RAI 1

The unreasonable cost of open source contribution

Rob Norris

Hello!

- Freelance open-source developer
- Melbourne, Australia · Bunurong Country

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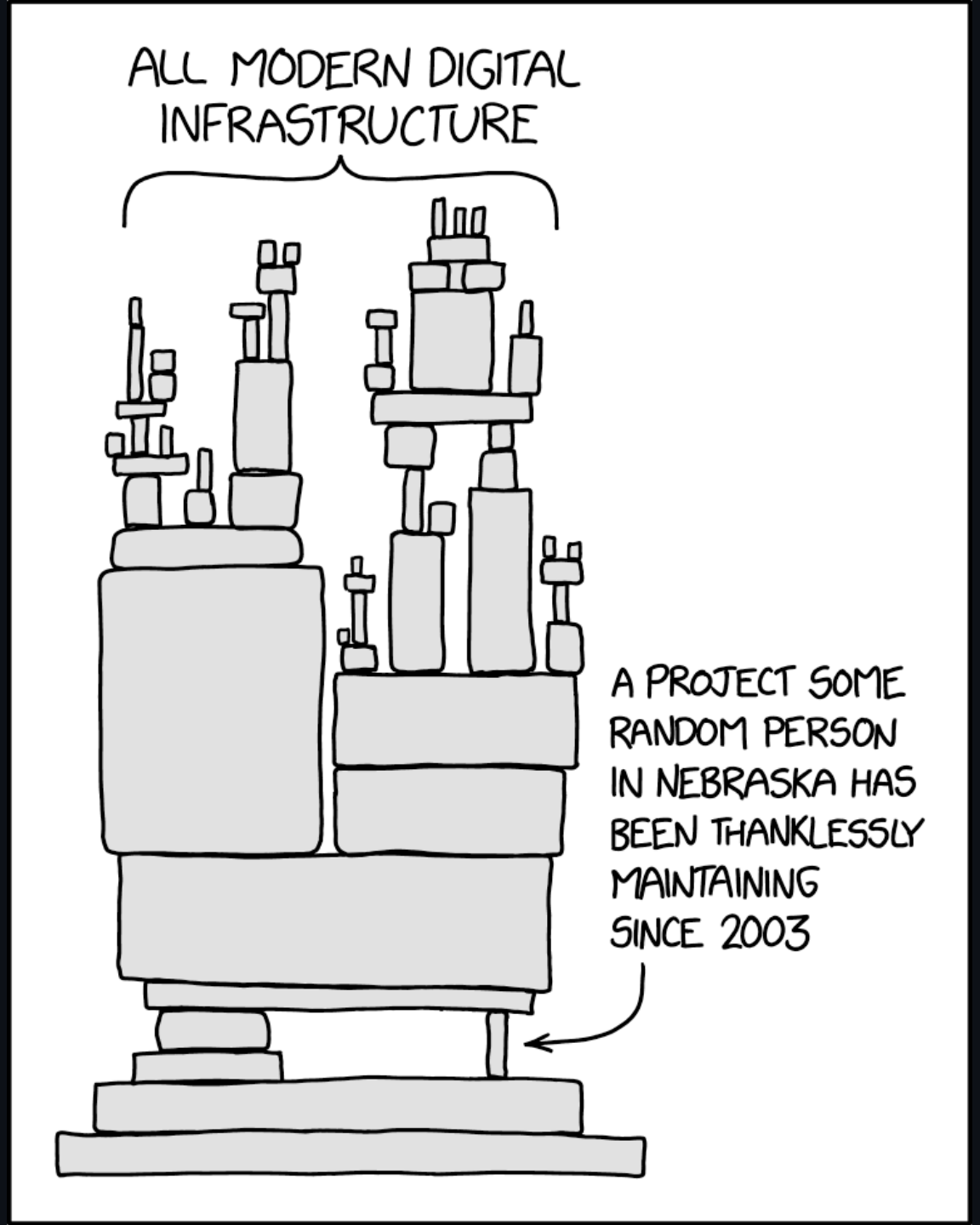
- Freelance open-source developer
- Melbourne, Australia · Bunurong Country
- Talk homepage: robn.au/open-source-cost

