

HOW TO MAKE OPEN SOURCE PROFITABLE

Strategies, Mistakes, and Lessons Learned

 Anastasiia Zvenigorodskaja



**WHEN WE HEAR
"OPEN SOURCE",
MANY PEOPLE THINK
IT MEANS "FREE"**



**BUT OPEN SOURCE IS
ABOUT BEING OPEN,
NOT ABOUT BEING
FREE.**





WHO AM I AND WHY YOU CAN TRUST ME?

ANASTASIIA ZVENIGORODSKAIA

- Co-founder & COO at Epicmax
- I started my open source journey at 17 with Linux community
- 10+ years in frontend development & project management
- Was a Chief Editor of the open-source magazine “User & Linux” for 3 years
- I'm not great at choosing usernames 😊

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AGENDA: WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

- 1. How much time and money we spent on open source: 8 years at Epicmax**
- 2. 3 key parts of a successful open source project**
- 3. 7 monetization models with real (and cute) examples**
- 4. Stages of an open source project and which model fits best**
- 5. How to attract users — and turn them into clients — at each stage**
- 6. Our biggest mistake, key lessons we've learned, and what we do now**

HOW MOST OPEN SOURCE PROJECTS **START**

“This tool doesn’t work the way I want...

Well, I'm gonna go build my own UI library.

With blackjack and no dependencies!”

If your goal is to make your work easier and share something helpful with the community — **Forget monetization. Just enjoy it.**

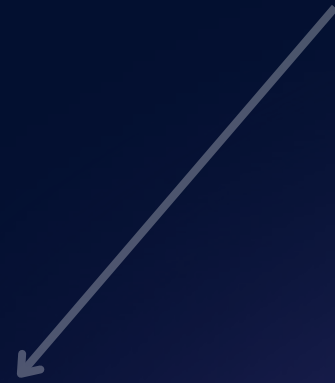


IF YOU WANT TO TURN YOUR OS PROJECT INTO A BUSINESS

You need to start thinking like a founder — and choose your
strategy **from day one!**



BE HONEST — IS IT A HOBBY OR A BUSINESS?



- helps you learn
- connect with the community
- build your portfolio



- grows your name
- brings real income
- needs a clear plan

EPICMAX OPEN SOURCE STORY

Let's go back to 2017, when Epicmax started.

- no portfolio
- no public projects
- Lots of love for Vue.js and Open Source idea ❤️

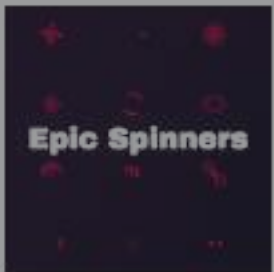
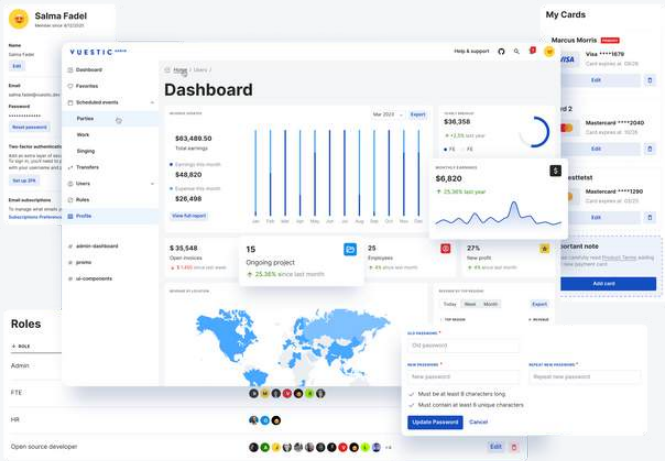


EPICMAX OPEN SOURCE STORY



August 2017

Vuestic Admin



December 2017

Epic Spinners



May 2021

Vuestic UI



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EPICMAX OPEN SOURCE STORY



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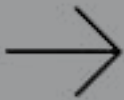
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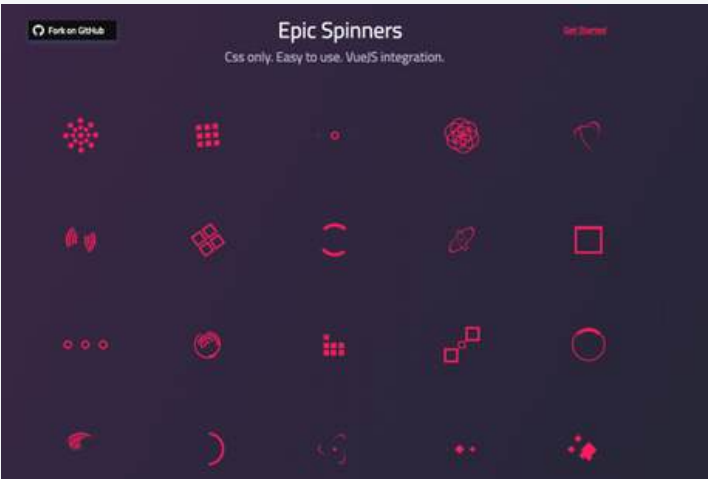
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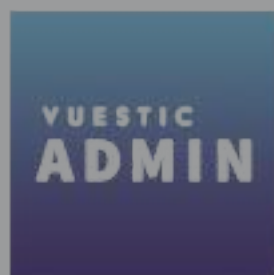


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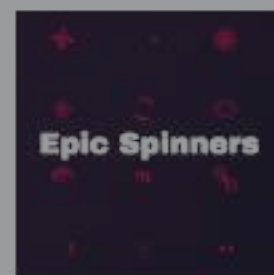
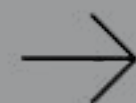


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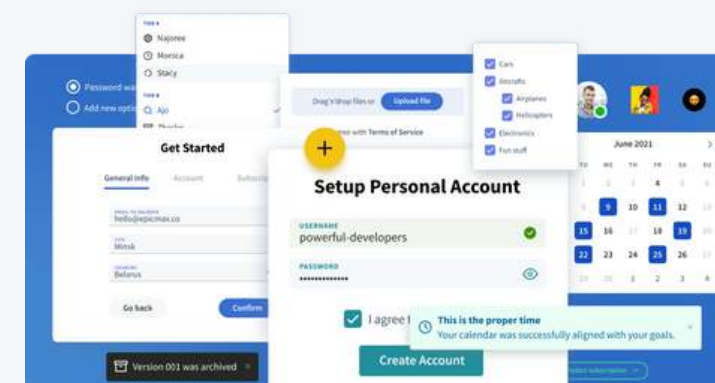
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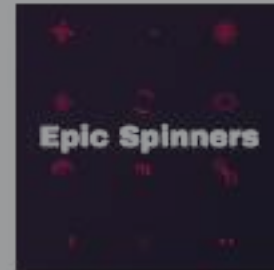
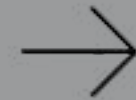


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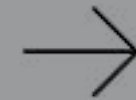
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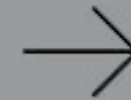


Star 10.7k



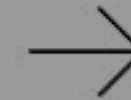
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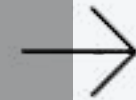


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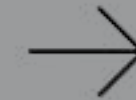
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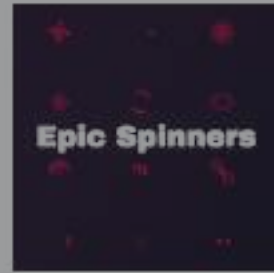
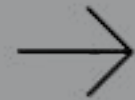


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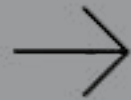


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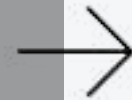


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Fork 354

Star 3.6k



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QUICK CALCULATION

$\{ \{ \text{developerHourlyRate} + (\text{taxes} * \text{developerHourlyRate}) * \text{hoursSpent} \} \}$

According to Glassdoor, the average net salary in Spain in 2025
— €33 250 per year (€44 000 gross)

This means full-time mid-level developer will cost you around
€22 per hour gross*.

*I'll use this rate for calculations to give you a clear understanding of the potential costs.



