

The Interrupt-Driven Life

August 20, 2007

[Original link](#)

After what seemed like years working in the Reddit isolation chamber, I begun saying yes to all the interesting projects that came my way as soon as I got out. And there were a lot of interesting projects.

I signed up to build [a comprehensive catalog of every book](#), write three books of my own (since largely abandoned), consult on [a not-for-profit project](#), help build [an encyclopedia of jobs](#), get [a new weblog](#) off the ground, [found a startup](#), mentor two ambitious Google Summer of Code projects (stay tuned), build a Gmail clone, write a new online bookreader, start a career in journalism, [appear in a documentary](#), and research and co-author [a paper](#). And that's not including all the stuff I normally do. I've actually been spending most of my time catching up on my 2000 email backlog, reading a book a week, following a bunch of weblogs, and falling in love. (Falling in love takes a shockingly huge amount of time!) Yes, it has been pointed out to me that I'm insane.

Clearly part of this is that I have some kind of severe psychological problem (an inability to say no, an inclination toward stress, and a nasty habit of coping with stress by submerging myself in new projects). But it's not completely failing either. Every project has kind of half-finished. Maybe this is worthless, maybe instead of half-finished thirteen projects I should just completely finish one. But it doesn't seem obviously stupid — a half-finished project has *some* value (educational if nothing else) and it seems increasingly likely that some of them will get finished properly.

So how is it that I'm able to do so many tasks that even I, upon reflection, can't see how they're all getting done? The secret is to be interrupt-driven. Previously, if I wanted to do something, I'd immerse myself in that thing. I'd wake up in the morning thinking about the problem, spend all day either working on it, reading background materials for it, talking to friends about it, thinking about it in bed before I went to sleep and then dreaming about it. I'm sure I did much better work this way: all that thinking and dreaming led to lots of ideas I wouldn't have had otherwise. And it was fun, too. Immersing yourself in a problem can be very enjoyable. (*See* Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.) But clearly, you can really only work on one problem at a time this way and it doesn't leave much room for other people in your life.

In the new system, for every task I have a partner. And they're the one responsible for thinking about it. Perhaps they don't immerse themselves in it totally like I sometimes did, but it takes up a substantial portion of their mental energy. And so, after we hash out the big plan together at the beginning, they

work on it and think about it and worry about it and when they get stuck or finish a piece or just want to talk about it, they shoot me an email. Meanwhile, I sit at home and just deal with these emails, answering questions and solving problems as they come up.

Now while I think giving people a partner on these projects is really valuable (I wish I had one on more of my immersive projects) I'll readily admit that I'm lousy at it. I've been spending too much time ill and traveling and with people in my life to respond promptly or in detail. (I'm sorry guys; I'm going to work hard to pare things down and do better.)

But I think the larger principle is valuable. This is clearly how the real big-shots "get things done". Recall the scene in *Brazil* where the harried executive strolls purposefully (yet aimlessly) through the corridors with a trail of people waving papers behind him to which he barks either yes or no. (Reprised in *last week's Psych.*) Of course, when things get that far, it's rather unclear who's actually doing things. As with the political figure whose every minute is scheduled by their campaign manager or their chief of staff, one begins to wonder whether the others are working for the boss or whether the boss is simply working for them. In this way, moving up the corporate ladder means giving up more and more of your power and freedom.

At some point I plan to go back to the immersive life. I have some big plans that are just important enough to need that kind of dedication. But this is the year of Other People. I can't be everything to everyone, but I'll try my best to "get things done".