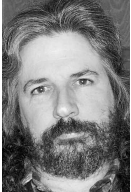ROBERT G. FERRELL

/dev/random

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The author's podcast of this article can be heard at http://www.antithetical.org/restlesswind/plinth/Podcasts/login_0407.mp3.

FEW DENIZENS OF THE COMPUTING wilderness have been more revered, reviled, rebutted, and reconciled than the wily system administrator. From Simon Paul Travaglia's legendary *Bastard Operator from Hell* to my own hapless Jake in *Chasing the Wind*, this species has gotten more attention than perhaps any other single deity in the digital pantheon. Apart from their tendency to be autocratic and possess an overriding obsession with config file tinkering, however, what do we really know about these often elusive creatures?

I happen to have been a student of sysadminology for, lo, these past two and a half decades, and as a result have a number of pointed observations to share on the subject. Most of my observations are pointed, come to think of it. I think it's because the pointed ones have better penetration.

The first of these pithy and poignant postulates concerns the lair of the beast. If you're wondering whether there is a WORKSPACE, SYSTEM ADMINISTRATOR'S, STANDARD, ONE EACH, the answer is, "negative, soldier." Sub-basements to penthouses, from dark 'n' dank to lofty 'n' looming, the habitat of the sysadmin is as variable as the campaign rhetoric of a congressional incumbent. There was a time when the unifying element of virtually all lairs was that they were chilly, owing to thermal requirements of the server rooms where sysadmins usually lurked, but even that has largely fallen by the wayside for modern practitioners of the art as more efficient heat dissipation systems and cooler-running components have evolved.

Whether considered as oubliette or *haute couture*, the digs of the sysadmin have certain commonalities, perhaps the most ubiquitous of which are spare parts. Scarcely exists there a system administrator's lair (slair) that has not within easily observable radius a plethora of software boxes, cables, trays, drives, stripped wires, adapters, backplanes, and a host of less readily identifiable fiddly bits. The very essence of the system administration experience can be reduced to the simple phrase "make it work." An intrinsic byproduct of the pursuit of that noble goal is the amassing of a sizeable collection of electronic gewgaws, which then tend to pile up on every available horizontal surface as the eons crawl inexorably by.

Another class of paraphernalia one often encounters whilst strolling through the slair habitat is that of the fecund reference publication. Ordinarily at least two full shelves will be devoted to this esoteric collection of apparently self-replicating printed material, despite the fact that the vast majority of it will be available on and consulted, when consulted at all, via electronic media. This is because sysadmins never throw anything away. The largest regiment of this cellulose battalion will consist of badly translated installation and troubleshooting guides that are of limited use in any capacity except perhaps as exhibits in a study of the relationship between linguistics and major military actions. The seasoned sysadmin will have survived a number of instances of encountering, when alacrity was of the essence and lucidity of instruction therefore an absolute necessity, admonitions such as, "Plugging board into slot not recognized, do not create difficulty when pushing down with top insertion." One common battle scar of the grizzled veteran of multiple system administration campaigns is a chronic scalp abrasion resulting from too much time spent head-scratching over this sort of literary surrealism.

System administrators have suffered under the onus of being perceived as oppressive information technology resource hegemonists for as long as multiuser computing environments have existed. To a certain degree this reputation is justified, inasmuch as the enforcement of chafing restrictions such as access control and disk quotas falls squarely on the sysadmin's shoulders and he or she must therefore play the "heavy" on occasion. However, the popular notion that sysadmins enjoy, relish, covet, or revel in this disciplinarian role is unfair and wholly in error. The system administrator is a humble servant of the users, dedicated to providing them with the best possible computing experience at all times. To suggest otherwise is a great way to get your privilege level reduced to "invertebrate."

Love them or loathe them, were it not for the perseverance of these dedicated professionals the topology of business and academic computing as we've known it simply could not exist. In light of this basic truth, I thought perhaps a few tips regarding the care and feeding of the person upon whom your computational happiness depends might be in order.

Never, ever give a sysadmin gooey confections in the workplace. Tech folks tend to have sweet teeth and often won't be able to resist tearing into the box of melt-instantly-in-your-hand chocolate-covered cherries right then and there. The havoc this can wreak with keyboards, network equipment, user account request forms, and general datacenter surfaces is simply not worth it. Similar caveats apply to crumb-generating snacks, any plant materials that could be rolled into a cylinder and smoked, or liquor. In fact, it's safest not to bestow upon your friendly neighborhood sysadmin any substance the immediate consumption of which might contribute to systems outages. Unfortunately, that narrows the prospective consumable gift list pretty much to carrot sticks and turkey jerky, the presentation of either of which may tend, once again, adversely to affect your user privileges (see "invertebrate," above).

The sysadmin does not, as a rule, thrive in strong sunlight. A dimly lit cubbyhole punctuated by blinking LEDs is the natural environment of the species, and any misguided attempt by management to "brighten up the place" will only send the resident scurrying away into the shadows, there to plot horrific vengeance. Similar failures will accompany initiatives centering on improving the decor by taking down the graphic novel posters, MMORPG screen shots, and obscure indie music CD covers scattered hither and yon throughout the slair. The feral sysadmin is a territorial creature that doesn't react well to intruders upon its domain. Any forced alterations to the ecosystem are likely to be met with considerable eye-rolling, if not downright aggression.

It has been suggested, albeit not by credible authorities, that the sysadmin is related to the wolverine. They both snarl rather viciously and tend to dig up the garden at night. I may be confusing wolverines with weimaraners, though.