EPICMAX OPEN SOURCE STORY



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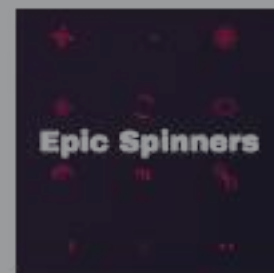
 Fork 1.8k  Star 10.7k



4,093.14 hours



€ 90 049.08



December 2017

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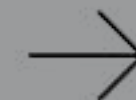
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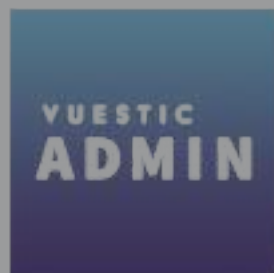


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470.03 hours



€ 10 340.66



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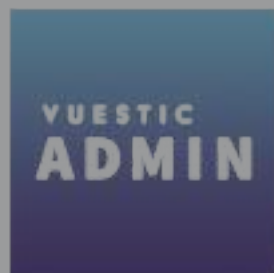


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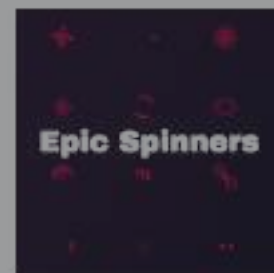
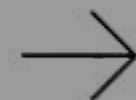
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Fork 1.8k Star 10.7k

🕒 4,093.14 hours

💰 € 90 049.08



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Fork 361 Star 3.9k

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May 2021

Vuestic UI

Fork 354 Star 3.6k

🕒 22,006.29 hours

💰 € 484 151.58

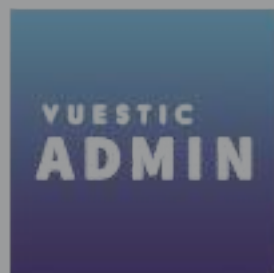


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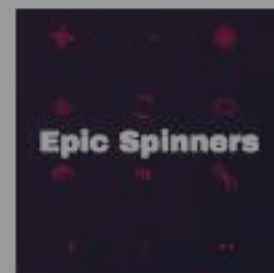
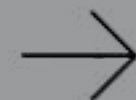
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4,093.14 hours



€ 90 049.08



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Fork 361

Star 3.9k



470.03 hours



€ 10 340.66



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Fork 354

Star 3.6k



22,006.29 hours



€ 484 151.58



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~ 200 calendar subscribers



~ 4 hours per month



We spent almost nothing

YES, WE HAD MORE VISIBILITY.

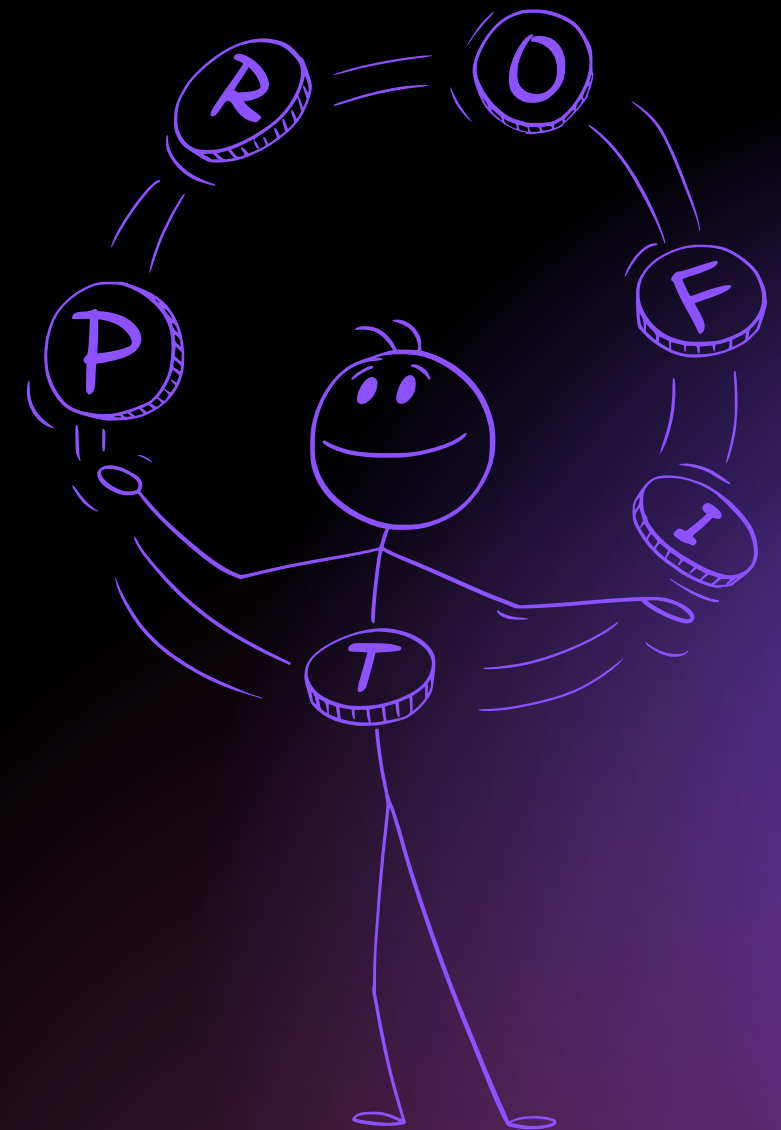
**YES, WE LOOKED BETTER THAN OTHER
AGENCIES.**

BUT WE COULD HAVE ACHIEVED MORE —

SO WHAT WENT WRONG?

WHY DO SOME OPEN SOURCE PROJECTS MAKE MONEY — AND OTHERS DON'T?

The answer is simple:
Successful projects have a strategy!

