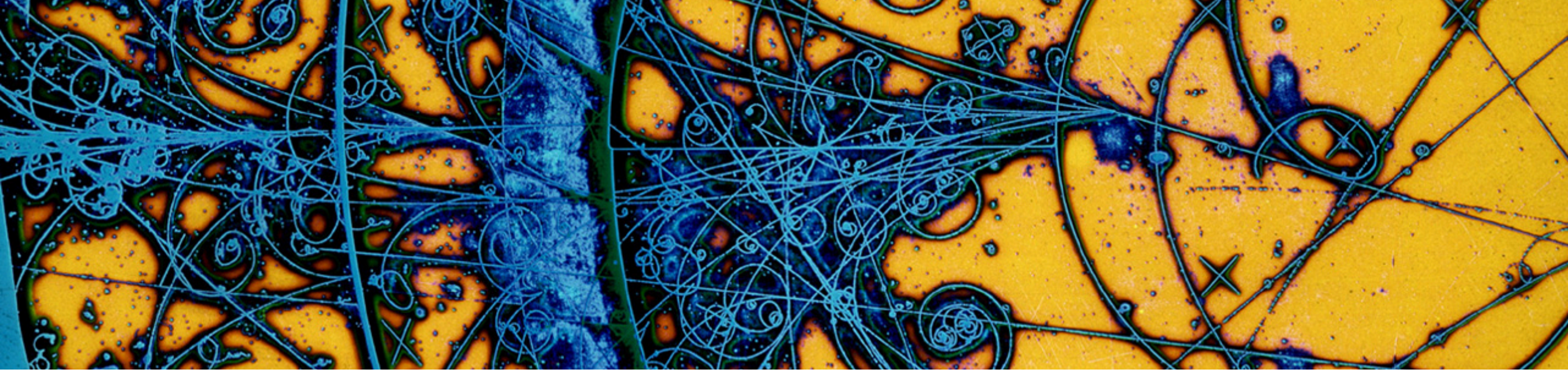

LHCB WEEK · 22 JUNE 2026

Conda, Pixi and RattlerFS

Chris Burr

CERN

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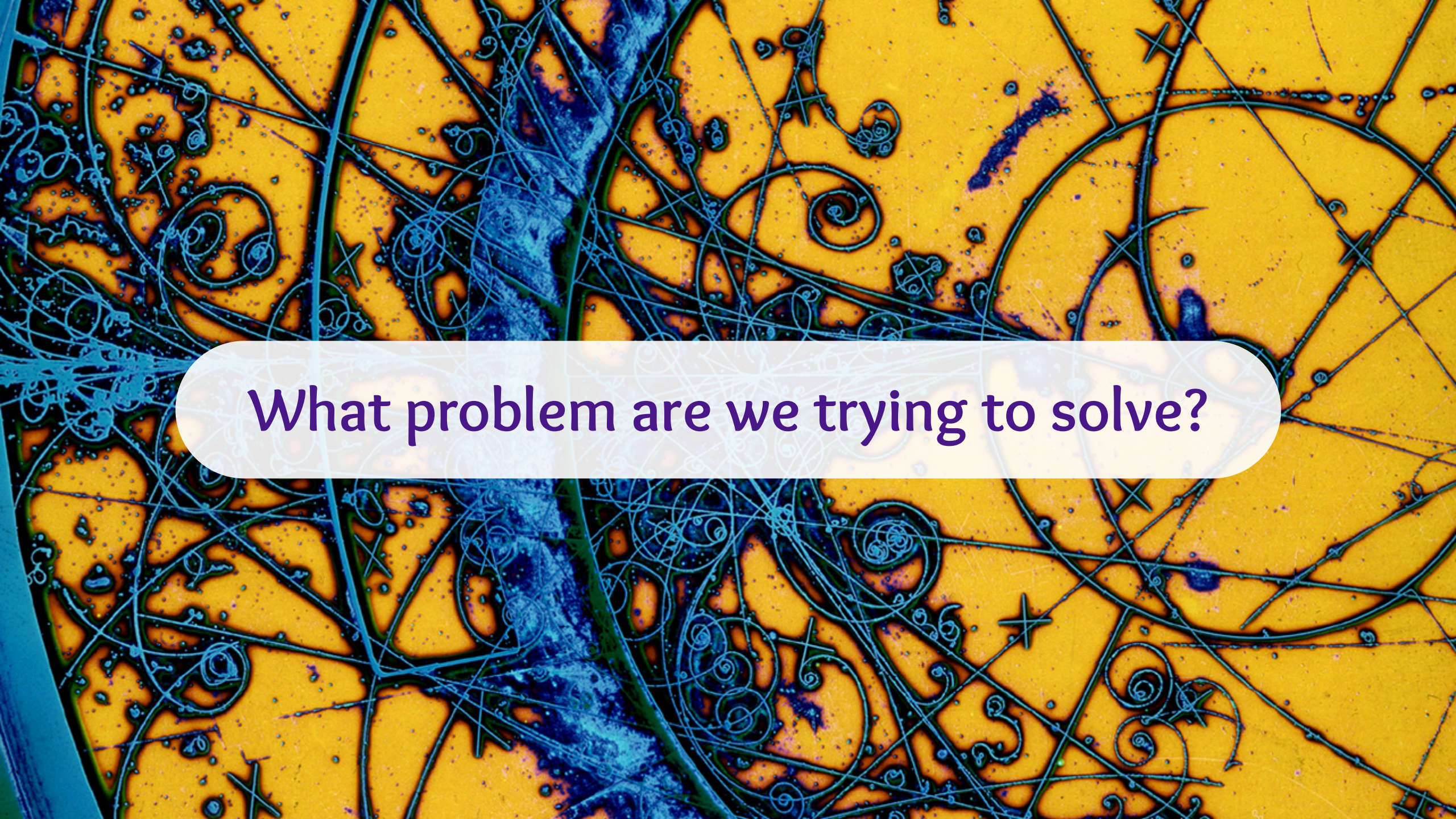
What are we talking about today?

