



Growing FreeBSD Contributors with the “Doc Lounge” Concept

by Warren Block / Many FreeBSD conferences and events have a “hacker lounge,” a large room where people can go to work together on projects. These are popular rooms with a large attendance at all hours of the day. To the uninitiated, they can be loud and intimidating.

The shy, modest, and attractive documentation group found it difficult to work on documentation in the hacker lounge, and so we considered having our own meeting at night in our own room. Dru Lavigne came up with the idea to take it a step further, suggesting that not only could it be held in a different room, but we could invite anyone interested in documentation to attend. If they wanted to learn how to fix an error, or how our doc toolchain works, or anything at all about FreeBSD documentation, we would work with them.

At first, I was skeptical. There is a good argument that the documentation crowd should be right in there with the source group. Docs are part of a program and should be considered as such, and not an afterthought. The noise in the hacker lounge can make it difficult to work in there, and even if only the doc group showed up at the doc lounge, we would still have plenty of things to work on.

But that did not happen. Even with very little publicizing, people showed up. They sat and waited patiently to talk to a doc devel-

oper or committer, then showed up again on following nights. The problem was that we just did not have enough people to work with everyone who was interested.

Over the last couple of years, the format has changed from just open discussion. Now, we have short presentations for the entire group once or twice a night. These change the group dynamic and provide some variety. We try to limit the presentations to 10 or 15 minutes each, then go back to small groups.

It is much more difficult to get started with something new than to make modifications. I call this the “curb effect,” and it works the same way in lots of areas. Beginners have a difficult time knowing what is required, what is optional, and determining the order of things to accomplish. This is why there is the standard “Hello World” example in programming. It demonstrates the bare minimum required, and leaves out other potentially distracting details. Mostly people just need a little help getting over that curb. It is immensely reassuring to have someone present to point out which things are important and help avoid the little pitfalls along the way.

Some demonstrations are no more involved than demonstrating how to check out the documentation, make a small change, create a patch, and submit it. This is simple stuff to a committer, but at least partly alien to most new users. Rather than being



*“Doc”
Hacker
Lounge*

bored, new people are fascinated. At BSDCan 2015, they pointed out a bug in the documented process. Fixing it and committing the change became part of that demonstration.

Potential translators are another group that show up at the doc lounge. These are highly skilled people who are able to work on technology in at least two languages. They show up because they are interested in translating FreeBSD documents and making them available to more people. In the past, we have not been able to easily accept the help they offered. The traditional translation system required too much time and work for casual contributors. Sometimes it is too much for dedicated existing translators, too. Our new PO translation toolchain makes translation much less work, and when people offer their skills at translating, we will now be able to get them started.

The doc lounge also attracts programmers, sysadmins, students, and other types who are not necessarily interested in documentation at all. Instead, they want to get a feeling for how the project works by seeing how the documentation portion works. Some are just curious about FreeBSD, but are put off by the size and noise of the hacker lounge. There is no easy way to join that crowd without an introduction, but the shy, modest, and attractive documentation group is less daunting.

The one problem is that we usually do not have enough FreeBSD developers and committers to work with all the interested people. It is understandable from both sides. After attending meetings or a conference all day, people are tired. It also takes a lot of time and patience to work with someone who is new to FreeBSD, and not everyone has the temperament or experience to do so. But the effort pays off as that personal introduction to FreeBSD leads to contributors who go on to become developers and committers.

We would like to have more FreeBSD developers and doc committers attend the doc lounge as that would allow us to publicize it, attract additional interested people, and afford the opportunity to work with all of them.

The doc lounges are held at BSDCan (<http://www.bsdcan.org>) and vBSDCon (<http://vbsdcon.com>). They could be held at other events also. We invite conference organizers to provide a room and conference attendees to attend or assist. •

WARREN BLOCK has been using FreeBSD since 1998, and has been a documentation committer since 2011.



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