

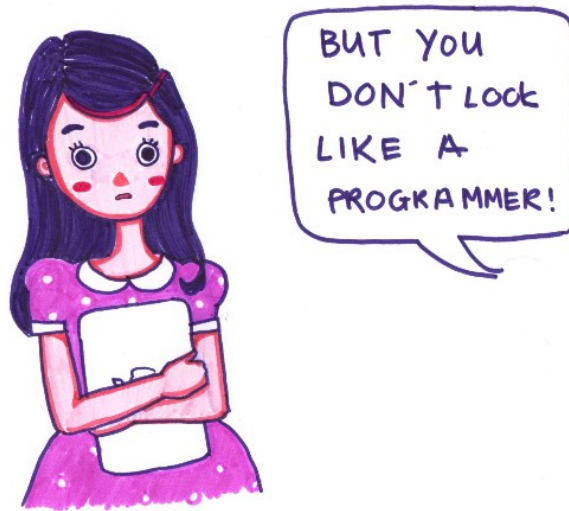
Coding Like a Girl

(this was originally given as a talk at AlterConf in Oakland. this talk only addresses gender diversity and was given in the context of other talks addressing racism, disability, classism, and many other topics.)

In an advertisement campaign by Always, when adult women and men are asked to run/hit/throw like a girl they do those things wispily and terribly. On the other hand, when young girls are asked to run/hit/throw like a girl, they do those things with lots of enthusiasm and effort. When asked what doing things like a girl means to them, a young girl responds “Do them as best as you can.”

Heartbreakingly, at some age, we become convinced that doing anything like a girl means that you are doing it ineffectively, wimpily, and in a way that can't be taken seriously at all. What then, does this mean for women and non-binary people who work in technology and present as feminine? What does it mean for those of us who code like girls?

I want to share with you some of my experiences during my 20 years of presenting as feminine and being a programmer along with similar experiences shared by some women I've talked to. I'll also talk about some actionable things that we can do to make tech and games a place where people can feel comfortable presenting as any gender.



"but you don't look like a programmer"

One category of reactions that I receive all the time as a programmer that presents as feminine is: **No one believes I am a programmer.**

I can't tell you how many people, when meeting me and hearing my profession, tell me that I look like a designer, someone in accounting, someone in marketing, anything but a programmer.

I have been a TA for weekend workshops that teach women to code. My male co-TA's constantly asked me throughout the workshop how I was enjoying learning to program.

Apparently, presenting as feminine makes you look like a beginner. It is very frustrating that I will either look like not a programmer or look like a permanent beginner because I have programmed since age 8. I have basically always wanted to be a programmer. I received undergrad and grad degrees from MIT. I've worked as a visiting researcher in Honda's humanoid robotics division on machine learning algorithms for ASIMO.

I don't think that any of these things make me a better programmer; I list them because I am pretty sure that if I were a white man with these credentials or even less than these credentials no one would doubt my programmer status.



"you wouldn't understand"

Tracy Chou, an engineer at Pinterest, shared this story with me: A couple years ago she attended a technical conference and on the first day, she wore a dress. When she walked around the conference, no one came up to talk to her. When she asked people very technical questions about their stack, questions she assumed would indicate that she was a programmer, she was brushed aside and told, "You wouldn't understand." She went back home that night really frustrated and flustered. She almost didn't feel like going to the conference the next day. But she did and wore a nerdy tshirt and jeans instead, and she had a better experience that day. People assumed she was technical and didn't dilute their explanations to her.

What can we do better as a community in these cases?

Assume people are as or more qualified than you.

If you're at a conference and talking to a feminine presenting person, assume they are an expert in the field of the conference.

Before you are about to explain a paper condescendingly to someone in a dress, assume that they wrote it.



"I wrote it."

Never ask "Who are you here with?" assume someone is at event out of their own interest.

Instead of assuming what someone's position or career is, ask, ask politely, and don't act surprised at the answer.



