

# Power Dynamics, Rug Pulls, and Other Corporate Impacts on OSS Sustainability

Monkigras 2025

Dr. Dawn M. Foster

Director of Data Science, CHAOSS

 <https://chaoss.community/>

 <https://github.com/chaoss>

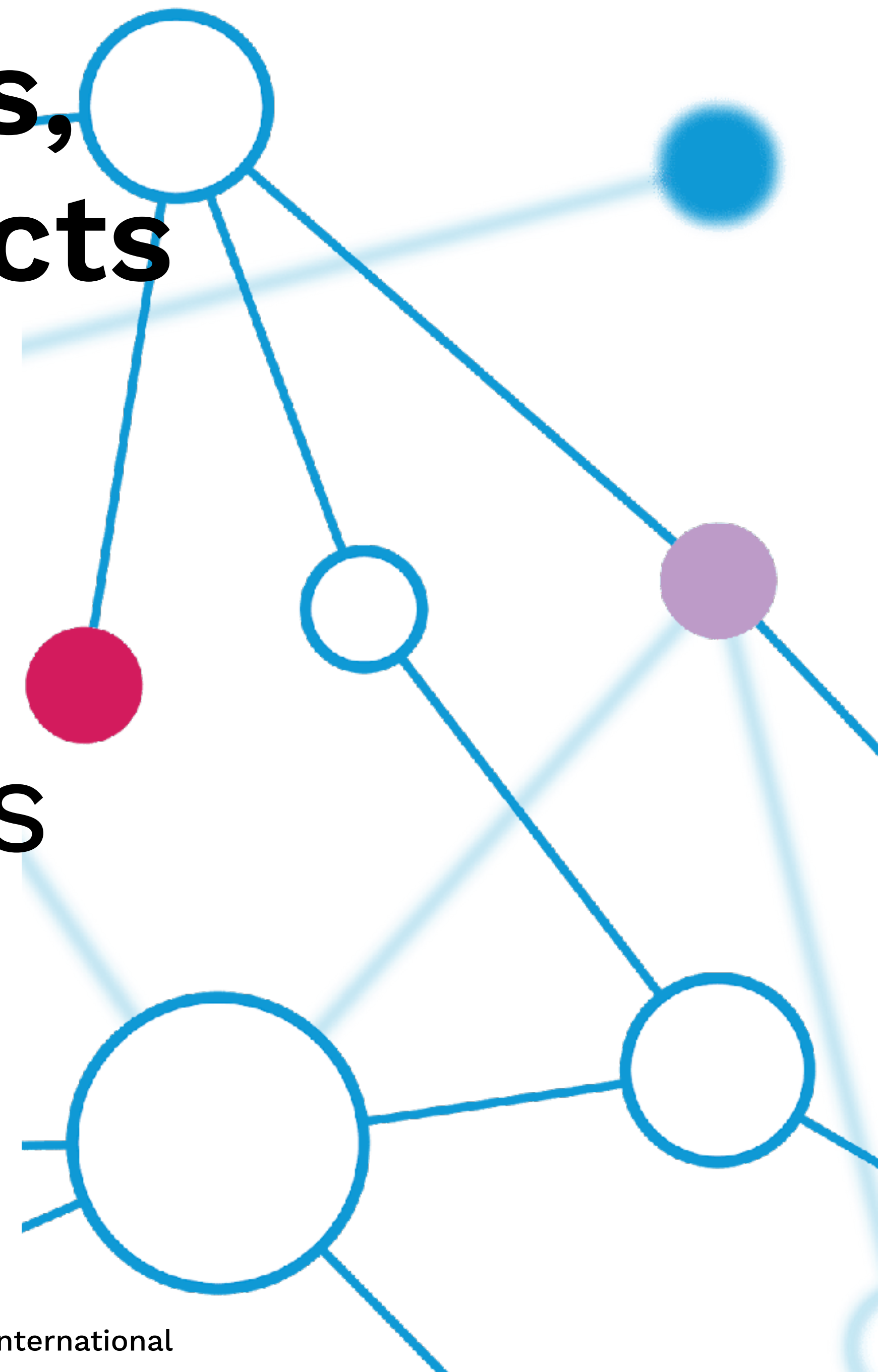
 [@chaoss@fosstodon.org](mailto:@chaoss@fosstodon.org)

