

The Software Developer's  
Career Handbook

# Being Geek



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Michael Lopp

“Michael Lopp has an audacious message that geeks everywhere need to hear: Unpredictability is our friend, not our enemy. And his book *Being Geek* is the essential resource for anyone who wants to learn how to harness the power of unpredictable career moments—so we can fail faster, learn more, challenge our own expectations, and ultimately achieve something epic.”

—Jane McGonigal  
Director of Games Research and Development  
at the Institute for the Future

# BeingGeek

## The Software Developer's Career Handbook

At some point you realize that there's much more to your career than dealing with code. Is it time to become a manager? Tell your boss off? Join that startup? Michael Lopp recalls his own make-or-break moments with Silicon Valley giants—such as Apple, Netscape, and Symantec—in *Being Geek*, an insightful, entertaining book with more than 40 standalone stories that will help you make better career decisions.

Lopp walks through a complete job life cycle, starting with the job interview and ending with the realization that it might be time to find another gig. Many books cover how to interview for a job or successfully manage a project, this book helps you handle the baffling circumstances you may encounter throughout your career.

- Decide what you're worth, with “The Business”
- Determine the nature of the miracle your CEO wants, with “The Impossible”
- Give effective presentations, with “How Not to Throw Up”
- Handle liars and people with devious agendas, with “Managing Werewolves”
- Realize when you should be looking for a new gig, with “The Itch”

Michael Lopp is a Silicon Valley-based engineering manager. He is the author of *Managing Humans*, a collection of essays on software management (Apress).



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## Praise for Being Geek

*“Michael Lopp is that rare beast: the completely honest manager who uses plain language. You want to know how to cultivate a thriving career in this industry? Listen to Lopp.”*

John Gruber, Daring Fireball

*“I’ve seen too many people who were technically brilliant but who you didn’t want to let out of a locked room, because you knew they’d get eaten alive in the real world. Being Geek gives them a fighting chance to adapt to corporate life and manage the ‘messy parts’ of real life.”*

Thomas “Duffbert” Duff

*“Being Geek is a must-read for geeks and the people who need geeks to achieve the impossible.”*

Gina Bianchini, Founder of Ning.com

*“The geek shall inherit the earth. Michael Lopp uncovers the soul of a generation that is usually quite happy to keep to themselves.”*

Jim Coudal, Coudal Partners

*Michael Lopp has an audacious message that geeks everywhere need to hear: Unpredictability is our friend, not our enemy. And his book Being Geek is the essential resource for anyone who wants to learn how to harness the power of unpredictable career moments—so we can fail faster, learn more, challenge our own expectations, and ultimately achieve something epic.*

Jane McGonigal, Director of Games Research and Development  
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Michael Lopp

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## Being Geek

by Michael Lopp

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*To Spencer and Claire.*

*My daily reminders of the value of caring  
about someone deeply.*





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## Preface

I'm a geek, and I might be a nerd, but I'm not a dork.

I've been at these definitions long enough to see them transformed from cruel words of judgment to badges of honor and labels of praise, but even with dramatically better PR and social standing, we're still a demographic saddled with debilitating social skills, strange control issues, and an insatiable appetite for information.

...and we don't even have a good definition for the labels we've given ourselves.

Some of the content for this book was first seen in the Rands in Repose weblog, and many years ago I made a snap decision about whether to embrace the word *nerd* or *geek* to describe my demographic. I was writing a lightweight article regarding attention deficiency disorder and I needed an acronym, because nothing dresses up an idea like a clever acronym.

The choices were Nerd Attention Deficiency Disorder (N.A.D.D.) or Geek Attention Deficiency Disorder (G.A.D.D.). While neither rolls of the tongue, N.A.D.D. struck me as slightly less terrible. This brief decision had lasting impact because, moving forward, I exclusively used *nerd* in my articles.

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It is a defining characteristic of the nerd or geek to seek definition. This makes my off-the-cuff nerd naming choice an ongoing source of annoyance for me. What is the actual definition of the nerd? And the geek? And what about those dorks?

This annoyance became a full-blown inconvenience as I worked with my editor on this book that is now in your hands. As titles we debated, she came up with the elegant and precise *Being Geek*. Right. Right. Dammit. That's perfect. Problem is, I've never written about geeks. I'm a nerd. Or am I?

The origins of the word don't help. Geek originally described a circus performer who bit the heads off live animals. Nerd has a more honorable origin in its first documented appearance in Dr. Seuss's 1950 book *If I Ran the Zoo*, where the narrator claims he would collect "A Nerkle, a Nerd, and a Seersucker too."

Since then, the words have blended. There are clever Venn diagrams that describe the respective traits of nerds versus geeks. Some suggest the geeks are more obsessive than the nerds. Others call out the social ineptitude of the nerds, but for every definition you find, another can be found to contradict the previous definition.

So, it's a toss up.

The good news is the lack of a clear delineation between nerd and geek doesn't prevent us from tackling dork.

