Eat and Code

August 2, 2005

Dear Diary: Sorry I haven't written so long. Running a startup is *hard*! That and finally having people to talk to sort of takes some of the time and desire out of writing. I'm thinking maybe instead of a full blow-by-blow account of what happened, I'll write posts about different topics, that will recap the story so far. My first attempt follows. -ASw

Life seems so incredibly overworked and overcomplicated that you pare it down to the bare essentials: eat and code. Surely you should be able to handle this without distraction. Unfortunately, it's not so easy.

Let's take eating.

To be honest, I've always had a problematic relationship with food. I always liked plain things — the year before college I lived mostly off of eating plain, microwaved bagels. At oriental restaurants I would always just order steamed white rice. Wes Felter, noting I would apparently only eat white food joked, referencing a Science Fiction novel, that I would eat light bulbs, but "only the white ones". This reached its extremes at a World Wide Web conference where all the food was white, even the plate it was on. Tim Berners-Lee later pulled my mother aside to share his concerns about this diet.

Finally, one day at an oriental restaurant by Stanford (years before I went to school there), we had the typical discussion except this time Cory Doctorow spoke up: 'are you sure you're not a supertaster?' he asked. I had heard the They Might Be Giants song but never considered the possibility. I thought about it as the conversation continued and it seemed to make sense to me. [At this point I imagine a crane shot lifting up and up over the conversation at the restaurant. Fade to:] I did some research on the Internet and did the test (which formally consists of putting blue food coloring on your tongue, taking a piece of paper with a three-hole punch, placing it over the tongue and counting the number of taste buds in it) and indeed, I am a supertaster. This hasn't eliminated the discussions about my eating habits, but it does shift the blame.

In any event, I'm not one for the fine arts of cooking. So it's always seemed attractive to me to have a simple food that tastes decent that I can just pull out and eat whenever I want. And, lo, it appeared that I had found it: Cheerios. Cheerios claimed on the box to be healthy, they had little in the way of taste, I could eat them whenever I want, they had big boxes of them at the corner

grocery store — everything seemed great. Cheerio boxes piled up in the corner. (Photo to follow.)

There were some problems, though. I didn't eat them with water or milk, which meant that a fine Cheerio dust went everywhere. This dust was so fine that it got into invisible cracks in my laptop's surface and apparently bonded with the metal and had to be scraped out each time I ate. And then I begun to discover that the Cheerio dust was also into my system, possibly even my lungs and giving me some Cheerio form of silicosis; they made it difficult to breathe deeply. 'Wouldn't it be ironic if I died of pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis?' I asked Simon. (I chose pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis as a spelling word in 6th grade.)

At the same time, I was suffering from bouts of acid reflux which continued to grow in frequency and severity. First just some acid. Then, one night walking back from a Noam Chomsky lecture, I began to cough of what felt like my stomach lining. I gave up the Cheerios but it didn't help. Last night I threw up my entire dinner.

And then what do I eat instead? We go for regular meals at 12 and 6 but I'm only sporadically hungry and the food is getting boring. In Science Fiction stories, we imagine small packets of food that are healthy but taste like whatever we enjoy. Forget that, I'd be happy with just packets of food that are healthy. I'm sick of having to worry about food.

And then there's programming. When I'm feeling good, I'll have bouts of just amazing productivity, doing everything that needs to be done in hours. The only problem is that these good days are followed by a week of bad ones, where I feel tired or depressed or scared and can't quite force myself to sit and face the code.

I used to think this was just cowardice, that I just needed to sit down and program and I'd get the same level of productivity again. But what if this is some serious limit in my brain? What if programming takes so much out of me that it takes days to recharge? I've never seriously considered this possibility before, but it's not just fatalism — it has real implications for how I should structure my days.

The last time I was fighting procrastination I was watching a bunch of good television shows. And as part of this, I would read Tim Goodman, the Roger Ebert of television critics. I was struck to learn one day that even Tim Goodman, whose job was to literally sit down and watch TV, could not bring himself to accomplish this task. I mean, I knew all about Structured Procrastination but surely it had its limits. How could someone procrastinate sitting down and watching TV? And yet, here it was before my eyes — my favorite television critic, a hardworking and thoughtful man who had even spent a column answering a question I sent him, even though I lived in Chicago at the time.

The lesson I drew from this is that the human mind is such that whatever you do, it will try to avoid it. So you might as well aim high. Now the question is: what do you do with the rest of time?