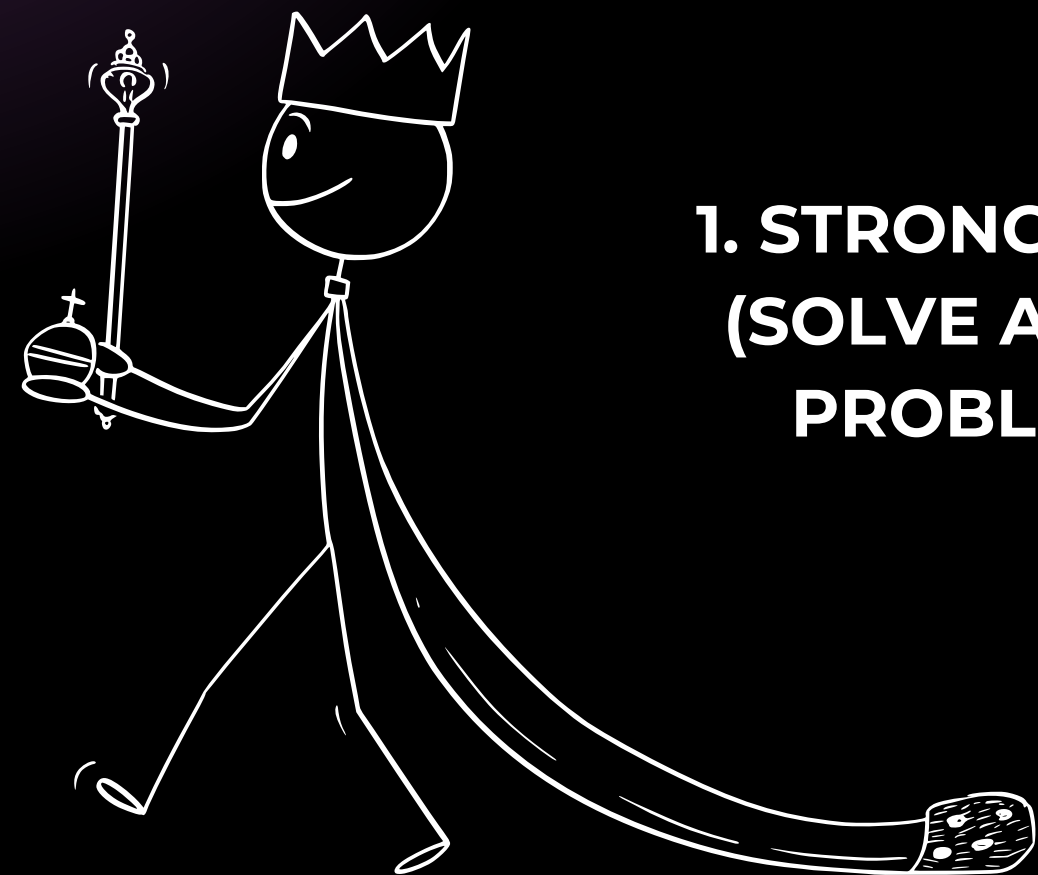


**WITHOUT A STRATEGY,
AN OPEN-SOURCE PROJECT
IS AN EXPENSIVE HOBBY.**

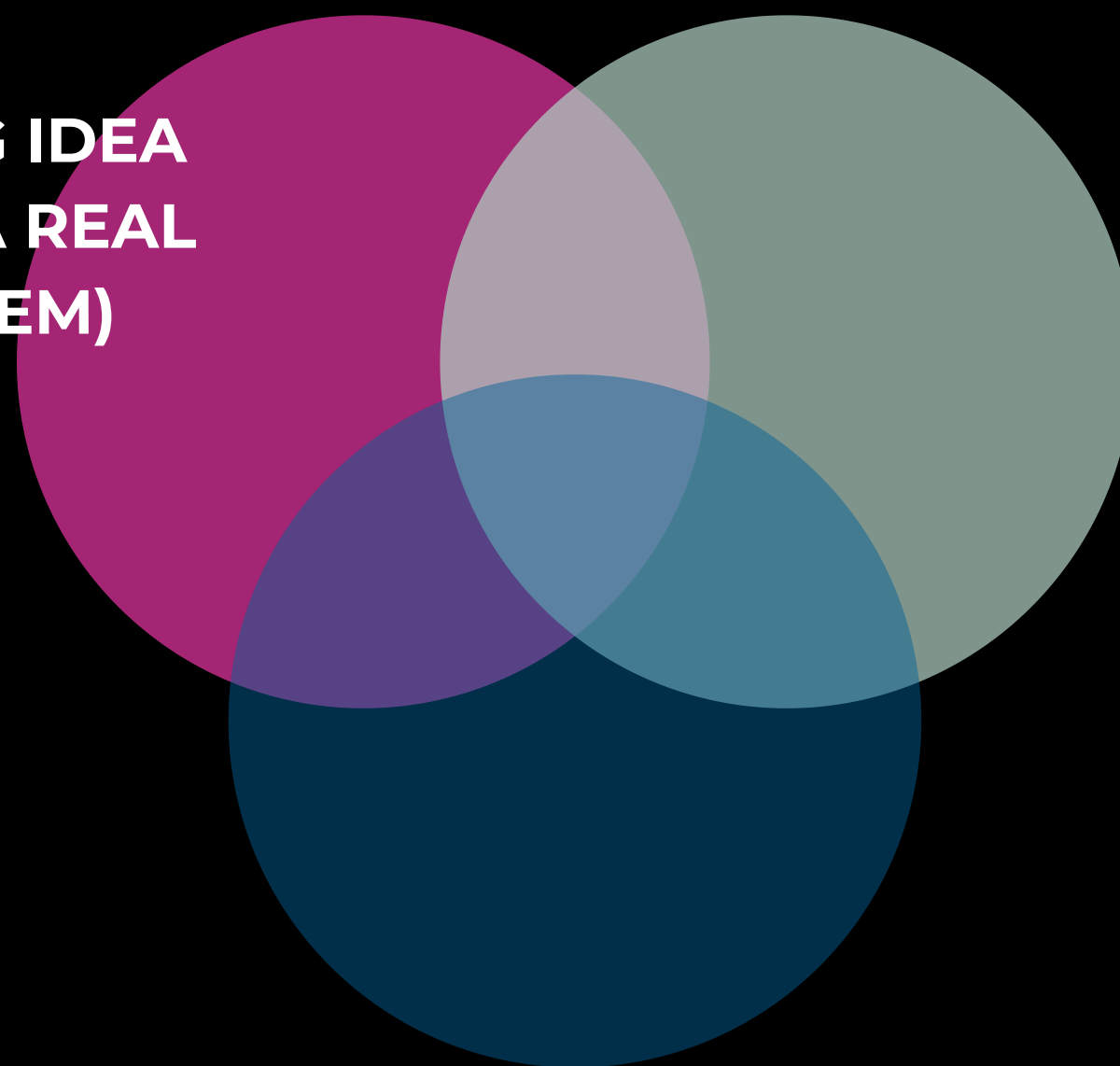
And if you want to build open source seriously,
the first skill you need is brutal **honesty with yourself**

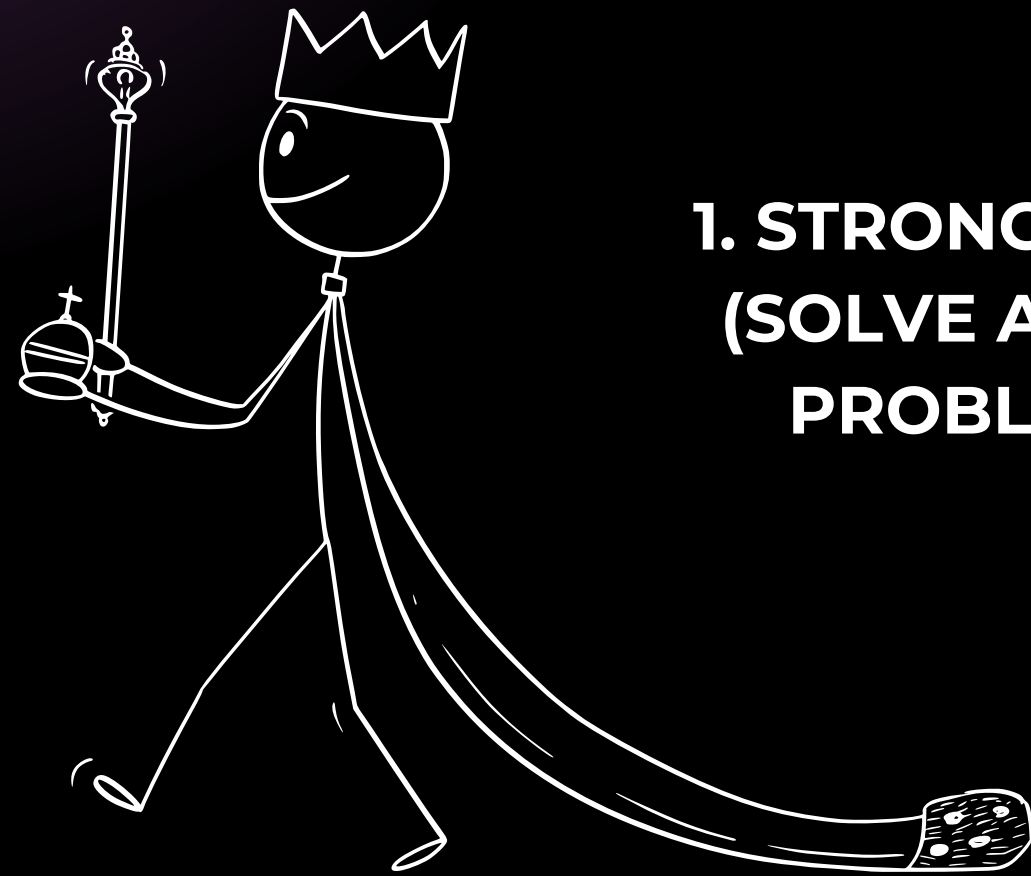


WHAT MAKES OPEN SOURCE PROJECTS SUCCESSFUL?

