



SUSAN SONS

# Girls and Software

**December 2013's EOF, titled "Mars Needs Women", visited an interesting fact: that the male/female ratio among *Linux Journal* readers, and Linux kernel developers, is so lopsided (male high, female low) that graphing it would produce a near-vertical line. I was hoping the piece would invite a Linux hacker on the female side of that graph to step up and move the conversation forward. And sure enough, here we have Susan Sons aka @HedgeMage. Read on.—Doc Searls**

**Y**ep, I said "girls". Since men were once boys, but women sprang from the head of Zeus full-grown and fighting like modern-day Athenas, you can start flaming me now for using that nasty word...unless you'd like to see the industry through the eyes of a girl who grew up to be a woman in the midst of a loose collection of open-source communities.

Looking around at the hackers I know, the great ones started before puberty. Even if they lacked computers, they were taking apart alarm clocks, repairing pencil sharpeners or tinkering with ham

radios. Some of them built pumpkin launchers or LEGO trains. I started coding when I was six years old, sitting in my father's basement office, on the machine he used to track inventory for his repair service. After a summer of determined trial and error, I'd managed to make some gorillas throw things other than exploding bananas. It felt like victory!

When I was 12, I got my hands on a Slackware disk and installed it on my computer—a Christmas gift from my parents in an especially good year for my dad's company—and I found a bug in a program. The program was in C, a language I'd never seen. I found

my way onto IRC and explained the predicament: what was happening, how to reproduce it and where I thought I'd found the problem.

I was pretty clueless then—I hadn't even realized that the reason I couldn't read the code well was that there was more than one programming language in the world—but the channel denizens pointed me to the project's issue tracker, explained its purpose and helped me file my first bug report.

What I didn't find out about until later was the following private message exchange between one of the veterans who'd been helping me and a channel denizen who recognized my nickname from a mailing list:

coder0: That was a really well-asked question...but why do I get the feeling he's a 16yo boy?

coder1: Because she's a 12yo girl.

coder0: Well...wow. What do her parents do that she thinks like that?

coder1: I think she's on a farm somewhere, actually.

When coder1 told me about the

conversation, I was sold on open source. As a little girl from farm country who'd repeatedly been excluded from intellectual activities because she wasn't wealthy or urban or old enough to be wanted, I could not believe how readily I'd been accepted and treated like anybody else in the channel, even though I'd been outed. I was doubly floored when I found out that coder0 was none other than Eric S. Raymond, whose writings I'd devoured shortly after discovering Linux.

Open source was my refuge because it was a place where nobody cared what my pedigree was or what I looked like—they cared only about what I did. I ingratiated myself to people who could help me learn by doing dull scutwork: triaging issues to keep the issue queues neat and orderly, writing documentation and fixing code comments. I was the helpful kid, so when I needed help, the community was there. I'd never met another programmer in real life at this point, but I knew more about programming than some college students.

### **It Really Is about Girls (and Boys)**

Twelve-year-old girls today don't generally get to have the experiences that I did. Parents are warned to

keep kids off the computer lest they get lured away by child molesters or worse—become fat! That goes doubly for girls, who then grow up to be liberal arts majors. Then, in their late teens or early twenties, someone who feels the gender skew in technology communities is a problem drags them to a LUG meeting or an IRC channel. Shockingly, this doesn't turn the young women into hackers.

Why does anyone, anywhere, think this will work? Start with a young woman who's already formed her identity. Dump her in a situation that operates on different social scripts than she's accustomed to, full of people talking about a subject she doesn't yet understand. Then tell her the community is hostile toward women and therefore doesn't have enough of them, all while showing her off like a prize poodle so you can feel good about recruiting a female. This is a recipe for failure.

Young women don't magically become technologists at 22. Neither do young men. Hackers are born in childhood, because that's when the addiction to solving the puzzle or building something kicks in to those who've experienced that "victory!" moment like I had when I imposed my will on a couple electronic primates.

Unfortunately, our society has set girls up to be anything but technologists. My son is in elementary school. Last year, his school offered a robotics class for girls only. When my son asked why he couldn't join, it was explained to him that girls need special help to become interested in technology, and that if there are boys around, the girls will be too scared to try.

My son came home very confused. You see, he grew up with a mom who coded while she breastfed and brought him to his first LUG meeting at age seven weeks. The first time he saw a home-built robot, it was shown to him by a local hackerspace member, a woman who happens to administer one of the country's biggest supercomputers. Why was his school acting like girls were dumb?

Thanks so much, modern-day "feminism", for putting very unfeminist ideas in my son's head.

There's another place in my life, besides my home, where the idea of technology being a "guy thing" is totally absent: my hometown. I still visit Sandridge School from time to time, most recently when my old math teacher invited me in to talk to students about STEM careers. I'm fairly sure I'm the only programmer anyone in that town has met in

person...so I'm something of the archetypal computer geek as far as they are concerned. If anything, some folks assume that it's a "girl thing".