- Follow up to my talk at the Computing workshop in January

- I'm not going to talk about using conda for building the stack*

** Hopefully next time* 😉


What problem are we trying to solve?

What is a package manager?

- It installs software **and all of its dependencies** for you.
- It resolves a set of mutually-compatible versions so things actually work together.
- The hard part is gluing everything together
- `apt`, `pip`, `conda`, `spack`, ... each manage a different ecosystem.

xkcd 1654

How does it help LHCb?

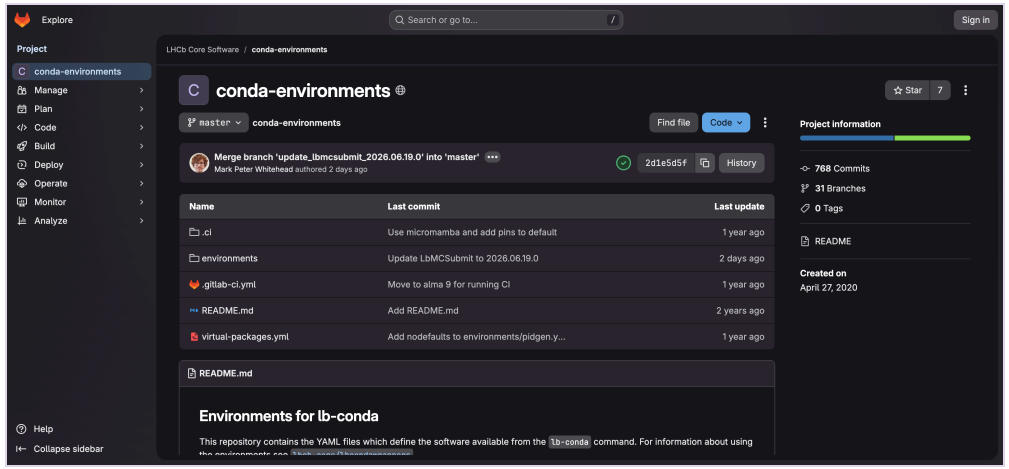
- From one perspective LHCb (and HEP) has solved this problem
  - Install software on CVMFS
  - Call a script like lb-run/lb-conda/lb-dirac/"`source .../setup.sh`"

How does it help LHCb?

- From one perspective LHCb (and HEP) has solved this problem
  - Install software on CVMFS
  - Call a script like lb-run/lb-conda/lb-dirac/"`source .../setup.sh`"
- But this is a very specific solution, it doesn't solve:
  - How to put software on CVMFS?
  - What about locally without CVMFS/EL9?
  - What if I want different software installed?
  - What if I want to develop software?