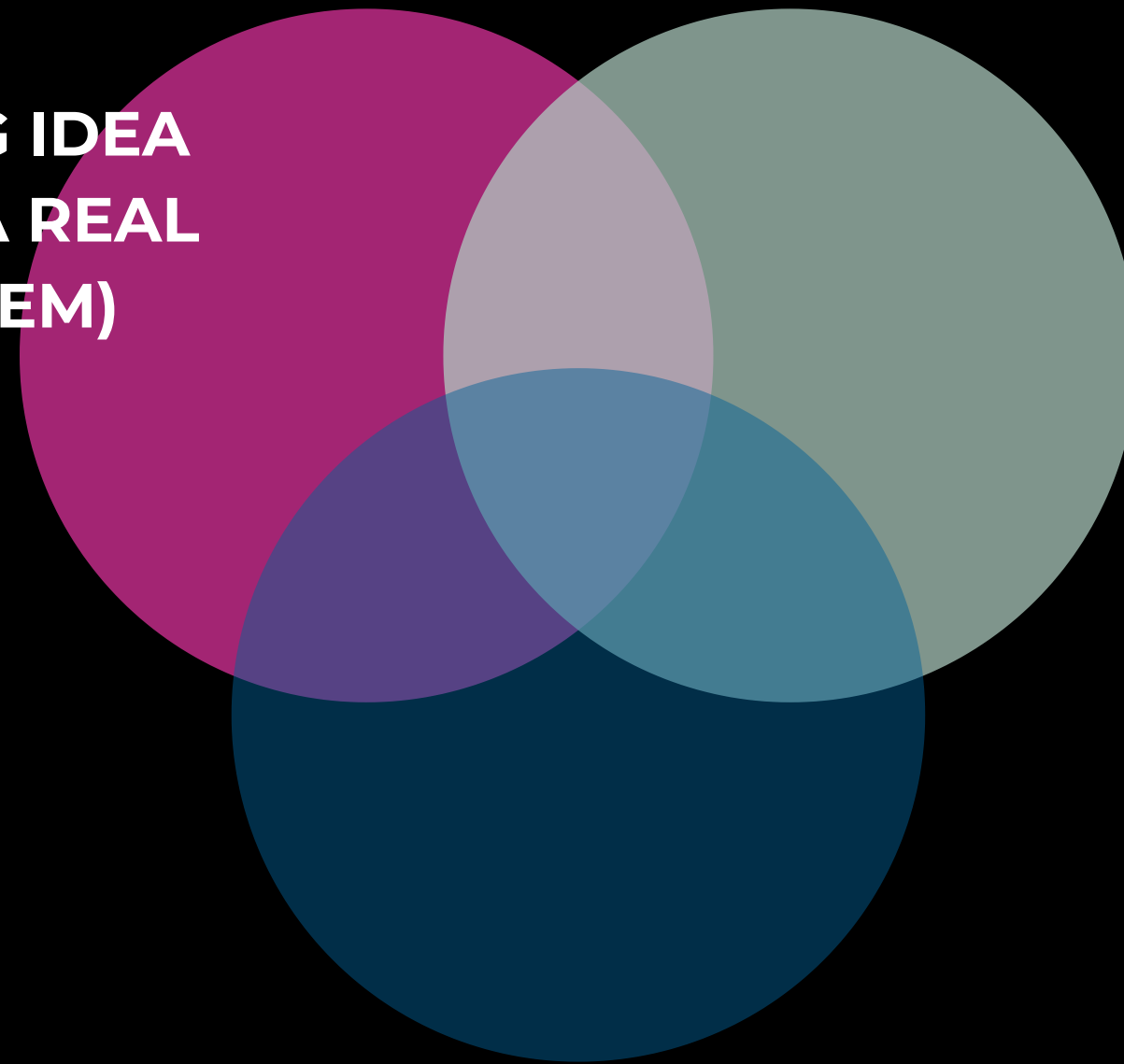


**1. STRONG IDEA
(SOLVE A REAL
PROBLEM)**

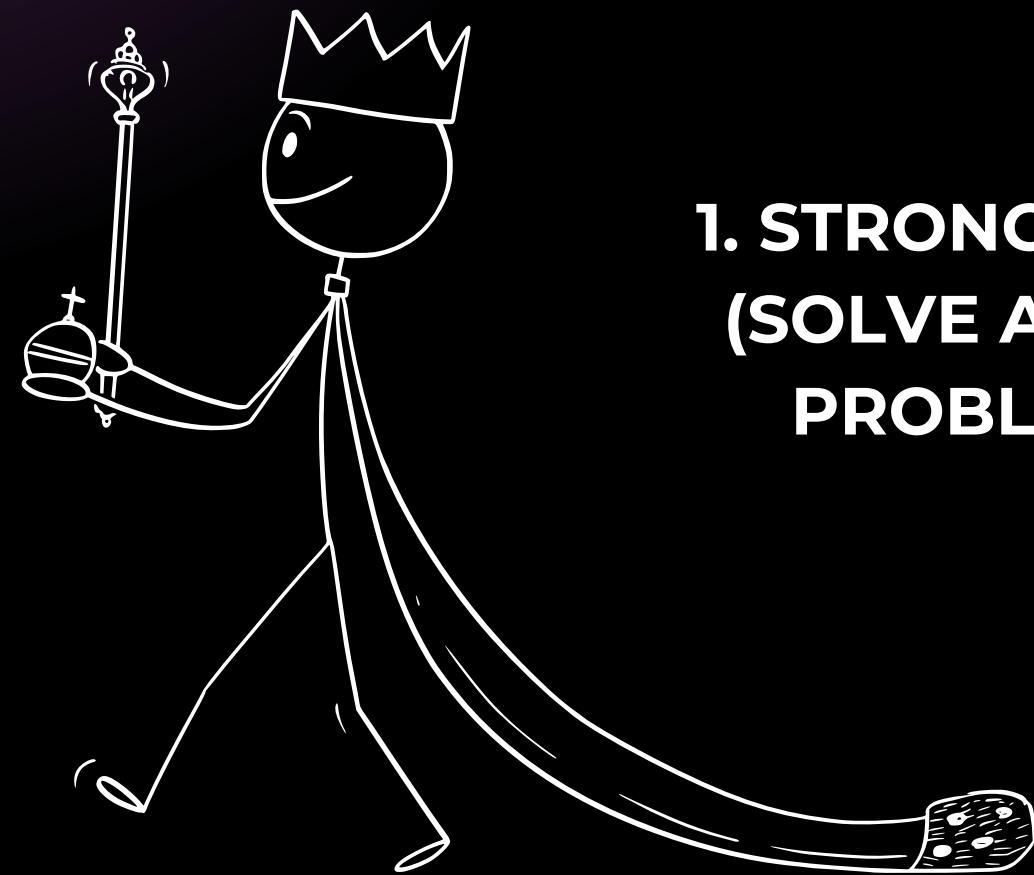




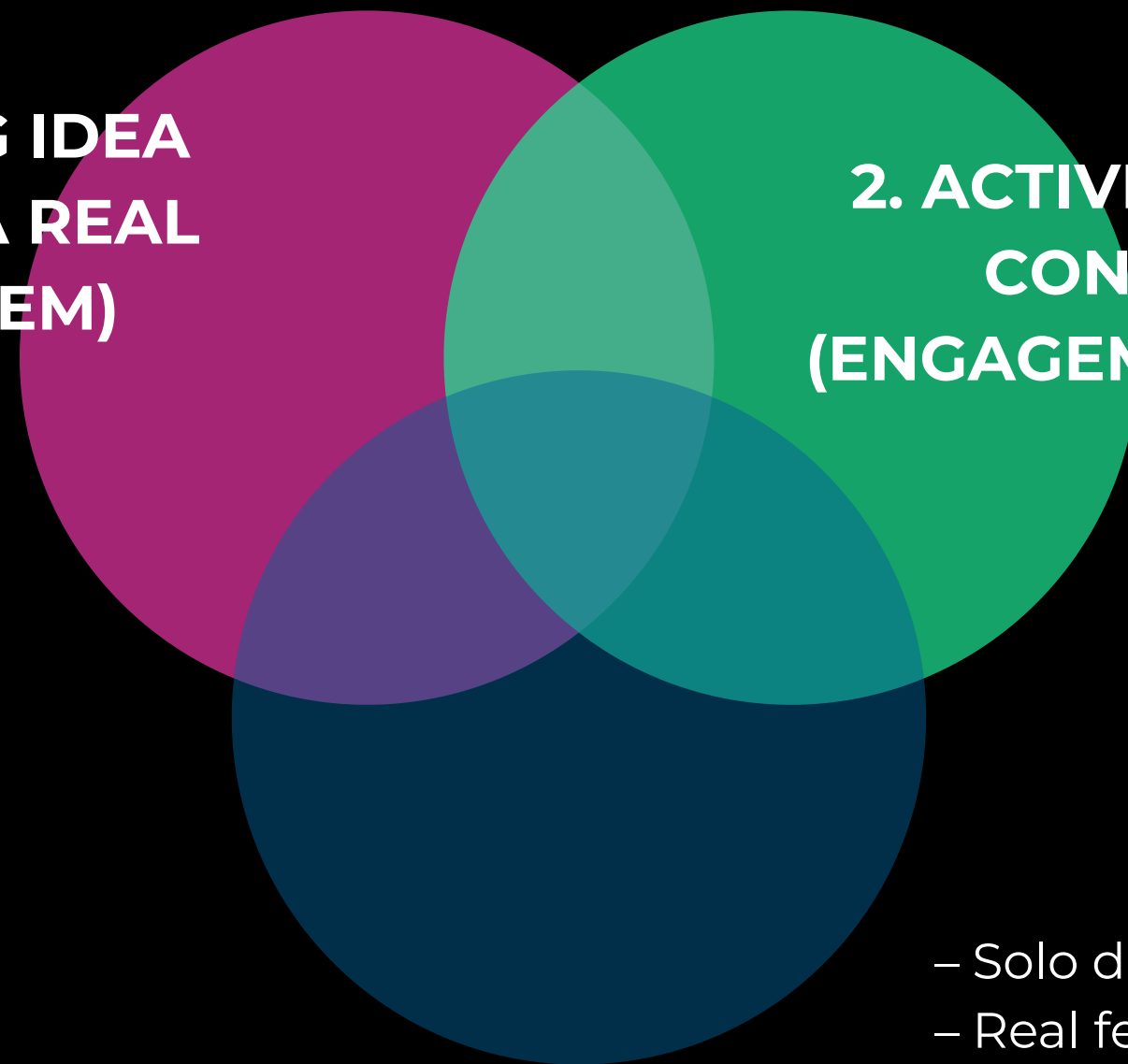
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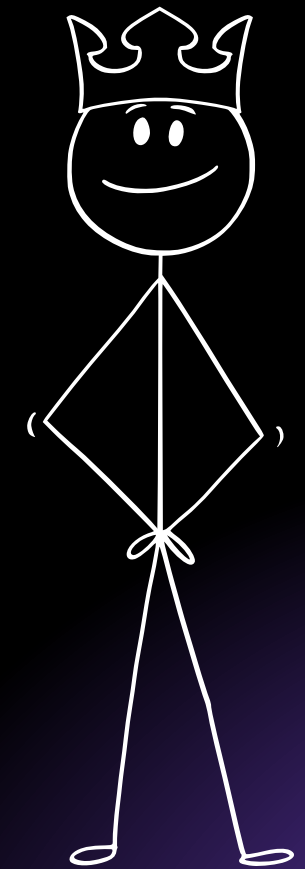
- Talk to people
- Ask other developers for feedback
- Open source folks are friendly
- Watch what competitors are doing