Still, I don't see the area producing a bunch of female hackers. The poverty, urbanization and rising crime aside, girls aren't being raised to hack any more in my hometown than they are anywhere else. When I talked to those fifth-grade math classes, the boys told me about fixing broken video game systems or rooting their phones. The girls didn't do projects—they talked about fashion or seeking popularity—not building things.

### **What's Changed?**

I've never had a problem with old-school hackers. These guys treat me like one of them, rather than "the woman in the group", and many are old enough to remember when they worked on teams that were about one third women, and no one thought that strange. Of course, the key word here is "old" (sorry guys). Most of the programmers I like are closer to my father's age than mine.

The new breed of open-source programmer isn't like the old. They've changed the rules in ways that have put a spotlight on my sex for the first time in my 18 years in this community.

When we call a man a "technologist",

we mean he's a programmer, system administrator, electrical engineer or something like that. The same used to be true when we called a woman a "technologist". However, according to the new breed, a female technologist might also be a graphic designer or someone who tweets for a living. Now, I'm glad that there are social media people out there—it means I can ignore that end of things—but putting them next to programmers makes being a "woman in tech" feel a lot like the Programmer Special Olympics.

It used to be that I was comfortable standing side by side with men, and no one cared how I looked. Now I find myself having to waste time talking about my gender rather than my technology...otherwise, there are lectures:

- The "you didn't have a woman on the panel" lecture. I'm on the panel, but I'm told I don't count because of the way I dress: t-shirt, jeans, boots, no make-up.
- The "you desexualize yourself to fit in; you're oppressed!" lecture. I'm told that deep in my female heart I must really love make-up and fashion. It's not that I'm a geek who doesn't much care how she looks.

■ The “you aren’t representing women; you’d be a better role model for girls if you looked the part” lecture. Funny, the *rest* of the world seems very busy telling girls to look fashionable (just pick up a magazine or walk down the girls’ toy aisle). I don’t think someone as bad at fashion as I am should worry about it.

With one exception, I’ve heard these lectures only from women, and women who can’t code at that. Sometimes I want to shout “you’re not a programmer, what are you *doing* here?!”

I’ve also come to realize that I have an advantage that female newcomers don’t: I was here before the sexism moral panic started. When a dozen guys decide to drink and hack in someone’s hotel room, I get invited. They’ve known me for years, so I’m safe. New women, regardless of competence, don’t get invited unless I’m along. That’s a sexual harassment accusation waiting to happen, and no one will risk having 12 men alone with a single woman and booze. So the new ladies get left out.

I’ve never been segregated into a “Women in X” group, away from the real action in a project. I’ve got enough clout to say no when I’m

told I should be loyal and spend my time working on women’s groups instead of technology. I’m not young or impressionable enough to listen to the likes of the Ada Initiative (<http://adainitiative.org>) who’d have me passive-aggressively redcarding (<http://singlevoice.net/redyellow-card-project>) anyone who bothers me or feeling like every male is a threat, or that every social conflict I have is because of my sex.

Here’s a news flash for you: except for the polymaths in the group, hackers are generally kind of socially inept. If someone of any gender does something that violates my boundaries, I assume it was a misunderstanding. I calmly and specifically explain what bothered me and how to avoid crossing that boundary, making it a point to let the person know that I am not upset with them, I just want to make sure they’re aware so it doesn’t happen again. This is what adults do, and it works. Adults don’t look for ways to take offense, silently hand out “creeper cards” or expect anyone to read their minds. I’m not a child, I’m an adult, and I act like one.

### **My Boobs Don’t Matter**

I came to the Open Source world because I liked being part of a community where my ideas, my skills

and my experience mattered, not my boobs. That's changed, and it's changed at the hands of the people who say they want a community where ideas, skills and experience matter more than boobs.

There aren't very many girls who want to hack. I imagine this has a lot to do with the fact that girls are given fashion dolls and make-up and told to fantasize about dating and popularity, while boys are given LEGOs and tool sets and told to do something. I imagine it has a lot to do with the sort of women who used to coo "but she could be so pretty if only she didn't waste so much time with computers". I imagine it has a lot to do with how girls are sold on ephemera—popularity, beauty and fitting in—while boys are taught to revel in accomplishment.

Give me a young person of any gender with a hacker mentality, and I'll make sure they get the support they need to become awesome. Meanwhile, buy your niece or daughter or neighbor girl some LEGOs and teach her to solder. I love seeing kids at LUG meetings and hackerspaces—bring them! There can never be too many hackers.

Do not punish the men simply for being here. "Male privilege" is a way to say "you are guilty because you

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LinuxFest Northwest	<a href="http://linuxfestnorthwest.org">http://linuxfestnorthwest.org</a>	15
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