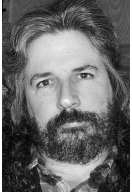


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/dev/random



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HAVING BEEN IMMERSSED IN COMPUTER-related jargon for most of my life, I tend to scoff at the notion that said vocabulary is anything other than perfectly logical and apropos. On those rare occasions when the planetary gears align and free radicals roam the wild prairie unfettered, however, objectivity sneaks in for a brief visit and I find myself reflecting on the mystical nature of the terminology adopted by our austere and august profession.

Since operating systems are on the plate for this issue, let's start there. The name UNIX itself is a famously wry cut at what must have seemed at the time the semimythical Multics, whose operational status the Creators grew weary of anticipating in futility. This saucy philosophical underpinning ensured that lexicographic mayhem was more or less inevitable. Take as evidence of this postulate the cascade of variants that followed as a result of AT&T having trademarked "UNIX": ULTRIX, XENIX, AIX, Dynix, AUX, POSIX, HP-UX, DG/UX, Linux, and, yes, USENIX. The fact that computer geeks tend to have active, if somewhat bizarre, senses of humor just adds an extra layer of rich, velvety goodness to the mix.

In this issue my peculiar phraseology focus is on the "log" bog. Somewhere along the tortuous path of multiuser computing evolution, it became de rigueur to refer to the action of connecting to a mainframe or server as "logging." That in itself is curious: Why "log"? I have to date three roughly equally unlikely hypotheses as to the origin of this term:

1. Watching the tape drives spin reminded them of the lumberjacks' sport of birling.
2. Users waiting for an available terminal looked like harvested lumber getting jammed together on a river.
3. The perniciously high error rate of their programs spawned a deep-seated urge to have at the CPU with an uprooted tree.

[Oh, and if you just happen to know "log"'s true origin, please keep it to yourself. However flawed, I prefer my etymological fantasies unsullied by prosaic factoids.]

We're not quite finished with log, however, for we have yet to consider the Great and Uniquely Topical to This Publication Preposition Proposition: to log "in" or "on"? I'm reminded

thereby of George Carlin's reply to being instructed to get on an airplane (paraphrased for your protection): "No, thanks. I'm getting in the plane."

So, which is it? Does one "log in" or "log on"? The answer seems to be platform-specific, at least according to Bob DuCharme's useful and unexpectedly entertaining *The Operating Systems Handbook*. One logs *on* to IBM mainframes, but logs *in* to UNIX or VMS. One can generally circumnavigate this prickly semantic conundrum altogether by *hacking in*, of course.

Disclaimer: I'm only kidding (as far as you know).

Moving along, I've always been fascinated in a "look-at-that-funky-insect-crawling-around-in-the-sink-I-hope-it-doesn't-sting" sort of way with kernel programming. I don't really understand it at any deep level, but I've never been proficient at resisting the urge to muck about under the hood. Most of the time my more creative attempts are stillborn, but once in a while the compiler is so traumatized by my complete lack of comprehension of C syntax that it gets confused and kicks out a viable kernel. Actually, "viable" is not nearly so accurate a term as "insane." Well, we all have our hobbies.

Another of my hobbies is writing new front ends in Perl for common system functions. I've rewired `rm`, for example, so that it merely moves the target file into an obscure directory. I've also added undocumented options that accomplish pointless tasks, such as list processes in numerical order by the hex representation of the letters in their names. There is no conceivable use for this listing scheme, admittedly, but paucity of utility is pretty much my hallmark where coding is concerned. My crowning achievement in this arena was `lsuf`, which listed all files in a given directory *not* in use by a process.

I once messed with `kill` so that it generated a little ASCII art animation of whatever was entered as arguments being run through with a spear by a tiny Viking warrior. In the same vein I've animated `mount`, `umount`, and `fsck`, the nature of which embellishments I leave to the reader's fertile imagination.

Perhaps my most ambitious foray into this twisted realm was when I decided to create an entire "artificial horizon" for one of my Internet-facing Sun boxes. I mangled every command line utility that could conceivably be of use to anyone gaining illicit access to the system for the sole purpose of driving said intruder crazy. I substituted characters when renaming, created spurious columns for `ps`, generated nonsense for `netstat`, and redirected `ls` to random commands such as `file /dev/*`. I made a text file of all the magical personages I could think of from literature and the cinema to be displayed when someone typed which; more triggered the response, "Don't be greedy!" but not much else. The command `perl` (regardless of the arguments) brought up a man page expounding the natural history of the oyster. Try to `grep` something and up popped a Freud-in-the-Box:

```
# grep nameserver /etc/resolv.conf
```

```
You seem to have unresolved nameserver issues. Tell me about your  
childhood.
```

In short, I rendered the system thoroughly useless to anyone not privy to the fact that I'm a nut case. Come to think of it, awareness of my mental status probably wouldn't be of any real benefit. Some things just can't be dealt with in a rational manner.

On a distantly related closing note, did I ever mention that my friends of the "dabbling in the supernatural on a boring Saturday night" persuasion

have declared me a psychic damper? Apparently my very presence in the general area is equivalent to the Blue Screen of Death for Ouija board sessions and seances. It's not that I'm some huge skeptic of ghosts, UFOs, and their ilk, surprisingly. In truth I take no stance, since in the absence of evidence an absolute belief in the existence or nonexistence of something is equally bogus. If a bona fide ghost floated up and shook my hand, I'd just shrug and cross ectoplasm off the list of things I've never seen.

Overall, I find natural phenomena more inconvenient than frightening. I got struck in a half-hearted way by lightning a few years ago, for example, but it just made me spill my beer. I was hoping super-powers might develop as a result, but all I really have to show for the experience, other than a slightly more robust liver, is a tiny hole-shaped scar on the heel of my right hand, where several palmar folds intersect, and a tendency to attract foam packing peanuts from a considerable distance. All hail Static Boy!