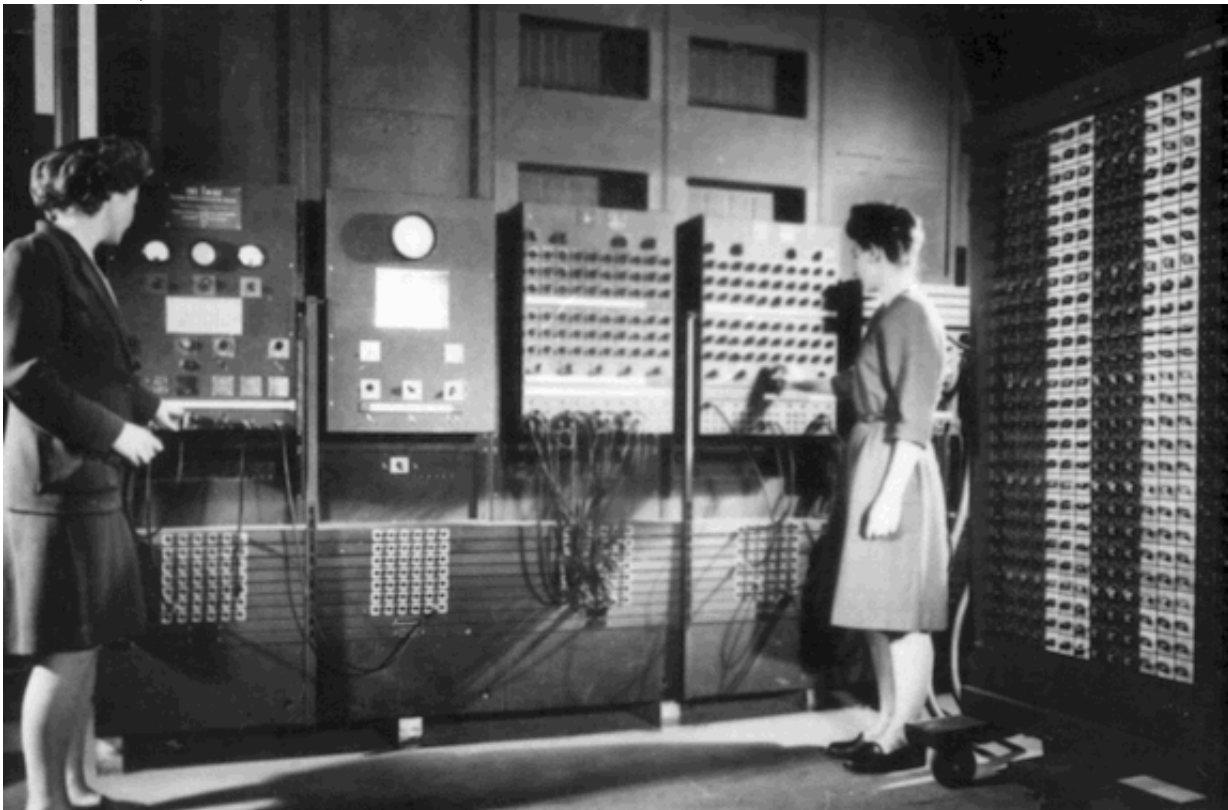# Smithsonian.com

Computer Programming Used To Be Women's Work

Today, computer programmers are expected to be male, nerdy and antisocial - an odd, and self fulfilling prophesy that forgets the women that the entire field was built upon

By Rose Eveleth
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Two women operating ENIAC Image: U.S. Army

Today, the computer programming field is dominated by men. But that wasn't always the case. In fact, for a long time, computer programming was a women's field. At Gender News, Brenda D. Frink explains how "computer geek" overtook "computer girl" as the stereotype. She writes:

> As late as the 1960s many people perceived computer programming as a natural career choice for savvy young women. Even the trend-spotters at Cosmopolitan Magazine urged their fashionable female readership to consider careers in programming. In an article titled "The Computer Girls," the magazine described the field as offering better job opportunities for women than many other professional careers. As computer scientist Dr. Grace Hopper told a reporter, programming was "just like planning a dinner. You have to

plan ahead and schedule everything so that it's ready when you need it…. Women are 'naturals' at computer programming." James Adams, the director of education for the Association for Computing Machinery, agreed: "I don't know of any other field, outside of teaching, where there's as much opportunity for a woman."

Now, it's not that managers of yore respected women more than they do now. They simply saw computer programming as an easy job. It was like typing or filing to them and the development of software was less important than the development of hardware. So women wrote software, programmed and even told their male colleagues how to make the hardware better. (It turns out programming is hard, and women are actually just as good at it as men.)

What changed? Well, male programmers wanted to elevate their job out of the "women's work" category. They created professional associations and discouraged the hiring of women. Ads began to connect women staffers with error and inefficiency. They instituted math puzzle tests for hiring purposes that gave men who had taken math classes an advantage, and personality tests that purported to find the ideal "programming type." Frink writes:

> According to test developers, successful programmers had most of the same personality traits as other white-collar professionals. The important distinction, however, was that programmers displayed "disinterest in people" and that they disliked "activities involving close personal interaction." It is these personality profiles, says Ensmenger, that originated our modern stereotype of the anti-social computer geek.

And so here we are today, with a world computer programmers who are expected to be male, nerdy and antisocial—an odd, self-fulfilling prophecy that forgets the women that the entire field was built upon.

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Rose Eveleth is a writer for Smart News and a producer/designer/ science writer/ animator based in Brooklyn. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times, Scientific American, Story Collider, TED-Ed* and *OnEarth*.

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