# Building FreeBSD Communities

This is some advice for running different types of community events ranging from small informal meetings to single-track conferences.

BY TOM JONES

FreeBSD is an open source community, and when there is a feature missing, we have the power to add it ourselves. That power isn't limited just to software, we can use it for social events too.

I have been involved in running technology-based meetings and groups for about 13 years. This began in University, when I helped start the student computer science society, and since then, I have run monthly meet ups, a hackerspace with weekly meetings, a tiny festival that was accidentally on Hackaday, and a Friendly Wee Tech Conference in the North East of Scotland.

FreeBSD encompasses all sorts of events. We have user group meetings (the famous NYCBug is a great example), there are semi-frequent hackathons and bugsquashes hosted by the community and user groups, and we have several conferences a year. Conferences range from the BSD DevRoom sub event at FOSDEM to three large BSD-focused events (BSDCan, EuroBSDCon, AsiaBSDCon) and some purely technology-driven events like the OpenZFS developer summit and the BSDCam unconference. All sizes of event are open for you to run, but smaller events that can be put on by one or two people are a good (and realistic) place to start.
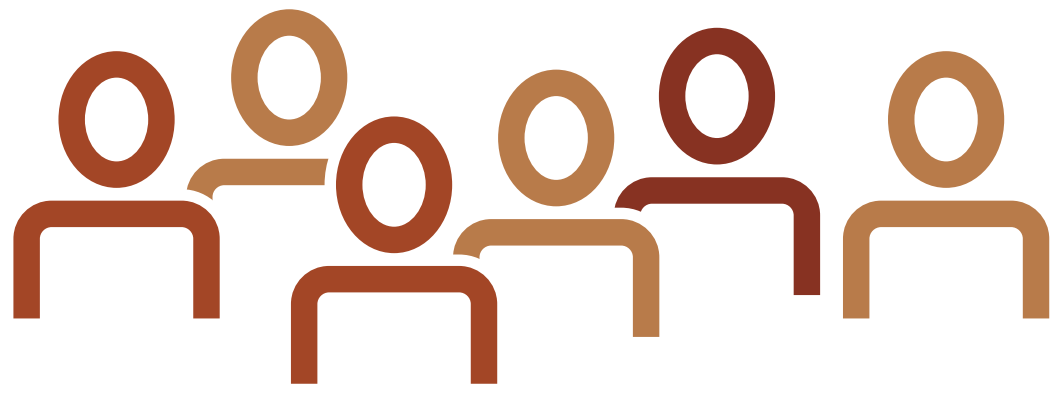
If you have never run anything before, there is nothing to fear. I continue to be surprised at how friendly people are everywhere--even the scariest hackerspace in a secret complex in Berlin was full of really friendly people who just wanted to nerd out with like-minded people.

## Informal Meetings

On the way into the pandemic, I had one really good idea. I am part of a local group of hackers that meets through a hackerspace plus a few times a year at conferences and festivals, I forced us to meet twice a week. First over Mumble, then Jitsi, and finally through a work adventure based Jitsi chat thing that allowed us to have multiple conversations focused in a single setting. Meeting frequently gave all of us a way to keep speaking to our friends, and many of us became a lot closer in the pandemic than we were before.

These informal meetings were a great way to keep everyone in touch and created a focal point beyond just chatting on IRC. Informal meetings are a great way to judge interest in an area for a FreeBSD user group. They give you focused time where you can meet with interested people--you get to know each other and plan things out. Informal meetings can have other activities bolted on to them too. For many years, the TechMeetUp group I helped organize was a pizza eating session, followed by a talk, and then a trip to the pub.

Regular, informal meetings work best when you get a core group of people to commit to attending. You can use that core group as a kernel to build out from, making the event public and advertising it as much as you can (or want). Without a core set of people, you might find you have very few attendees and things can be awkward. After running events for a number of years, I have come up with a rule that the first meeting will be exciting and new, the second meeting will be much smaller, and the third meeting will start to have people that regularly go to things.

The logic behind this is that it is easy to get attention for a new meeting, but the people who go to exciting new things don't tend to go to regular meetings. The second meeting sees a downturn because those people who were excited, have found something else to be excited by. The second meeting is normally smaller, anyone who heard about your first great meeting has probably planned to come to your second meeting, but then life has gotten in the way, or they just plain forgot. By the third meeting, you start to build a weight of common knowledge and the people who forgot or missed will remember and show up.

This means that if you want to go down the path of organizing regular meetings, then you have to take heart and steel yourself for disappointment, as it is very likely that it will take several meetings for attendance to grow and for the event to find its feet. It just takes time for word of mouth to spread.

In 2022, you will likely start informal meetings with just a regularly scheduled video call. For a call as a meeting, all you need is somewhere to meet and then get people to show up. I wouldn't plan any regular, in-person meetings in 2022 without a fallback plan for when things change.