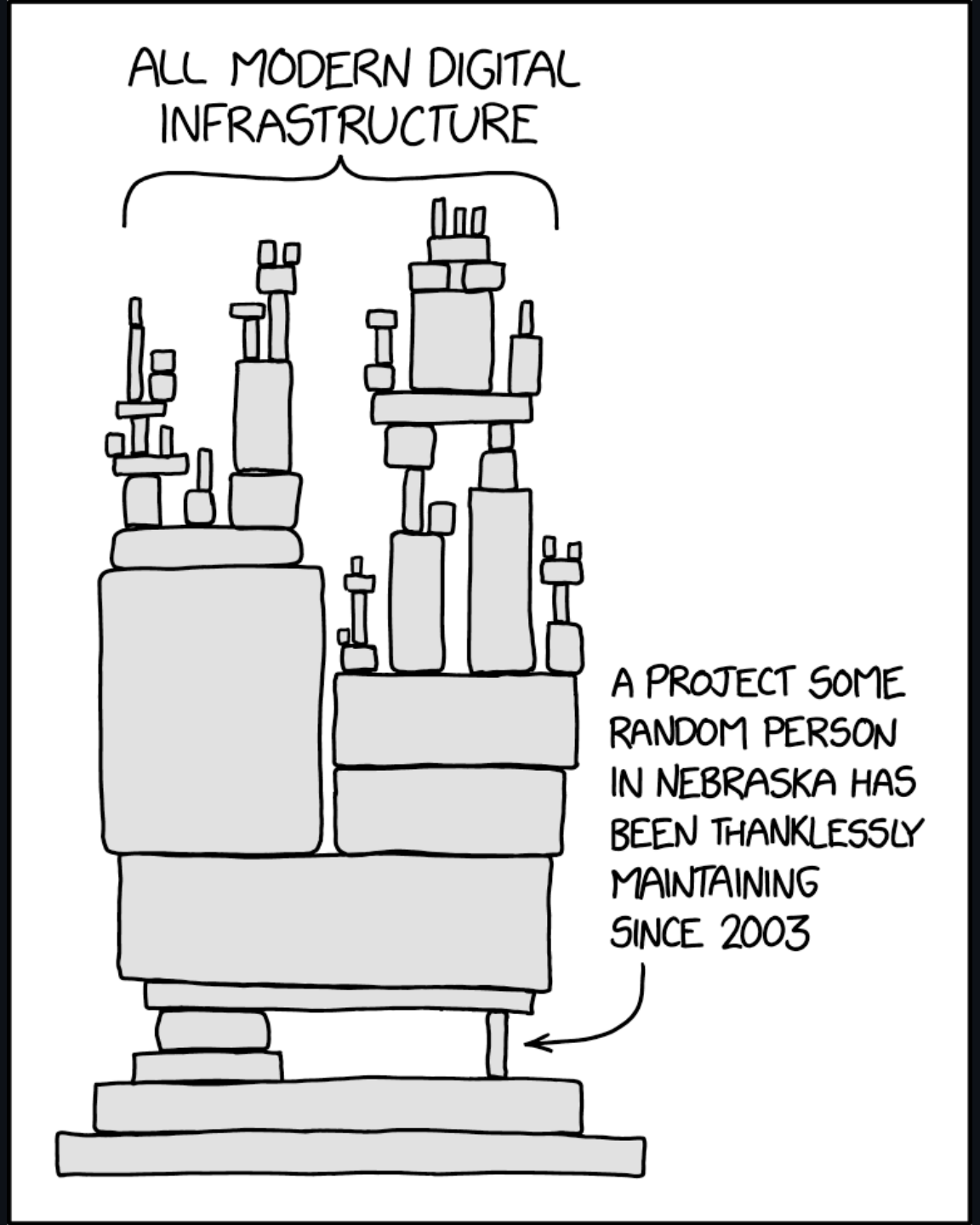
OPEN SOURCE SUSTAINABILITY


ALL MODERN DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE
A PROJECT SOME RANDOM PERSON IN NEBRASKA HAS BEEN THANKLESSLY MAINTAINING SINCE 2003