 <https://fastwonderblog.com/>

 <https://github.com/geekygirldawn>

 [@geekygirldawn@hachyderm.io](mailto:@geekygirldawn@hachyderm.io)

 [@geekygirldawn.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/@geekygirldawn)



# Thank You!



**ALFRED P. SLOAN**  
**FOUNDATION**



**Matt Germonprez**

Professor

University of Nebraska Omaha

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/mattgermonprez/>



**FORD**  
**FOUNDATION**



# Whoami



- Geek, traveler, reader
- 20+ yr tech career focused on community & open source (VMware, Intel, Puppet, ...)
- OpenUK Board
- CHAOSS Board and Maintainer
- CNCF TAG Contrib Strategy co-chair
- PhD on Linux kernel collaboration

Photos by Mom, the Linux Foundation, and me



# Agenda

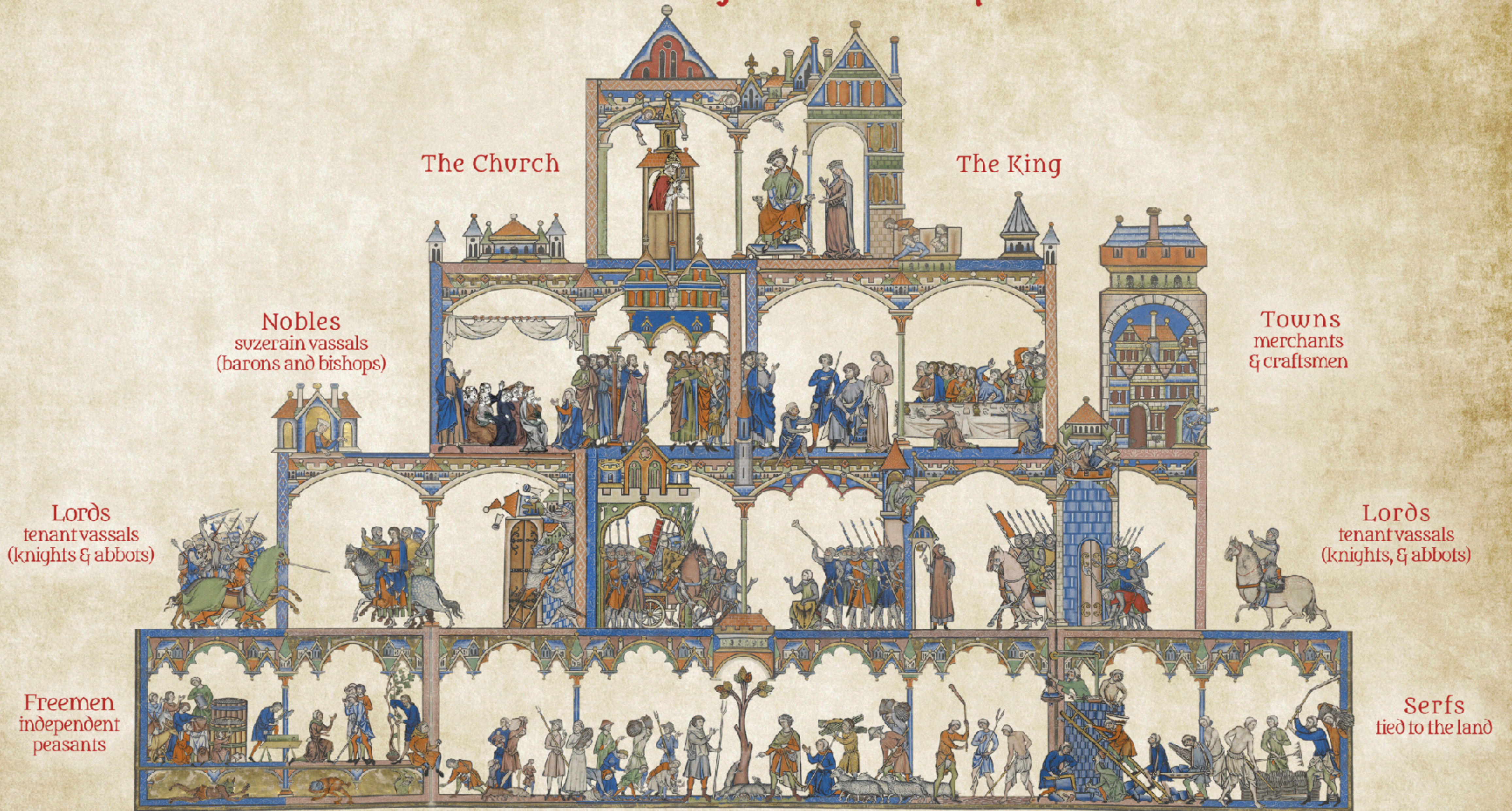
- Power Dynamics
- Rug Pulls
  - Relicensing -> Forks
  - Other Rug Pulls
- What Can We Do?

