Open Systems laid bare

Prentice Hall offer two new books on one of IT's liveliest topics

*O*pen Systems: the reality, by T A Critchley and K C Batty. Prentice Hall (UK), 1993. xxxiii + 390. $78.95 ISBN 0-13-030735-1

What are Open Systems? The authors of this first book found more than a hundred contradictory definitions: is it a product? software? a philosophy? a strategy? At least one manufacturer distinguishes between 'open' (i.e., our products) and 'proprietary' (everybody else's products). It seems to be none of these or all of these, but depends heavily on standards and rules, publicly available and preferably defined by consensus. Much of the thinking on openness relates to UNIX or UNIX-like systems, but there is increasing pressure for wider portability between different computer platforms.

The book is one of the British Computer Society series, but it has been written, so far as is possible in a highly technical field, for the non-specialist reader who has an interest or requirement to come to terms with this complex topic. It has four parts: Setting the Scene, History and Development of IT Systems, The World of Standards and The Paths to Openness. Many of the chapters within these parts have an introductory overview, and most have conclusions. This means that it is possible to first review the broader concepts and then plunge into particular areas to any necessary depth. The 'final thoughts' are that most computer users will evolve into open systems gradually: the authors aim to plot possible ways in which this evolution can take place in an in-formed and logical manner.

Prentice Hall's other offering here is *The Magic Garden Explained: the internals of UNIX System V Release 4. An open systems design,* by Benny Goodheart and James Cox. Prentice Hall of Australia Pty Ltd, 1994. xxviiii + 664. $59.95 ISBN 0-13-098138-9

There is a delightful passage in the Foreword by John Mashey, looking back to his time in Bell Labs in the heroic days of 1973: 'In those years there existed but a few dozen of UNIX systems, and a 'release' was accomplished by driving up to Murray Hill, NJ, logging onto the 'research' machine, and making a tape of anything new that looked interesting.' Things have changed a bit since then…

The Australian-ness of this book is clearly seen in the section on history, which highlights the pioneering work at Wollongong University and UNSW in the middle 1970s, and later in looking at Department of Defence applications. It is delightfully written throughout, but it is not for the faint-hearted: it assumes the reader has 'experience with a structured programming language, preferably C, and with the UNIX system as a user or administrator'. It is intended as a university level computing textbook and for application developers and system administrators. Its greatest use, say the authors, is as an aid for system engineers and programmers involved with porting and supporting the UNIX System V Release 4 operating system. ∎

LIAC opens at Gosford City library

Gosford City Library became the ninth Legal Information Access Centre (LIAC) to open in NSW at a ceremony held on 23 February. The opening was performed by State Librarian, Alison Crook, and Terence Purcell, Director of the Law Foundation of NSW.

LIAC has many benefits. Legal information is no longer only accessible to lawyers. Thanks to the Law Foundation, which funds the Centre, and the State Library, which supplies the expertise and staff training, anyone who walks in off the street will have access to accurate legal information. This high quality legal information service cannot be underestimated. People will have ready access to information about the laws which regulate their daily lives. Secondary and tertiary Legal Studies students and teachers will gain additional access to appropriate resources.

Other LIAC centres in NSW are at Albury, Bega, Dubbo, Forster, Moree, Liverpool, Hawkesbury, Broken Hill and Coffs Harbour. ∎