



Dear Letters Column Person,

I keep hearing about FreeBSD sysadmins doing fun things at work, but here I am just running servers and getting a paycheck, day in and day out. How do I make things exciting?

Bored Stupid

Mr. Stupid,

No, that's making a bad assumption. You could very well be Missus Stupid, or Miss Stupid. My apologies.

You stop being bored by setting sail on the Sea of Ignorance.

The world is full of exciting stuff, like rockets and panthers and mold and that woman on the street corner who you think is a wacked-out street preacher with a brain fried by a cornucopia of illicit substances but is actually smarter than both of us combined and is deliberately bawling out the secrets of the cosmos in a manner that nobody will believe because it makes her giggle.

It's no good to say, "I want to learn how to put FreeBSD on a Raspberry Pi," because that's not hard. You'll struggle with it for a few hours. You'll swear. You'll curse everyone even tangentially involved in the process. Then it'll be done, and you'll realize that it's boring.

The problem is, you lack ambition. You stepped into a puny little puddle of ignorance, something solvable in an afternoon. A puddle isn't big enough. You need to set yourself adrift in your own ignorance, floating on a makeshift raft of your own knowledge, and desperately scabble facts out of the ocean to shore up your raft until you can muddle your way to a destination you can only vaguely see. Did the Vikings say, "Hey, we're gonna discover America 500 years before that dolt Columbus!" before hopping in their leaky oversized canoes? No! They grabbed their delusions of grandeur and set sail for the edge of the world, gleefully ignorant of the fact that it had already been discovered by the millions of people already living there, all with the vague hope that a millennium later they'd appear on the cover of *Time Magazine*.

See, magazines were sheets of paper folded and stapled together, with web pages printed on them.

Sigh. Paper is trees, ground up real fine and—look, this is what Wikipedia's for; check it out on your own time. Before the day's out I've

got to get this column done and get with my attorney about that third lawsuit from the Avocado Liberation Front.

The point is, computers aren't the thing to do.

Computers are tools that let you do things.

This is why I don't own a 3D printer. They're nifty tools, but only tools. I don't have a goal that demands I own and master that tool. When I finish designing my "128 Most Loathed People in Computing" action figures, I'm better off hiring someone else to print them. (I'm still trying to trim the list down to 256, let alone 128, so it'll be a while yet. And don't worry, you're still on the list.)

If you're just feeding the operating systems and cleaning their cages and waiting for the vet to show up and replace those shoddy hard drives, you're not a geek.

You're a stable hand.

Stable hands are always bored.

Stable hands can make a good living. Most people's dignity won't allow them to shovel server droppings all day. If that's all you're doing, of course you're bored.

Set yourself a goal that you have no idea how to reach. Chances are that'll involve a computer. Sure, put FreeBSD on a Raspberry Pi, fine, but then wire it into your car to control a laser so you can persuade that chronic tailgater that he really wants to pull over and protect his remaining eye. Or you could do something legal, like assemble your own home automation system. Whatever.

Throw yourself onto the Sea of Ignorance with only a vague idea of how to cross it. You'll sieve out all sorts of facts on the way and have the joy of assembling them into skills, into results, into things. You might fail—you probably will fail—most people fail at most things—but keep trying. Even when—er, if, I meant if—you fail, you'll discover things on the way. Not all of them will be related to FreeBSD, sure, but you'll accumulate sysadmin skills along the way. FreeBSD has all sorts of features that support such endeavors.

And you won't be bored.

None of this is related to your job, of course. Because if your job was exciting, they wouldn't have to pay you so much to do it. Learning all these skills will get you a better job, though. A differently boring job.

All I know is, I didn't get the job of answering your letter by being bored. No! As a callow youth, I ate my way through 300 boxes of Captain Crunch cereal questing for a whistle so I could earn a visit from the FBI. I first installed FreeBSD because I wanted to have a truly private email server, which illustrates just how much ignorance I still had left to cross.

I sincerely look forward to watching you splash around in your efforts to accomplish something meaningful with your life.

Dear Letters Column Person,

No, I mean, I have everything running perfectly and so I only need to do real work about two hours a day. And the boss won't let me play MMO games in the downtime.

Not Stupid, Just Bored

Dear Boring,

So sorry, my mistake. Obviously, that's what you meant.

Put your laptop in text console mode. Run `tcpdump` on one virtual terminal. Play Nethack in the other. When the boss comes up, flip to the other terminal and keep staring like you're interpreting packets in real time. When queried, keep staring blankly and inform him you're watching for possible IPsec-over-DNSSEC terabit Ethernet HTML 5 truncation flux.

You're clearly right where you need to be. ●

Michael W Lucas is the author of *Absolute FreeBSD*, *FreeBSD Mastery: Jails*, and a bunch of other books. He's still seeking something useful to do with his life. Send your questions to letters@freebsdjournal.com if you're bored stupid.

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