Photo by Marco Verch - CC BY 2.0

@geekygirl dawn

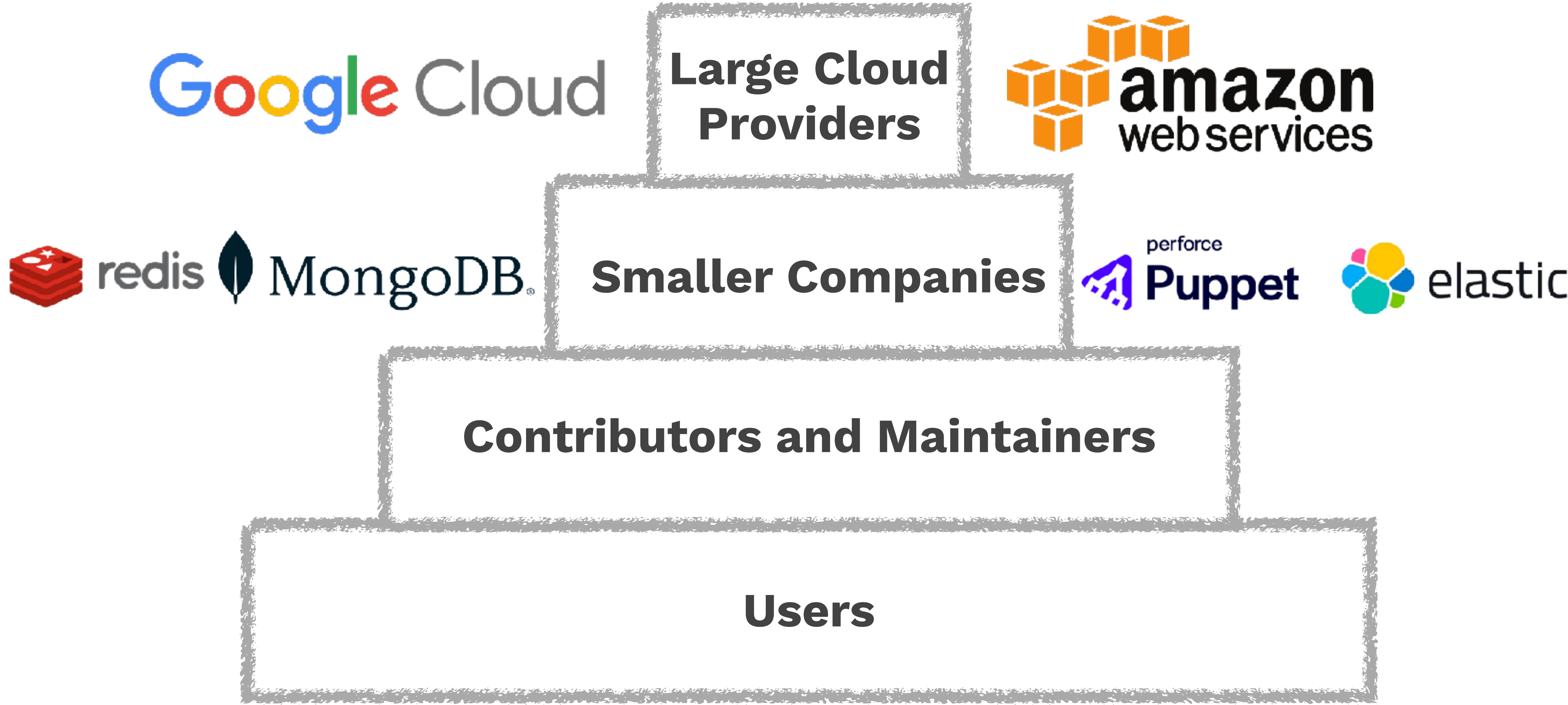


# The Feudal Society in Medieval Europe





# Open Source Power Dynamics





# Rug Pulls and Disruption

Companies with more power  
can pull the rug from  
underneath the rest of us  
resulting in disruptions