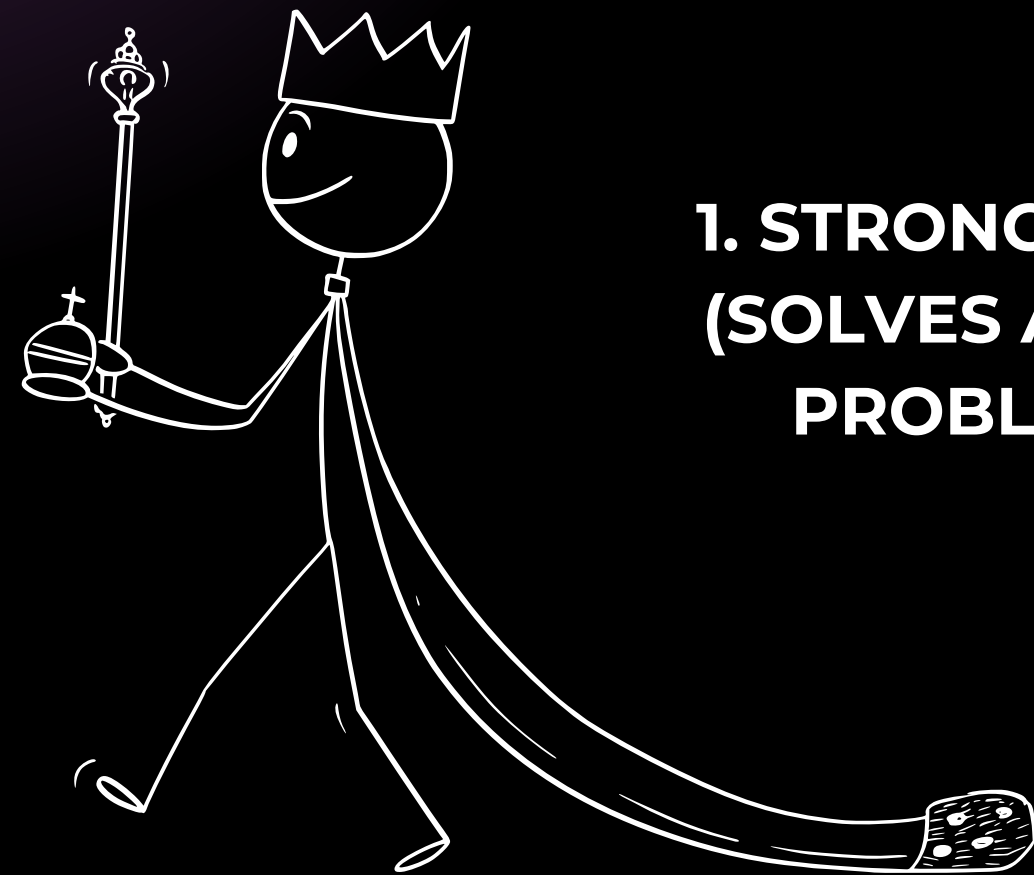
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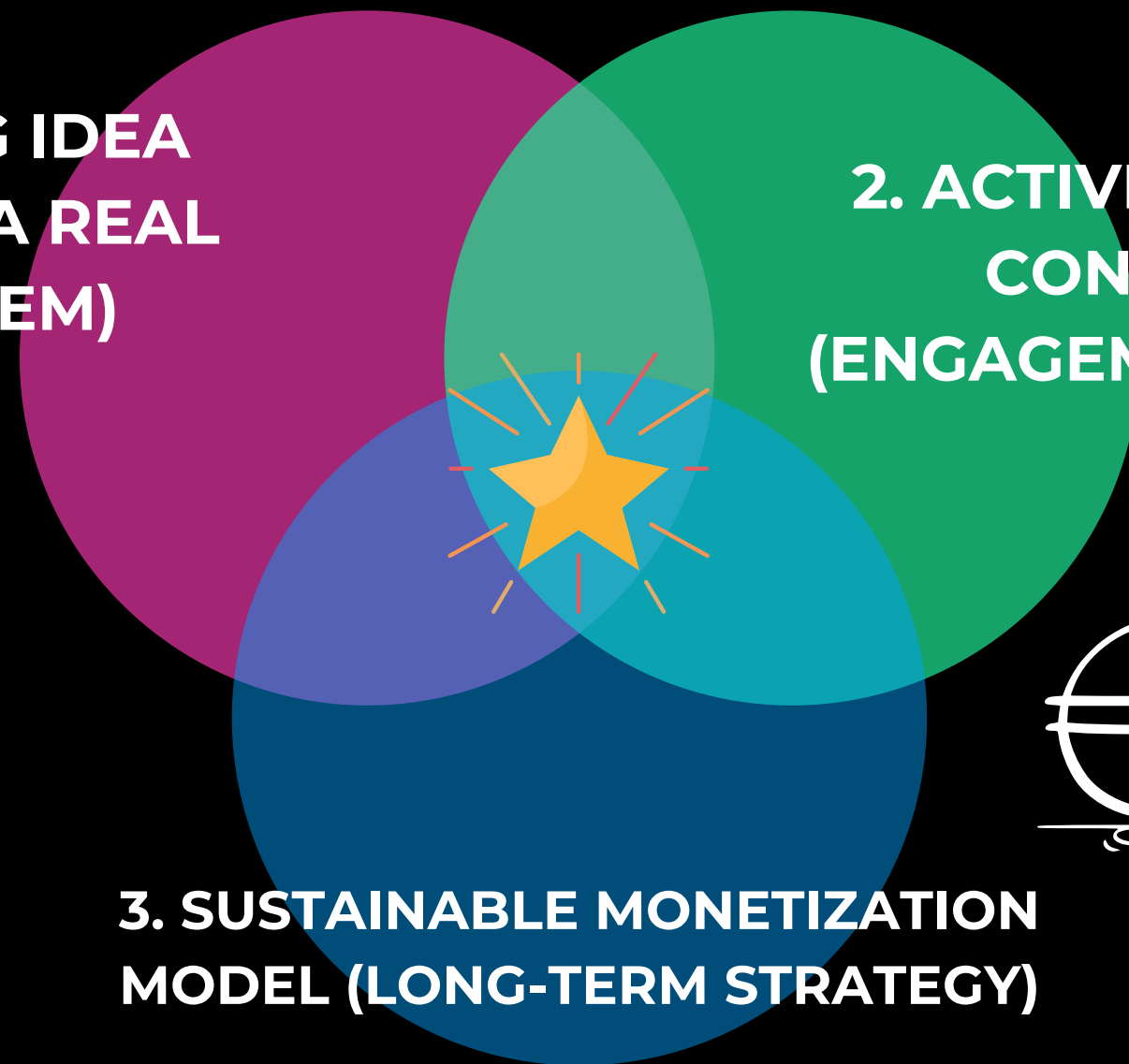
**2. ACTIVE COMMUNITY &
CONTRIBUTORS
(ENGAGEMENT & GROWTH)**