"don't play with your hair"

Another category of things I experience all the time is: **When I get feedback, I get gendered feedback.**

I remember giving project presentations during college. We would receive feedback from peers, and the professor would also hand out awards for the projects & presentations they thought were best. Despite several times getting awards from professors on my presentations about de-duplication algorithms for backup storage or face-recognition algorithms for my image processing class, this was the kind of feedback I always got from my peers:

“Why are your slides so pink? It’s very distracting.”

“Stop pushing your hair behind your ear when you present. It’s very distracting.”

“Your voice goes up after every sentence you say.”

and comments rating my appearance.

I met Liz Rush, a new programmer who graduated from the Ada Developers Academy, at Rubyconf last year. In her year of giving talks about tagging civic data with her project partner, also an Ada Developers Academy graduate, she talked about how her most frequent feedback was statements like “nice outfit”, and “you’re so pretty” instead of comments on the actual content of her presentation. One person started asking her a technical question after a presentation & then changed their mind, saying, actually let me ask your partner about this instead, I think she might have more to contribute. Liz’s project partner is a woman who doesn’t present as feminine, while Liz does. These experiences have made Liz decide that she doesn’t want to give any conference talks this year, and only speak at female-centered & diversity-focused meetups.

We can do better with this.

In order to make feminine women and feminine non-gender binary people in tech feel valued for their accomplishments, we can:

Give feedback based on content.

When you think something is distracting during a presentation, ask yourself, do you really mean that you are just not used to seeing this in a presentation?

Ask yourself, “Would I give this feedback to a masculine-presenting white cis man?”



“is this professional?”

Another thing that feminine-presenting women and non-binary people have to deal with that other people in tech don’t have to: **the tightrope walk of professionalism & fashion when deciding what to wear to interviews or presentations.**

I’ve seen women tweet before giving their first technical presentation, “Wearing a dress is out of the question for this, right?” Women worry that if they wear dresses when they present they might not get taken seriously or they might receive unwanted comments or advances. I’ve read so many internet advice columns that say: “Women, don’t distract from your own presentation! Dress nicely but not flashily”.

I’ve seen women worried that if they wear makeup or dress up that they’re not being feminist, and I’ve seen feminists chide women who present as

feminine.

It's one kind of progress for people to agree with the statement "Women can be anything they want". It combats a kind of sexism called oppositional sexism. But there's another kind of sexism, traditional sexism, that we've made less progress on. You could get more people to agree that women can be anything they want than to agree that femininity is as valuable as masculinity.

Let's take for example the idea of a Strong Female Character. There are plenty of them in movies. But think of what comes to mind as traits for a woman being badass: loud, assertive, rides a motorcycle, maybe really good at martial arts. And yes that woman does sound badass. But we pretty much never explore the idea of strong female characters that save the world by being feminine, empathetic, and caring.

This is part of the problem of *Lean In*, too: women should feel free to be assertive if that's their personality and let's celebrate that instead of criticizing it, but let's also celebrate people that display leadership by empathy and encouraging.

Let's value individuality in how people would like to present themselves. Let's recognize femininity as valuable and celebrate it in anyone who would like to display it.



THIS IS WHAT A PROGRAMMER
LOOKS LIKE.

this is what a programmer looks like

Once an ex-partner told me “You look better in jeans and a tshirt. Why do you wear dresses? Why do you wear makeup? You don’t have to dress up to impress me.” That moment led me to so many realizations. It made me realize that most people think femininity is an act to impress men. It was then that I was 100% sure my dressing up wasn’t for him at all, I didn’t at all care if a partner disliked my dresses, or makeup. I was wearing them for me. And it was then, that I realized that continuing to wearing dresses just for myself was a totally valid way to say a big FUCK YOU to the patriarchy.

So I say: if you feel like you are able to, and if you don’t feel up for it that is totally ok because self-care comes before any kind of activism. But if you feel up to it, I encourage you wear exactly what you want. Be as flamboyant, fancy, frilly, girly as you would like to be. Do it while being a gamer, a programmer, a game designer. Because you are helping to change people’s ideas of what a programmer/gamer/game developer looks like. And you are making the world a more awesome place by being you.

Thanks to AlterConf for creating a safe space for me to talk about this, and to Tracy Chou and Liz Rush for letting me share their stories.



sailor mercury

short haired computer scientist girl

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