Dork is derogatory, there's no doubt about it, but it does have a place amongst the geek and nerd definition. The term geek can be added to any number of fields, many of which have little to do with technology. Movie geek, music geek—this describes a deep appreciation of a thing. My belief is that the term *dork* is used by geeks to position their geekery above another's geek field. For example, I'm a computer geek, but those movie geeks are dorks.

Make sense?

The point being, depending on where you're standing, we're all dorks.

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As becoming comfortable with ambiguity is one of the goals of this book, perhaps it's a good opening to understand there really isn't a clear distinction between geek and nerd. While this book is called *Being Geek*, I'm likely to throw a few nerds in there for good measure.

A couple of other conventions to be aware of before we begin:

For much of this book, my prototypical geek is a he as a convenience. There are plenty of she geeks out there for which the observations of this book equally apply.

The narrator throughout this book is Rands. This is a pseudonym I've been using for over a decade. The comfortable anonymity of Rands provides a professional distance from the topics I cover. Similarly, just about every proper name and situation described in this book is fake. They've been deliberately constructed in order to tell a tale.

And that tale starts now.

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The readers of Rands in Repose. Your comments, your interest, and your mails keep me writing.

42. You remain the answer to life, the universe, and everything.



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## SECTION 1:

# A CAREER PLAYBOOK

For each new job I've considered, I can remember the moment I decided to make the leap. The consideration that went into each of these decisions was epic. There were Pro and Con lists, there were spreadsheets that did financial modeling, and there were endless conversations with trusted people that started with support and, weeks later, finished with, "Enough talking. When are you going to decide?"

This first section of *Being Geek* walks you through the endless list of decisions and tasks you can perform as you consider and engage in the search for your next gig. From early warning signs in the current gig to figuring out how to constructively stalk your future employer, these chapters document the various plays you can make as you consider the next move in your career.

These chapters leave the hardest part to you—making the decision.



## How to Win

You've had a small number of career-defining moments.

Small decisions cross your desk, your inbox, all day, but this isn't a small decision. It's massive, and once you've made this decision, there is absolutely no going back. It is in this moment you make a painful discovery—shit, I'm a geek.

You don't have an MBA. You know there are HR people in the building somewhere, but you've no idea what to do with them. You want to hide in the comforting structure of code, but you know that in this moment, this decision is going to significantly affect your career...if only you knew how.

Can I argue for more money after I received an offer? OK, how? What do I do when my boss lies to me? What do I need to do to resign? What's a program manager? Should I apply for a management gig? They make more money doing less, right? Can I get a promotion without talking to a single human being? There isn't a class in college that teaches any of this. Wikipedia can give you definitions, but it can't help a social introvert who sees much of the world through a keyboard.

This is the hand you've been dealt. Let's embrace the geek.

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## A System Thinker

We're different, and understanding these differences is a good place to start. At our core, I believe geeks are system thinkers. A simpler way to think about this is that in the mind of a geek, the world is like a computer—discernible, knowable, and finite. After years of successfully using the computer as a means of interacting with the world, we've come to follow a certain credo:

We seek *definition* to understand  
the *system* so that we can discern  
the *rules* so that we  
*know what to do next* so that  
we *win*.

Definition, system, and rules. It all goes back to our ever-favorite tool, the computer. Our success with the computer has tweaked out perspective of the planet. We believe that given enough time and effort, you can totally understand the system. *A hard drive has these attributes and make this type of operation faster. More memory will improve these types of operations. When my boss tells me I'm passive-aggressive, I should....*

Wait, what? Passive what?

A crisis occurs when a situation appears that doesn't follow the rules, doesn't fit in the system, and is inherently undefinable. We go into high alert when we see a flaw in the system because the system is what we tell ourselves to get through the day. Unfortunately, this structure is a comfortable illusion and full of certain flaws that I like to call people.

## People Are Messy

People screw things up. They are the sources of bugs. They ask odd questions, and their logic is flawed. In the pleasant mental flow-chart we have in our geek heads, it's a single person who causes us to frustratingly ask, "Who are these people and why the hell don't they follow the rules? Can't they see the system? DON'T THEY WANT TO WIN?"

Yes, they do.

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No one wants a reminder that life is a crapshoot. That we're all making it up as we go based on reacting to whatever random strangeness occurs in our corner of the world. The lack of control is especially discomfoting to the geek, which is why we construct imaginary structured versions of our world to make the chaos a bit more palatable and predictable.

I'm a geek, and while I'm just as ambiguous and emotionally slippery as that comic book dork in the cube next door, I've been staring at geeks struggling with messy parts of high tech for over a decade. I believe I can improve the chances that we can win, even with all these people stumbling around and touching our stuff.

The advice and this book begin with a contradiction: prepare for the unpredictable.

