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The Newsletter of UKUUG, the UK's Unix and Open Systems Users Group

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News from the Secretariat

Jane Morrison

The Linux 2006 event, held in Brighton from 29th June to 2nd July was very well received although delegate numbers were slightly down from previous years. We are wondering if this was because it was held earlier than usual at the end of June instead of the end of July. Perhaps if you didn't attend because of the earlier date or in fact for any other particular reason you could send me an email with your comments that I can pass on to the UKUUG Council.

We would like to thank The Positive Internet Company who kindly sponsored the excellent Conference Dinner held on Friday evening. From the returned questionnaires the evening was enjoyed by all.

Linux Magazine have kindly permitted us to reprint Heike Jurzik's article describing the event. For those members who were unable to attend please find enclosed a copy of the conference CD. This is a benefit of membership which entitles you to receive all CDs produced by UKUUG.

Planning is now under way for both conferences in 2007: see the call for papers for the Spring Conference in this issue.

The AGM this year will be held on the evening of 28th September at University College London. The agenda and other documents for this meeting have recently been sent to all members, and are also available on the web site.

The Spring Conference will be held at the Manchester Conference Centre, a venue which provides good facilities and has excellent rail, road and bus links. Please put the event dates in your diary now.

The next Newsletter will be the December issue and the copy date is: 22nd November. As usual any articles, letters etc. can be sent for inclusion to: newsletter@ukuug.org

UKUUG Annual General Meeting 2006

UKUUG's 2006 Annual General Meeting will be held from 6pm on Thursday 28th September, at University College London, Cruciform Building (Lecture Theatre 2), Gower Street, London, WC1E 6AE.

Documents have been posted out to members, and are also available at

<http://www.ukuug.org/events/agm2006/>

Details of decisions taken at the AGM and the new make-up of UKUUG Council will be sent out to members shortly after the meeting.

UKUUG Spring 2007 Conference

Sam Smith

19th - 21st March 2007 (provisional dates)

Call for Papers

Taking place in Manchester the UKUUG's annual Large Installation Systems Administration (LISA) conference is now seeking papers covering all aspects of systems and network administration.

The variety of recent topics of interest include:

- operating systems

- virtualisation
- security and audit
- ethics and legislative compliance
- storage solutions
- network file systems
- databases and directory services
- authentication and authorisation
- nomadic and wireless computing
- benchmarking and performance tuning
- configuration management
- scripting and task automation
- cluster management

Abstracts should be sent to

spring2007@ukuug.org

The closing date is 1st November 2006.

The full call for papers can be found on our web site at:

<http://www.ukuug.org/events/spring2007/cfp/>

We are especially interested in talks which include some aspect of “Virtualisation, large-scale resource management and flexibility”, and aim to have a stream covering many aspects of this topic. Quoting Tim O’Reilly:

I really think that everyone in IT is going to be dealing with virtualisation over the next few years. There’s too many compelling resource and energy issues to ignore it.

Further details of the Conference will always be available at:

<http://www.ukuug.org/events/spring2007/>

Significant Dates

- Closing date for abstracts: 1st November 2006
- Authors notified by: 21st November 2006
- Programme published: 5th December 2006
- Final papers due: 20th February 2007

Method of Submission

Please submit a short autobiography and an initial abstract of 250-500 words via email to spring2007@ukuug.org

Talks should normally last 45 minutes (including questions and answers). There will also be slots available for extended talks of 60 minutes and lightning talks of 15 minutes.

You do not have to be a member of UKUUG to submit a paper, and submissions from speakers outside the UK are welcome. Potential speakers may request further information from

spring2007@ukuug.org

Sponsorship Opportunities

We are seeking companies or institutions to sponsor various elements of the conference. Sponsorship opportunities include: paying for a speaker's travel or accommodation; providing bursaries for delegates who cannot pay the conference fee themselves; sponsoring catering, lunches, or the conference dinner; providing pens, coffee cups, or other items with your company logo.

All sponsors will be listed in the conference proceedings and included on our website with a link back to your site. You will also have the opportunity to provide literature for distribution in delegate packs. Please contact the UKUUG Secretariat to discuss the possibilities.

Best Paper

The programme committee will also award a prize for the Best Paper submitted to the conference proceedings. Prizes will be a selection of O'Reilly books of the winner's choosing.

More Information

See the conference web site for news and up-to-date information:

<http://www.ukuug.org/events/spring2007/>

Novell becomes a Gold Sponsoring member of UKUUG

UKUUG is very pleased to announce that Novell now sponsor UKUUG as Gold Sponsoring members.

Details of the sponsoring members scheme are available at

<http://www.ukuug.org/sponsors/sm.shtml>

For more information on Novell, see

<http://www.novell.com/>

UKUUG Polo shirt

UKUUG has produced some smart polo shirts containing the UKUUG logo embroidered in silver onto a black polo shirt.

This indispensable fashion accessory is available from the UKUUG office at a cost of only £15.

Further details are at

<http://www.ukuug.org/shirt/>

Announcement: BCS OSSG Forthcoming events

We have received notification of the following events planned by the BCS Open Source Specialist Group.

