



news@UK

The newsletter of FLOSS UK, the new name for the UK's oldest Open Systems User Group, UKUUG

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From the Secretariat

Jane Morrison

FLOSS UK continues to work with Josette Garcia at O'Reilly to organise tutorials.

Our next tutorial, 'Understanding Regular Expressions' will be presented by Damian Conway on Thursday 11th October at the Imperial Hotel, Russell Square, London.

Following this on Friday 12th October, again at the Imperial Hotel we are repeating the very successful tutorial given in April this year 'Presentation Skills'. This tutorial will also be given by Damian Conway.

Then on Wednesday 7th November John Pinner will give his 'Intermediate Python' tutorial.

The AGM this year will be held on Thursday 20th September at the Ambassadors Hotel, 12 Upper Woburn Place, London WC1H 0HX, starting at 6:15 p.m. Full details including the Agenda etc. were sent to all paid up members on 17th August.

We hope you will be able to attend. Full details can be found below.

Looking ahead please see below details of other forthcoming events:

Saturday 27th October: Unconference

This will be hosted by BCS OSSG and will be held at BCS, Southampton Street, London WC2E 7HA. There will be no charge for attending this event. More information about the unconference can be found at

<http://www.flossuk.org/unconf2012>

March 2013 – Spring Tutorial and Conference

This will be held in Newcastle – more information soon.

The next Newsletter will be the December issue and the copy date is: 16th November. As usual any articles, letters etc. can be sent for inclusion to newsletter@ukuug.org.

Chairman's report

Paul Waring

Recent and Upcoming Conferences

We are planning to run our second one-day unconference in the autumn in London, hosted by the BCS Open Source SG. This event will take place on a Saturday so that delegates can travel to the venue and back in one day and without having to book time off work.

More details can be found within this issue and on the FLOSS UK website, and I would like to encourage people to attend and get involved in an event which will be more relaxed and informal than our usual conferences.

Get Involved

FLOSS UK exists to serve its members and we are always on the lookout for people who are keen to get involved in any capacity, whether that be through volunteering to help with organising events, writing newsletter articles, or entirely new activities which haven't been tried before.

We have a vacancy on Council for someone who would like to get involved on a regular basis, and we are also keen to get members involved in running next year's Spring conference. If you would like to help out in any capacity please do get in touch via office@ukuug.org.

Tutorial announcement: Presentation Skills

FLOSS UK and O'Reilly present:

Presentation Skills

A full day tutorial by Damian Conway.

Friday 12th October 2012.

Venue: Imperial Hotel, Russell Square, London WC1B 5BB.

Description: The best and most effective presentations capture the audience quickly, hold their interest effortlessly, educate and entertain them in equal measure, and sometimes even inspire them.

This class explores simple and effective techniques for achieving those goals in any kind of presentation.

The first half of the class focuses on preparation, content selection, visual design, delivery, handling questions and effective techniques for presenting various kinds of technical information (code, data, statistics, charts, structure diagrams etc.)

The second half of the course is an in-depth tutorial on improving the 'look and feel' of presentation materials – especially Powerpoint/Keynote/Impress presentations. In particular, it demonstrates practical techniques for making your slides not suck!

Tutor: Damian Conway is a renowned programmer, speaker and educator, best known for his work on Perl programming language.

Previously as Associate Professor in Computer Science at Australia's largest University, for the past decade he has made his living entirely by giving conference keynotes, technical presentations, programming tutorials and professional training courses.

He has been keynote speaker at major technical Conferences such as OSCON, linux.conf.au, OLS, Webstock, DebConf, and GOTO, presenting on topics as diverse as quantum physics, website design, computational linguistics, bioinformatics, and programming language design.

He has also been invited to speak and teach at Institutions such as Harvard, MIT, Carnegie Mellon, U. Toronto and ETH Zurich and has delivered seminars and taught classes for major corporations including Apple, Yahoo!, Amazon, Canonical, Xerox, Qualcomm, Canon, Michelin, Morgan Stanley and Goldman Sachs.

Visit the web site at: <http://www.flossuk.org/presenting2012> for delegate costs and on-line booking.

Places are limited – early booking is essential.

Early-bird rates available until 15th September 2012.