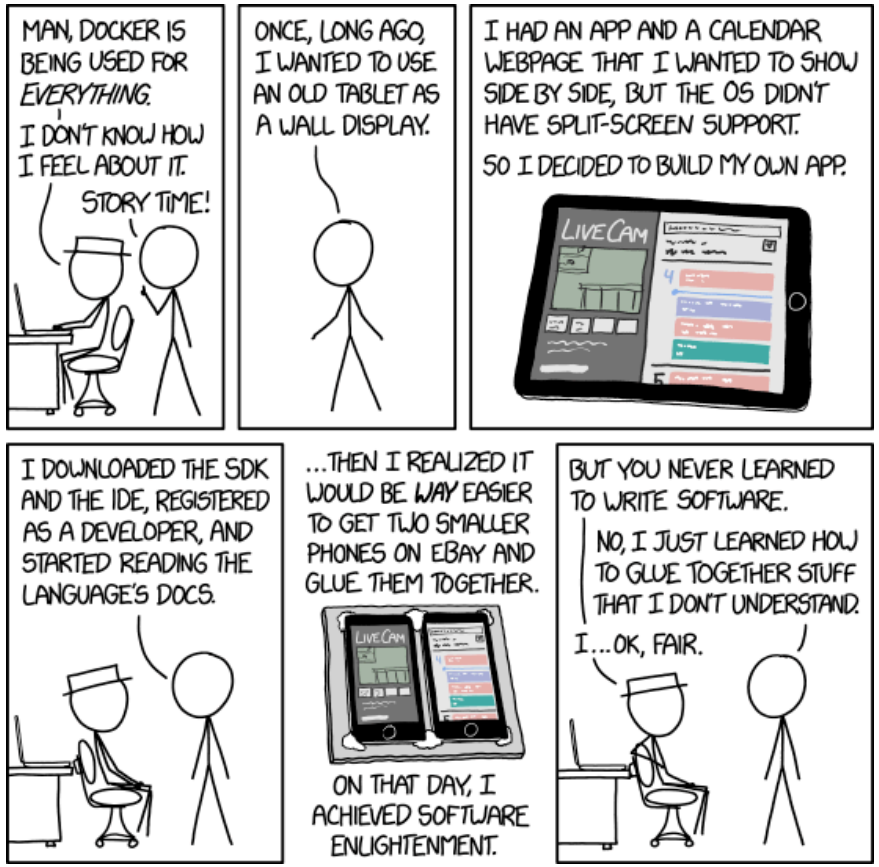
Problem: How to put software on CVMFS?

- We more-or-less have this solved, but…
  - Installing software from LCG is time consuming and causes delays
  - lb-conda is updated by making an MR to `lhcb-core/conda-environments`
    - Still causes delays and gives less flexibility



Problem: What about locally without CVMFS/EL9?

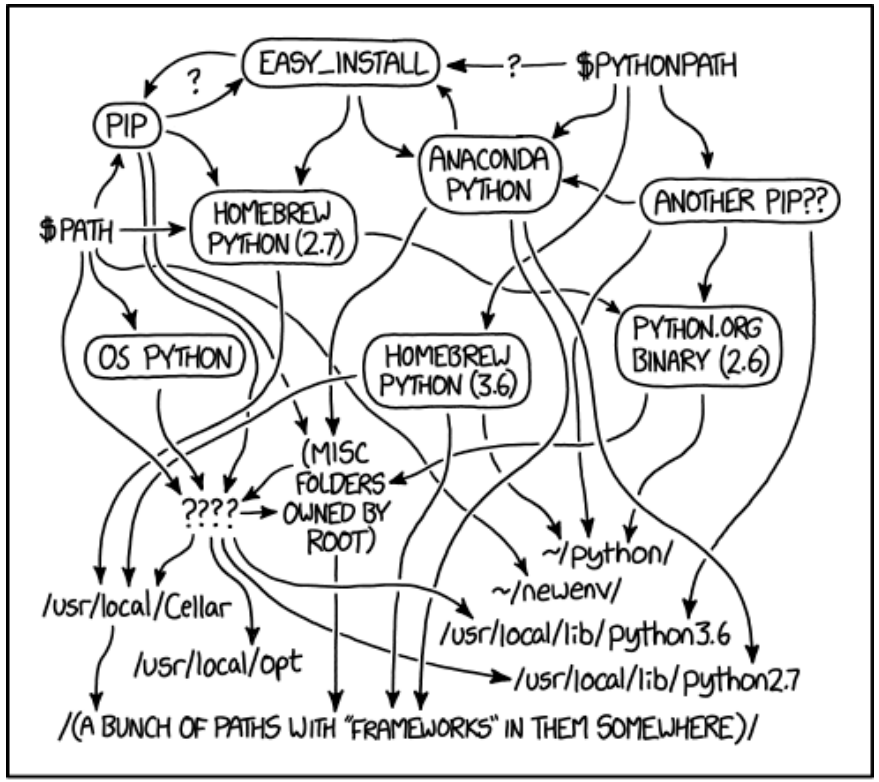
- **Primary answer:** Don't...
- Can use docker/apptainer maybe, but has never been well maintained.