On 26th September 2006, Steve Coast will speak in London to a joint meeting with the newly formed BCS Geospatial SG on the theme of open source mapping methodologies. For further details, see:

<http://ossg.bcs.org/2006/09/26/geospatial-open-source-activity/>

On 24th October 2006, Glyn Moody will give a talk in London with the title "Open Source ideas and methods applied outside programming"

Glyn has a PhD in Mathematics from Cambridge University, and for the last 25 years has written about IT and related issues for publications such as The Economist, The Financial Times, The Telegraph, The Guardian, New Scientist, Wired magazine and many others. Glyn has written several books including "Rebel Code: Linux and the Open Source Revolution", and "Digital Code of Life: How Bioinformatics Is Revolutionizing Science, Medicine and Business". For further details please visit

<http://ossg.bcs.org/2006/10/24/glyn-moody/>

On 21st November 2006 there will be a combined event in London of the BCS Open Source Specialist Group (OSSG) and BCS Information Retrieval Specialist Group. For further details please visit

<http://ossg.bcs.org/2006/11/21/info-retrieval/>

Eighth Real-Time Linux Workshop

We have received notification of the Eighth Real-Time Linux Workshop which will be held between October 12th and 15th 2006 at Lanzhou University, Lanzhou, Gansu, China.

Further information on this event is at:

<http://www.realtimelinuxfoundation.org/events/rtlws-2006/ws.html>

EuroBSDCon 2006, the European BSD Conference

We have received the following announcement of EuroBSDCon which will be held in Milan, Italy between November 10th and 12th, 2006.

Hosted in the foggy northern Italy, the fifth EuroBSDCon aims at being a new successful chapter in the itinerant series of European BSD conferences.

EuroBSDCon represents the biggest gathering for BSD developers from the old continent, as well as users and passionate enthusiasts from around the World. It is also a chance to share experiences, know-how, and cultures.

EuroBSDCon 2006 is organized by WillyStudios.com in association with the Italian FreeBSD Users Group. It will be held on the same day and in the same place as the annual GUFICon.

For the first time, parallel to the main event, an event for wives/girlfriends/friends will be organized. It will consist of guided tours of the city of Milan, a probable trip to Como and visits to various museums. We're also working towards offering a show at the Teatro alla Scala.

Further details are available at:

<http://www.eurobsdcon.org/>

International System Administrator Appreciation Day

Sam Smith

International System Administrator Appreciation Day takes place on the last Friday each July. To commemorate the day this year, UKUUG released a flash animation and song covering some of the things that your average sysadmin covers in their daily lives.

Although we hope that you don't have servers powered by snails, you have less dancing penguins and don't require a divers helmet to go into your machine room. Well, very often, anyway.

For people without the ability to view flash animations, we also made it available as a download in a variety of formats including audio only.

See:

<http://www.ukuug.org/sysadminday>

From the UKUUG Diary

The UKUUG maintains a web diary of future events of interest at

<http://www.ukuug.org/diary/>

The following events are a small selection of those currently listed.

BCS OSSG: Open Source Geospatial Activity

26th September 2006: London

The British Computer Society (BCS) Open Source Specialist Group (OSSG) in conjunction with the newly formed BCS Geospatial SG announce a detailed talk by Steve Coast, Open Source Geospatial enthusiast/activist, about the Open Source Software and Methodologies that he and others are using to map areas of the UK.

<http://ossg.bcs.org/2006/09/26/geospatial-open-source-activity/>

UKUUG AGM

28th September 2006: London

<http://www.ukuug.org/events/agm2006/>

RSA Conference Europe

23rd October 2006: Nice, France

RSA Conference Europe 2006 is the foremost information security industry event in Europe. Now in its seventh year, it offers a full schedule of sessions, keynotes and tutorials, plus an exhibition featuring leading security vendors from across Europe. With a reputation for high-calibre speakers and unbiased content, RSA Conference Europe is a unique opportunity to learn the latest trends and issues, and gain the information you need to keep current and stay ahead of changing information security threats.

<http://2006.rsaconference.com/europe/>

BCS OSSG – Talk by Glyn Moody: London

31st October 2006

Glyn Moody discusses Open Source ideas and methods applied outside programming. Glyn has a PhD in Mathematics from Cambridge University, and for the last 25 years has written about IT and related issues for publications such as The Economist, The Financial Times, The Telegraph, The Guardian, New Scientist, Wired magazine and many others. Glyn has written several books including Rebel Code: Linux and the Open Source Revolution, and Digital Code of Life: How Bioinformatics Is Revolutionizing Science, Medicine and Business.

<http://ossg.bcs.org/2006/10/31/glyn-moody/>

BCS OSSG

21st November 2006

Combined British Computer Society (BCS) Open Source Specialist Group (OSSG) and BCS Information Retrieval Specialist Group Event.

<http://ossg.bcs.org/2006/11/21/info-retrieval/>

ARES 2007

10th April 2007: Vienna, Austria

The Second International Conference on Availability, Reliability and Security (ARES 2007 - The International Dependability Conference) will bring together researchers and practitioners in the area of dependability. ARES 2007 will highlight the various aspects of dependability - with special focus on the crucial linkage between availability, reliability and security. ARES 2007 aims at a full and detailed discussion of the research issues of dependability as an integrative concept that covers amongst others availability, safety, confidentiality, integrity, maintainability and security in the different fields of applications.

<http://www.ares-conference.eu/>

Brighton Bash

Heike Jurzik

Brighton is a lovely seaside resort on the south coast of England. Apart from the pier with the famous funfair, the town offers a large beach, two universities, several nice restaurants, and some cozy pubs. The UKUUG summer meeting 2006 was held at the University of Sussex, on a campus about four miles from the city centre. Most of the attendees stayed in the students' halls on campus, which offered plenty of opportunity to socialise after pub closing time and enjoy some more geek talk on the lawn at night.

As with recent years, the conference started with a tutorial day on Thursday: Jos Vos described how to create, modify, and use RPM packages; Mark Leith talked about MySQL optimisation, and Richard J Moore held a workshop on diagnosing kernel-related problems using kdump and SystemTap.

