

Security Hackathon in Vienna

A hackathon requires a lot of preparation. I tried FreeBSD for the first time while a student and was deeply impressed by its elegance, simplicity, and stability. I even used it as the main operating system in my student job as a system administrator. Being a huge fan of free software, I attended as many events as I could to meet fellow FreeBSD fans and developers. Together we organized the first BSD-Day in Vienna in 2012. Organizing and attending FreeBSD events entails meeting a lot of people with different backgrounds and from different countries so it's a great way to exchange ideas!

Without realizing it, I became part of the FreeBSD community, which then led to other projects: I co-organized booths and meetups and twice attended Google's Summer of Code. I met a lot of people in the community, and one day Benedict Reuschling approached me to ask about a suitable hackathon location in Vienna. Being conveniently situated in the heart of Europe, Vienna was a natural choice. I had recently joined SBA Research, an Austrian information security research center, with commercial and research departments. SBA Research hosts many community events such as Capture the Flag tournaments and privacy meetups, and our scientific director immediately agreed to host the hackathon—including drinks and catering. Thanks to our events team, my only tasks were to make evening reservations and answer a few emails.

THE HACKATHON

A hackathon is about hacking all day long. Unlike community events, which put the emphasis on socializing, a hackathon has a working atmosphere, and everybody prepares their specific projects in advance of the event. Thus, after a short introductory round, we immediately started hacking—the hours following were “quality hacking time.” Some attendees worked on ports, some on documentation or improving Yubikey support. I fuzzed many base system tools using the well-known APL fuzzer and worked on ports. I am by no means a newbie when it comes to writing ports; however, I still lack the experience of more seasoned experts. Fortunately, this was not a problem. Even though everyone was working on their own projects, we were collaborating. People could just ask the group whenever they had a question or got stuck. The fact that a bunch of hackers sit in one room and put their heads together is the main advantage of hackathons. Sitting in the same room and discussing technical matters while working might sound similar to hanging out on IRC—however, discussing things face-to-face is completely different. I got to know more new technical and nontechnical aspects of the FreeBSD Project in a couple days than I would have on IRC in months.

SIGHTSEEING AND SOCIALIZING

A hackathon would not be half as much fun without its social events. It would be a pity to miss the opportunity to discuss your work with fellow FreeBSD hackers in a relaxed setting. Hence, we

went for dinner and drinks in the evenings, and, of course, enjoyed Austrian beer and Viennese schnitzel. Among the attendees were researchers, programmers, sysadmins, and people working for the FreeBSD Foundation. In such good company, running out of topics is nearly impossible and so we often stayed out quite late.

Many hackers travelled to Vienna just to attend the hackathon, and for many, it was their first visit to the city. After-dinner sightseeing was almost mandatory, so every night I gave little guided tours through the historic center of Vienna. Luckily, Vienna is worth seeing at any time of the day. Benedict stayed for one additional day, and we enjoyed the lovely weather at the royal Gardens of Schoenbrunn.

Although we all spent a sunny weekend in a room staring at a laptop screen, it was well worth it. I definitely extended my knowledge of FreeBSD, got to know more developers, and came away even more motivated to work on FreeBSD-related projects in the future. My FreeBSD batteries were definitely recharged! I recommend that you give FreeBSD a try (if you have not done so yet) and attend or even organize a hackathon. ●

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