xkcd 1988

Problem: What if I want different software installed?

- **Primary answer:** Don't...
- Can maybe try editing `PATH` or `LD_LIBRARY_PATH`?
  - High chance of non-trivial issues



MY PYTHON ENVIRONMENT HAS BECOME SO DEGRADED THAT MY LAPTOP HAS BEEN DECLARED A SUPERFUND SITE.

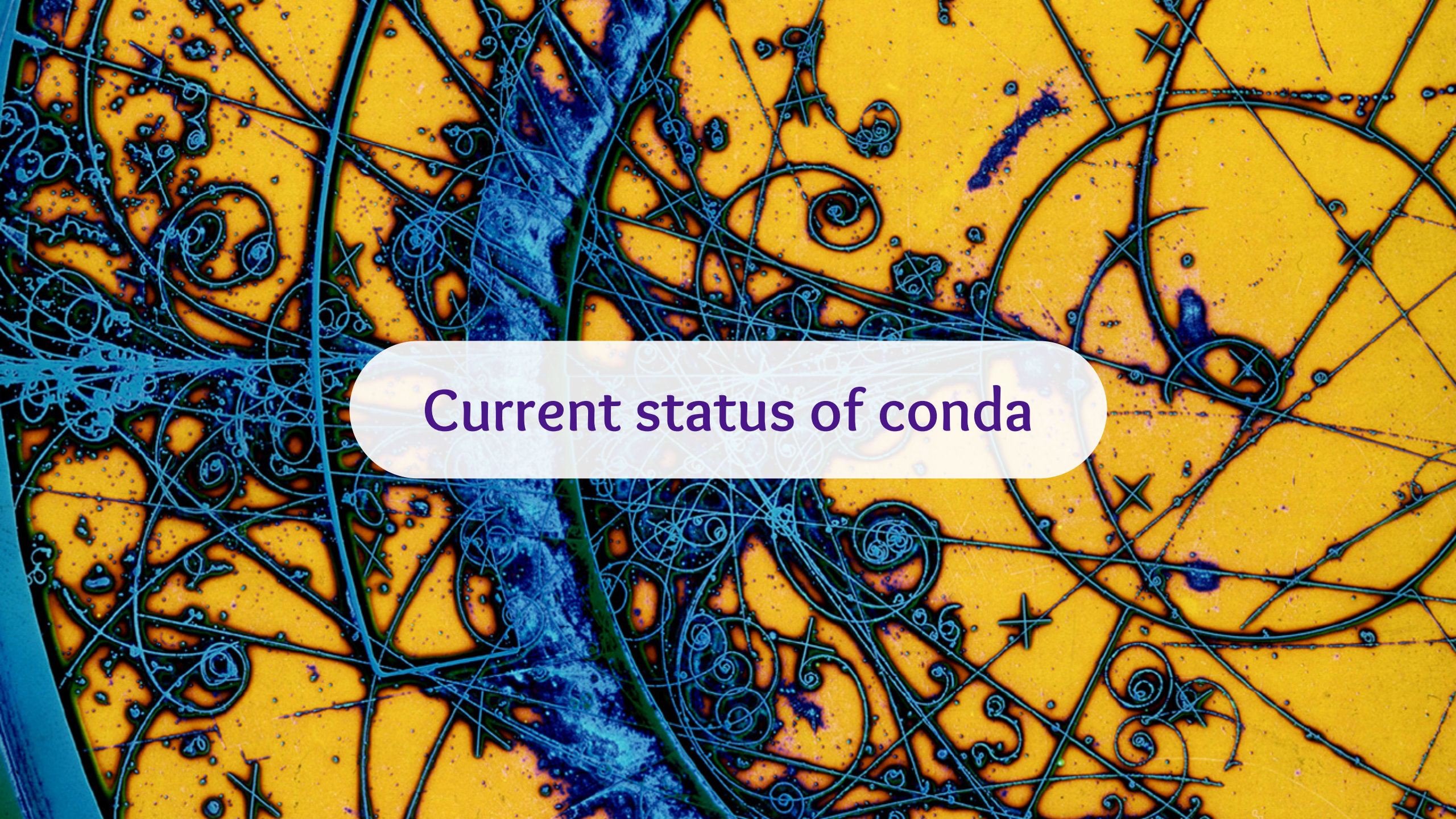
xkcd 1987

Problem: What if I want to develop software?

- `lb-stack-setup` works well for developing LHCb software.
- What about testing a small fix in ROOT?
  - Wait until it's merged, LCG nightlies are updated, then finally test the fix
  - Low chance of building ROOT in a way which will work with DaVinci
- Non-trivial developments across non-LHCb projects?
  - No chance without significant effort (e.g. GEANT4)

An aside: What about containers?

- Container images can standardise distribution