Friday saw two presentation tracks with interesting talks on topics such as "Sed: more than just s/foo/bar", "MySQL Roadmap", "Settling onto decent Python Web Technologies" and "Apache at the Register". Apart from these purely technical presentations, this year's conference also included several talks and open discussions about Open Source and Free Software in the public sector. Stuart Yeates from OSS Watch gave an overview of "The State of Open Source in Higher and Further Education" and presented the results of a recent survey showing that three quarters of all UK colleges and universities at least consider OS solutions.

The subsequent talk by Mark Taylor and Duncan Gibb took a more practical approach: in an interesting presentation that included a lot of audience participation, they drew a picture of how to run a business on OS software as an alternative to proprietary solutions. In a private conversation that followed the talk, Mark, the president of the Open Source Consortium, said that "the technical argument for Free Software had been won years ago" and that it was now important to define a business model to help companies understand the fiscal implications.

Ted Haeger gave a talk about Suse Linux Enterprise Desktop, and he said that Novell was aiming itself at both the Open Source community and the business community. He claimed that Novell made "fast and easy interfaces", although a few technical problems with the presentation produced some friendly heckling from the audience. Someone in the audience asked, "Do you want to demonstrate this on my Ubuntu box, where it works?" to which Ted replied, "I want a box the code was written on, not just one it was pushed onto".

On Friday evening, everybody headed into town to attend the conference dinner at an Italian restaurant – an excellent choice, given that Italy won their World Cup match against the Ukraine that night, and the meal was excellent.

Welcome to the Club!

Saturday morning saw several talks for beginners. The talks included helpful sessions on how to choose a distribution, a session on getting started with Apache, and an excellent introduction

to networking. Antony Stone explained the concepts behind networking, briefing newcomers on troubleshooting and security with memorable lines such as, “A firewall is a router that can say no”.

The technical track on Saturday also had some highlights, such as John Pinner’s lecture on how to control the heating system of a house with a Linux machine and some Python scripts. Philip Hands had a nice talk about “Automated Debian installs for fun and profit”. He started his lecture by typing the following on the laptop he was using for the presentation:

```
dd if=/dev/zero of=/dev/hda bs=1024 count=1; sync; reboot
```

After the closing session on Sunday, everyone headed back home. The conference was another great opportunity to meet up with other geeks – with mostly interesting and well-presented talks.

This account of this summer’s Linux Technical Conference at Brighton was written for and first published in Linux Magazine, by whose kind permission it is reproduced here.

The original article is available at the Linux Magazine web site at

<http://www.linux-magazine.com/issue/71/UKUUG.Linux.Conference.2006.pdf>

FLOSSIE conference report

Leslie Fletcher

On 20 and 21 July I attended the FLOSSIE (Free/Libre and Open Source Software in Education) conference, held for a second year at the Bolton Technical Innovation Centre (www.uktic.org), which again proved a splendid venue for the meeting. Highly capable technical support was available at all times, the catering arrangements were excellent and the Centre is readily accessible by car and by public transport. The Centre’s understated, but very firm, commitment to FLOSS makes it somewhere UKUUG members seeking a meeting venue should seriously consider.

A report of the conference proceedings, including speakers’ slides, is gradually appearing on the Schoolforge website (www.schoolforge.org.uk) so I will only highlight the things which particularly caught my attention.

The first thing which thrust itself upon, rather than merely catching, my attention was one of what Schoolforge describes as “minor last minutes changes” to the programme. I arrived about 13.45 on the Thursday to be told that I was the next speaker, in about 40 minutes; I was expecting to speak on the following day! Slight panic and last-minute technical arrangements distracted me from most of Mark Ellse’s talk on the widespread use of Open Office in his school, but it generated a lively discussion of both technical and organisational issues.

I gave much the same talk on the efforts to set up an All-Party Parliamentary Open Source Group as I had given earlier in the month at the UKUUG Brighton conference. Throughout the conference there was a thread of concern and comment about the impact of public policy on FLOSS deployments in schools. I and others expressed several times serious concerns that the ICT component of BSF (Building Schools for the Future) will not permit the grass-roots technical innovation of which other speakers were rightly proud.

Stuart Johnson (www.ClASSforSchools.com) and Robert Jones (www.FreeMIS.net) described their different, though complementary, approaches to the development of a FLOSS alternative to Capita SIMS, the near-ubiquitous school information management system (IMS). This is currently a major gap in the FLOSS portfolio for schools so these projects, and www.scholarpack.org mentioned by Alastair Crust in his talk, are potentially of great interest. All three have “demonstration” sites but, on trying them after the conference, I was dismayed to find that those for FreeMIS and scholarpack don’t actually demonstrate much. There is more functionality in the

ClaSSforSchools demonstration, but it is hard to follow or evaluate without the as yet non-existent user guide.

Stuart started from the point of view of a classroom teacher, his need for data and the information, knowledge and, ultimately, wisdom which flows from it. The key DfES publication “Releasing Potential, Raising Attainment” comments that “All schools are data rich, good schools are information rich”.

<http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ts/docs/RPRA.pdf>

He also quoted extensively from a BECTA report entitled “School Management Information Systems and Value for Money” (June 2005) which is sharply critical of the existing provision of MIS for use by schools and particularly of the continuing lack of an open interoperability architecture. Robert is not surprised that the FLOSS MIS has been such a long time coming; while it might be “the Big Problem”, it has not been a Big Itch for anybody. There is serious, though relatively mundane, work to ensure conformance to standards such as SIF (School Interoperability Framework), the reporting requirements of the DfES and integration with popular tools such as Moodle and Elgg.

