BOOK REVIEWS
BY JAMES PYLES

Wicked Cool PHP: Real-World Scripts That Solve Difficult Problems

Wouldn't it be nice to read a programming book that assumes you already know the basics and are now ready for the next step? Say no more: Steinmetz and Ward wrote it, at least for PHP.

The idea is that once you learn PHP, which isn't incredibly difficult, you'll want to tap into the potential of this language without having to bang your head against a wall for six months trying to figure out the best way to do things on your own.

The first sentence of Chapter 1 says, "The scripts contained in this chapter answer several questions that clog PHP forums and discussion groups all over the world." This book lifts those questions out of the dank recesses of discussion forum databases and answers them.
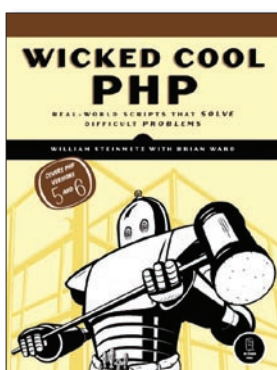
This book is the next step after a beginner's book, when you want more experience with PHP. Chapter 2 addresses basic PHP configuration tasks, and subsequent chapters present more specific material, such as security, forms, email, session tracking, and so on.

Each chapter provides scripts that accomplish specific goals. I recommend that you at least read the first two chapters, then browse the table of contents or index for the specific topics that interest you.

The scripts focus on the most common things you learned PHP for in the first place, such as specific server-side tasks. As a language, PHP has its particular strengths and weaknesses. The Steinmetz and Ward book excels at presenting scripts that highlight the strengths and help you avoid the weaknesses.

If you're interested in PHP, then get a copy of *Wicked Cool PHP*.

William Steinmetz and Brian Ward
Paperback, 224 Pages
No Starch Press; 2008
ISBN-10: 1593271735
ISBN-13: 978-1593271732
UK£ 18.99, US$ 29.95, EUR 35,99

Building a Server with FreeBSD 7

If you plan to start at the hardware level of server building, this book isn't for you. Although the hardware requirements are noted in each section, no chapters talk about how to select a motherboard or how many processors to install. Either purchase an off-the-shelf server computer that fits the requirements or already know how to build one yourself before proceeding with this text.

This book is instructional, constructed in a step-by-step approach. The book doesn't really have chapters so much as "teaching modules," and each module presents an isolated and self-contained task. Modules are organized in specific sections, such as Summary, Resources, Required (hardware and software requirements), Preparation, and so on.
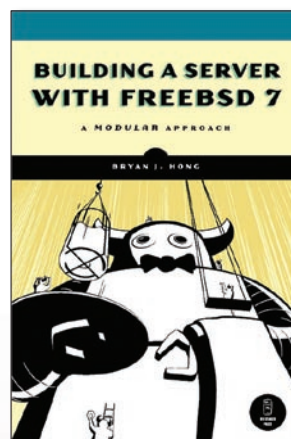
Hong deftly helps readers navigate through the more than 15,000 applications offered through the FreeBSD ports tree. Although the ports tree does make it easier to configure applications, it's still not for the faint of heart.

This book was written as your guide through such uncharted (or at least, previously not as well charted) territory, allowing you to accomplish with relative ease what might have seemed like a daunting project previously.

The book is also an easy read, is technically accurate, and presents just the information you need to get each job done.

Hong organized his book in just two parts – "The Base System" and "Third-Party Applications" – but each part contains the relevant modules. The first part is brief because the base system is just the common foundation required to build any BSD system. Part 2 is where the book really takes off.

At this point, you can either select the module or modules that interest you, or you can read each and every one. The latter option is compelling because it illustrates to the reader just what is possible to build with the instructions at hand.

The caveat is that you really need to have sys admin experience, particularly with UNIX-like operating systems. A talented student would suffice, but although the book does present some elementary concepts, it doesn't take you from being a novice to being an expert. If building your own system using FreeBSD 7 meets any of your goals, then check out this book.

Bryan J. Hong
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Refactoring HTML: Improving the Design of Existing Web Applications

Most websites on the Internet aren't kept completely (or at all, in some cases) current, both in terms of content and technology. What is refactoring?

In Chapter 1, the author explains, "… refactoring is the gradual improvement of a code base by making small changes that don't modify a program's behavior, usually with the help of some kind of automated tool."

That explanation goes a long way to providing an answer as to whether or not this book is for you.

Harold's background in programming is easy to see in both his choice of subject and his approach. Chapter 1 sets the stage by, first, providing a list with the tell-tale "smells" that indicate code needing to be refactored, then, setting the stage for when and what to refactor. Although refactoring your XHTML (which for most websites is probably plain vanilla HTML) and CSS seems a no-brainer, refactoring REST (Representational State Transfer) might be a head-scratcher. REST is the "architecture of HTTP," according to Harold, so it deserves at least an honorable mention.

Chapter 2 moves into the tools required for the job. The book then advances into the realms of "well-formedness," "validity," "layout," and so on – the building blocks of site design and development.
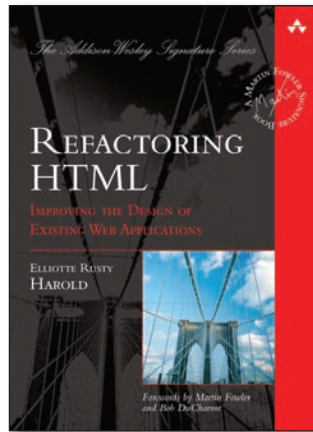
Anyone responsible for web site management and maintenance could find this book useful.

Minimally, you should know HTML, CSS, and probably JavaScript as it relates to creating and supporting websites on the Internet.

Is *Refactoring HTML* the book for you? It's useful if you are a serious web developer, but if you are just noodling around with the family web page, it might be more than you need.

Worry about refactoring your website only if whoever or whatever you are representing on the web needs to keep its freshest (technological) face forward.

You can visit the author's site at *http://www.cafeconleche.org/* and see how he puts his ideas, expertise, and advice into action.

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