The story so far

> “An Obvious Statement About Open Source”
> Christopher Neugebauer, Monktoberfest 2024
> https://youtu.be/bf_6EVTlZOY

- XZ attack: “Maintainer burnout as a weapon”
- Open source devalues the work of developers and maintainers *by design*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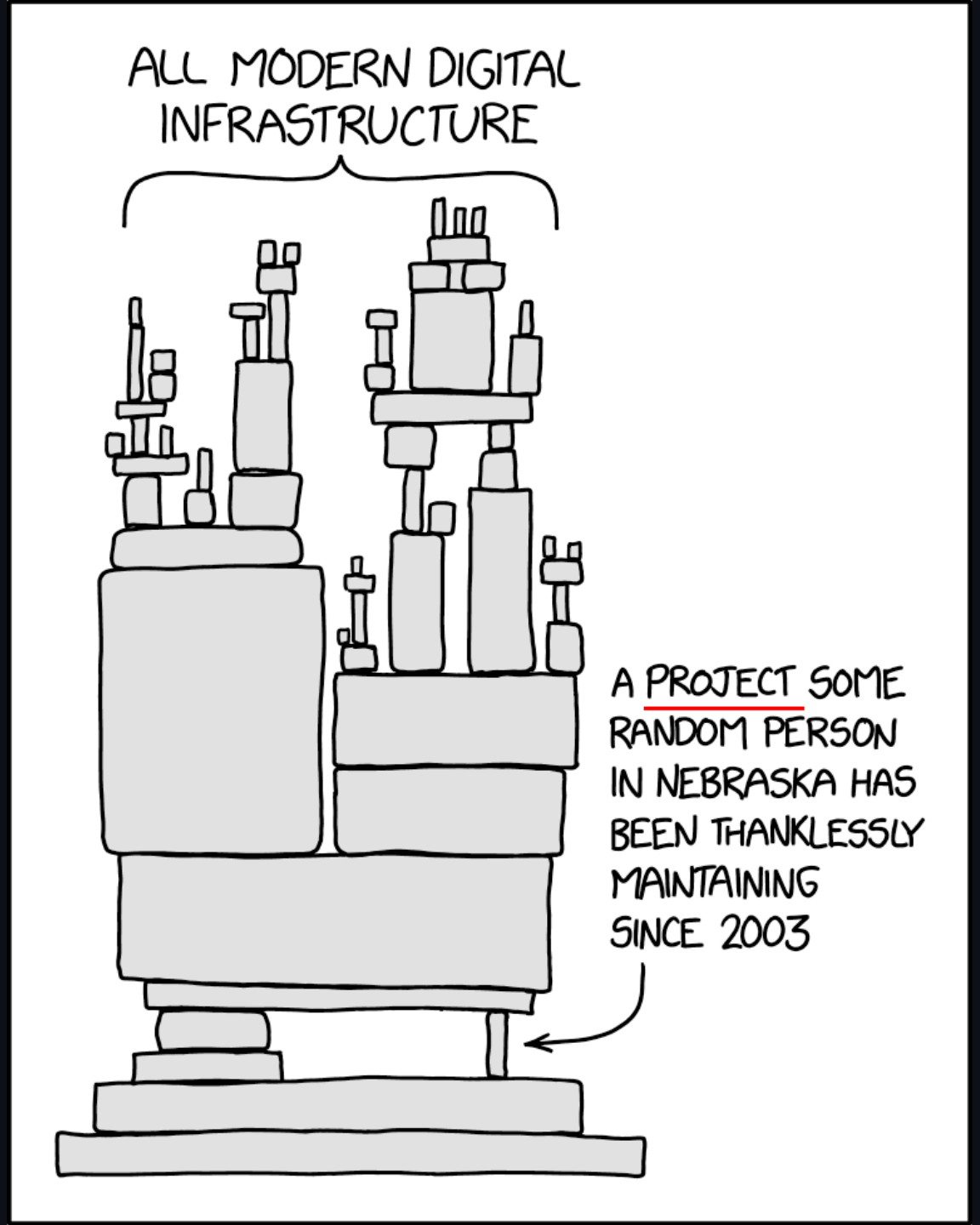
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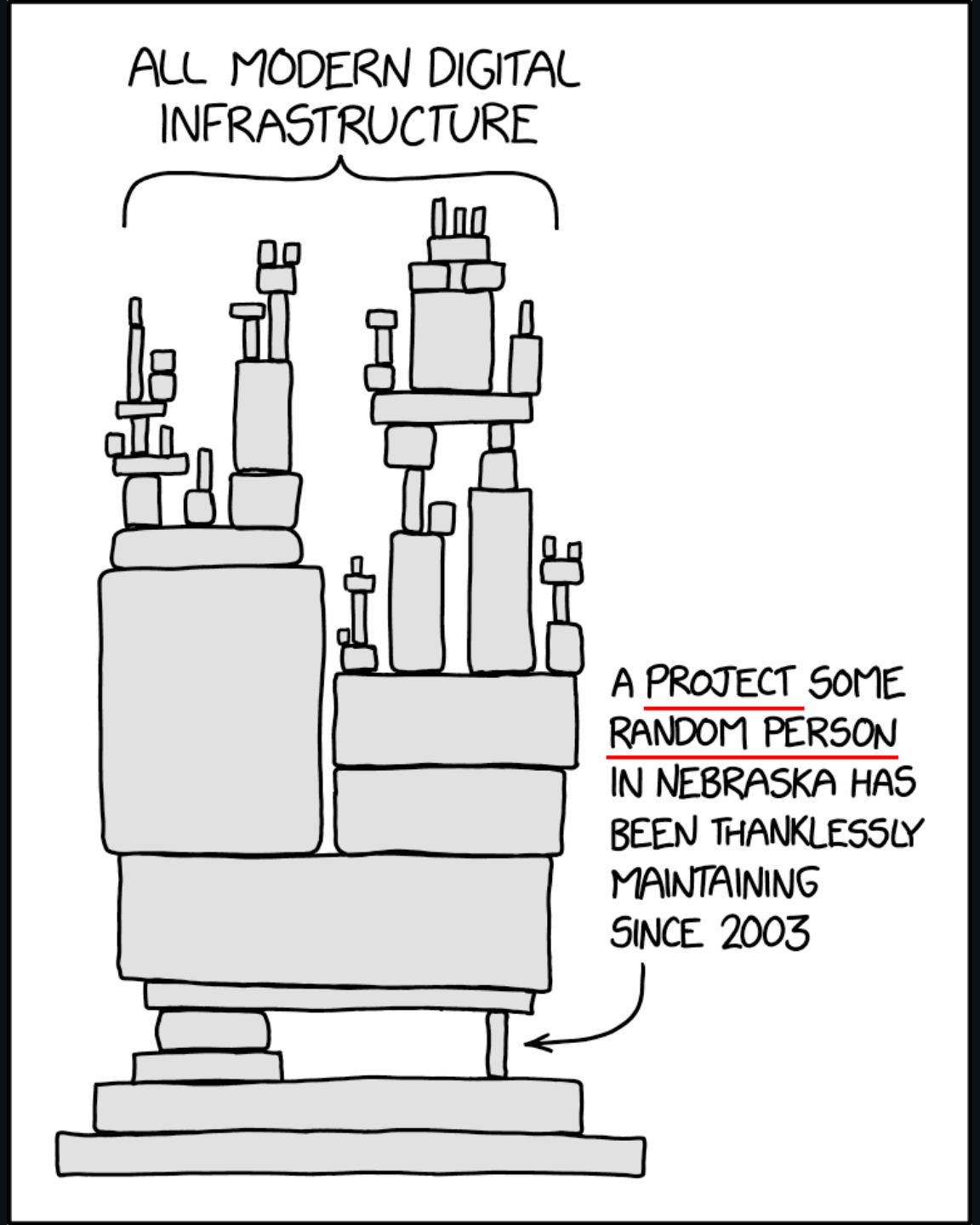