Tutorial Announcement: Understanding Regular Expressions

FLOSS UK and O'Reilly present:

Understanding Regular Expressions

A full day tutorial by Damian Conway.

Thursday 11th October 2012

Venue: Imperial Hotel, Russell Square, London WC1B 5BB

Description: This full day tutorial introduces beginner and intermediate programmers to the full functionality of Perl's regular expressions (and hence to the general behaviour of the Perl-compatible, or POSIX-ERE, regular expressions that are used in most other programming languages, editors, and developer tools as well).

The morning sessions will focus on the underlying theory and the core features of Perl's pattern matching, thereby exploring the principles and mechanisms underlying all regular expressions.

You'll see how the highly compact syntax of patterns actually programs a built-in "text-recognition engine", and you'll learn how to design and construct regexes to drive that engine efficiently. By lunch time, regular expressions will no longer seem like a mystery wrapped in an enigma wrapped in line-noise.

In the afternoon we'll look at some of the newer and more powerful features of Perl regular expressions, such as code embedding, recursive matching, named subrules, and backtracking control. These high-end features are not well covered in most textbooks or classes, yet understanding and being able to apply them is essential when dealing with large, real world data sets.

By the end of the day, you will no longer have to "cross your fingers" when using pattern matching, and will have gained the necessary understanding to start actively engineering regular expressions that are both correct and efficient.

Tutor: Damian Conway is a renowned programmer, speaker and educator, best known for his work on Perl programming language.

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Visit the web site at: <http://www.flossuk.org/regex2012> for costs and on-line booking.

Places are limited – early booking is essential.

Early-bird rates available until 15th September 2012.

Tutorial Announcement: Intermediate Python

FLOSS UK and O'Reilly present:

Intermediate Python

A full day tutorial by John Pinner.

Wednesday 7th November 2012

Venue: Imperial Hotel, Russell Square, London WC1B 5BB

Description: So, you've been programming in C/C++/Java/Perl/FORTRAN/Ruby for years, and are regarded as a bit of an expert. Now you've 'picked up' Python and got a few programs going, it all seemed easy enough although you were shocked/horrified/mystified at the differences between Python and your favourite language.

On top of this, you showed your latest Python program to a long-time friend who is an experienced Python user, and she turned her nose up at your code (of which you had been rather proud) and said 'It's not very Pythonic, is it?'

So this one day tutorial is for you, things we will cover include:

Recapitulation

- Name spaces
- mutability vs immutability
- compile-time vs run-time behaviour

Python Functions

- Variable numbers of arguments
- Python functions are first-class objects
- A simple despatch table

Contracts (lack of) and Conventions

- Lack of interface/discipline cf [insert language here]
- Informal contracts and conventions
- 'Duck' typing
- Naming conventions

Code Maintainability

- Documentation
- Avoiding mistakes; code checkers: pychecker, pylint

Unicode – If you think you don't need Unicode, you're probably in denial, face up to it now.

Python 2 vs Python 3

- What are the differences?
- Which should I be using?

Multi-Platform applications

- Tips for writing multi-platform code
- Licensing

Functional Programming with Python

- Python functional constructs
- List comprehensions
- Lexical closures

WTF is Pythonic?

- Style – The Zen of Python

- PEP 8 – write code like Guido van Rossum
- Working with Python, it's not C, C++ or Java, don't try and make it so

Tutor: (Traditionally bios are written in the third person, but John Pinner does not like this). I first started using computers in the sixties and have used a number of programming languages, among them machine and assembly languages, BASIC, Pascal, FORTRAN and C, together with a hefty dose of Bourne and Korn shells.

Sadly, I became fluent in assembly language and even(re) wrote an entire disk filing system in assembler.

Nowadays, just as it is no longer necessary to write filing systems and disk drivers, one does not have to battle with archaic programming languages.

Thanks to Linux Journal I 'discovered' Python in 2000 and have been using it ever since; together with an occasional regression to C, it covers all my programming needs. I find that it gets in the way least of all the languages I have used, and brings back the joy to programming. I am proud to be an elected member of the Python Software Foundation, and am something of a Python evangelist, through running training courses and promoting such events such as PyCon UK.

As well as Python, I have been an enthusiastic user of FLOSS, was an original contributor to the FSF, newly formed by RMS in 1985, and have served on UKUUG's Council.'

