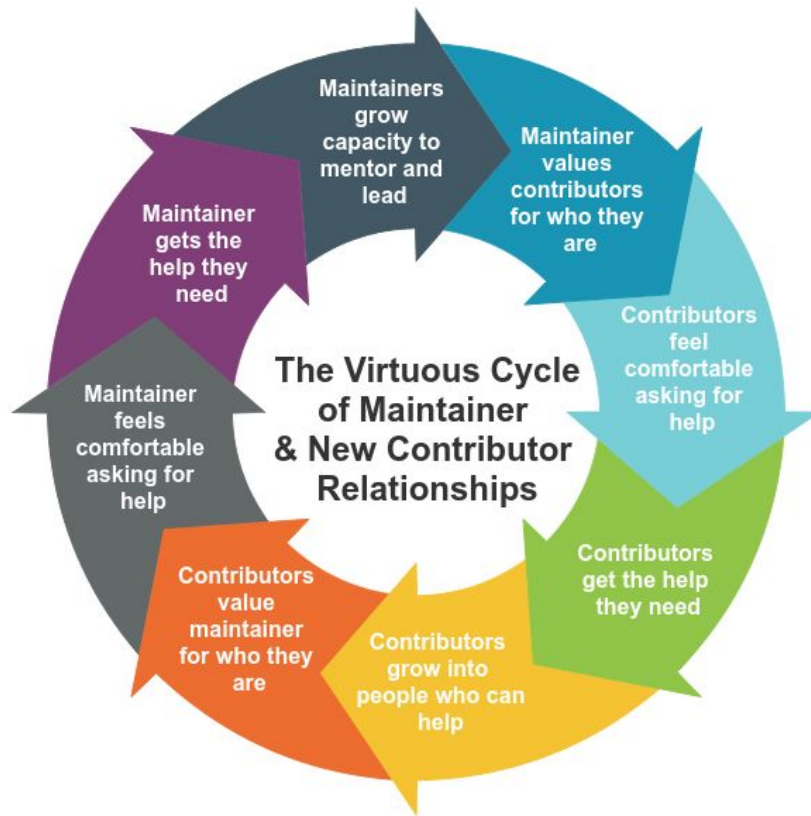
Easier for 'technically savvy' users. Why? Because FOSS projects **are in relationship with** technically savvy users:

- more likely to leave an issue in an issue tracker
- more likely to show up in irc/matrix/discord/slack
- more likely to know maintainers/contributors from conferences, work, social media, etc

To improve user experience for less savvy users, projects need to **build relationships** with less savvy users.

