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Penguicon Report

A little bit sci-fi, a little bit open source, but a whole lot of fun for the geek crowd. Of course, I'm talking about Penguicon, the annual science fiction and open source convention in Troy, Michigan. Penguicon is where geeks gather to talk open source, gaming, authorship, and fandom and maybe get a little uninhibited as the evening wears on.

By Joe "Zonker" Brockmeier

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This year I had the pleasure of being invited to Penguicon as a Guest of Honor (GoH), alongside sci-fi author Karl Schroeder, cartoonist Howard Tayler, and fellow open source author Marcel Gagné. Being a guest of honor is sort of like having the keys to a city, except there's no key, no city, but plenty to drink. In all seriousness, the Penguicon staff take really good care of the GoHs and Nifties (other invited speakers) who come to Penguicon to speak and hang out with the attendees. Penguicon also draws some notable guests not on the program, such as Eric Raymond and sci-fi author John Scalzi.

The Penguicon schedule is a little unusual compared with shows like Ohio LinuxFest and SCaLE. The festivities start Friday afternoon and open officially at 7pm. Scheduled content goes well into the wee hours, with lots of talks and sessions, room parties, and events. The talks are less main attraction and more icing on the cake at Penguicon. Like a lot of shows, Penguicon has its core audience that attends year after year, and it's as much a social event as an opportunity to learn about open source.

Although open source shares top billing with sci-fi, it's not the primary focus. Only about a fifth of the talks scheduled were on open source. I gave a talk on Vim Saturday and sat on a panel with Gagné, Shawn Powers, and Kyle Rankin to discuss writing about open source. Penguicon also featured talks on open source gaming, OpenBSD, and an Ubuntu Q&A with Ubuntu's Jorge Castro. Sunday, Geek.net developer Mark Ramm talked about how the company redesigned the SourceForge website and handled scalability problems with TurboGears, Python, and MongoDB.

Along with the techie talks were sessions on running a creative business, discussions of writing techniques and character development, and lots of gaming and socializing. A separate room set aside for gamers was usually full (or nearly so) with geeks getting a dose of their favorite card and board games. The organizers also provided sessions in which GoHs made ice cream with liquid nitrogen. All in all, programming chair Trevor Jagoda saw to it that every hour of programming was packed full of options for geeks of all stripes. Attendees certainly got their money's worth, which wasn't hard, because the maximum ticket price for three days was $50 at the door – and much cheaper in advance.

Fun is the operative word at Penguicon. People go to unwind and be as geeky as they want to be. It should be mentioned that Penguicon is really not appropriate for kids. Some of the sessions focus on adult content, and the atmosphere can best be described as bawdy. It's all in good fun, but it's not your standard business-oriented crowd.

Overall, the event drew more than 1,300 people, although con chair Randy Bradakis didn't have an exact number for me at the end of the conference. The Marriott was new for Penguicon this year, because the event had outgrown its old facility. Jer Lance, who headed up facilities, did a great job of coordinating the rooms and keeping things running.

Should you be at Penguicon next year? If you're looking for a full-blown LinuxFest or developer's conference, Penguicon is not the con you're looking for. But if you want to get together with a friendly group of sci-fi and open source enthusiasts and talk shop, drink a few beers, and do a bit of gaming, then Penguicon might be right up your alley.

Every year, Penguicon features interesting guests from the tech world and sci-fi beat, and you'll not lack for things to do from one morning to the next. Although only my second Penguicon, it definitely won't be my last. ∎∎∎