Yellow Porcupine

Doug Clapp. *The NeXT Bible: Hardware and Software Systems for the NeXT Computer.* Brady, New York, 1990. Paperback, xix, 684 pp.

The word "Bible" in the title of computer books has come to mean that the book provides details and insights that one needs once one gets past introductory material on the topic. *The NeXT Bible* does not: it is written for people new to NeXT and/or to Unix.® It is also written *by* a person new to NeXT (but an experienced Mac GUI user) and to Unix.

When I scanned through *The NeXT Bible* at the book store, I was impressed with its easy-going presentation style and simple language. It did not seem like it presented any information that could not be found in NeXT online documentation, but I like seeing alternative presentations of material. I spotted one error, which I assumed typographical, in the appendix that lists Unix commands, but such errors are inevitable in the first edition of any book. I bought it, went home, marked the error with a Post-it™ note, and started reading.

I needed another Post-it on page 12. Then on page 23. Then two on page 24, one each on page 26, 27, 30, 32, 34… This is when I decided to contribute to the preservation of the world's forests by cutting the Post-it notes into strips. I still went through two pads. My book looks like a yellow porcupine.

There are all kinds of errors in the book, and very few of them are of the "harmless typo" variety. There are typos in examples that change their meaning (such as using grave apostrophes instead of apostrophes) and make them not work. There are statements that are just plain false (e.g., "UNIX doesn't allow file names containing spaces." p. 24). There is a whole slew of errors stemming from the habit of the author to do all his work from the root account and use "`/`" as the home directory (two terrible things to do in themselves). There are very questionable statements ("The Mach kernel is object-oriented" because "the idea of 'message passing' is at the lowest level of Mach." p. 20). There is terrible advice (log in as root and the computer is all under your control; create new commands in `/bin`, p. 55), and very questionable advice (if you are just starting to learn to program, "learn assembly language first." p. 250).

There is much confusion typical with Unix beginners that the author propagates to the reader. Examples are the instruction to use "Control-c or *Control-z* (emphasis mine unless otherwise noted—JVG)" to stop a running program and return to the shell's prompt (p. 48); the confusion between daemons and their clients (`lpd` vs. `lpr`, p. 57), file name "paths" vs. search "paths" (p. 27).

In addition, Mr. Clapp relays a set of misconceptions that are due to his inexperience with multi-user systems of any kind (`wall` "sends a message to all users *on the network*." p. 523; `who` is "a version of the whoami command." p. 523). The confusion between `who` and `whoami` is symptomatic of another type of mistakes in the book: trying a command, the author gets output that is coincidentally similar to that of another command, and jumps to the conclusion that the two commands are basically the same (`pwd` vs. `dirs`, p. 49).

Though the coverage of Unix is bad enough, it is surpassed in profusion of confusion by just about anything that has to do with networking, and especially Chapter 12, "A Networking Primer." If you have read it, and it served as your introduction to networking on a NeXT, to TCP/IP, to UUCP, to the Internet—*go to a hypnotist immediately and have all that nonsense erased from your mind!* If, on the other hand, you already know all this stuff, you may want to read Chapter 12: it is very entertaining.

Other sections of the book have a much lower frequency of errors, but they are not perfect either. Another frequent problem with those sections is redundancy between narration and illustrations.

The following table provides a rough idea of the distribution of the errors in the book. I intended to make it more specific by classifying the types of mistakes, but this edition of the book is just not worth that much trouble.

Chapter	**Pages**	**Post-its**
Section I: Software		
1. In the Beginning: UNIX	4	0
2. The Design of UNIX	10	2
3. Mach	6	2
4. Files and Directories	24	9
5. Hands-on UNIX	14	8
6. NextStep Fundamentals	45	0
7. The Workspace Manager	28	1
Section II: Hardware		
8. The NeXT Display, Keyboard, and Mouse	12	1
9. Inside the Cube	22	1
10. Disks and Drives	11	0
11. The NeXT Laser Printer	11	6
Intermission: Images	11	

Section III: Networking and Communications		
12. A Networking Primer	30	16*
Section IV: Programming the Cube		
13. Programming the NeXT Computer	10	5
14. The Window Server and Display Postscript	8	2
15. Interface Builder	16	0
16. The NeXT Application Kit, Part I: Non-Responsive Classes	18	2
17. —, Part II: Responder and Its Subclasses	16	4
18. Sound and Music	13	0†
Section IV: A Software Treasure Chest		
19. WriteNow	4	0
20. Edit	15	0
21. Mail	8	0
22. Mathematica	20	1†
23. Digital Webster	6	0
24. Quotations	1	0
25. Digital Librarian	10	2
26. Terminal and Shell	6	2
27. And More…	13	1
Section VI: The Present and Future		
28. Coming Soon…Maybe	11	‡
29. Interview: Brad Cox	12	
Appendices		
A. Command-Key Combinations	2	0
B. Keyboard Key Codes	1	†
C. [Shell] Special Characters	4	0
D. NeXT/UNIX Files and Utilities	77	25
E. Files in the NeXT 1.0 Software Release	109	
F. Third-Party Products	18	•
G. Further Reading	12	
H. NeXT Hardware Specifications	5	1

* plus many, many very, very wrong conclusions drawn from these errors

† not thoroughly reviewed due to the reviewer's ignorance of the topic

‡ no sense debugging 1-year-old speculations

• outdated, too volatile to be included in a book

Note Appendix E. One hundred and eight pages of output from "`find / -print | sort`." One hundred and eight pages! This from a guy who advises people to turn off their NeXTs after every use, to save resources. There is no excuse for this. There are other places where Mr. Clapp seems to go for the bulk: he includes whole system files, where a small portion could have served as a perfectly fine example. And this information *is* on-line, after all.

This edition of this book is not suitable for people new to Unix or to the NeXT. Its only possible use is to test experts: every sentence, every example, every claim is a true/false question. The majority is true, but too many are false.

This edition should have never been published. If this was software, it would not have made it out of alpha test. I have never heard of a book being recalled, but this one really should be. My copy can be returned with many useful Post-it stickers.

I hope Mr. Clapp does fix all the mistakes and produces a second edition. It could be such a delightful book.

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