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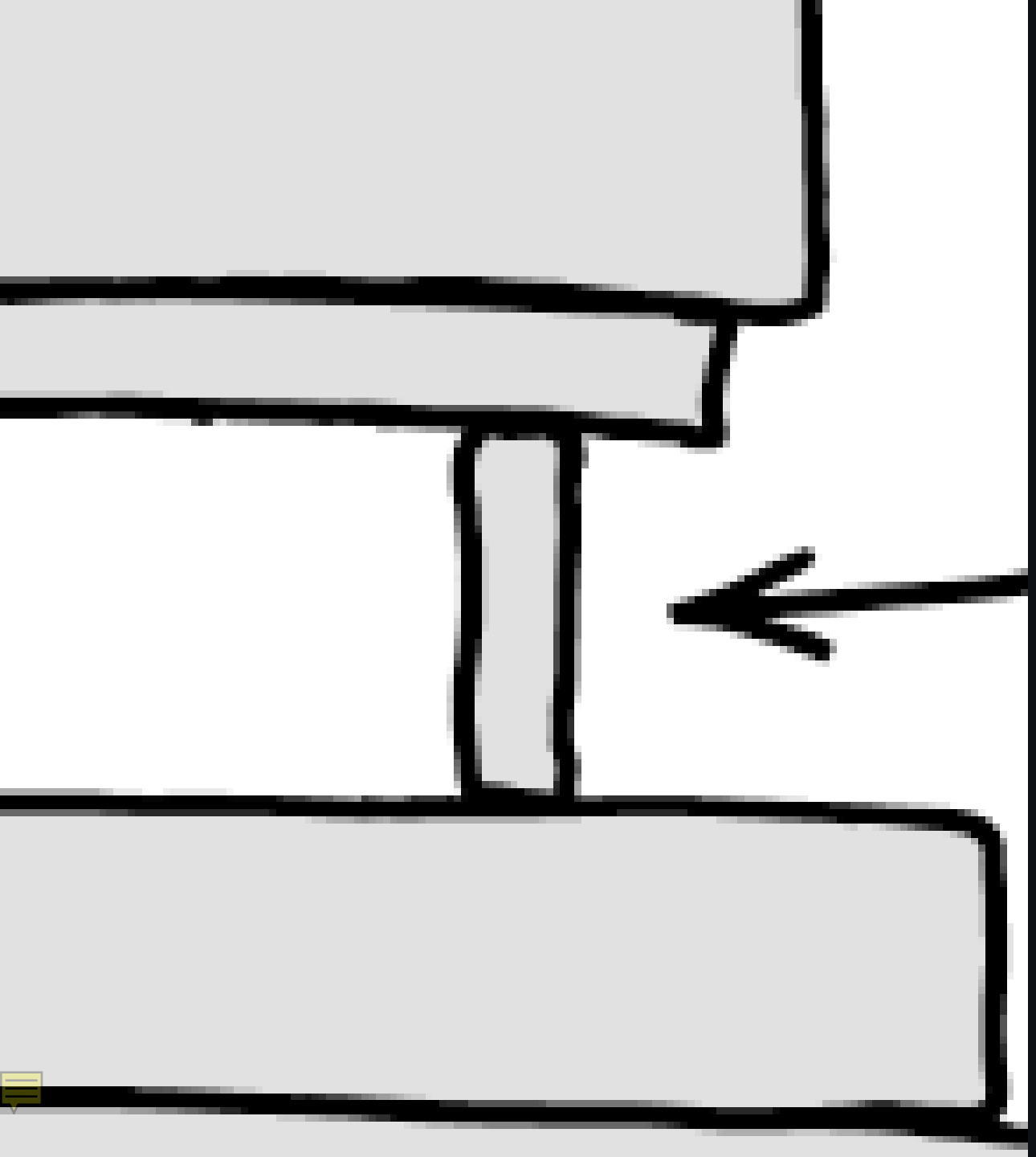
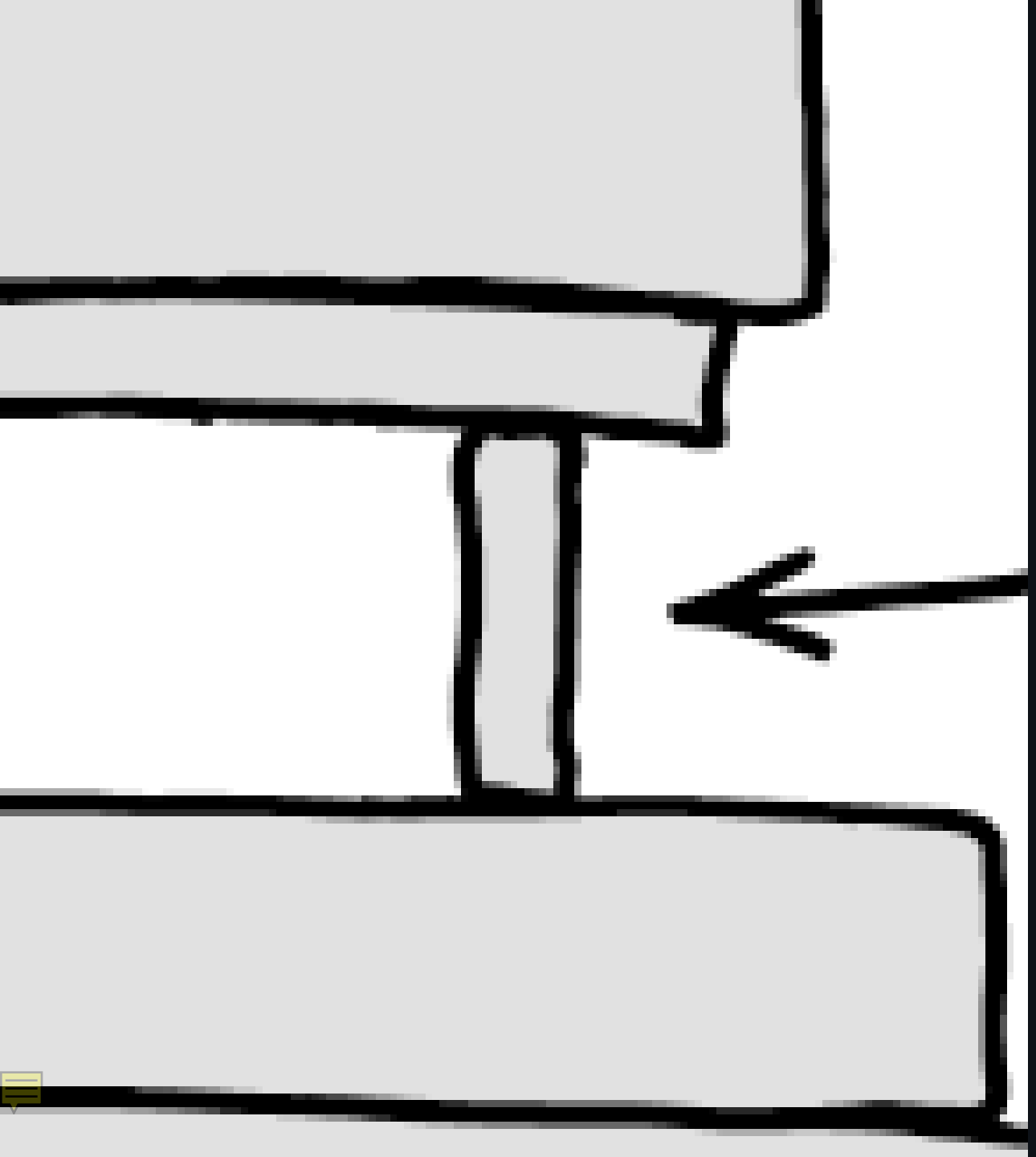
RANDOM PERSON