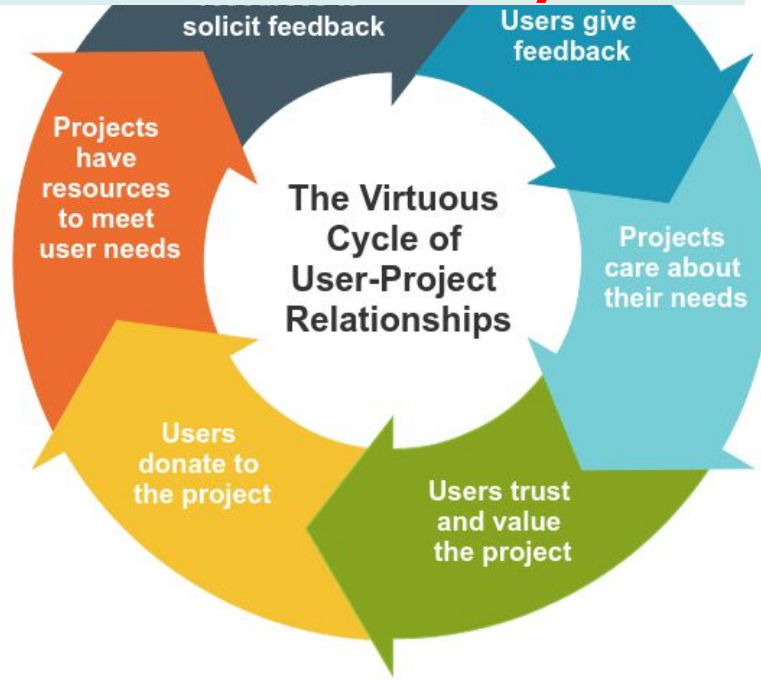




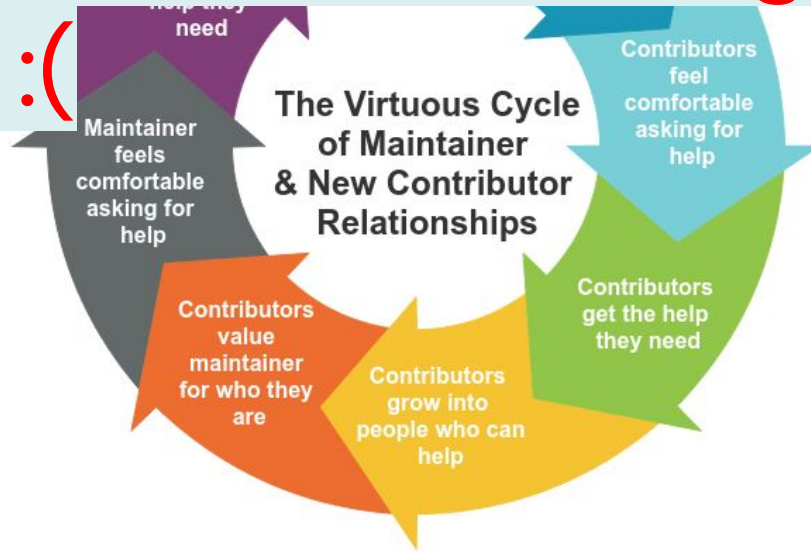


A virtuous cycle you can't start is a Catch-22

Where's the money???



Changing deeply held beliefs is even harder than asking for money :(



Relationships matter.



A good relationship is one where people can share their needs with each other, and collaborate on getting those needs met, even when those needs are in conflict.

Steps to building a good relationship

Clarify

Connect

Communicate

Conflict

Commit

Steps to building a good relationship

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Clarify your needs

Understanding your needs will help you find/build relationships that meet those needs.

Two tools:

Open Source Needs Assessment

Visibility Spectrum Exercise

If my open source experience had...

- people to celebrate with when things go well
- someone to talk to when I need help
- someone who can take over for me if I need to take a step back
- knowledge that the work I'm doing matters
- visibility into how my work is impacting others
- work that is intellectually engaging
- work that helps me grow
- work that advances my career
- income from open source (enough to survive on)
- income from open source (enough to make me financially secure)
- opportunity to speak or write (through conferences, podcasts, etc) a
- a feeling of pride and accomplishment in my work

Clarify your needs

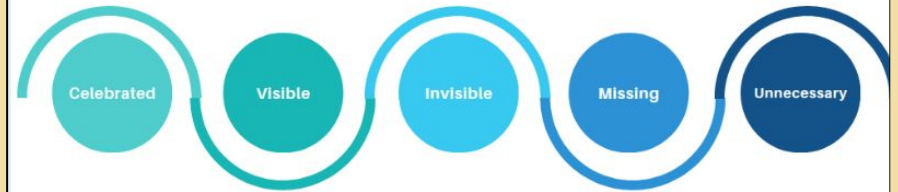
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Two tools:

Open Source Needs Assessment

Visibility Spectrum Exercise

The Visibility Spectrum



Some work within a software project is **celebrated**. Designing and building a new project from scratch, or adding big features to an existing project, is enjoyable and often prestigious work. Other work is **visible**, but not often celebrated, like adding tests or documentation to a project.

Some work that happens in a project is **invisible** - only a few people know it's even happening. For example, a community manager might have a one-on-one conversation with a community member who has been causing trouble, to find out what's going wrong.

Some work is not just invisible but **missing** entirely. Maybe a project is difficult to use. They need help from someone who can do user research and user design. But no such person exists in the community, and no such work is being done.

Finally, there is work that isn't done and doesn't need to be done. For example, an open source

Steps to building a good relationship

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**conflict
avoidance**



**conflict
escalation**



**conflict
acceptance**

Steps to building a good relationship

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Connect

Communicate

Conflict

Commit

**If we build better relationships,
we can build better FOSS.**

Image Credits

In order of use

[Young Couple Talking with a Therapist](#) by Timur Webber.

Gif of GitHub pull requests from [the GitHub blog](#).

Screenshots from Django website and documentation. Image of Django community from [VintaSoftware](#).

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[Small pond, Bedfords Park](#) by Robin Webster, CC BY-SA 2.0.

[money, money, money](#) by Markus, CC BY-SA 2.0.

[Woman in white shirt showing frustration](#) by Andrea Piacquadio.

All other images and charts created by Shauna Gordon-McKeon, CC BY-SA 4.0.

More Info

THANK YOU!

Find the Open Source Needs Assessment, the Visibility Spectrum Exercise, and more at relational-tech.com. You can also sign up for my newsletter or a free one hour consultation.

Follow me on mastodon: [shauna@social.coop](https://social.coop/@shauna)

If you're on bluesky, bridged to: [shauna.social.coop.ap.brid.gy](https://social.coop.ap.brid.gy)

Things I wanted to put in the talk but didn't have time for:

- Sumana Harihareswara's [celebration of Beautiful Soup's 20th birthday](#)
- New contributor tasks:
 - [Context-Building Tasks](#)
 - [FRAMEd Tasks](#)
 - Contributing Non-Coding Expertise via [Whole Community Sprints](#)
 - [Onboarding Tasks](#)