  - But they don't help you create the image in the first place
- Containerisation "technology" also provides some runtime benefits
  - e.g. give me a different operating system, hide from the host, security etc.
- CVMFS solves the distribution problem for LHCb
  - It's a custom content distribution network (CDN) for software in HEP++



Current status of conda

It's been a while...

> Looking back at your PyHEP 2019 conda-forge talk (interesting to see how much has stayed the same over 6+ years)

Packaging for Python and Beyond — PyHEP 2019

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- Compiler toolchains are now much more mature
  - Originally hard to use outside of conda builds
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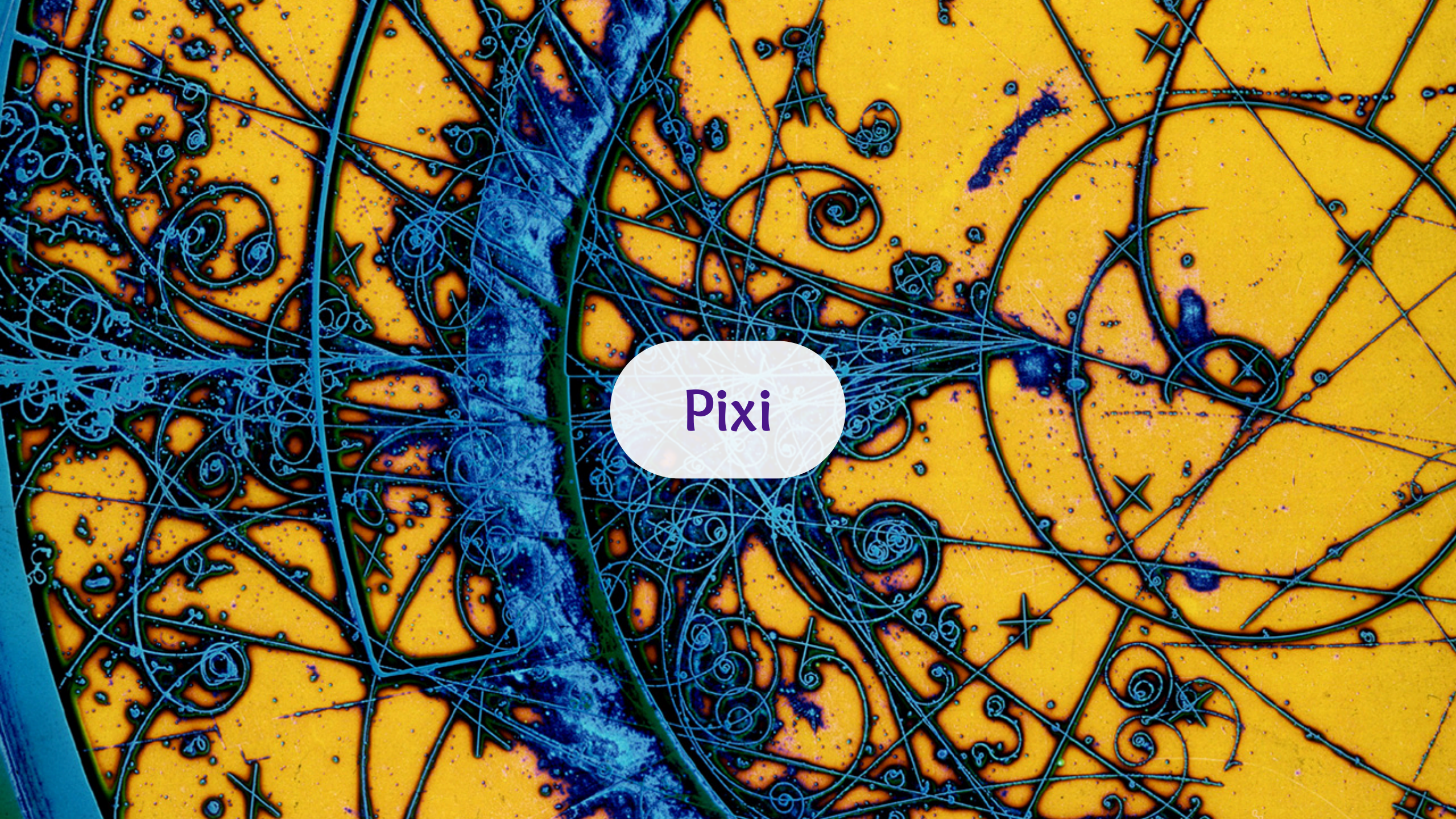
- Pixi provides a lot of "user experience" improvements