Visit the web site at: www.flossuk.org/python2012 for delegate costs and on-line booking.

Places are limited – early booking is essential.

Early-bird rates available until 5th October 2012.

OggCamp 2012

Roger Whittaker

This year's OggCamp was held in Liverpool on the 18th and 19th August at the John Moores University Art and Design Academy. This very enjoyable event took the form of a two day weekend unconference, and attracted a very good attendance.

OggCamp dates back to 2009, when it effectively replaced the famous LugRadio Live event that was held for several years at Wolverhampton. It is organised by the Linux Outlaws and Ubuntu UK Podcast teams, and bills itself as a "Free Software and Free Culture" event.

The venue was ideal for an event of this kind, with a large auditorium for plenary sessions, and several smaller rooms available. There was a good sized room for coffee and exhibitors, and a lively and friendly social atmosphere. Alongside the event there was an "Open Hardware Jam" with interesting hardware projects on show and people doing stuff with soldering irons... Of course Raspberry Pi and Arduino were in evidence, as was Nanode.

Among the speakers were Simon Phipps, who spoke on behalf of the OSI and also ORG. Andy Piper spoke on MQTT. Ken Boak spoke about Nanode and there were two talks about the Pi. Richard Hughes spoke about ColorHug, and there was a description of the Enigma machine by Nahuel Marisi. Stephen Fry made a guest appearance on video, answering questions specially for the event.

There were the usual lightning talks as well as panel events and a couple of comedy sessions.

The conference hotel was the nearby Adelphi, an impressive place of slightly fading splendour where a party was held on the Saturday night.

A full list of talks can be found at <https://joind.in/event/view/1024>.

The doomed economy

Martin Houston

I am going to be doing a few weeks putting in the IT infrastructure at Firebox London
<http://fireboxlondon.net/>.

I said they should run their computers on Linux so how could I refuse when they agreed with me? It is a different sort of challenge to the usual City job, having to do the best with meagre budget and donated equipment, however it is something I feel I have to do. Only when people start choosing not to just take part in our doomed economy will essential change happen.

If you want to know why things are so urgent, even if governments like to play it down take a look at this:

<http://www.peakprosperity.com/crashcourse>

Governments will play the extent of the crisis down because they are influenced by powerful vested interests who do not want to loose out as they would inevitably do with the changes needed for human survival. They do not want to face this, which is what makes the whole situation so very dangerous. Crash Course really is worth a few hours of your time, it is very thorough and there is a companion book that goes into things in even greater detail with all the supporting evidence. I am totally convinced that on a macro level the modern world simply cannot carry on functioning. It is time to hit the brakes and do an emergency landing. I took it about 7 months ago, the realisation that this was not all just doom mongering made me physically sick, just be warned.

This site is not one lone crank either, there must be at least a million organisations worldwide now concentrating on one aspect or other of how human society has lost any assurance that it has a future. The Left (Left of New Labour) generally and movements such as Occupy and Anonymous have been warning publicly about the deep seated problems with our profit obsessed system for quite a while, people that work in the City too will admit there are problems, but only after a few beers! What is now quite urgent is to get large, critical mass, numbers of them to admit there are problems that need urgent solutions even when they are sober!

This is why I have decided to put my time (as I don't have that much money) where my mouth is and work for a better world. Not because I am particularly charitable, it could be argued that the survival of the human race is a matter of self interest, you could be polite and call it 'enlightened self interest'.

We need for people to stop stupidly putting their money into things that are very rapidly destroying this one planet we have to live on. Instead join me in putting your effort into the change that is very urgently needed, or if you feel you cannot yet make that leap, use your money towards helping the people who do have some very solid and sensible ideas for making a world that at least has a future. Time to wake up. The big Olympic party is over now. We simply do not have any more time to be distracted by anything else.

Safe C++**Vladimir Kushnir****O'Reilly Media****ISBN: 978-1-4493-2093-5****142pp.****£ 18.99****Published: June 2012****reviewed by Paul Waring**

Given the relatively low level at which the C++ language operates, there are plenty of opportunities to make mistakes (e.g. in memory management) which rarely come up in other languages. This book attempts to cover some of the most common mistakes, and to provide strategies for preventing or working around them.