- Solo devs move slower and stuck in their own mind
- Real feedback only comes from the community
- People use your code in unexpected ways
- 50 small contributors > 3 full-time devs

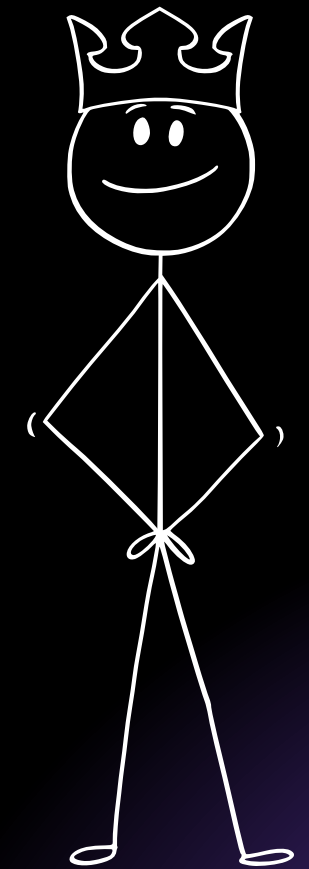


**1. STRONG IDEA
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PROBLEM)**



**2. ACTIVE COMMUNITY &
CONTRIBUTORS
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**3. SUSTAINABLE MONETIZATION
MODEL (LONG-TERM STRATEGY)**



HOW CAN YOU MAKE MONEY WITH OPEN SOURCE?

Choose the right model. Let's review 7 of them.

To make it simple, let's imagine you don't write code, you make shoes.



1. OPEN CORE

FREE SHOES, PREMIUM COMFORT

You give people free shoes for walking around the city. But if they want better comfort and stronger material, they need to pay.

Real example in tech: GitLab, Grafana, Elasticsearch

Best for: projects that have a clear line between “basic” and “pro”.



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- ✓ Attracts many users
- ✓ Flexible monetization – you control what to sell
- ✗ Hard to draw the line between free and paid
- ✗ Low contributor motivation for paid features
- ✗ Maintaining two versions = tech debt
- ✗ Big cloud providers can host your OS project



2. SAAS:

FREE SHOES, PAID CLEANING & DELIVERY

People can take your shoes and clean them by themselves.

But if they want clean, ready shoes delivered every week — you can offer a paid service.

Real example in tech: GitLab Cloud, Nuxt Studio, Docker Hub

Best for: those who can offer hosting and support



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- ✓ Fully open-source and community-friendly



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Best for: those who can offer hosting and support

- ✓ Recurring revenue
- ✓ Fully open-source and community-friendly
- ✗ Requires infrastructure and customer support



3. DUAL LICENSE:

FREE FOR WALKS, PAID FOR WORK

You can wear the shoes in the park — for free.

But if you are a waiter walking 12 hours a day — you need a special version, and you pay for it.

Real example: MySQL, Tauri, AG Grid

Best for: tools used by companies



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- ✓ Developers use for free, businesses pay
- ✓ Protects from big clouds selling your product without paying



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Best for: tools used by companies

- ✓ Developers use for free, businesses pay
- ✓ Protects from big clouds selling your product without paying
- ✗ You need clear license terms and maybe lawyers



4. SUPPORT AND CONSULTING: SHOES ARE FREE, BUT HELP IS PAID

You give the shoes for free. But if someone wants you to come, check the fit, change the insole and teach you how not to get blisters — they pay for your help.

Real example: Red Hat, Vuestic UI, Nextcloud

Best for: teams that can work directly with clients



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- ✓ High-value clients
- ✓ Trust and long-term relationships



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Best for: teams that can work directly with clients

- ✓ High-value clients
- ✓ Trust and long-term relationships
- ✗ Not easy to scale, depends on people
- ✗ You sell human hours, not product usage



5. PLUGINS AND MARKETPLACE: BASE SHOES ARE FREE, DECORATIONS COST MONEY

You give basic black shoes for free. But if someone wants red laces — they can buy them separately.

Real example: WordPress, Grafana

Best for: projects where you can add extra features



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Best for: projects where you can add extra features

- ✓ People pay only for what they need
- ✓ Can grow into a full ecosystem
- ✗ You need a big community, or it won't work
- ✗ Hard to control plugin quality and consistency



6. SPONSORSHIP: YOU MAKE SHOES, KIND PEOPLE SUPPORT YOU

You say: “I make awesome shoes for everyone. Support me!”
And people donate — because they love what you do.

Real example: Vue.js, Blender

Best for: projects with strong communities



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Best for: projects with strong communities

- ✓ Keeps everything 100% open-source
- ✓ Builds strong emotional connection with community



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Real example: Vue.js, Blender

Best for: projects with strong communities

- ✓ Keeps everything 100% open-source
- ✓ Builds strong emotional connection with community
- ✗ Low and unstable income
- ✗ Hard to plan growth or hire a team



7. COURSES AND EDUCATION: YOU MAKE SHOES AND TEACH OTHERS

You keep working on your open source shoes. But you also teach others how to make similar ones. You sell online courses, host webinars, and offer certificates.

Real example: Linux Foundation, VueSchool

Best for: experts and community leaders



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Best for: experts and community leaders

- ✓ Stable income
- ✓ Builds a strong personal or project brand
- ✗ Time and money to build content
- ✗ Requires teaching and speaking skills
- ✗ Distraction from product development (but easy delegated)



SO, WHAT IS THE BEST MODEL?

There is no one perfect answer.

Most successful projects use 2 or 3 models together.

- ✓ Nuxt → SaaS + Consulting + Support
- ✓ Tauri → Licensing + Sponsors + Hardware
- ✓ Grafana → Open Core + Plugins + Hosting

HOW TO CHOOSE THE MODEL?

FIRST, KNOW WHERE YOU ARE

3

STAGES OF OS PROJECT AND WHICH MODEL FITS BEST

1. EARLY STAGE — JUST GETTING STARTED

Goal: Get users, feedback, and community

💡 **What matters:**

- Easy to start
- Build trust
- Focus on value, not money yet

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✅ **Good models:**

- Sponsorship (+ GitHub Accelerator)
- Education (videos, blogs, talks)
- Consulting – help others using your tool

SO — WHERE DO YOU FIND **FIRST** USERS?

Baby steps:

- **Don't wait for the launch and 1000 stars.** Start sharing your story early — people love the process.
- Post on Twitter, Reddit, LinkedIn, Medium.
- Join Discord communities and GitHub discussions.
- Share your **values** and goals.



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Do consulting:

- Be visible, be helpful, and ask for real feedback — not just stars.
- Begin by offering free help — but always set clear boundaries.



SO — WHERE DO YOU FIND **FIRST** USERS?

Baby steps:

- **Don't wait for the launch and 1000 stars.** Start sharing your story early — people love the process.
- Post on Twitter, Reddit, LinkedIn, Medium.
- Join Discord communities and GitHub discussions.
- Share your **values** and goals.

Do consulting:

- Be visible, be helpful, and ask for real feedback — not just stars.
- Begin by offering free help — but always set clear boundaries.