Alastair Crust’s presentation described the striking innovations at Skegness Grammar School which may lead to the existing Windows network being almost entirely scrapped and replaced by a FLOSS system using LTSP. One new computer room has already been set up, at a cost of about £29k compared with an estimated £100k for an equivalent Windows setup; moreover the LTSP network was more reliable and faster, particularly for whole class logons, than any other system in School. Unfortunately there seems to be nothing at all about this on the school’s web site, but there is a little more information at

<http://www.schoolforge.org.uk/index.php/Skegness.Grammar>

Alastair was also enthusiastic about students’ use of a range of FLOSS applications in gaining the Diploma in Digital Applications

<http://dida.edexcel.org.uk/home/aboutdida/>

However, these innovations mean that Skegness Grammar had not been able to spend all of its e-Learning Credits since these cannot be applied to FLOSS.

The first talk on the Friday was given by Dr Brian Iddon MP, Chair of the Board of Bolton Technical Innovation Centre Limited, Member of Parliament for Bolton South East. It was meeting Brian at last year’s FLOSSIE conference which set in motion the APOSG project. As a former research chemist he is very much aware that openness is crucial to innovation in science. As a member of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee he has been at the centre of the equally important issue of open access to scientific publications.

Chris Gerry, who spoke next, is head teacher of the New Line Learning Schools Federation in Maidstone. This is a new style of school organisation bringing together one strong school with two weaker, but improving schools. Chris described this a first small step toward replacing 3500 sometimes idiosyncratic high schools with something more systematic and creating, as he saw it, better relations with young people and their parents through a customer service approach. As part of the task of bringing these three schools together, he and his team had invested £1.7M in ICT and new spaces with 1000 computers and all new Year 7 children being provided with tablet PCs. Chris saw these steps as fundamental to his vision of redesigning the learning process, though the transformation was not without its problems and the whole approach of New Line Learning is controversial

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Articles_for_deletion/New_Line_Learning

Next came a very enthusiastic talk on Edubuntu by John Ingleby and Daniel Carrera. John explained that their talk was based on real experience in taking a school from a poor position in ICT provision to a working and useful system “for next to nothing”. His professional experience at Sun Microsystems made him a great fan of thin clients, which combine technological elegance with much reduced environmental impact. Grahame Leon-Smith intervened to explain that his

project provides schools with effective thin clients for £50 a piece by using a few of the 3 million computers discarded by businesses every year. “Stop dumping computers in landfill!” is his message.

<http://www.free-computers.org/>

Daniel Carrera made some important technical points, amplified in his contribution to the Ubuntu wiki.

<https://wiki.ubuntu.com/DanielCarrera>

A lively technical discussion followed, which had to be brought to a close by the chairman so that the next speaker could begin.

In the wide-ranging and impressive talk which followed, Miles Berry showed how to harness “social software” to give personalisation, voice and choice to young people. He identified some key aspirations in the DfES e-strategy “Harnessing Technology: Transforming learning and children’s services” and demonstrated how these were already being achieved in his school by the use of Moodle and Elgg. He finished on a more sombre note by highlighting some of the institutional and attitudinal barriers to the adoption of FLOSS – Moodle in particular – by regional broadband consortia and local education authorities.

Miles’s presentation captured what seemed to me the two divergent strands of the conference - a range of innovative projects using the technical and philosophical strengths of FLOSS to offer real educational benefits, coupled with something between sober realisation and outrage at the kind of dissimulation about FLOSS exemplified by the DfES official attitude to Moodle

<http://moodlea.blogspot.com/2006/07/moodle-muddle-message-from-dfes.html>

These are indeed interesting times for FLOSS, in education and elsewhere.

Note: e-Learning Credits were introduced by the Government in August 2002 “to stimulate both the supply and demand for multimedia educational software”. So far about £500 million has been allocated to schools to spend on “approved products and services” (quotations from DfES press notice

http://www.dfes.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2005_0132)

The guidance on licencing is at

http://procurementtools.becta.org.uk/advice/licence_types/licences.php?skin=0

This does not mention any free software or open source licences, it appears that there is no mechanism by which FLOSS products or services could gain approval. The resulting market distortions are examined in Ian Lynch’s excellent paper “Government Policy and Open Source Software” on the schoolforge website, and in a recent ZDNet article

<http://insight.zdnet.co.uk/software/linuxunix/0,39020472,39256042-2,00.html>

Building Scalable Web Sites

Cal Henderson

O’Reilly Media

ISBN 0-596-10235-6

352pp.

£ 28.50

Published: 26 May 2006

reviewed by Sam Smith

Building Scalable Web Sites is not just about web sites. If you’ve not heard of flickr.com, the photo sharing website, go have a look and then come back and read this review. I’ll wait.

So, you know what flickr is – the photo sharing website that’s taking over the world, and has a

vast number of fans due to the APIs it offers and the ability to almost anything with your, and other peoples', photos. Flickr is a posterchild for the revolution Tim O'Reilly calls "Web 2.0" of services and small sites loosely joined...

I've heard something like that before talking about a highly successful system.

The book covers all the lessons from building flickr - both the software itself and all the associated infrastructure that goes with it. And that is where the significant value from this book comes for those who don't build web applications. Cal covers in some detail the tradeoffs that were there, with a brief note on what was chosen for this application, and how it could be very different for other applications. Cal also gives a talk version of this book which is highly recommended should you ever get the chance to hear it. The passion and knowledge with which Cal comes out throughout the book.