Pixi

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** Assuming the same OS (Linux/macOS) and CPU architecture.*
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- ✨ Pixi takes care of managing all of the software environments for you ✨

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```
$ git clone git@github.com:DIRACGrid/diracx.git
$ cd diracx/
$ pixi run pytest-diracx
...
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- DiracX has 30 different software environments for different use cases
  - Developers don't need to think about them at all...

More examples...

- Completely different software environment is used for this one:

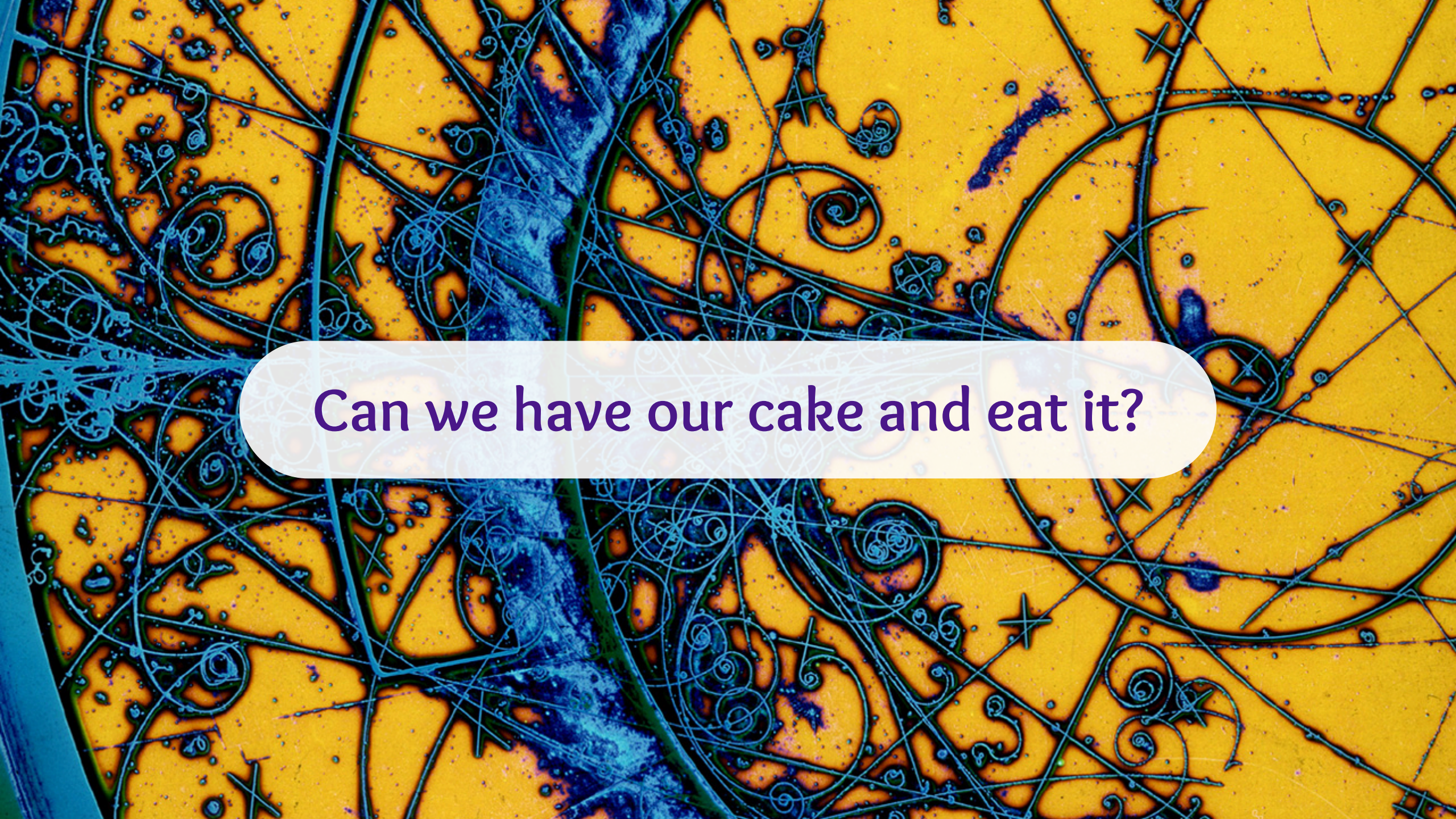
```
$ pixi run pytest-gubbins
===== 58 passed, 2 skipped, 1 warning in 10.58s =====
```

