



Fri Ignite Boston shows the way to beat commerce interruptus

listen

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[Andy Oram](#)

I felt like I was drifting back to the dot-com boom last night during [Ignite Boston](#). Movements that I saw getting stalled seven years ago seem to be finding their way forward again.

Ignite Boston, a party held every few months by O'Reilly, draws people from around the region who are interested in technology and socializing. Last night, the approximately 325 attendees packed two floors of a bar, and it's a good thing the street outside was closed off because there were plenty of celebrants out there as well, escaping the noise inside to have a conversation.

All the formal talks were intriguing and delivered well. Several could be filed under the category "socially beneficial applications of Web 2.0." For instance, [HealthMap](#), which tracks reports of disease outbreaks around the world, serves as an important resource for the Center for Disease Control and government agencies. [CO2Stats](#) determines how much your web site contributes to global warming, estimating your energy usage as well that of your visitors and the networks they traverse.

Microsoft's [WorldWide Telescope](#) makes it so easy to create a video of space objects that a sophisticated six-year old can use it. This falls under the category of "make science exciting" projects I praised in a [blog](#) about [Maker Faire](#).

Other presentations recalled the experiments O'Reilly documented in the book [Peer to Peer](#). Here's where I felt technologists were picking up again on the themes of the dot-com era.

Tool developer Jesse Vincent is promoting a distributed database system called [Prophet](#) as a way to break out of the walled gardens maintained by portals and social networks. His idea is that those services disempower their users by holding on to their data, and that users can create their own networks without giving up control.

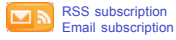
Noting that the popular [Twitter](#) site goes down from time to time (including this week), causing all twitterers to be disconnected during such periods, Joe Cascio proposed a Distributed Twitter service based on communicating servers. He compared it to the distributed server approach in Jabber (XMPP). His diagrams also reminded me of the superpeer approach added to Gnutella as it grew.

Our Ignite Boston events regularly fulfill their goals, one of which is to show that Boston has a lot of inventive technologists doing cool stuff. I think such projects, nationwide, will pull us out of the slump that left so many dreams in the bit bucket after 2001. The question is whether the upcoming recession will trash the tech recovery. But I don't think it will.

The costs of developing software tools and web presences have come way down since 2001, thanks to advances in infrastructures. Open source projects and peer production (which I highlighted in an [article](#) two weeks ago) lower the barriers to successful projects even more.

The recession can actually inject new life into small-scale projects. Knowing that some paid jobs are out of reach, people may turn to open source and do things that seize their imaginations instead. (The dearth of computing job opportunities that Europe provides, relative to North America, is often credited for the greater participation in open source projects there.)

People are also turning away from the pursuit of glossy fashion and unnecessary material things. They are taking to heart the realization that consumption for its own sake is bad for the planet.



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