The unpredictable shows up on your doorstep in two forms: simple unpredictability, which you can assess and act on immediately, and world-changing unpredictability that rocks your world and requires serious work on your part. In *Being Geek*, my hope is to first equip you with a system of improvisation that will help you act on the simple unpredictability and, second, to encourage you to develop a blueprint for your career to prepare for when the sky really falls.

## A System of Improvisation

In my head, a handbook is a book with curled pages, a beaten cover, and folded pages that is never far away. It's achieved this state by being repeatedly and tactically useful. *Being Geek's* chapters are structured around a single job. From the initial job search, the interview, the offer negotiations, and learning about your company and your coworkers, to finally deciding it's time to search for a new gig. The idea is not the arc; the idea is that as you're going through a small bit of unpredictability, you can flip to Chapter 34 and read about how to interpret your yearly review so you can make a decision: *am I or am I not going to get fussy about this poorly written review?*

The chapters of *Being Geek* are standalone, meaning there are minimal threads tying one chapter to the next. This is partially a function of where some of the chapters originated—my weblog, Rands in Repose—but also a function of the geek attention span, which

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can be...limited. My hope is these fully contained, easily consumable chapters are useful when small decisions show up, in that they help you take apart your decisions. They aren't prescriptive, because whatever decisions you have on your plate are yours to make, and the best I can offer is to tell you the story of when I found that decision, what I thought, and how I moved forward.

It's satisfying: the completion of a task, the making of a decision, getting a thing done. These small bits of motion you apply to your day make up the majority of the decisions you make in your life, and they happen with little pomp and circumstance. Making these decisions and seeing what happens make up the bulk of your experience and how you continue your endless search for rules that define your system. The better you get at them, hopefully, the more success you have and the quicker you make them the next time they show up.

Still, these are the small bits of unpredictability, and you also need to know what to do when the massive unpredictability appears.

## A Career Blueprint

You read a book. From beginning to end. While the chapters of *Being Geek* can stand alone, this book is written around a single hypothetical job and is intended to tell a long story. The time it takes to read this book will, hopefully, give you distance from the day to day work of your job and remind you that you're working toward something bigger. Your job is not just what you're doing; it should be preparing you for what you want to do.

As you read this book, you need to keep three classes of questions in your head:

- What am I doing?
- What do I do?
- What matters to me? What do I care about?

Your work day is deviously designed around focusing you on the first question. Think about your state of mind when you get in the car to drive home, when you're sitting on the subway, when you're barely pulling yourself out of the sea of things to do. You're not

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dreaming about your next gig, you're not thinking strategically about your career; you are recovering from a day of tactical tasks. That's what you're doing, but is that what you do?

Maybe you're lucky. You're the software architect. You're the director of design. You're the guy who cares more about databases than anything else on the planet Earth. You've discovered a larger theme to what you're doing and that's what you do. It's your career, and a career is much bigger than a job.

Perhaps you don't know. It's your first gig, and while all this coding is delicious, there sure seem to be a lot of people running around talking about career growth. That's what HR is going to do for me, right? My boss has that covered, right?

Wrong.

As an avid watcher of management in the Silicon Valley for coming up on two decades, I can safely say that the good intentions of HR and partial attention of your boss does not a career make.

Whether you know what you do or you don't, the act of reading this book from cover to cover is a few hours of your time when you get to ask, "What matters to me? What do I care about?" Does this management gig float my boat? Am I a developer for life? Is the fact I spend the entire subway trip home cursing my gig a bad sign? It's professionally fashionable to bitch about your company and your inept manager, but when you start bitching about your career, I call bullshit. The idea that anyone besides you is responsible for your career is flawed. Your boss is only your boss while he's your boss. Your career is yours forever.

You choose your career and the choice makes life easy when massive unpredictability arrives. Think about it like this: how much easier would it be to make that big decision if you knew exactly what you wanted to do? Is it easier or harder to argue for that new project at work when you know it's perfect for your career goals? How would the review conversation go with your boss when you're completely sure that you want to get into management?

All decisions are easier when you're clear where you're headed.

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## A Collection of Moments

Your career is a collection of moments when you make a decision. PC or Mac? Answering that recruiting email or not? Confront or retreat? Even with this book in hand, you're going to screw up as many decisions as you make correctly, which is a troubling thought for the system-searching geek who is simply trying to win, but there are still rules to discern.

With time and experience, you'll learn there is a finite set of personalities walking the halls. Yes, they have their individual nuances, but these personalities and their motivations can be understood. Your boss and his motivation will vary from company to company, but it's a knowable set of motivations varying somewhere from "hiding until I retire" to "driving everyone absolutely crazy as I attempt to conquer the world." You can make most meetings useful. You can dig yourself out from underneath the endless list of things to do. It's OK to quit a job with people you like because there are a lot of people to like out there.

*Being Geek* is a distillation of 15 years in the Silicon Valley working at companies both large and small. I've had equal parts of calm and chaos, and I've been keeping notes during the entire time because I believe I'm always one rule away from figuring it all out, and that's how you win.



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