Become a speaker:

- Small online meetups => early users
- One good offline talk => users, contributors, and future clients



2. GROWING STAGE — YOU HAVE USERS

Goal: Start earning money, scale the project

💡 **What matters:**

- Clear reason to pay, not just “support me”
- Make pricing simple
- Repeatable income, not one-off donations

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✅ **Good models:**

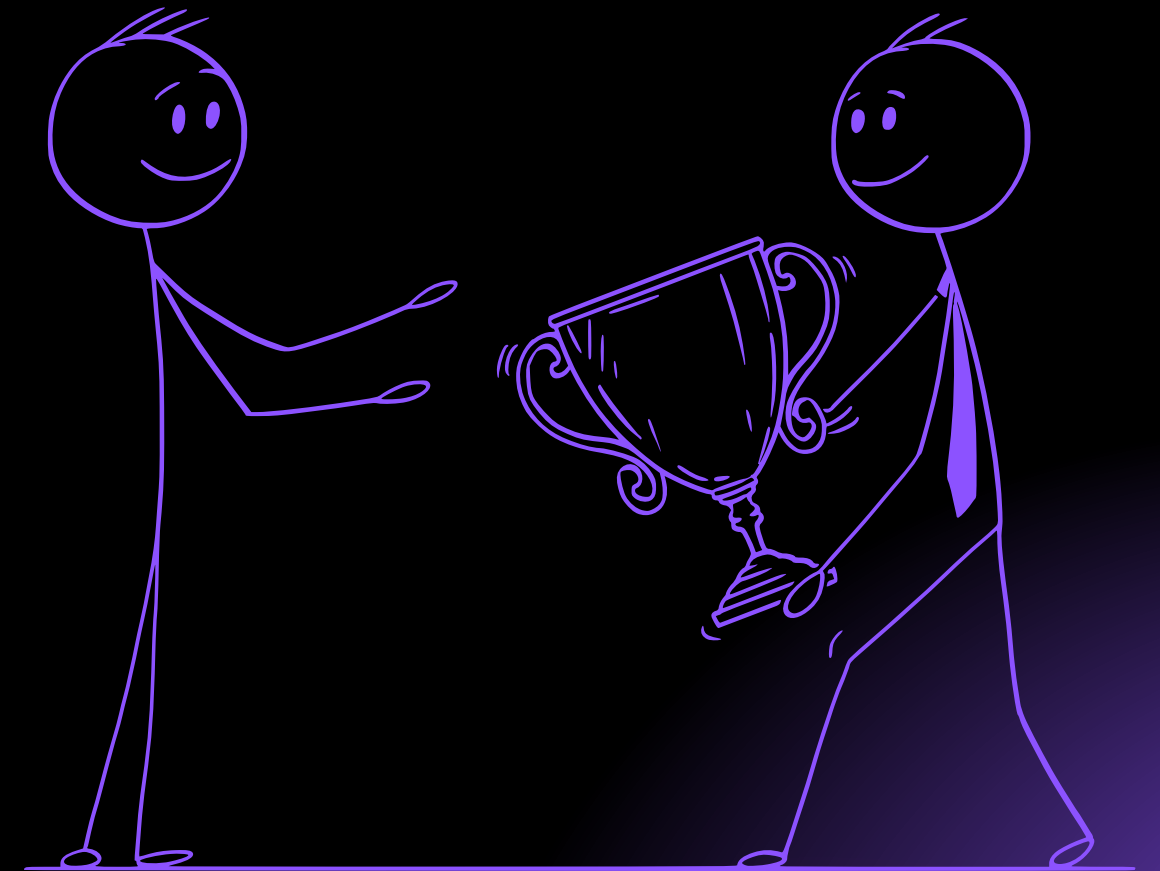
- Open Core – free basics, pro features cost money
- SaaS – hosting, updates, convenience for a fee
- Marketplace – themes, plugins, extras for sale

👉 **Tip: Split features: “free for everyone” vs “premium for teams”.**

WHERE DO YOU FIND **PAYING** USERS?

🔍 Start with your current users:

- Talk to them, ask what they'd pay for
 - Use onboarding emails, Discord, and feedback calls
- Turn early adopters into early customers



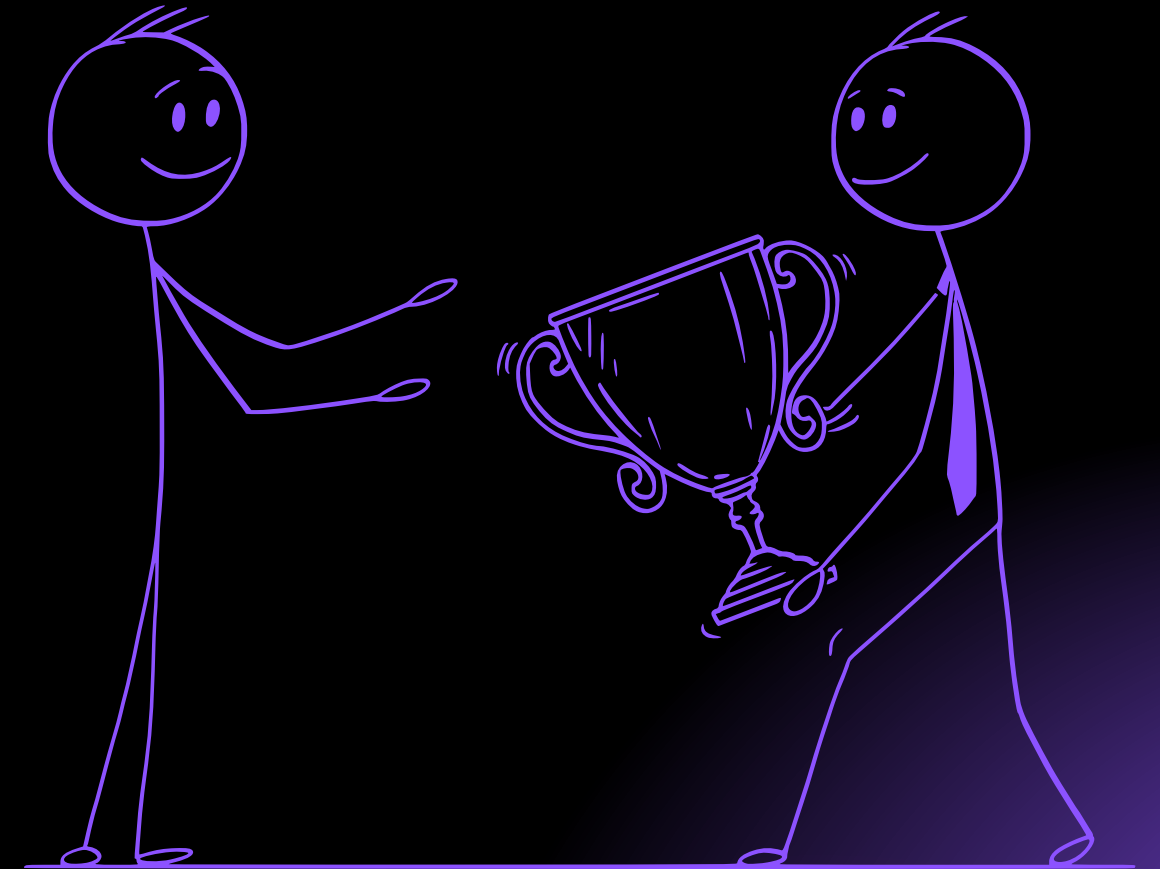
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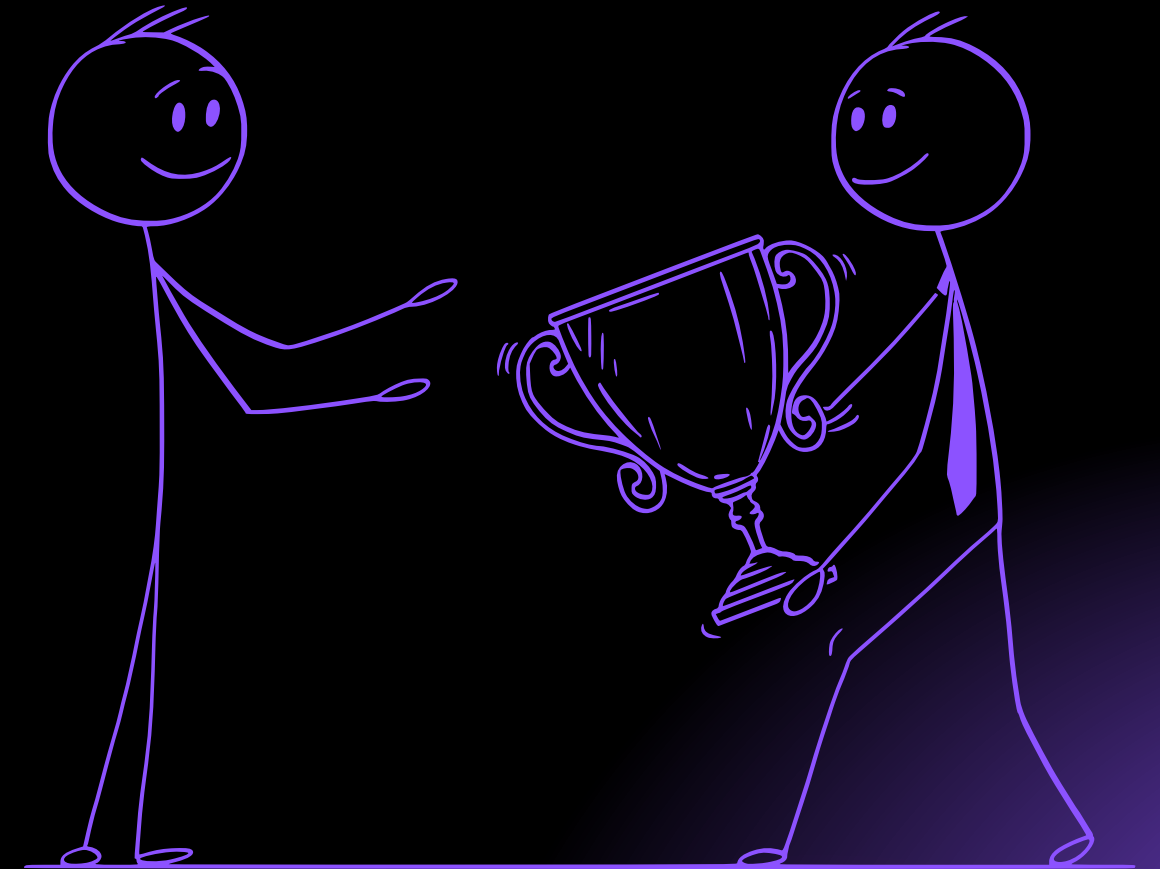
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💰 **Create partnerships program:**