In-person venues need to allow for people to speak and therefore work best if they are in public places. You are more likely to go and meet strangers if you don't have to go to some hidden room in the basement of a university building. Bars are popular for meetings like this, but I tend to discourage that choice, as it can exclude anyone not comfortable meeting strangers in bars. If a public university space isn't available to you, coffee shops are often a good alternative. Make sure to plan your meeting around the venue's activity schedule. There is nothing worse than getting everyone together to talk about kernel hacking and then something else begins.

Wherever you meet should have power, a source for refreshments and should be easy to get to.

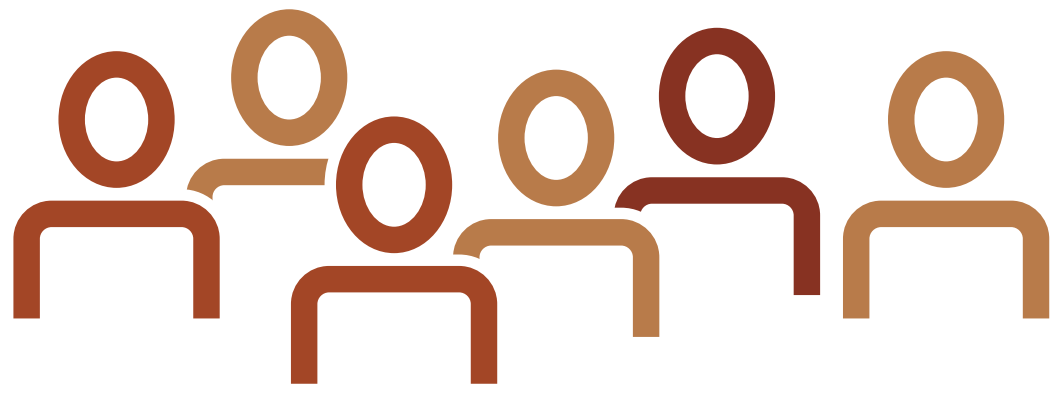## Hackathons/Bugsquashes/Installfests and other Activities Days

In parallel with or as an alternative to regular meetings is the opportunity to run day-long, focused activities. I am very partial to Hackathons and development activities, but you might get the same sort of pleasure from helping others install FreeBSD or build test labs.

Day-long events can be an ego gamble. It is very upsetting to put a lot of energy into planning a hackathon and then only have one or two other people show up (ask me how I know :D).

Day long events benefit greatly from a format (how are you going to approach what you do?) and a theme (what is the core focus of what you are doing?). You can get by with one of these, but I think strongly focused events work a lot better.

This means that rather than having a hackathon, you host a 'Network Hackathon' or an 'Embedded Device' hackathon, which makes the "what you are going to do" and "how you are going to do it" clear. Installfests are a clear idea, but maybe, instead, you want to host a 'build a FreeBSD Cluster Saturday.' I have run un-themed events, and they always require a lot of explanation of the 'what will we do' type.

Virtual events of this form are straightforward to run, you need to pick a time zone and time period that allows the core people you want to turn up to be able to turn up. I have found it works well to get three or four other people to commit to a slot and then others to join if they can. In addition to a time, you need a meeting technology, which can be a video call, a voice chat, or you all can just get together in IRC.

In-person, day-long events require some planning and infrastructure. You have to cater to the needs of people for the duration of the event, so—given the computer enthusiasts that BSD folk generally are—you need a place that has power and Internet as a minimum. You need available rest room facilities, heat in the winter and cooling in the summer or a park—BSD park meets should be a thing!

You don't have to arrange food or refreshments, but you should arrange for a location that makes it possible to get refreshments or give people fair warning that they will have to look after their own basic needs. There was an OpenBSD, multi-day hackathon in a mountain cabin —a several hour hike from any food, but I think the participants were warned before they showed up.

Day-long hackathons and Installfest events can be very successful. You can track how some of them have gone in the past by looking at the 'Event' tag in the FreeBSD commit log. However, if you are the organizer, then you might spend more time managing things and looking after people than you expect--don't plan to get too much done!

## Small Conference

The next step after running some single-day, activity-based events is running conferences. I don't think anyone who has run a conference would recommend that you run a conference (myself included). I also know that if you really want to run a conference, then you won't heed this advice.

