

Professional Issues: Humanity or GTFO

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I'm past due to write this year's My, What A Busy Week! post, but didn't feel like doing it in August and haven't felt like doing it since. Well, it had a good long run. I'd like to mark the passage of that week in what I hope is a less flip and more thoughtful way. The only really notable occurrence in my life during the last Monday-through-Saturday in August this year is that someone in the #rust channel on IRC said "boobs or gtfo" to me. So, let's talk about that for a minute.

I don't often choose the "don't use 'guys' to refer to mixed-gender groups" battle. Over the years, 'guys' has come to grate on me, but only in certain contexts, and even then, it only grates a tiny bit. It's almost never a battle worth choosing. So, when someone showed up in #rust and said [sic] "Guys, can you recommend library for getting something from internets via http?", I almost let it go, because it just wasn't that big of a deal. But I was emboldened by my friend Adam's recent choice of the same battle on a (private) mailing list we're both on, so I decided to say something.

I was polite, I think. All I said was, "please remember that not everyone in the IRC channel is a guy." The initial response was, "Do you have any proofs?" While I was contemplating whether I'd be the only one who would find it amusing at that point if I sent him a link to the latter forty pages of this document ("Sure! Here are some of my favorites!"), "boobs or gtfo" showed up on my screen.

I said, out loud, "Holy shit!" My officemate, sitting across the room, said, "What?" But I couldn't actually make my voice work to tell him what had just happened, because by then, adrenaline was sweeping through me. It was ten seconds before I remembered how to talk. The only other times in my life that I can remember that happening have been in response to an immediate physical threat, like when a car was about to hit my bike.

It was unexpected. I hadn't been expecting this person to actually correct themselves, of course. But I had been expecting them to respond with something like "uh, 'guys' is a gender-neutral word", in which case my reaction would have been to shrug and say something like, "Yeah, I'm sure that's how you meant it." And I would have left it at that, because, again, it wasn't that big of a deal, and all I really

aim to accomplish here is encourage people to think about it a little harder, maybe choose a different word next time. But that's not what happened. What happened was that when I made a polite request, a flood of hate came rushing out at me. And now it's hard for me to continue to pretend or assume that that hate doesn't boil under the surface of our community.

Later on, various members of the full-time Rust staff (who have ops in the channel) apologized to me, and banned the user, and added several more ops from various time zones so that it would be more likely that someone with ops would be around next time (since it had been lunchtime on the west coast and no one had been around). They also added a link to the conduct policy to the channel topic, to help reduce the chances of this sort of thing happening in the future. All that was great. The Rust team is awesome. But here's the thing: every time I point out something like this in a community I'm part of, whether it's the Rust community or any other, there's a part of me that insists on first checking to see how much social capital I have to spend there. How high up am I on the contributors list? Have I contributed to the next release yet? All right, I guess it's okay for me to say something – as though it hurts the project to speak up about a community problem! And so I have a double-entry accounting system in my head for amount of code contributed and amount of abuse reported, and it's terrible and broken that I feel that that's necessary. The only qualification that any of us should need to be treated with humanity is that we are human.

I've been contributing to Rust for a long time. #rust is my community, and it's been my community since there were only twenty-odd people in it, instead of the three hundred-some we usually have today. I shouldn't have to worry about being attacked while standing on my own ground. And, indeed, right after it happened, a friend who worked on Rust with me last year privmsg'd me to say that it seemed to him that "something sacred had been violated".

Meanwhile, in the channel, my friends joked ruefully about "boobs or gtfo" being some sort of milestone – that we hadn't been a real language before, and hooray, now we were. I laughed along with them. But I would like to make the wholly unoriginal and unrevolutionary suggestion that, if being a "real language" means that your longtime contributors get harassed by strangers in the official IRC

channel for being female, then being a "real language" is a pretty fucking abysmal standard to aspire to. We'd all like to think that the Rust community is safe and welcoming to all, and for the most part, most of the time, I think we do okay – or, at least, we do okay relative to the abysmal standard that's been set. I almost feel sheepish complaining, since the occasional "boobs or gtfo" from some stranger on IRC is a laughably insignificant problem for our community to have. I still can barely believe it happened; it seems surreal. It's certainly not the #rust that I'm accustomed to. But if we want to keep it that way, or maybe even do better, then we'll need to work at it, and we'll certainly need to work harder now than we would have had to work two and a half years ago, and if we're very fortunate and Rust continues to grow in popularity, we'll have to work harder still.

And this is work that I believe is worth doing. As much as I like to talk about pattern matching and default methods and (recently) hygienic macros and everything else in Rust that I like and care about, there's no getting around the fact that the most important feature of any programming language is its community. At the Haskell Symposium two weeks ago, Bastiaan Heeren said, "The strength and weakness of Haskell is GHC and its community." This followed Ken Shan's program chair report in which he exhorted the Haskell community to do a better job of treating one another with humanity. Rust's community is the strength and weakness of Rust, too, and we have a tremendous opportunity to make it more of a strength and less of a weakness, if we want to.

Update, September 2014

Since this post is linked prominently from the Rust subreddit and other places, perhaps some context is in order. Here's a timeline of events:

On August 28, 2013, I said "please remember that not everyone in the IRC channel is a guy" to someone in #rust, in response to them addressing the people in the channel as "Guys". The person responded with "boobs or gtfo". I responded by asking the moderators to kick them out of the channel. (Kicking is a mild penalty; a kicked person can rejoin immediately.) They left the channel a short while later of their own accord. Later, I emailed some people on the Rust team about what happened, and one of them banned the user. You can find the chat logs linked below.

Several weeks later, in October 2013, I wrote this post. I wrote it because I have a long-running yearly tradition of writing about what goes on in my life during the last week in August – or "had", I suppose; I haven't much felt like continuing the tradition since last year. For the first seven years that I wrote them, these last-week-of-August posts were largely about mundane, day-to-day things. I had expected 2013 to be no different. But when I sat down to write the post in October of that year, the main recollection I had from the last week of August was how bad it had felt to have someone say "boobs or gtfo" to me in the IRC channel

of a project to which I had been contributing for two years. So, I just wrote about that.

The post got a lot of attention. A lot of people responded supportively. On the other hand, the top comment on Hacker News characterizes my saying "please remember that not everyone in the IRC channel is a guy" as an "attack", while, in the same breath, describing "boobs or gtfo" as a "poorly chosen attempt at ironic humor". So, you know, the usual.

Some time later, in April 2014, someone came into the Rust IRC channel and began spamming the channel with "boobs or gtfo" and "fuck lindsey" repeatedly. I tweeted about how I was getting IRC abuse for having written about IRC abuse. Various people who had previously been unaware of the whole saga found out about it. Again, I got a lot of attention, and a lot of people responded supportively, including the Rust team. (Among other things, they asked me to be a mod on #rust, and I accepted.) On the other hand, at least one person wrote a blog post about how quote-unquote "fucktarded" I am. (I won't be linking to it here; I'm sure you can find it if you really want to.) So, you know, the usual.

To sum up, there have been people who seem to think that I (or the #rust mods, or the Rust team) consider use of "guys" to be abusive, and who are upset with me (or the #rust mods, or the Rust team) for "attacking" people who use "guys". So, allow me to clarify:

- "guys" is not abusive; "boobs or gtfo", however, is.
- "please remember that not everyone in the IRC channel is a guy" is not an "attack"; "fuck lindsey", however, is.

Hope that clears things up a bit, folks! The original post from October 2013 follows.