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P4 Tech Women: Beyond Unix and Short Skirts

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by Liz Lam, QA Lead Engineer (@p4liz)

This is part of a [blog series](#) designed to explore the stories of our Women in Tech at Perforce. It's been fun and inspiring talking to each one of these women. As they share where they've been and how they came to where they are now, it is my hope that others will be encouraged and inspired too.

Steph Turner is no stranger to the Perforce Community. A seasoned developer with a wealth of knowledge, she is also very involved in creating opportunities for girls in technology and youth sports. She is currently working with the public schools, Boys and Girls Club, the Perforce Foundation and private industry to develop a hands on technology program that exposes high school and college students to current industry skills and practices. Steph also started two tournament girls basketball programs and sits on the Board for Alameda Youth Basketball.



What was your first tech job?

I was 21 years old and just moved from New York to California working as a research assistant to a professor at UC Berkeley. I started hanging out every night at the Triple Rock Brewery in Berkeley where I met these super smart guys who worked down in Silicon Valley. One of them got me an interview at a company called Valid Logic Systems, a company that developed integrated circuit design software for the Electronic Design Automation (EDA) industry. I was originally hired to work on marketing collateral but an engineering director soon put me to work as a System Administrator.

What were some of your first challenges as a woman on that team?

I was one of only a handful of women in engineering and one of the youngest employees at the company. That was a double whammy. I started out wearing skirts and high heels like most other women I worked with in marketing. In my new role, I noticed I started getting a lot of the "network trouble" calls from the guy engineers. There were two places I had to check for network connection issues. The first was the mux boxes, conveniently located under their desks and the second, ceiling connections which I had to climb up a ladder to check. Once I figured out what was going on I stopped wearing those little skirts to work.

When did you realize you loved working with software?

I'm pretty sure that I'm going to disappoint you with my answer, but I was originally going to go into academia. I fell in love with working in software when I got my first pay check.

What was your first programming language?

Basic on a Data General Mini and a TRS-80.

Did any mentors help you along the way?

Yes, I was moved to a sysadmin role because I told the Director of Engineering that I worked on a Vax 750/780 in college and that I knew unix. I was a very confident young person and I'm sure that was part of the reason why he offered me the opportunity. I remember thinking to myself, "This guy must be joking, unix is easy, how hard is it to use 'ls' and 'cd'".

Imagine my surprise when he had the Sun manual set delivered to my cube. I think there were at least twenty thick three ring binders in the set. It took up an entire side of my cube. If that wasn't enough, the next week, I cried when he had the Dec Alpha and HP-UX manual sets delivered.

I started working late every night. Reading and learning all this gobbly gook about the different flavors of unix. Fortunately for me, there was this other developer that worked late every night. He happened to be "that guy" on the team. You know, the one that has "root" privileges and knows everything about the network and the machines. He was my mentor. I ended up marrying him.

How did you get started with Perforce and version control?

After the "short skirt" episode, I started focusing on the "software" side of being a sysadmin. I quickly became the resident OS, C++ compiler, X Windows and licensing expert. This opened the opportunity for me to step into a Release Engineering group. I wrote source code management tools on top of [SCCS](#) and [RCS](#).

I was running a consulting firm when I picked Perforce up as a client. Perforce gave me a six week contract to write Folder Diff. I remember thinking, "They must be joking. It's not going to take six weeks to write a GUI tool that diffs two directories." It took me six weeks to figure out how to sync the files back onto my local drive from the Perforce server after I used `rm -rf` to remove them from my local disk. That inspired me to write the first version of reconcile in Folder Diff.

What is your role at Perforce now?

I worked on P4V, Perforce's main GUI client, until a couple of years ago when I helped build the Open Source Community and [Perforce Workshop](#). Now I spend most of my time developing new code, porting and preparing existing code to open source into the Workshop, and begging internal developers, customers and partners to open source their really cool stuff into the Workshop. I also develop outreach programs and the curriculum for community-based technology education programs.

What language do you code in today?

I am mostly coding in C++, Javascript and Python. I'm gearing up for Ruby on Rails.

What are some of the differences between coding open source and closed source projects?

I think that the two worlds are rapidly converging. The collaboration practices, release models and tool chains are being intermixed.

What resources would you recommend for people interested in open source software?



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software:

Any resource that helps you with interpersonal and communication skills.

What advice would you give to women getting into the software industry?

Don't be afraid to ask questions. If someone goes whacko on you for asking a question, it's likely a reflection of their own insecurities.

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About the author:

Liz Lam plays on Team QA at Perforce Software. She loves breaking software, contributing ideas to new features and apparently writing blogs while consuming large amounts of coffee.

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