

De-Brogramming the History of Computing

Marie Hicks

Illinois Institute of Technology

Editor: Nathan Ensmenger

In April 2012, the term *brogrammer* became part of the national consciousness thanks to a frenzy of media scrutiny kicked off by a *Mother Jones* article called “‘Gangbang Interviews’ and ‘Bikini Shots’: Silicon Valley’s Brogrammer Problem.”¹ The piece was meant to sound an alarm about the state of the US high tech industry, but some questioned how seriously to take this latest incarnation of nerd culture.² Was it a goof, a cheeky effort by a group often derided as uncool to reclaim social prestige through masculine posturing? Or was this new breed of fratty, chauvinist programmer a threat to an industry that has famously tried to increase women’s flagging participation since the 1990s?

The obnoxious affect of the brogrammer, rape jokes and all, was designed to provoke a new understanding of computing, but instead it seemed to rehash the old. It drew attention to bias in computing fields once again, particularly in Silicon Valley startup culture. Around the same time, Ellen Pao was filing a gender discrimination lawsuit against her Silicon Valley venture capital firm.³ Statistics about women entrepreneurs’ low rates of funding were making the rounds of the twittersphere, and several tech conferences were embroiled in debates about sexual harassment or underrepresentation of women and minority speakers.⁴

Elsewhere on the Internet, though originating from the same state (California) that incubated the brogrammers, a media critic named Anita Sarkeesian publicized a Kickstarter campaign to make programs about gender stereotypes in videogames.⁵ Noting that women in videogames were slotted into just a few, unfortunate tropes, Sarkeesian argued that discussion of stereotypes could help lead to solutions.

Within hours of her Kickstarter going live, waves of misogynistic comments, from the standard threats of rape and dismemberment to barely ironic demands that she “get back to the kitchen,” rolled in. Her home address was found and posted publicly. Vandalism of her online profiles and attempts to hack her accounts took on a ferociousness that even surprised those already jaded by the casual sexism of the gaming world.

The loosely orchestrated hate campaign came to a head when an amateur game programmer named Benjamin Daniel, using the pseudonym Ben Spurr, made a Flash game that encouraged players to beat up Anita Sarkeesian until her face was bruised and bloodied beyond recognition.⁶ In fact, many conceived of their

cyberbullying campaign as a kind of massive multiplayer online game.⁶ In the same year, Jennifer Hepler, a game writer for Bioware, was also the target of an online hate campaign for her efforts to make games more accessible and game storylines more gay friendly.

Lessons from the Fringe

Both brogramming and what happened to Sarkeesian were cloaked in an affect of humor or play, both marginalized and threatened women, and both were intertwined with leading-edge technological cultures. Although exclusionary nerd cultures are nothing new, historians of computing have shown that episodes of wagon circling are usually a hallmark of newly professionalizing fields or culturally marginal skill and interest groups.⁷ As computing has matured as a profession, these episodes have become less stark.

But if the culture of the modern programmer in the Anglo-American world, from university CS departments to major computer companies, does not condone such attitudes, why should we care about these seemingly fringe incidents? The reason is that they show us new ways to understand persistent issues of underrepresentation, from the underrepresentation of women and certain American-born minorities to the closeting of thousands of GLBTQ (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer) computer professionals and students.⁸

Instead of being mere growing pains of maturing fields, these incidents are evidence of a replicating pattern in computing’s development. Technologies, fundamentally about consolidating and wielding power, help us manifest abstract ideals and translate goals and beliefs into physical reality. Brogrammers sought to monopolize this power through an alpha male affect in the workplace that encouraged the technological ends and aims of an “elite” subgroup. Meanwhile, Sarkeesian’s bullies tried to normalize a culture of violence and feminine submissiveness to gain power online and in gaming.

Centering Other Fringes

Commenters have focused on the misogyny, sexism, and to a lesser extent, racism of these incidents. Yet, in both of the examples, the elephant in the room is not gender, but sexuality. In particular, the “performance” of a particular kind of heterosexuality as class privilege is highlighted. These incidents can show us something about mainstream computing culture that

continued on p. 86

continued from p. 88

we do not see if we look straight at it. Indeed, they tell us more about threatened heteronormativity than about differences between women and men.⁹

As historians of computing, we have studied gender-as-women and gender-as-men, but now we would benefit from significantly *queering our approach*: decoupling assumptions about sex and gender from seemingly unified categories like “men” and “women.” Queering our approach encourages a discussion of how often we take for granted the standards and goals of a narrow heteronormativity (born out of particular classes within Anglo-American culture) when we define what topics fall within the history of computing.

Taking pains to de-familiarize and de-center these norms will enhance our ability to discuss variations within seemingly concrete, discrete groups and will take us away from focusing on subcultures of angry young men as the most important segments of computing culture. It will also help avoid assumptions about different national, temporal, and sociotechnical contexts. Perhaps most importantly, it can aid us in locating themes and actors that upend current narratives in subtler ways, creating an engine for further insights and greater theoretical sophistication in reconstructing the past.

Recent scholarship has already begun to do this. For instance, the history of housewife gamers’ relationships to family PCs shows us a history of computing differentiated by age, location, class, race, and sexuality.¹⁰ Meanwhile, prostitution rings of telegraph boys infiltrating aristocratic circles in 19th-century Britain show us the hidden reach of communication networks and how they subvert power.¹¹ In another example, a scholar looking at Christian repurposing of answering machines for proselytizing complicates notions of progress. Each study turns away from top-down or bottom-up ways of explaining technological change.¹² Instead, they point us to the interstitial spaces and actors that exert, absorb, and magnify power.