Incredibly concise but detailed are the many discussions of the tradeoffs that come from using different infrastructure pieces through the wide angle lense of someone who has been there and built the large systems. Sections of the book include topics such as "statistics, monitoring and alerting" which are applicable no matter your application, and are widely useful even in much more conventional environments. An entire section on "Development Environments" covers the benefits of source control, and the benefits that come form it, and the way that flickr integrates source control into their processes. How to identify bottlenecks in services is also covered, including some suggestions on how not to fix them.

For web applications there is significant concise detail of internationalisation and localisation; ensuring that you don't create common holes in your code; and the issues of scaling. All these are relatively critical issues which it's important to have a basic awareness of in a web environment, and some more so than others in other environments.

What this book gives, possibly uniquely, is both a look at the whole spectrum of building a service and some details of all the major stages. It's ideal to give to someone who has a tight focus or experience on a particular area, e.g. writing lines and lines of PHP code which kills the database or filer because the author has little appreciation of what happens at other levels of the system structure. This book would make an ideal guide to people who need to be given some indications of the world beyond a small area. It's also a good read for those who build web sites which may potentially get a large volume of traffic to learn from flickr and why they made the decisions they made.

Wicked Cool Shell Scripts

Dave Taylor

No Starch Press

ISBN 1-593-27012-7

320pp.

£ 22.99

Published: 31 Oct 2003

reviewed by Jan Wysocki

I'm a bit dismayed by this book. It's got a great cover - a cute little comic book robot is reading "SEKRIT LAB NOTES" and a great title. However, it's not 'wicked' in any sense, cool is how I feel about it and it's a dull mass of text inside..

It states its intentions and makes it clear that this is not an exhaustive tutorial. It contains 101 examples grouped in chapters such as "Improving On User Commands", "Webmaster Hacks", "Mac OS X Scripts", etc. Each example is annotated with a "How it works" section, followed by advice on "Running the Script", "The Results" and usually a "Hacking the Script" section.

This cookbook approach can be good for a novice. Many of us learn to program by modifying someone else's code until it does what we want. However, although you'll definitely learn from the "How It Works" and "Hacking the Script" sections, I'm troubled by the lack of reference sections and there's no clear conceptual model of what you're doing when you run a shell script. With over 300 pages, it surprised me that only three are devoted to a very breezy overview of debugging, which amounts to little more than:

- 'build scripts incrementally' – but it doesn't show you how.
- 'sprinkle your code with echoes' – but it doesn't give examples.
- 'use the -x flag to the shell' – but doesn't tell you what that means

In the index? No. In the text? Well maybe somewhere.... I was even more surprised that redirection doesn't get mentioned until page 233, although functions are used from script #1, without comment. Oh and the first script throws in Posix variable slicing as well!

I'm not going to make a meal of this. I don't think this is a coherent approach if you want to learn the art of shell scripting. However, it will amuse and interest some tinkerers and if there's a script you like and can use off authors website doesn't the shelf, it'll suit you fine. However, you have to type in all the code since the author's website only has some example code and there's no CD-ROM with the book!

The best feature of this book, is probably its price – Amazon will sell it to you for 15 pounds including postage, but that may be because an update is due. It's two years old and surely needs an "updated for Tiger/Leopard" sticker.

There's no doubt that Dave Taylor can write shell scripts, but I doubt that many people are going to learn much from this book.

C++ Cookbook

Jeff Cogswell and Ray Lischner and Ryan Stephens

O'Reilly Media

ISBN 0-596-00761-2

592pp.

£ 31.95

Published: 11 Nov 2005

reviewed by John Collins

This book provides solutions to short C++ programming "problems" as "problem" and "recipe" format. I've never much cared for this format, which seems a poor substitute for understanding the language properly particularly for C++ with all its subtle nuances.

The first 100 pages are spent discussing how to build C++ programs and libraries using various compilers and operating systems which seem to me to fall outside the scope of a "cookbook". Then are presented fairly simple discussions of numeric conversions, string manipulation and dates and times. Then we skim over the standard library containers and algorithms before starting to discuss classes and exceptions. Next we skim over streams and files before discussion of some science and mathematical operations, a version of multithreading, some discussion of Unicode and finally XML handling using some XML libraries (but not libxml which I use).

I didn't like the order in which things were treated - talking about classes so late seems to me to defeat the whole point of C++. I didn't really feel that the treatment of standard containers

(before the classes they might contain!) did a lot to help the user choose the right one. There was no treatment of templates even though the part at the beginning discusses the export of templates quite extensively. I thought that the early chapters were a bit basic and some of the later chapters just seemed to pick things to do out of the air. Handling XML is probably worth a book in itself – I didn't think it was nearly complete enough.

I really didn't feel this book was too helpful for other than an introduction to some basic concepts.

Designing Interfaces

Jenifer Tidwell

O'Reilly Media

ISBN 0-596-00803-1

352pp.

£ 35.50

Published: 2 Dec 2005

reviewed by John Collins

This book is a pretty comprehensive review of various kinds of interface styles. It gives an excellent study of various interface choices and a guide to the pros and cons of various ways of doing things for example as lists versus drop-down boxes and why you should choose one rather than another. It's most orientated towards web site design but there is plenty of material about user interfaces for applications. There are plenty of examples of what the author is saying from web sites that she approves of.

I think this is a book you need to read through rather than dip into to get the full thrust of what the author is driving at. I think it has a very good style and will encourage a people like me to rethink their approaches in places.

One caveat however – it doesn't say a word about how to actually achieve some of the more subtle interface tricks – and some of them, popup windows and such are quite hard to achieve with some toolkits and particularly websites without resorting to Java applets. Likewise there are problems getting things to work in every possible browser. But it will give the programmers a target to aim for.