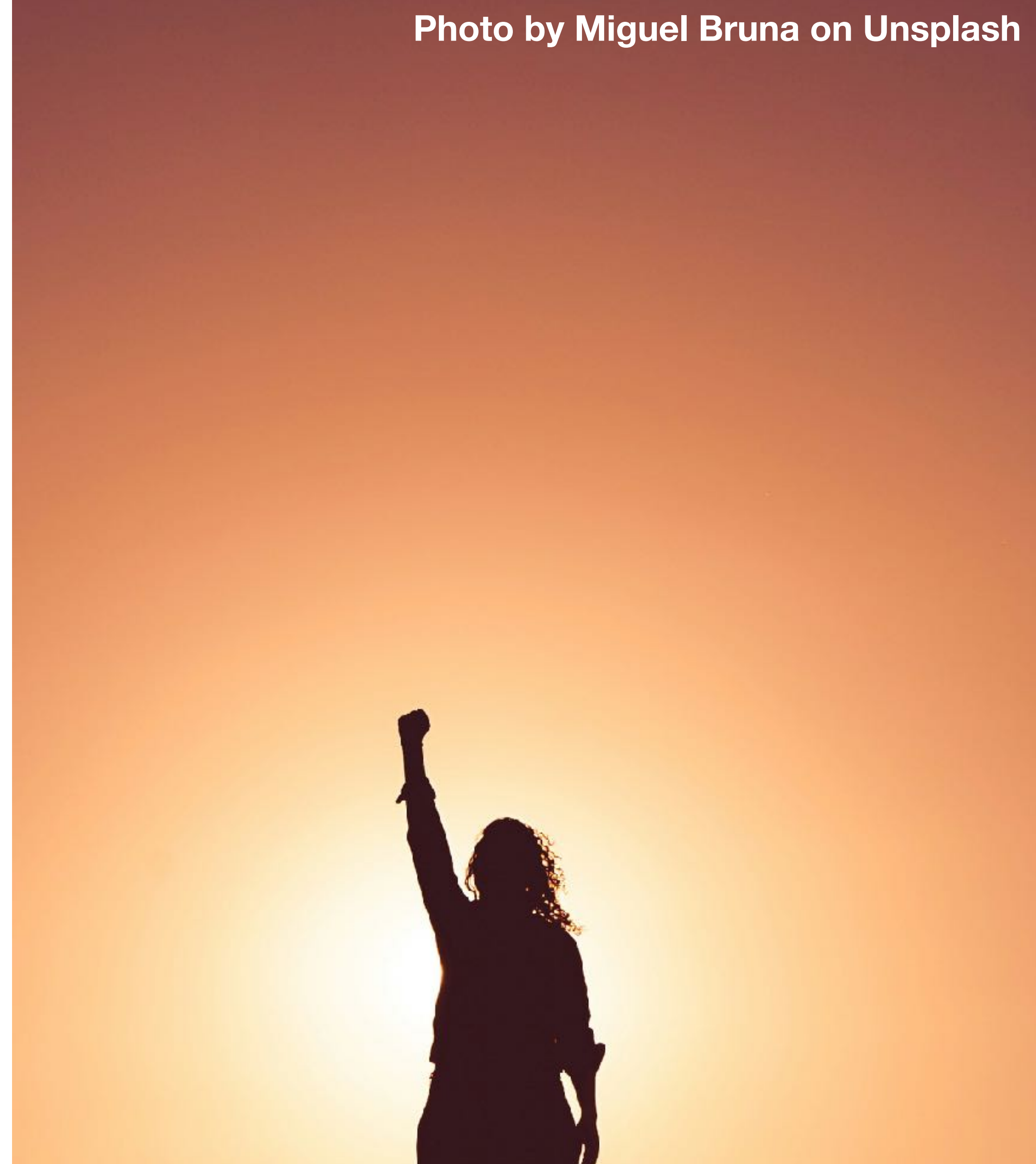


Photo by Jan Fidler - CC BY 2.0



# Relicensing: Flip the Power Dynamic


Cloud providers often cited as  
cause for relicense, which puts  
more power in the hands of the  
smaller company





