

book reviews

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THE UNOFFICIAL LEGO BUILDER'S GUIDE

Allan Bedford

No Starch Press, 2005, 1-59327-054-2, 319 pp.

The process of selecting books to review is, to put it politely, organic; it involves complex variables such as my level of interest in the topic, my level of knowledge about the topic, my estimation of readers' levels of interest, the other books in the stack, and whether or not I think a book is cool. Which is all by way of saying, no, Lego does not have much to do with advanced computing systems, but I think it's cool, and I'm betting a fair number of you do, too.

This book is cool. It's not rocket science, although there is a nice walk-through of how to design a space shuttle model. It would be a great Christmas gift for the person on your list with the big Lego collection and no very focused idea of what to do with it. You might be more reluctant to give it to anybody in your own household, as the storage suggestions may result in the reader developing entirely new ideas of the scale of a "big" Lego collection, and wanting closets-full. If you already have closets full of Lego, this book will give you the graph paper and the ideas to turn it into Lego cities, or whatever. It's suitable for older kids and young-at-heart adults. And you

can feel good about giving it to kids, because it teaches some nice mathematics about ratios, making it genuinely educational.

I learned some neat stuff (the thin Legos are exactly 1/3 the size of normal-height ones), and it's my 18-month-old's second-favorite of the books I've reviewed, because it led me to build things she likes out of her Duplo. (Her favorite is a hardback with a penguin on it. She likes the penguin and finds it an especially intriguing size, for some unknown baby reason.)

THE LINUX ENTERPRISE CLUSTER: BUILD A HIGHLY AVAILABLE CLUSTER WITH COMMODITY HARDWARE AND FREE SOFTWARE

Karl Kopper

No Starch Press, 2005, 1-59327-036-4, 430 pp.

Suppose you know not very much about Linux, and less about clusters, and somebody comes to you and says, "Hey, here's a pile of computers; build a cluster out of them, and, oh, by the way, we want to run business-critical software on it." If you sit down with this book and follow it through, at the end, I am convinced, you will have a reasonable solution to that problem. I don't know that it will be the best possible solution; this book walks through one particular set of tools, which undoubtedly won't be the best for every situation. I'm sure that serious Linux cluster aficionados will argue passionately about the author's choices. But there's no avoiding that problem if you want to explain the nuts and bolts of using a particular solution, which the author does very nicely.

The authors take an unusual but effective approach: they walk you through detailed recipes for setting up, not the production environment, but a test environment where you learn how all the parts work and how you can customize them for your purposes. This

makes a nice balance between detailed, hand-holding exposition and getting the concepts you need to be able to extend the recipes into your environment.

If you already know something about clusters and Linux (or general UNIX system administration), go straight to chapter 5, bypassing the very general discussion of what a cluster is and a lot of background on kernel builds, SSH installation, rsync, and the like.

WEB MAPPING ILLUSTRATED

Tyler Mitchell

O'Reilly, 2005, 0-596-00865-1, 349 pp.

Here's another one I think is cool. (Though it's about maps *on* the Web, not maps *of* the Web, which might have been even cooler.) I like maps, and this book made me want to run right out and add gratuitous maps to my Web site. Better yet, it made me think that the next time I'm on a project where the right thing is to put up an interactive map on a Web server, I will have an answer that doesn't involve all the Web programmers saying glumly, "Gee, that sounds really hard." (That's what happened the last two times, and I didn't get my interactive maps.) True, it wouldn't take 349 pages to explain it if it were really easy, but *Web Mapping Illustrated* tells you how to get and use open source tools to do powerful things with maps, with some basic information on getting and generating the data to go along with the tools. It's enough information to get people past the fear of the unknown.

One caution: it's meant for people who understand maps and want to put them on the Web. It gives some basic background for people who understand the Web but don't know much about maps, but it's probably only enough to make somebody like me able to make real mapmakers writhe in pain. If you want respectable maps, you're going to need either to be very

conservative or to get somebody who knows a lot about maps. This book will take you past the edge of your mapmaking competence and induce the map equivalent of the ransom-note typography that was so popular when word processors first let amateurs play around with fonts. But hey, it's fun to do, even if it's not always fun to watch.

**HP-UX 11I VERSION 2 SYSTEM
ADMINISTRATION: HP INTEGRITY
AND HP 9000 SERVERS**

Marty Poniatowski

Prentice Hall, 2005, 0-13-192759-0,
643 pp.

If you are an experienced administrator looking for information about HP-UX commands, particularly those specific to HP hard-

ware, you may find some information of interest here. However, the book does not go into enough depth for my taste (it talks about how to use HP's remote install process but not about its underpinnings) and doesn't have enough detail for an inexperienced administrator (it says the author usually modifies the default partition layouts, but doesn't talk about how or why). It is also security-naive; while the author does make some gestures toward security, suggesting that hosts.equiv and .rhosts be used cautiously, he doesn't warn administrators that 6 characters is not a reasonable current minimum password length, that scanning your own network is liable to annoy not just the network admin-

istrators but also the security people, that remote SNMP system management has security implications, or that giving nonprivileged users backup and restore privileges has security implications. On the whole, I can't recommend this book. In most situations, you'd be better off with a good, general system administration book and HP's documentation.