This is a definitely good book to study before you set out to design some new application or website and maybe an inspiration to revisit existing material.

DNS and Bind, 5th Edition

Paul Albitz and Cricket Liu

O'Reilly Media

ISBN 0-596-10057-4

640pp.

£ 35.50

Published: 2 Jun 2006

reviewed by Mike Smith

I already have a copy of DNS and Bind (DaB) from the early days. My intention with this review was to compare this new 5th edition with the old one. However when I came to look for the old copy, probably a first or second edition, I wasn't able to locate it :(I have many excuses lined up, but I suppose it demonstrates that I haven't had to refer to it for a while. I'm sure many of you will also have copies of this text as it is a classic and I wanted to let you know whether its worth updating. So please accept my apologies in advance if I am not able to do this authoritatively (pun intended) but I'll do my best to let you know what's in it.

This edition specifically covers Bind version 9.3 (it says so on the cover). O'Reilly's own synopsis can be found here:

<http://www.oreilly.com/catalog/dns5/>

In fact there's a whole suite of pages – one for each edition; just change the number in the URL. The third edition was significant as this introduced Bind 8 as well as covering Bind 4. The fourth edition is also significant as it covered version 9 (as well as 8 and 4); also IPv6 and security.

I'm not yet convinced it's worth refreshing if you have the 4th edition already as it just appears to be a point release (though it is a major one, and at the time of writing the current version). There are a few other new areas covered too: internationalised domain names, ENUM (electronic numbering), and SPF (the Sender Policy Framework). Each of these only warrants a couple of pages - it's worth understanding them, but that's not a lot of material.

As DNS and Bind has evolved, there have been several changes but the basic structure of the book is exactly as it was in 1992. One thing that has changed from the first to the fifth editions is that originally some specific configuration options were given for various flavours of UNIX; including SunOs, HP-UX, AIX, Irix and SCO (hiss). Now we only have a section on the Windows XP resolver! Grrrr.

Other interesting observations when comparing versions are the introduction of programming examples in Perl and the Advanced Features chapter (both earlier in the life of the book). In this edition we get another new chapter on Architecture. This covers different architectural designs, as one would expect, and in particular looks at external and internal views, Forwarding and the like.

In summary then, returning to my objective of the review, if you have either the first or second edition of the book, and you are actively implementing or managing DNS configurations then I think it's worth investing in the new edition. If you already have a later edition then probably not (just Google the specific new areas). I wonder if O'Reilly do a trade-up scheme? That would make upgrades much more palatable. Someone ask Josette if you bump into her.

Enterprise SOA

Dan Woods and Thomas Mattern

O'Reilly Media

ISBN 0-596-10238-0

452pp.

£ 35.50

Published: 16 May 2006

reviewed by Mike Smith

SOA is the biggest new buzzword (or perhaps buzz-acronym) in the IT industry today. IBM are making quite a noise about it, so I'm sure it's not just fad. However let me warn you that this book, Enterprise SOA, is not a general text on SOA but a guide to SAP's Enterprise Services Architecture (ESA).

In case you're not aware of who SAP are, they were formed in the 70s by some ex-IBMers. R1 and R2 were mainframe products, but my own knowledge on SAP was gained in managing SAP/R3 on various UNIX systems during the 90s.

Now SAP are delivering services using Internet technologies - web services, SOAP etc with their mySAP services. Their approach for designing applications on this infrastructure (into the future) is called the Enterprise Services Architecture. They have a product to underpin this, the SAP NetWeaver platform. There's more information here: <http://www.sap.com/platform/esa/>

The rhetoric from SAP on their website, the back of the book and seemingly all over the place is "Enterprise service-oriented architecture (enterprise SOA) is a blueprint for services-based, enterprise-scale business solutions that offer increased levels of adaptability, flexibility, and openness. With the SAP NetWeaver platform as its technical foundation, enterprise SOA moves IT architectures step-by-step to dramatically higher levels of adaptability - and helps companies move closer to the vision of the real-time enterprise." I hope that helps!

I found it quite heavy reading, but perhaps this is because it is more on the business analysis side and application development to a certain extent, rather than technology where my interests lie. There is some good material on the business process lifecycle, how SOA (and ESA) fits, and most importantly how to construct a business case. However my main point stands - I think this is of most relevance if you are using the SAP services and product set. In fact there are some case studies covering how some of SAP's clients have used their ESA methodology (if I can call it that).

So I think this book is very much an advert for SAP, written by two of its employees. There might be something more general - have a look at Amazon. There's a book of the same name published in 2004 but there are several others with rave reviews. Don't buy this just because it's O'Reilly.

Ajax Hacks**Bruce W Perry**

O'Reilly Media

ISBN 0-596-10169-4

438pp.

£ 20.99

Published: 4 April 2006

reviewed by Lindsay Marshall

See the combined review below.

Head Rush Ajax**Elisabeth Freeman, Eric Freeman and Brett D. McLaughlin**

O'Reilly Media

ISBN 0-596-10225-9

446pp.

£ 28.50

Published: 4 April 2006

reviewed by Lindsay Marshall

See the combined review below.

Pragmatic Ajax: A Web 2.0 Primer**Justin Gehtland, Ben Galbraith and Dion Almaer**

Pragmatic Bookshelf

ISBN 0-976-69408-5

304pp.

£ 20.99

Published: 25 April 2006

reviewed by Lindsay Marshall

Flash, vim, ajax: why is there all this software named after the household cleaning products of my childhood?