# Rug Pulls -> Forks

Social fork: forking a project to collaborate and contribute back to it (GitHub fork)

 **Hard fork (aka hostile fork):**  
**starts a new project that often competes with the original**





# Forks Flip the Power Dynamic

Forks are a form of collective action where those with less power can take control of the governance of a project via a fork

(Mindel et al., 2018)



Photo by Alex G on Unsplash

@geekygirldawn



# Rug Pulls: Relicensing, Forks, and More





# Relicensing Rug Pulls -> Forks: The Data

<p><b>Elasticsearch</b> (Elastic relicensed 2021-02-03)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1 yr before: 67 Employees &gt;96% adds / deletes. 3 non-employees &lt;1% adds / deletes.</li><li>• 1 yr after: similar results</li></ul>	<p><b>OpenSearch</b> (Amazon launched fork 2021-04-12)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1 yr after fork: 7 Employees / &gt;80% adds / deletes. 2 non-employees &lt;7% adds / deletes.</li><li>• 1 yr before LF: 40 Employees / &gt;63% adds / deletes. 6 non-employees &lt;13% adds / deletes.</li></ul>
<p><b>Terraform</b> (HashiCorp relicensed 2023-08-10)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1 yr before: 21 employees, &gt; 93% adds / deletes. 2 non-employees: &lt; 1% of adds / deletes.</li><li>• 1 yr after: similar results</li></ul>	<p><b>OpenTofu</b> (Linux Foundation launched fork 2023-09-05)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1 yr after fork: 31 people at 11 companies: Spacelift, Env0, Scalr, Harness, Red Hat ...</li><li>• None previously contributed to Terraform</li></ul>
<p><b>Redis</b> (Redis relicensed 2024-03-20)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1 yr before: 6 employees 28% commits, &gt; 74% adds / deletes. 12 non-employees 54% commits, 12% additions, 15% deletions</li><li>• 6 mos after: 0 non-employees with 5+ commits</li></ul>	<p><b>Valkey</b> (Linux Foundation launched fork 2024-03-28)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 6 mo after fork: 29 people at 10 companies: Amazon, Tencent, Huawei, Ericsson, Google, others</li><li>• 18 previously contributed to Redis</li></ul>

Primary project repo. ElasticSearch / OpenSearch: 10+ commits, Other projects: 5+ commits. Data: <https://github.com/chaoss/wg-data-science/tree/main/publications>



# Relicensing Rug Pulls without Forks

Relicensing events don't  
always result in a popular fork.

Examples: MongoDB, Sentry





# Other Rug Pulls

Perforce doesn't "relicense"  
Puppet, but they move the  
development and releases  
to behind closed doors,  
which resulted in the  
OpenVox fork