The first chapter is remarkably brief - just two pages on where bugs come from, including common mistakes in C and the abusable features added by C++. Chapter two discusses the importance of catching bugs early, and demonstrates ways to refactor code so that the compiler can spot potential errors, such as by using the explicit keyword and using enums to create new types. However, the author notes that most bugs arise as a result of data which is not known at runtime - such as that supplied by users - and therefore the rest of the book covers only runtime errors.

Chapter 3 covers what to do when encountering a runtime error, which is arguably as important as detecting the error in the first place. A helpful macro is provided for printing useful error messages. The next chapter comprehensively covers the 'index out of bounds' bug, with sections on dynamic, static and multidimensional arrays. Chapter five is half a page and basically states, in several different ways, 'do not use pointer arithmetic' (a source of many bugs and unreadable code). Sound advice, although perhaps difficult to apply to existing software projects.

The next two chapters skim over invalid pointers and uninitialised variables. Whilst most of the advice is sensible, the author ends up recommending the creation of wrapper classes for every basic type (e.g. int becomes Int), and to use these for declaring all class members, which seems an unnecessary level of abstraction. Memory leaks and NULL pointers are given a chapter each, though I think both topics could benefit from greater coverage.

The final part of the book covers testing and debugging. Most of this is at a fairly high level, but there is some useful advice on making code 'debugger friendly'. There are several appendices, but all are source code listings and feel as if they are padding out the book, since the code can be downloaded from the publisher's website.

Overall, for such a small book (88 pages if you ignore the appendices), this does a good job of covering the basic C++ mistakes to look out for, and how to write code which is more resilient to begin with. The book covers the subject area in breadth rather than depth, so further reading may be required on several of the topics in order to gain a full understanding, but otherwise this is a useful text for anyone who writes C++ on a regular basis.

Building Web Applications with Erlang

O'Reilly Media

ISBN: 978-1-4493-0996-1

156pp.

£ 15.50

Published: June 2012

reviewed by Paul Waring

The first, and perhaps most important thing to understand about this book is that it assumes the reader is already familiar with Erlang. In addition, knowledge of web development and the basics of HTTP are required in order to make sense of the text – this is not a book which takes you from a total beginner to building web applications. Also, with this being a new book, your package management system may not have the recommended version of Erlang (R15B). Whilst this is not absolutely necessary, a few code examples do require this version and so you may not be able to run everything without installing a backport or compiling from source.

Moving onto the text itself, the first chapter explains why Erlang is a good choice for web applications – though this feels somewhat redundant as any readers will presumably have already decided on the choice of language, and the advantages of Erlang do not seem particularly compelling at this point. Chapter two introduces Yaws, a framework for building web applications in Erlang, with a startup guide and the obligatory ‘Hello world’ example.

In the third chapter things start to get going, as session handling and access control are covered, albeit in only a few pages. This is followed by a relatively lengthy chapter on REST and handling HTTP requests, and another on uploading and storing files - including the use of Amazon S3.

The majority of the remainder of the book covers the building of a complete application module, as opposed to the snippets of code shown in the previous chapters. This provides a good starting point for creating a custom application of your own, although my limited Erlang knowledge meant that I was starting to get lost at this point. Finally, there are some useful appendices, including one for using Erlang with Emacs (but nothing on vim - a shocking oversight).

Overall, this book acts as a good introduction to building web applications with Erlang, although a substantial amount of prior knowledge is assumed. This is also an incredibly specific book, which is something of a double-edged sword. If you want to build web applications with Erlang (and use Yaws as your framework) it covers enough material to get you going, but it is really only useful if you fit the exact niche which it is aiming for

Using Drupal

Angela Byron, Addison Berry and Bruno De Bondt

O'Reilly Media

ISBN: 978-1-4493-9052-5

496pp.

\$44.99

Published: (2nd edition) April 2012

reviewed by John Collins and Jon Diamond

Drupal is one of the 3 main open-source Content Management Systems for building websites as an alternative to hand-crafted HTML, CSS and/or PHP. The other two are Wordpress and Joomla. All three are PHP based and use an open-source database package, usually MySQL (although others are supported).