Maybe's it's a Web 2.0 thing. Ajax certainly is. From 0-60 in about half a second, in fact so fast that there a considerable number of normally clued up people haven't heard of it even now. It shows what giving a slick name to an already existing technique can do for you. Indeed, the person who made up the name (Jesse James Garrett – clearly from a long line of snappy namers) writes a foreword to the Ajax Hacks book. A foreword, that is in fact entirely pointless as all it says, “I made up the name but I really know very little about what it involves”. However, as this is only a page long it isn't exactly a big issue. I have previously been rude about or at least dismissive of several volumes in the “Hacks” series, but this one is actually pretty good and there is a lot of useful code in it. The main trouble is that there is a *lot* of code involved and I just hope that it is all available for download somewhere as I wouldn't want to have to type it all in accurately - JavaScript can be a little tedious, especially when you are accessing DOM functions (I always get the capitalisation of the functions wrong is it document.getElementById or document.getElementById?). But it covers all the major tool kits (Prototype, script.aculo.us etc.) and has material for Rails programmers, so it presses all the right trendy buttons. Which is

no bad thing. There is a lot in the book that competent programmers could generate themselves but why re-invent things? I will certainly be keeping this one on my desk.

Head Rush Ajax is rather a different container of crustaceans. I suspect that you will either hate it or love it. I haven't decide yet which side I am on, but I think I tend towards hate. This is, shall we say, an unconventional book. All images and handwritten typefaces and arrows, jokey asides - you know the sort of thing. It's not man pages that's for sure. Probably intended for young people. It even describes itself as "A caffienated learning guide to the world of dynamic web pages". I'm not really sure what that means to be honest. It's all a bit too myspace for me, but to be fair (and I am always fair), it covers lots of useful material and has good clear explanations of processes and protocols once you get under the surface. If you want to get grips with Ajaxy things and aren't put off by the presentation then this is probably worthwhile, but, first, don't buy it unseen, you really do need to look at it to see if it is for you and second, it is purely an introduction, it has no utility as a long term reference so you have weigh up the cost carefully.

The final book is much more conventional having chapters and such like, and it covers a lot of ground that both the other books cover: Prototype, Dojo, Google Maps API, asynchrony, JSON, XML. Again it's instructional in nature rather than a reference text and takes you carefully through lots and lots of code and HTML. It is probably pretty good for someone coming fresh to the ideas behind Ajax and trying to use them. However, for some reason I just don't like the book. It's one of the Pragmatic Programmers series and I have the other two books in this series and I don't like them either. There is something about the layout and style that I find off putting - the content is always spot on, it's the presentation that gets to me. An entirely irrational prejudice of course.

Of the three, as I said above, I will be keeping Ajax Hacks on my desk. I may dip into Pragmatic Ajax for some things that are not covered by Hacks, but Head Rush, well, I will probably try it out on one of my project students and see how they fair with it. I'm sure it's just an age thing. Just like the cleaning products.

Best of Ruby Quiz

James Edward Gray II

Pragmatic Bookshelf

ISBN 0-976-69407-7

176pp.

£ 20.99

Published: 28 Mar 2006

reviewed by Lindsay Marshall

I have to straight off that I am extremely dubious about people turning mailing lists or websites that collect contributions from people into books. They have to add a lot of value to the content (IMHO) if their making a profit or a reputation from it is to be acceptable. I'm am not familiar with the Ruby Quiz that runs on the Ruby Talk mailing list (life is too short to join another mailing list...) so I cannot really judge how much the author has added - the blurb claims that the material has been expanded greatly and that will have to do for now.

Anyhow the book is slightly odd. The first 65 pages set 25 problems to be solved in Ruby and then the rest of the book (200 pages or so) looks at solutions. The problems are all relatively simple - a Secret Santa script for example - and the answers usually look at a couple of different solutions. If you don't know Ruby then most of this will be a waste of time since you simply won't understand much of what is going on, and, in fact, I think you have to know Ruby and its

libraries pretty well to really get to grips with some of the solutions that are presented.

This is another of the Pragmatic Programmers series and yet again the layout of the book is awkward - there are some ugly typeface choices and the pages seem to have too much whitespace yet still look cramped. I am really not sure who the audience for this book is. Perhaps the people who contribute the problems and solutions to the mailing list? Novice Ruby programmers will not get enough out of it as there may be too much going on that they don't yet know, and advanced programmers will perhaps see a new idiom or two which they are not familiar, but that's about it. The set of people that exists between these two extremes, particular for Ruby, doesn't seem that large. Not a bad book, just one that seems a bit pointless and lost.

Programming PHP

Rasmus Lerdorf, Kevin Tatroe and Peter MacIntyre

O'Reilly

ISBN 0-596-00681-0

540pp.

£ 28.50

Published: 12 May 2006

reviewed by Lindsay Marshall

PHP is still holding up as one of the most popular server-side development languages for the web, and it is certainly a language that anyone interested in web development ought to know their way around. It's also a language that you have to program using a great deal of discipline and restraint - there's a lot of truly dreadful PHP coding out in the wild - and I have to say that I there are aspects of PHP programming style that this book introduces with which I vehemently disagree, but that is a relatively minor issue.

The book takes a traditional approach to describing the language: starting with variables and then flow control and then functions and so on. However it isn't really put together as a first steps in programming primer either so it is best suited to experienced programmers who want a gentle introduction to the language, picking up the syntax with a few simple examples. It can be a little terse, however, for example the section on regular expressions covers the whole subject in a few pages, and I have to say that I don't really understand their example of negative lookahead after a couple of readings (that might just be me being obtuse of course). There's also a lot of stuff that is taken from the PHP manual pages with a small amount of cosmetic dusted on them.