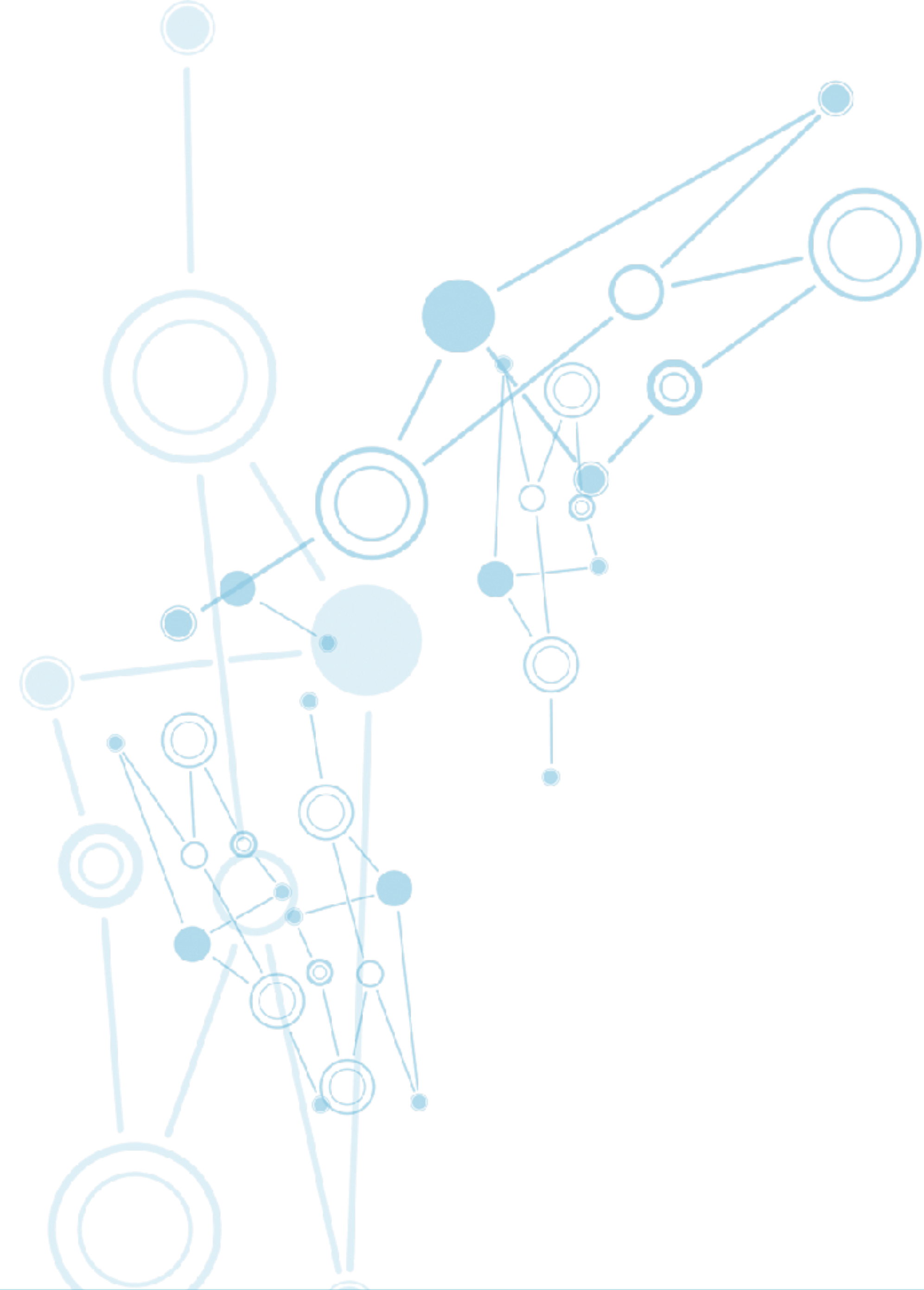


perforce

**Puppet**



# What can we do?





# Legal Stuff\*

Contributor License Agreement (CLA)

vs.

Developer Certificate of Origin (DCO)



Photo by Tingey Injury Law Firm on Unsplash



# Neutral Foundations

Embrace projects  
under foundations  
where we can all  
participate as equals



**CLOUD NATIVE**  
COMPUTING FOUNDATION





# Neutral Governance

Level playing field with  
leaders/ maintainers from  
a variety of organizations  
and a fair and transparent  
process for selecting them





# Contributor Sustainability

Active contributors from  
a variety of  
different organizations



Image by the CNCF  
@geekygirldawn



# Contribute!

Have your employees contribute to the projects that are most important for your company to improve the sustainability of those projects from within