Wordpress is by far the “market leader” and is considered easiest and most user-friendly to set up. Drupal has a reputation for being the hardest to set up and least user-friendly and Joomla is

supposed to be somewhere in between (at least one of the authors of this review disagrees). For the programmer's point of view, Drupal is by far the easiest to integrate custom pieces of PHP code and there are numerous custom "modules" and "themes" which may be obtained (and unlike with the others they are mostly free).

This book is entitled "Using Drupal" and its subtitle "Choosing and Configuring Modules" shows its focus, as Drupal without Modules is not very useful. It gives initial installation and setup as an appendix, but it glosses over some of the points where you have to get "down and dirty" when you first start up.

The bulk of the book is taken up with examples of types of websites using various add-on modules which are all explained well. Perhaps the user might be a little at sea if his/her requirements are not covered by the modules described, but the kinds of tasks described are likely to cover most cases and the user is clearly directed where to find out more.

A glaring omission for commercial users is any description of Search Engine Optimisation. The difficulty of doing this well is probably the main downside of Drupal in many people's eyes, and probably done best in Joomla.

All told, this book is well written and can be recommended as a useful and thorough introduction to Drupal.

PHP and MySQL Novice to Ninja, 5th Edition

Kevin Yank

Sitepoint

ISBN: 0-9871530-8-0

496pp.

£ 30.99

Published: June 2012

reviewed by Alain Williams

Summary: this won't make you a Ninja, but is a good introduction and will serve as a good reference for techniques as you grow your skills.

He starts out teaching MySQL basics: database and table creation, table insert, update and simple selects. Enough to get started.

For MySQL administration he uses phpMyAdmin, which I suppose works if you like pointy clicky slowness and comes with XAMPP and MAMP. Shame that he does not talk about the excellent MySQL command line tool.

Next he takes you through PHP basics: variables, conditions, loops, forms, generating HTML links (A tags), use of includes to modularise your code. One thing that he does raise awareness of is which character set is being used (both in the database and web page), something often glossed over.

Then he puts the two together and shows how to drive MySQL through PHP. This leads to more PHP syntax, eg arrays, as he develops a simple application that is a database of jokes.

I am glad to see that he teaches the PDO (PHP Data Objects) library for interacting with MySQL, this is much better, and safer, than the old `mysql_` and `mysqli_` libraries that too many books still focus on.

He teaches the use of placeholders in SQL statements – great at preventing SQL injection attacks, but does this by way of `bindValue()` to bind values for SQL to something like `' :id'`; this is much more tedious than using positional `'?`' and putting them in order to the `execute()` method. This is important – if something is easier then people are more likely to use it.

He also uses try/catch for error handling, but does this for every database interaction. This results in a huge amount of code that is repeated in many places. One of the things that I like about PDO is that I can, by and large, not worry about error handling on every SQL operation but put a try/catch round the whole program and have one handler.

He then moves on to database design: multiple tables, joins and relationships. This is nicely illustrated with SQL and box and arrows of sample data in tables.

Structured PHP is about use of includes, eg one include to open the database so that a good job is done once and the password needs to only updated in one place where it changes – it is surprising how many people don't do that simple thing! This also talks about functions, how and why.

He then leaps to designing and writing a simple Content Management System – to better store jokes. If someone were to go through and understand it they would learn a lot; but this is probably not the same person who needed the basics in the first chapters – at least within a few months. But it will provide examples of ways of doing things that will be valuable to novices.

He also covers regular expressions, sessions, cookies and how to give users individual logins to your web site. There is a surprisingly large chapter on binary data: uploading of files via a web form and storing the result in a file on disk or a database BLOB. All of this with lots of code as worked examples.

The book talks about implementation under MS Windows (with XAMPP), OS/X (with MAMP). It is these platforms that the author seems to understand. For Linux he basically says that the reader will probably know how to do it and as a fall back he suggests that a generic binaries or source are downloaded for various packages. However: I would not regard that as a major minus on the book, PHP is reasonably platform agnostic so this should not matter.

He has 4 appendices:

A. More details on how to install MySQL, PHP and Apache on MS Windows, OS/X and generic Linux. I suppose that it might be useful if a standard install has problems but I think was out of place in an introductory book like this one, especially in the case of Linux as there are differences between the different distros.

