

new faces

of FreeBSD

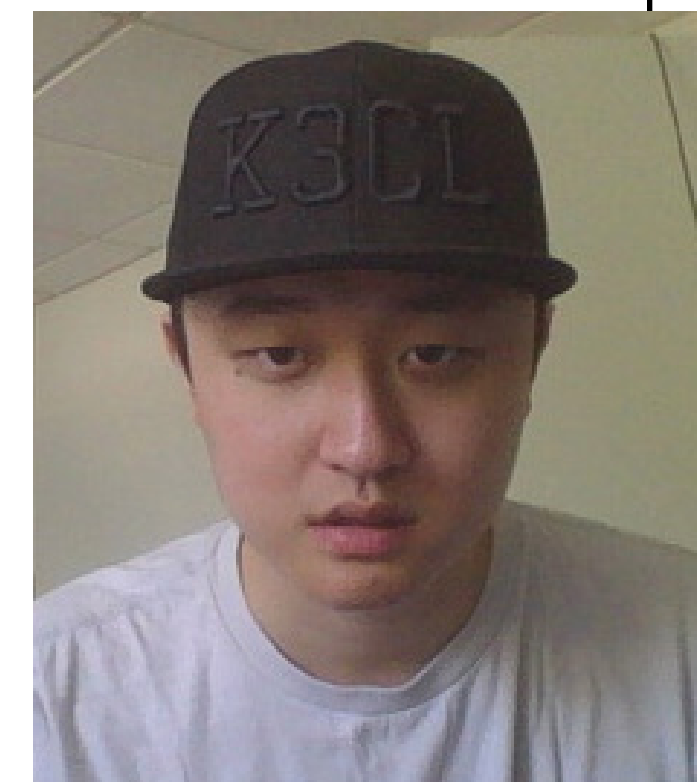
BY DRU LAVIGNE

This column aims to shine a spotlight on contributors who recently received their commit bit and to introduce them to the FreeBSD community.

In this installment, the spotlight is on Charlie Li, who received his ports bit in April.

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 Tell us a bit about yourself, your background, and your interests.

- **Li:** I was born in China but came to the United States in time for my fifth birthday with, among other things, a now-textbook-thick Toshiba Satellite with Windows 95 that at the time to me was mostly a toy but started my journey in breaking software. I pretty much grew up contributing to open source in one way or another between the end of elementary school and beginning of middle school, initially with reporting bugs whilst running Firefox (the included updater didn't work for an entire release cycle) and soon after contributing to Wikimedia projects including some years as a Wikimedia Commons administrator.



I now bounce between Philadelphia and northeast Pennsylvania, balancing my technical consulting business with a second round of undergraduate education in Electrical Engineering Technology (ABET-accredited) at Penn State University. Interests in the computing space chiefly include making sure our desktop side works well enough that those curious can use it, and embedded applications where much of my business has headed. Outside of computing, I play amateur radio (callsign: K3CL) and race road and track bicycles.

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 How did you first learn about FreeBSD and what about FreeBSD interested you?

- **Li:** I had known that FreeBSD and the rest of the BSD family existed since the early 2010s but not much more than a cursory glance at Wikimedia content about them, not least because I was still wrangling with getting Linux to work smoothly with my desktops and laptops. During the FreeBSD 10.2-RELEASE cycle, I noticed my then-VPS provider started offering images of FreeBSD, so curiosity got the best of me, and I created a VM. It quickly became my primary web and mail server for my personal stuff, and later, during the 11.1-RELEASE cycle, I spun up another VM for my business side as well.

It was a "slow" learning process since I was very much buried in the Linux mindset at the time, but one of the aspects that got me hooked quickly was the separation between base system and ports. From there, I started dabbling with non-default ports options, which eventually led to replacing Linux with FreeBSD on my laptop for the "full experience." This was the early stages of graphics/drm-kmod that would panic my system periodically, but I kept at it and tried to be as helpful as possible to those working on this code. For my desktop, I had to resort to using MATE, which I had used for a bit on Linux, as it was up-to-date in ports at the time,

but deep down I wanted to continue using Cinnamon, which was effectively unmaintained in our tree after 2.4. This and more outdated ports gave me a crash course on ports maintenance and I'm still at it.

Seeing how others have used FreeBSD as a basis for their own systems, products and businesses, along with a supportive community to this end, cemented my interest.

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How did you end up becoming a committer?

• **Li:** The desktop@ folks noticed that I not only effectively maintain the Cinnamon desktop environment and some other (mostly desktop-related) ports, but care about the overall health of the desktop "subsystem" or ecosystem. They may have been trying to punish me for a while, but life gets in the way and the asks get forgotten and remembered. During one of the "remembered" cycles we got it done.

How has your experience been since joining the FreeBSD Project? Do you have any advice for readers who may be interested in also becoming a FreeBSD committer?

• **Li:** Since joining the Project, overall, the experience has been positive. I still have a lot of learning and relationship building to do with existing Project members, but it's a process. Otherwise, it has been exciting to help out in a different role in this community and representing us in the greater open source world.

For those interested in thinking about being a committer, don't. I know it sounds harsh, but this is not something that one can really ask for, but rather, as previously stated, one can only get punished with the bit. There is a lot of responsibility that comes with the commit bit and much of it does not even involve code or documentation, but rather taking that systems thinking approach to everything we do. Relationships in and outside this project are vital to getting stuff done.

Something that I emphasize to any contributor, particularly in ports and especially the desktop ones, dogfood everything before thinking about submitting a patch. As a user, nothing angers me more than software that was not at the very least runtime tested, even in a cursory manner, before committed into the tree, even if the port follows everything in the Porter's Handbook to the letter and thus should theoretically work. No, testport doesn't count as dogfooding. An honest maintainer/committer who is up-front either in advance or on request about known or unknown issues gleaned from dogfooding is received better than one who submits/commits based on passing testport, but otherwise doesn't mind the runtime nuances. We don't need to start additional fires apart from the technical ones.

In essence, submit useful quality contributions, mind the overall system, build relationships, those will go a long way. Never forget that technology is a tool and is nothing without people.

DRU LAVIGNE is the author of *BSD Hacks* and *The Best of FreeBSD Basics*.