- A non-trivial tooling script for running code generation

```
$ pixi run generate-client
Please select an environment to run the task in: ›
❯ diracx-generate-client
  gubbins-generate-client
...
===== 1 passed, 1 warning in 91.27s (0:01:31) =====
```

Nothing is so perfect...

- The main trade off is disk space and IO usage
  - Pixi tries to be smart with reflinking/hardlinks, laziness, etc.
- It's fine on a local NVMe drive (e.g. your laptop)
  - On hard drives it's not ideal but manageable
  - On AFS it's almost unusable
  - Having it in every grid job would be a disaster (there is a reason we have CVMFS!)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- What does "installing a conda package" mean?
  1. Download and extract the package to the local cache
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  1. Download and extract the package to the local cache
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  3. Apply any necessary fixes (e.g. shebangs, hard coded paths, python stuff, ...)
- RattlerFS is a virtual filesystem which implements step 2+3
  - Proxies data from the local cache to the install location on demand
  - No need to copy files, no disk usage or IO overhead!

One step further with CVMFS

> Download and extract the package to the local cache

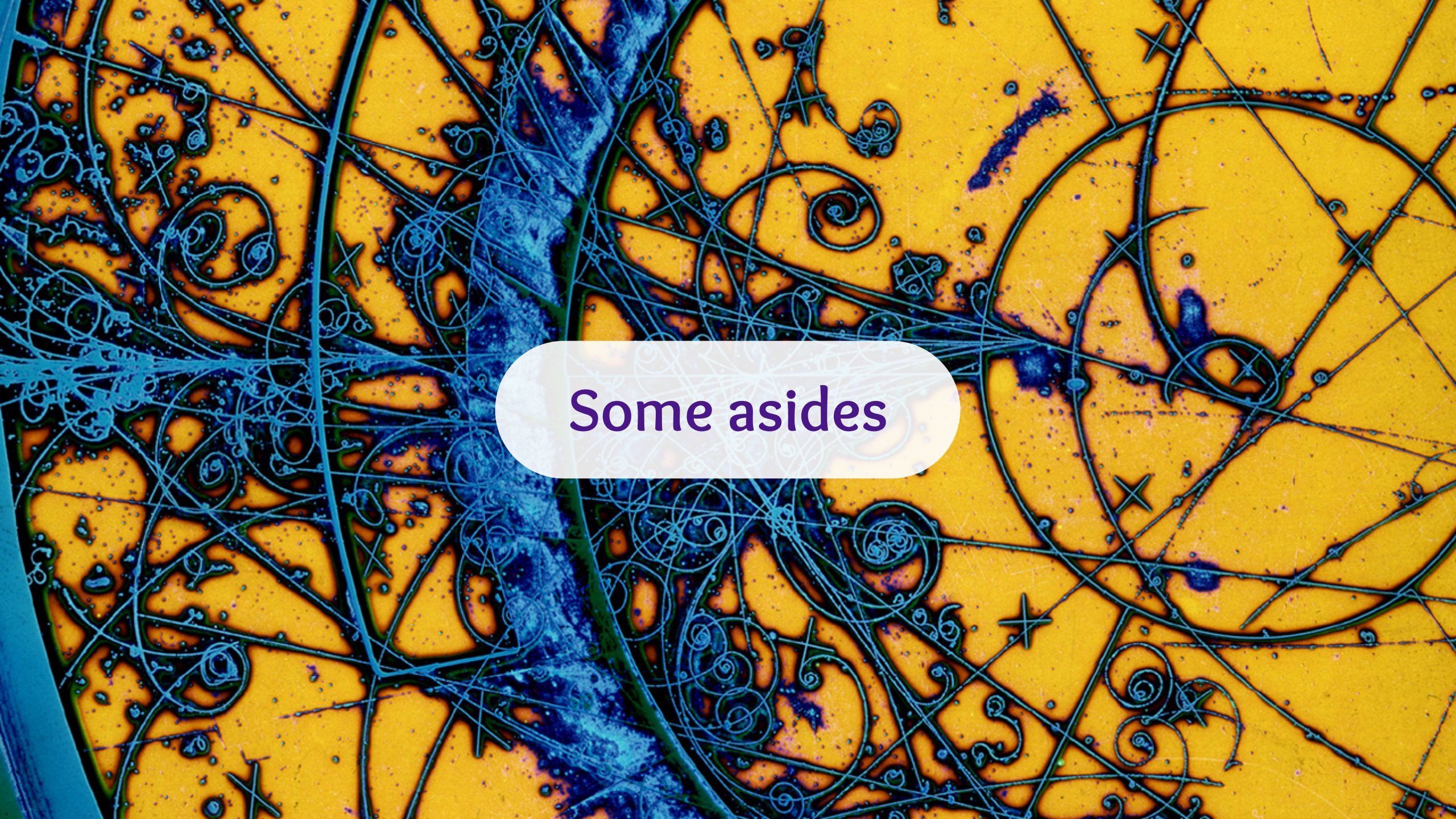
- We already have a tool for that: CVMFS!
- Cache all conda-forge packages on CVMFS
  - RattlerFS can proxy them to the install location on demand:

```
$ ls /cvmfs/conda-cache.cern.ch/prototype-v2/*
linux-64/  noarch/  osx-arm64/
```

RattlerFS status

- This works on Linux/macOS/Windows using FUSE/NFS/ProjFS*