B. MySQL syntax reference. As is common in a book such as this: an alphabetic list of commands. I feel that this would be much more useful to the novice if each command was followed by a few examples to illustrate the scary syntax that has lots of scary square brackets and vertical bars showing that some bits are optional or alternatives. This is especially needed for those commands that are not covered earlier in the book.

C. MySQL functions.

D. MySQL column types. Useful as this is it feels like a copy and paste from the standard manual; it would be nice to have seen some value add for the novice user in terms of examples and discussion – for instance: do **not** use `FLOAT` to store monetary values.

The code in the book can be downloaded to save you typing it.

If you are new to PHP and MySQL you could do worse than get this book.

Fitness for Geeks

Bruce W Perry

O'Reilly Media

ISBN: 978-1-4493-9989-4

336pp.

£ 26.99

Published: May 2012

reviewed by Alain Williams

Written in language and using idioms designed to appeal to a software geek, eg the first chapter “fitness and the human codebase”, this looks at the life that humans (of 10,000 years ago) were “designed” for – both food-wise and in terms of physical activity as compared to inactive “cubicle man” who sits around all day and hunts for food in supermarkets and takeaways. He suggests easy diet changes and things like using stairs rather than the lift. The geek bit is that he explained why the changes are needed – not just what; he also has in the book a lot of scientific detail, things like energy equations and molecular formula.

There is a chapter on apps for smart phones to help measure food (calories and other needs) and exercise taken, eg by measuring your routes takes (GPS) or motion sensors. I suspect that this will become out of date as new apps become popular, but he goes into some detail about some of these.

Another chapter covers nutrition (proteins, carbohydrates, fats) what foods contain what and how much. What are the different sugar types including diagrams of molecules. It is not as simple as saying that some are good and others are bad, there is a trade off.

Later he covers the other important food items: vitamins and minerals; which foods have them and why you need them. He includes a small piece by a nutrition professor at Arizona State University who talks about vitamin C, one of many such cameos that he has throughout the book.

He discusses how to shop, what to avoid, how to read the nutrition labels that I have always ignored, but they are a bit different in the USA. Then when to eat, how much and when not to eat – fasting is, apparently, good for you; he discusses different regimes – I am not sure that I like that idea.

There is a guide on exercise: both out doors and in a gym. What sorts of things to do, how to structure it and calculations for things like energy expenditure along with applications that will help you to collate and calculate all of this. This is an important of our energy balance, exercise too little for what you eat means that you will probably put on weight.

But do not get the impression that this is all about food and weight.

Yes: he does talk about caffeine intake – it is OK in moderate amounts.

What will I change as a result of reading the book?

Go to the gym? No – I can't stand the so called music, but I do swim three times a week and folk dance once or twice.

I will take note of some of the advice on food to better what what I eat with what I need.

Maybe I ought to take a walk every lunchtime rather than listen to the news on Radio 4 – if nothing else it will be less depressing.

Verdict: you only have one body, this will help you take care of it.

Contributors

John Collins is a former UKUUG council member and runs Xi Software Ltd which specialises in System Management Tools for UNIX and Linux systems. Xi Software is based in Welwyn Garden City and has been in existence for nearly 27 years. In his not-very-copious spare time he has in recent years taken to playing Go.

Jon Diamond is a semi-retired IT consultant with 40 years experience, mainly working for Hoskyns and Cap Gemini. He specialises in technical consultancy, especially performance analysis and testing, and is also responsible for creating several complex web sites. He is also president of the British Go Association (<http://www.britgo.org/>).

Martin Houston has been using Unix since 1980 starting with a PDP11/70 and Linux since 1994. He was the founder of the original UKUUG Linux SIG and is currently a freelance Linux consultant. He lives in Essex with wife Teresa and 2 cats, 2 dogs and too many computers.

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 (Fibreoptic Industry Association) that she also runs from the Manor House office.

Paul Waring is chairman of UKUUG and a director of a wholesale insurance broker. Outside of work he can usually be found filing documentation bugs against various open source and free software projects.

Roger Whittaker works for SUSE supporting SUSE Linux Enterprise Server for major customers in the UK. He is also the UKUUG Newsletter Editor, and co-author of three successive versions of a SUSE book published by Wiley.

Alain Williams is a folk dancer who particularly likes contras, squares and Playford. In his spare time he runs a Linux consultancy doing freelance system administration, web applications and Open Source technology teaching.

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