



A laptop to change the world

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"Education costs money, but then so does ignorance." -- Sir Claus Moser

Commentary-- Even if it fails, 'One Laptop per Child' will have an enormous impact on the computing landscape.



I just returned from the FOSDEM conference in Brussels, probably Europe's most influential Free/Open Source software conference. Unlike many of the more business-oriented Open Source conferences, I love attending the talks at FOSDEM. They are extremely technical and I learn things from the speakers. This year was no exception, with talks about the state of software patents in Europe, the current state of the Linux kernel, the latest developments in the Mono project, and many more besides.

I got to meet some of the most famous names in Free Software/Open Source and hang out with them at the speakers dinner, which is great fun. One of them, Andrew Morton, actually works with me at Google, but as his office is on the west side of the campus, across the great "Charleston Road" divide, he and I never meet at work, only at conferences.

The person I was thrilled to meet and talk with was Jim Gettys. In a very direct sense, Jim is the reason I'm in Silicon Valley in the first place. Jim was one of the original architects of the X Window System, and it was after reading one of his books on the subject that I decided to specialize in the X Windows code. That eventually became expertise enough for Sun Microsystems to send me over to the San Francisco Bay area to fix bugs in their X Windows-based products, and I never went back to the weather in England. (Be honest, would you?)

Jim isn't resting on his laurels; he is one of the chief scientists behind Nicholas Negroponte's "[One Laptop per Child](#)" (OLPC) project, which he hopes will end up changing the way the world educates children. Jim's talk at the conference was on the current state of the OLPC project, and was really eye-opening for me. The OLPC machines are being created for children in the developing world, not the developed world, and I learned how little I knew about how to make computers effective there.

Critics of the OLPC project focused on two things. Firstly, that developing countries need development, food and medical aid, not laptops. Secondly, that what they describe as "cut-down computers" are patronizing to people there. To answer the first point, the goal is to provide education, not simply computers. Educated people don't stay poor people for long, and lack of education is behind many of the developing world's problems. The second point shows how little people in the first world -- myself included -- understand the infrastructure of the developing world.

Jim started his talk with pictures from schools in Nigeria. For people used to first-world schools, these were heartbreaking. Kids are the same the world over, and it was painful to see how little these kids had to make do with. They were still proud and happy, smiling while showing off their school. But most of these schools don't have any electric lights, and power is a real problem. Originally, some of the children were given standard first-world laptops to take home and use. For most of these kids, the glow of the laptop screen was the first artificial light they'd ever had in their houses. Their parents were terrified of the computers; after all, the laptop their child had brought home was worth more than the entire house that housed the family, and theft was a very real fear. The power requirements of first-world computers are an unrealistic dream in these environments.

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Those laptops can hold a hundred books.
1 school book = \$50, 100 school books = \$5000
Those kids can run with one laptop.
Those kids CAN'T run with a hundred school books.

rat tat tat (BOOM) rebels invading... run for your lives... The school is burning! AAAaaahh!!!... ([Read the rest](#))

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