- The upstream package that provides conda tooling (`rattler`) is interested
- "Just" need to open the (large) pull request...

** Not all backends work on all operating systems*



Some asides

Security

- This involves installing random software from the internet
  - Recent supply-chain attacks: xz, Ultralytics, torchtriton
- Should use dependency cooldowns
  - Only install software that is more than a few days old
  - Hope malicious software is discovered by someone else first
- Should use dependency pinning
  - i.e. commit the lock file like I already mentioned

Global

- Often you want to install some tools which are always available
  - ripgrep, htop, pre-commit, git, etc.
- You can install these globally with `pixi global install <package>`
  - This makes a small environment per tool
  - Only a single wrapper binary is added to your PATH, which will then call the tool in its own environment
  - No more having junk on path due to it being an indirect dependency of some other tool

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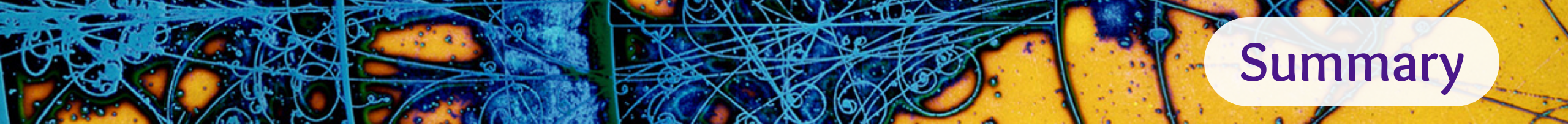
- With RattlerFS we can think about better integration with computing resources
  - Think next iteration of `lb-conda` (without breaking everything we already have)



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- With RattlerFS we can think about better integration with computing resources
  - Think next iteration of `lb-conda` (without breaking everything we already have)
- At CHEP there was a talk about coordinating conda efforts across HEP
  - Lots of interest and see a lot of activity as a result (e.g. SHiP and Belle2)

Questions?