- If your product fits into a bigger ecosystem, collaborate with others serving the same audience

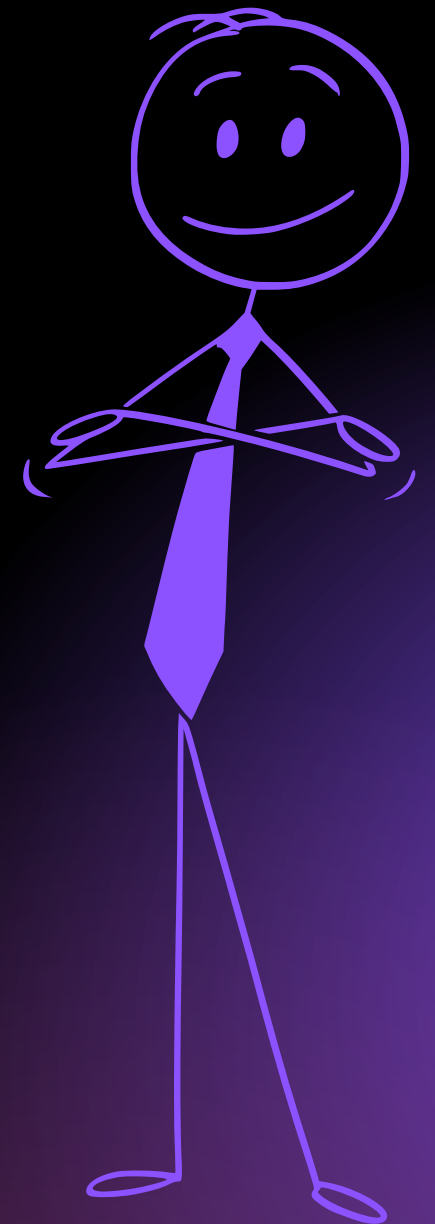


3. BUSINESS STAGE — COMPANIES USE YOUR PRODUCT

Goal: Stable income, enterprise clients

💡 **What matters:**

- Licensing, security, and compliance
- Clear business contracts
- Long-term support



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- Clear business contracts
- Long-term support

✅ **Good models:**

- Dual License – free for devs, paid for companies
- Support & Consulting – paid help, custom solutions
- Open Core + SLA – premium features + paid support

👉 **Tip: Offer serious tools and services that businesses trust.**



HOW TO **GROW** & FIND USERS AT THIS STAGE

Go where your clients are

- Tech conferences, B2B events
- Partner with agencies that serve your audience



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Position yourself as a solution

- Focus on ROI (Return on Investment) — how your tool saves time, money, or reduces risk.
- Share case studies, benchmarks, migration guides, offer an audit
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Reach out directly

- Cold emails, demos, onboarding calls
- Find new markets, do upselling, make big partnerships...

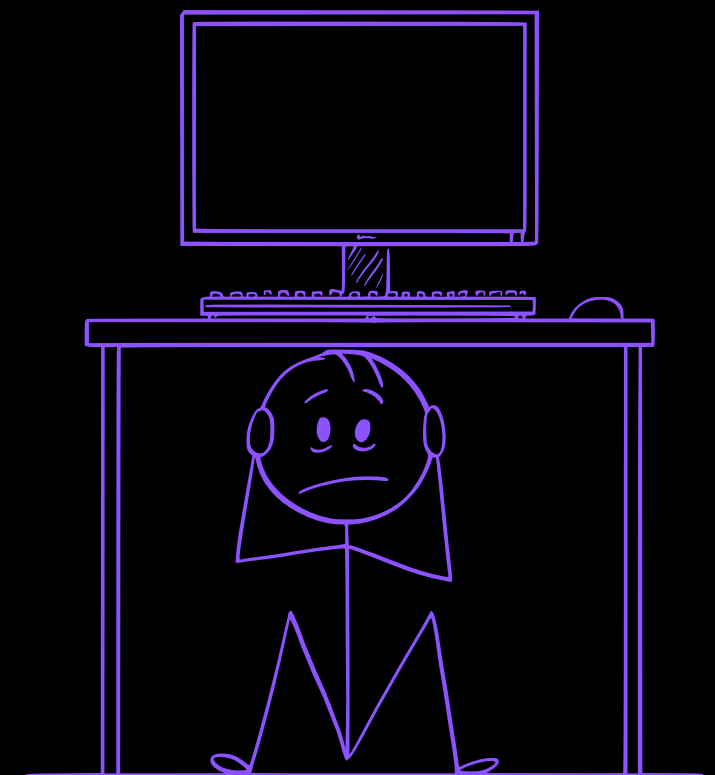


**8 YEARS IN OPEN SOURCE:
STILL EARLY STAGE**

**YES, IT COULD HAVE COST US
MUCH LESS**

WHERE DID WE GO WRONG?

- ✗ No strategy or clear goals before investing
- ✗ Developers chose tasks based on interest, not business impact
- ✗ Lack of real experience using our products in commercial projects
- ✗ Believed “if we build it, users will come”
- ✗ Focused 100% on code, 0% on business strategy and marketing
- ✗ **Treated the projects like a hobby** — no financial planning, no donation setup, no budgeting, no strategy sessions — **but invested in them like commercial products**





BUT WHAT DID WE DO RIGHT?

- ✓ **Built a strong team** - Used open source to test and onboard developers.
- ✓ **Focused** - Chose one small technology — gave us a clear niche and helped sell.
- ✓ **Built trust** and partnerships in the Vue ecosystem.
- ✓ **Recognized our mistakes** - Cut non-strategic investments, focused on Vue integrations.
- ✓ **No more silence** - Started writing, posting, speaking, and hosting events.

WHAT'S NEXT

This shift might finally move us into the Growing Stage — where stable income and smart investment truly make sense.

- 💡 Maybe a paid ready-to-use package based on Vuestic Admin.
- 💡 Maybe themes and plugins for marketplaces.

But this time, we start with:

- ✅ Strategic planning
- ✅ A clear financial model
- ✅ And real contributor involvement — not just internal effort.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ✓ Open source needs more than code — it needs **strategy** and clear goals
- ✓ **Choose your monetization model early** based on your stage
- ✓ Focus on community first, but **never forget the business side**
- ✓ **Hire the right people** in the right moment and do sales like a pro
- ✓ **Mistakes** are part of the journey — just don't stay stuck
- ✓ It's never too late to rethink, rebuild, and **grow**!



THANK YOU!

if you liked the talk — connect with me on LinkedIn!
If you didn't — connect anyway and tell me why 😊

If you have any questions or ideas — I'd love to chat!

