The value of open source

Screaming Circuits

There were a number of interesting sessions and debates last week at the DesignWest show. One of the more passion filled, was on the value of Open Source hardware. Some people think it will save the world,if only everyone will do everything open source. Some people think it's a stupid waste of time without a real business model.

Personally, I see more value in it than either of those extremes. What I see is that open source hardware (and software) has lowered the barriers to entry for people who want to create, design, build and sell. Yes, big companies innovate, but a vast amount of innovation and employment comes from small companies that start out without anything more than ideas.

A decade ago, before open source hardware became well know, it was pretty difficult and expensive to start a hardware company. In fact, I recall quite a few predictions and discussions about the death of hardware as an industry in the country. Open source hardware has lowered the barriers to entry and raised the level of awareness of hardware to the point that now, in my opinion, the environment is as ripe for start-up companies and innovation as was the late 1970's and 1980's.

Open source hardware has given us that, and that will be far more positively economically impactfull than whether or not an specific business can find a way to make money with open source hardware. These new businesses may or may not sell open source hardware. Again, that's far less important than the fact that open source hardware has really enabled so many more people to create.

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