Conferences are difficult to run because there are a lot more human-based, moving parts. The considerations for single-day activity events are still there, you need power, internet, food, water, and oxygen enough for everyone, but you also have to schedule and manage a lot of people.
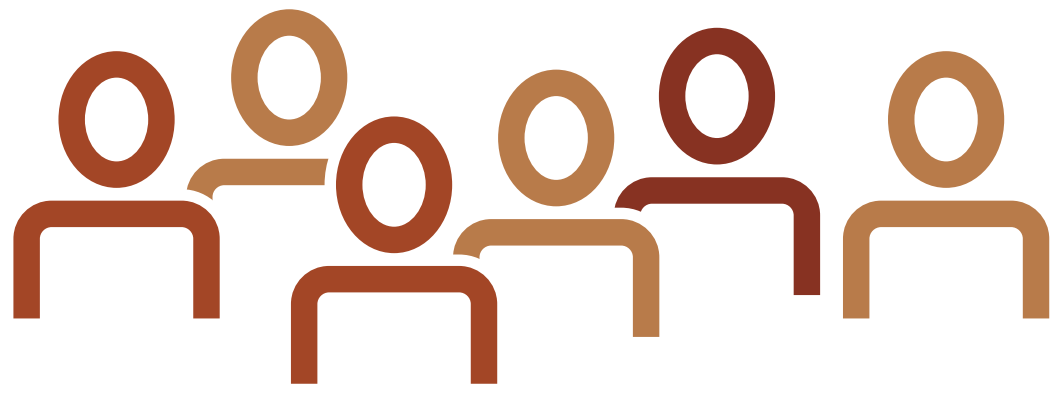
The difference is that in a single-day activity, your entertainment is the activity, the network stack can't not show up. When you are running a conference with speakers, there is always the worry that speakers won't show up, that it will run too short or far too long, or at the absolute worst, you'll have speakers and no audience.

You have to manage the venue, speakers, attendees, volunteers and the bits and bytes on the network.

Conferences require a lot of planning and involvement before the event. A conference has a day-long schedule to fill with talks and sessions. These need to come from the community you have built up (which is why it is good to run regular events). You need to solicit presentations and sessions generally, which is normally done with a Call for Papers or CFP. The secret thing you don't see as an attendee is that organizers will also have to solicit talks directly from potential speakers that you know will do a good job.

Conferences need a theme. The major BSD and open source conferences typically have the theme of 'BSD' or 'Open Source.' These are general themes, and while they might have a big audience on a global scale, they probably don't on a local scale. While you might want to run the 'Weimar FreeBSD tmpfs Storage Appliance' conference, you limit who will attend with the level of specificity. There are already a few large BSD conferences in the year, but there is still plenty of room for smaller, single-day events focused on a topic or a geographic region.

I have found that general topics are good, and then you can gently (or not so) encourage your local BSD friends to submit. The Friendly Wee Tech Conference I run has the theme 'Tools and Infrastructure.' We managed to have a talk about building Ham radio infrastructure using HamBSD next to other great talks about interesting tooling, the security of numberplate readers and hosting stuff on NixOS.

Conferences are hard work but very gratifying. If you decided to start a conference, there is a lot of help and advice available from the community. I found Li-Wen Hsu's talk "How to Bootstrap a BSD Conference" very helpful when I was contemplating running one myself.

The community will be able to give you advice on pitfalls to avoid, who to pester for talks, and the time of the year to slot your event into the calendar.

## Filling the Gap Between Events

It is good to have a place to bring together like minded people during events, but also between them. Informal community spaces give you somewhere to meet to discuss and plan your next event.

The FreeBSD project already has many of these communities. There are informal community spaces formed around mailing lists, IRC networks and the excellent FreeBSD Discord (you can join with this invite link https://discord.gg/freebsd). These are FreeBSD communities that focus on sub parts of the project. For regional or national activities, you can create similar spaces by forming regional FreeBSD or just BSD groups and meeting in whatever form you can get the most traction.

I love IRC, but there are many that have bad memories from the past or find it too obtuse to use. If you already speak to friends on Telegram or Discord, then you can start forming and planning your meetups using those tools. The way you meet really doesn't matter, only that you meet and organize and create a sense of community.

## I Want to Come to Your Event

There are more possibilities for events than I can cover here. They are all very rewarding to run, even if in the buildup they are stressful, and you find yourself worrying for other people and hoping that their talks will be a success.

The building blocks of successful events and communities are consistency and good planning. Nothing appears in the world fully formed though, and if you can find some friends—new or old--to run events with, then you will have a much more enjoyable time (and it will probably be more successful). Even when events have flopped for me, I have still had a good time hanging out with friends and laughing about how our grand plans of success failed. After successful events, I have had the best conversations of my life, where people recount stories from the day from something that I helped pull together. Even with the stress of someone asking you 'when is the next one?' it is an amazing feeling and makes running events worthwhile.

I want to see user groups and meetings in every country, and the only way to do that is to get more people organizing things.

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**TOM JONES** is a FreeBSD hacker from the North East of Scotland and has been involved in community groups and running events for more years than he wants to admit.