The book also has chapters devoted to PDF, XML, the web and databases which discuss various PHP interfaces to these topics again tersely but in useful enough depth for a learner. The chapter on PHP security covers much useful ground and I would have definitely made it a lot less terse and probably printed it in red or something to emphasise its importance: PHP is powerful and so the inexperienced can do dangerous things by accident. They need to be strongly warned off.

This is probably one of the better PHP books around but, and it's an important but, there is a claim that the book "covers PHP5". There are certainly some PHP5 features described (though not identified as PHP5 as such), but I can't find anything about some of the really essential new features that people really need to be using such as exception handling. This is the second book I've reviewed that claims to be about PHP5 that omits any mention that I can find of exception handling. I would have a chapter devoted to it alone, but nothing. Odd. But if you want a printed book to start you off this is fine, but I still recommend reading through the online manual.

Linux Annoyances for Geeks

Michael Jang

O'Reilly Media

ISBN 0-596-00801-5

502pp.

£ 24.99

Published: 21 April 2006

reviewed by Roger Whittaker

This book has some good content which will be useful to quite a few people. But I find it slightly odd, as it doesn't really have a unifying concept.

The title indicates that it is a part of O'Reilly's "Annoyances" series. I'd never really looked at any of these before, because they seemed to concern things that I would only find annoying if I ever actually used them ("Windows XP Annoyances", "Excel Annoyances" and the like).

The idea is supposed to be that there are a number of aspects of the system under consideration which people generally find particularly annoying. These are examined and workarounds or solutions are given.

In the case of this book, it isn't quite like that. Each item is (annoyingly!) called an "Annoyance", but most of them are not aspects of using a Linux system that are particularly annoying: it's really just a series of howtos grouped roughly into types. I suppose if you don't know how to do a particular thing on your system, that in itself is annoying, but only in the sense that it's annoying to be ignorant of anything and to need a book to learn from.

If the book's title had included the word "recipes" or "hacks", it would have been much the same, without the annoying terminology.

All that being said, there is some good material here, though quite a lot of it is rather humdrum and some of it is out of date. For instance the section on locking down the Gnome desktop does not mention Sabayon. I like the fact that the book tries to be distribution-neutral, but unfortunately the way it does this is to repeat already compressed information three or four times, for Fedora, SUSE and Debian, for instance.

There are quite good sections on disk and booting problems. Other sections (including the one on the real annoyance of Winmodems) are far too short to actually help anyone solve their problem. The same goes for the Kickstart and AutoYaST sections: just about enough to tell you that these things exist, but not enough to really learn to use them.

There is also some advice that is frankly eccentric to say the least. In this category I would probably include the recommendation of djbdns, and certainly the bizarre advice to readers to apply White Box updates to a RHEL system.

One or two sections address things that are genuinely annoying for beginners (particularly for instance "My CD/DVD is locked"). But the author succumbs to the temptation to include long lists of options (for instance of all the possible configuration options for SUSE's default cron setup) or file contents (parts of an `xorg.conf` file that will almost certainly be useless in practice to readers).

Overall, I think the usefulness of the book is fairly limited. If the author had set out with a clearer idea of his audience and what he was trying to achieve, it might have worked much better.

Contributors

John Collins is a member of UKUUG Council and founder of Xi Software (<http://www.xisl.com/>).

Leslie Fletcher works part-time as UKUUG Campaigns Manager, with the brief of improving the visibility and credibility of UKUUG and its mission in key arenas – business, politics, public service, education. His main first-hand involvement with Open Source is as chair of governors at Parris Wood Technology College in South Manchester. He also has some experience in IT management, having been head of the Department of Computer and Mathematical Sciences at Salford University for five years.

Heike Jurzik is a freelance journalist and writer specialising in Linux and related subjects (<http://www.linux-journalist.com/>).

Lindsay Marshall developed the Newcastle Connection distributed UNIX software and created the first Internet cemetery. He is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Computing Science at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne. He also runs the RISKS digest website and the Bifurcated Rivets weblog.

Ray Miller is a director of UKUUG and Chairman of UKUUG Council. He works as a Unix Systems Programmer at the University of Oxford, where he manages the Systems Development and Support team in the University's Computing Services.

Jane Morrison is Company Secretary and Administrator for UKUUG, and manages the UKUUG office at the Manor House in Buntingford. She has been involved with UKUUG administration since 1987. In addition to UKUUG, Jane is Company Secretary for a trade association (Fibre-optic Industry Association) that she also runs from the Manor House office.

Mike Smith works in the Chief Technology Office of a major European listed outsourcing company, setting technical strategy and working with hardware and software vendors to bring innovative solutions to its clients. He has over 15 years in the industry, including mid-range technical support roles and has experience with AIX, Dynix/ptx, HP-UX, Irix, Reliant UNIX, Solaris and of course Linux.

Sam Smith has been on UKUUG Council for 3 years and is currently the treasurer, with many random interests in addition to OpenBSD and Mac OS X. He's also active in the UK Online Democracy group mySociety and the Manchester Universities' Gilbert and Sullivan Society.

Roger Whittaker is a UKUUG Council member and works for Novell Technical Services as a Linux Support Engineer.

Jan Wysocki started out as a microbiologist, and has made use of computers in scientific work since 1964, but got into systems administration on a Primos mini-computer about 20 years ago. After a brief flirtation with Unix administration on a Mostek 68000, he grew to love Unix as a platform for the Poplog environment. After a few years programming AMT DAPs as Sun 3 attached processors, he has been administering a variety of Unices in various academic and commercial environments.

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