Funding abstractions

- Projects
- Foundation
- Company
- Government
- Charity or non-profit
- Grants



RANDOM PERSON IN NEBRASKA



SPECIFIC PERSON IN AUSTRALIA

(me it's me I'm the person)

Why me?

- 30+ years of "non-mainstream" computing
- 20+ year professional career as Linux sysadmin, system integrator, web programmer, project manager, team leader, ...
- 20+ years as open source contributor, maintainer, project leader, ...
- 3 years full-time open source contract programmer

Why me?

- Enough experience to identify the tricky bits
- Actually learned some things I didn't know about
- My contribution to this discussion of open source sustainability

YES, BUT WHO EVEN *IS* THIS GUY?

Norris family facts

- Likes: internet, videogames, musical theatre, Pokémon, K-pop, Pokemon, snacks, social justice
- Dislikes: bigots, hot weather, crowds, loud sounds, bright lights, unclear expectations
- Jobs: “computer”, disability support, volunteer management, construction insurance, retail
- Aspirations: financial regulation, accounting & business admin, beauty & makeup, partner, family, home ownership, travel, retirement
- Brainstuff: ASD, ADHD, Tourette's, FND, anxiety disorder
- Bodystuff: Chronic fatigue & pain, eating disorder

Expenses breakdown

- Rent: $2400
- Groceries: $2500
- Utilities: $843
  - Water: $80
  - Electricity: $285
  - Gas: $93
  - Internet: $85
  - Phones (5): $300

Expenses breakdown

- Cars (2): $3180
  - Loans: $1700
  - Fuel: $600
  - Tolls: $400
  - Insurance: $280
  - Maintenance: $200

Expenses breakdown

- Health & medical: $2855
  - Medications: $350
  - Insurance: $385
  - Appointments (out-of-pocket): $400
  - Allied health: $400
  - Support worker: $960
  - Gym membership (3): $360

Expenses breakdown

- Subscriptions: $135
  - Streaming: $60
  - Patreon: $60
  - Software/apps: $15

2025 average monthly expenses (after tax)

AUD $11,913

2025 average monthly income (after tax)

AUD $14,500

2025 average monthly income (before tax)

AUD $22,000

USD $14,722 @ 0.6692 (RBA rate 2026-01-19)

CONTRACT WORK

Everything you never had to think about before

- Set up a business (sole trader)
- Invoicing
  - Local and international requirements
- Tax
  - Income tax
  - Business Activity Statement
  - Goods & Services Tax
- Superannuation
- Leave

Everything you never had to think about before

- Insurance
  - Life
  - Business
  - Income
- Office space
- Loans
- Equipment
- Professional development (travel, training)
  - this very conference
- Salary packaging
  - Novated leasing

Everything you never had to think about before

- Contracts
  - A real legal agreement between you and some company
  - What happens if you can't deliver?
  - Where and how are disputes resolved?
  - Who owns the IP?
  - Local and international obligations
  - Do you need a lawyer?

The tyranny of hourly billing

- Most customers will expect to pay for some number of hours
  - which means you need an hourly rate that covers *everything* above
- Software engineering estimates are *hard*
- What is actually possible in an hour?
- What if it takes longer?
- What if its not possible?
- What if it will take hours to produce an estimate?
- How do I charge for “thinking time”?
- How do I charge for interruptions?

CUSTOMERS?

Customers?

- Profile/reputation
- A contact who can set up a meeting
- Grant applications (ish)
- Advertising?

- Customer relationship management
  - “People skills”

New

What have we learned

- There's a lot of software out there doing critical things
- It needs to be maintained
- As a culture, we don't value maintenance work
  - (or at least, we have vastly underpriced it)
- We have set maintainers up to fail

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT MONEY

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT PEOPLE

The unreasonable cost of open source contribution

robn.au/open-source-cost