As computing and allied communication technologies increasingly become tools for wielding power, altering discourse, and actualizing our ideals—not just economically, politically, or militarily, but socially, culturally, and personally—more people than ever before are becoming critically invested in this process of technological change. The history

of these changes must reflect that diversity for maximal impact and explanatory utility.¹³

Focusing on difference to understand norms, and how they change, is one of the key strengths of studying great men (and women) in computing history.¹⁴ Queer theory directs our attention to differences among the less powerful, even the relatively anonymous, to add to the texture and variety of the past. This allows us to find difference—the engine of historical change—in more settings than ever before.

Despite their seeming newness, the stilted postures of programmers and bullying gamers show us an echo chamber, with few new lessons to be learned. More than ever, these incidents lay bare the conceptual problems with the recurrent “boys and their toys” view of computing. By turning incidents like these on their heads and refusing to engage with them on the same old terms, we can reorient the intellectual debate. Using different analytical tools, we can uncover narratives that resonate with the many more interesting and innovative changes taking place in computing today.

References and Notes

1. T. Raja, “‘Gangbang Interviews’ and ‘Bikini Shots’: Silicon Valley’s Programmer Problem,” *Mother Jones*, 26 Apr. 2012; www.motherjones.com/media/2012/04/silicon-valley-programmer-culture-sexist-sxsw.
2. For recap of coverage, see M. Hicks, “From Antisocial to Alphasocial: Exclusionary Nerd Cultures and the Rise of the Programmer,” SIGCIS blog, 1 May 2012, www.sigcis.org/node/335.
3. D. Streitfeld, “Lawsuit Shakes Foundation of a Man’s World of Tech,” *New York Times*, 2 June 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/06/03/technology/lawsuit-against-kleiner-perkins-is-shaking-silicon-valley.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0. The article starts out with the untrue assertion that women did not exist in the history of Internet development, proving its own point about the self-perpetuating nature of stereotypes.
4. Most notably, Brit Ruby 2013 was cancelled after Josh Susser, a US conference organizer, critiqued their all-white, all-men program on Twitter. In response to harassment at DefCon, the Ada Initiative began an initiative to establish conference codes of conduct: <https://adainitiative.org/2012/08/defcon-why-conference-harassment-matters>.
5. H. Lewis, “Dear The Internet, This Is Why You Can’t Have Anything Nice,” *New Statesman*, 12 June 2012, www.newstatesman.com/blogs/

- internet/2012/06/dear-internet-why-you-cant-have-anything-nice.
6. A. Sarkeesian, "TEDxWomen Talk about Online Harassment and Cyber Mobs," video, 5 Dec. 2012; www.feministfrequency.com/2012/12/tedxwomen-talk-on-sexist-harassment-cyber-mobs.
 7. J. Abbate, *Recoding Gender*, MIT Press, 2012; N. Ensmenger, *The Computer Boys Take Over*, MIT Press, 2010; J. Light, "When Computers Were Women," *Technology and Culture*, vol. 40, no. 3, 1999, pp. 455–483; and M. Hicks, "Only the Clothes Changed: Women Operators in British Computing and Advertising, 1950–1970," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2010, pp. 5–17.
 8. Organizations such as the Anita Borg Institute, the National Center for Women and Information Technology (NCWIT), Girl Develop IT, Black Girls Code, and StartOut continue to focus on these problems.
 9. Of course many, if not most, men sided with neither the programmers nor the bullies.
 10. L. Nooney, "How We Compute History: Women, Computers and Gaming in the 1980s Household," lecture, Stony Brook Univ., 14 Nov. 2012, www.lainenooney.com/1/post/2012/12/provost-talk.html.
 11. K. Hindmarch-Watson, "Male Prostitution and the London GPO: Telegraph Boys' 'Immorality' from Nationalization to the Cleveland Street Scandal," *J. British Studies*, vol. 51, no. 3, 2012, pp. 594–617.
 12. B. Beaton, "Reducing the Cost of Conversion: Christian Experiments with Telephones and Telephone Answering Machines in the 1960s and 1970s," paper given at the Society for the History of Technology Conference in Copenhagen on 6 October 2012.
 13. For instance, as of the 2010 census, the majority of workers in Silicon Valley were Asian-American. D. Nakaso, "Asian Workers Now Dominate Silicon Valley Tech Jobs," *Silicon Valley Mercury News*, 30 Nov. 2012; www.mercurynews.com/news/ci_22094415.
 14. In 2012, the centennial of Alan Turing's birth, a theme across many conferences and exhibits was that Turing's genius was deeply intertwined with his gay identity. The untimely death of his first love and the fear that he would never find similar in the deeply homophobic culture of mid-20th-century Britain led directly to Turing's interest in AI and the concept of storing minds in machines.

Marie Hicks is an assistant professor at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Her research focuses on the history of technology, gender, and modern Europe, specializing in the history of computing. Hicks has a PhD in history from Duke University. Contact her at mhicks1@iit.edu.

cn Selected CS articles and columns are also available for free at <http://ComputingNow.computer.org>.



computing|now

NEW + EXPANDED

IEEE COMPUTER SOCIETY'S **COMPUTING NOW** WEBSITE

Featuring industry technology solutions you can use.

IEEE
IEEE computer society

Visit <http://computingnow.computer.org>