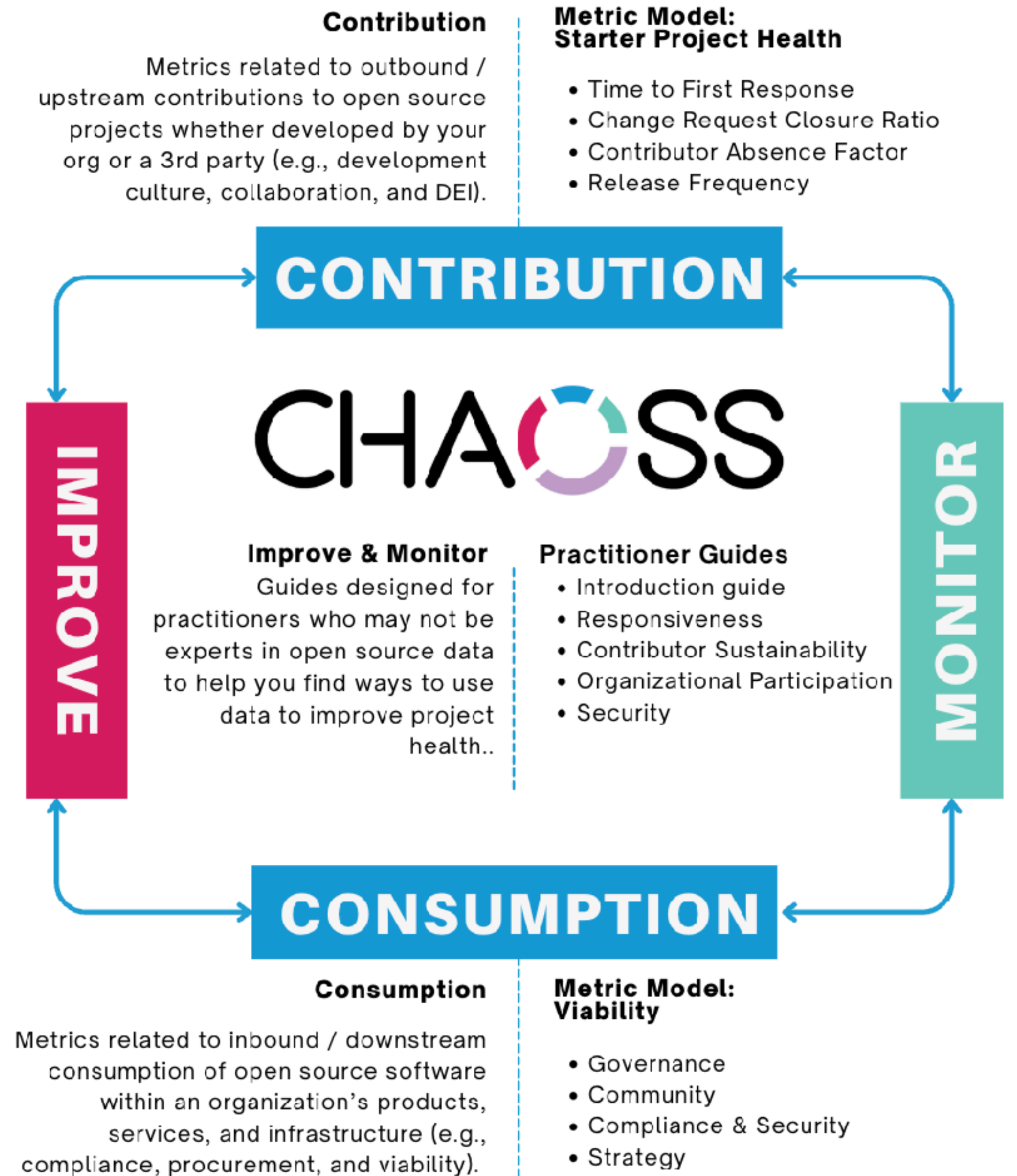


# CHAOSS Resources

Practitioner Guides  
and collections of  
metrics to improve the  
health and sustainability  
of your projects

<https://chaoss.community/kb/metrics-model-project-viability-starter/>

<https://chaoss.community/about-chaoss-practitioner-guides/>





# Resources and References

## Resources:

- [chaoss.community](https://chaoss.community)
- [github.com/chaoss/wg-data-science](https://github.com/chaoss/wg-data-science)
- [github.com/chaoss/wg-data-science/tree/main/dataset/license-changes/fork-case-study](https://github.com/chaoss/wg-data-science/tree/main/dataset/license-changes/fork-case-study)
- [chaoss.community/about-chaoss-practitioner-guides](https://chaoss.community/about-chaoss-practitioner-guides)

## References:

- Foster, D. (2024, November 13-14). The New Dynamics of Open Source: Relicensing, Forks, and Community Impact. OpenForum Academy Symposium 2024, Boston, Massachusetts, Available at <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2411.04739>.
- Germonprez, M., Kendall, J. E., Kendall, K. E., Mathiassen, L., Young, B., & Warner, B. (2017). A Theory of Responsive Design: A Field Study of Corporate Engagement with Open Source Communities. *Information Systems Research*, 28(1), 64-83.
- Mindel, V., Mathiassen, L., & Rai, A. (2018). The Sustainability of Polycentric Information Commons. *MIS quarterly*, 42(2), 607-632.



# Final Thoughts

**Relicensing and forks shift  
the power dynamics in  
open source projects to allow  
those with less power  
to take collective action  
and gain power back**

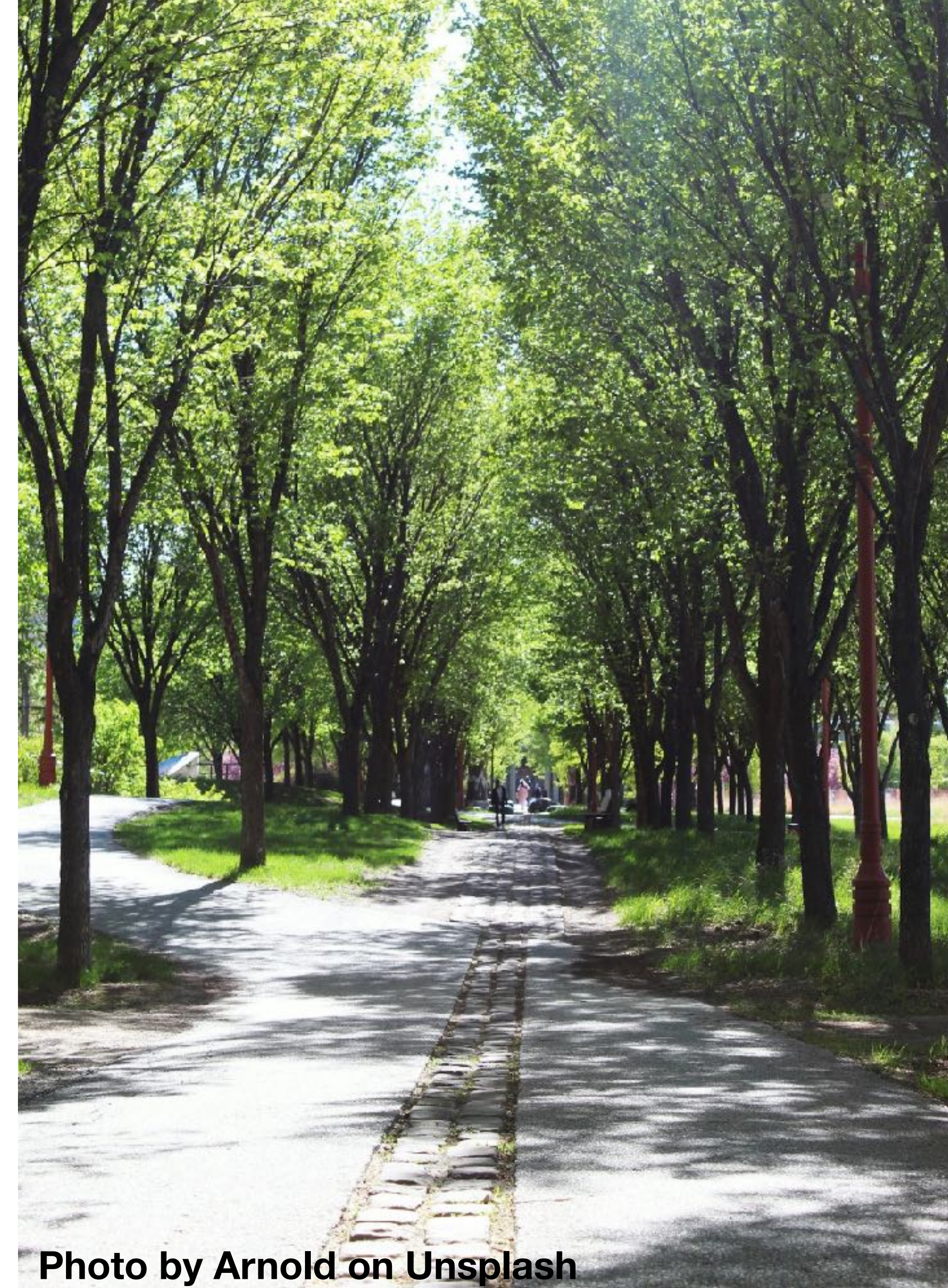








Photo by Arnold on Unsplash



# THANK YOU!

## Any Questions?

 <https://chaoss.community/>  
 <https://github.com/chaoss>  
 [@chaoss@fosstodon.org](mailto:@chaoss@fosstodon.org)

 <https://fastwonderblog.com/>  
 <https://github.com/geekygirldawn>  
 [@geekygirldawn@hachyderm.io](mailto:@geekygirldawn@hachyderm.io)  
 [@geekygirldawn.bsky.social](https://bsky.social/@geekygirldawn)

