P A U L   G R A H A M

DISCONNECTING DISTRACTION

Note: The strategy described at the end of this essay didn't work. It would work for a while, and then I'd gradually find myself using the Internet on my work computer. I'm trying other strategies now, but I think this time I'll wait till I'm sure they work before writing about them.

May 2008

Procrastination feeds on distractions. Most people find it uncomfortable just to sit and do nothing; you avoid work by doing something else.

So one way to beat procrastination is to starve it of distractions. But that's not as straightforward as it sounds, because there are people working hard to distract you. Distraction is not a static obstacle that you avoid like you might avoid a rock in the road. Distraction seeks you out.

Chesterfield described dirt as matter out of place. Distracting is, similarly, desirable at the wrong time. And technology is continually being refined to produce more and more desirable things. Which means that as we learn to avoid one class of distractions, new ones constantly appear, like drug-resistant bacteria.

Television, for example, has after 50 years of refinement reached the point where it's like visual crack. I realized when I was 13 that TV was addictive, so I stopped watching it. But I read recently that the average American watches 4 hours of TV a day. A quarter of their life.

TV is in decline now, but only because people have found even more addictive ways of wasting time. And what's especially dangerous is that many happen at your computer. This is no accident. An ever larger percentage of office workers sit in front of computers connected to the Internet, and distractions always evolve toward the procrastinators.

I remember when computers were, for me at least, exclusively for work. I might occasionally dial up a server to get mail or ftp files, but most of the time I was offline. All I could do was write and program. Now I feel as if someone snuck a television onto my desk. Terribly addictive things are just a click away. Run into an obstacle in what you're working on? Hmm, I wonder what's new online. Better check.

After years of carefully avoiding classic time sinks like TV, games, and Usenet, I still managed to fall prey to distraction, because I didn't realize that it evolves. Something that used to be safe, using the Internet, gradually became more and more dangerous.

Some days I'd wake up, get a cup of tea and check the news, then check email, then check the news again, then answer a few emails, then suddenly notice it was almost lunchtime and I hadn't gotten any real work done. And this started to happen more and more often.

It took me surprisingly long to realize how distracting the Internet had become, because the problem was intermittent. I ignored it the way you let yourself ignore a bug that only appears intermittently. When I was in the middle of a project, distractions weren't really a problem. It was when I'd finished one project and was deciding what to do next that they always bit me.

Another reason it was hard to notice the danger of this new type of distraction was that social customs hadn't yet caught up with it. If I'd spent a whole morning sitting on a sofa watching TV, I'd have noticed very quickly. That's a known danger sign, like drinking alone. But using the Internet still looked and felt a lot like work.

Eventually, though, it became clear that the Internet had become so much more distracting that I had to start treating it differently. Basically, I had to add a new application to my list of known time sinks: Firefox.

* * *

The problem is a hard one to solve because most people still need the Internet for some things. If you drink too much, you can solve that problem by stopping entirely. But you can't solve the problem of overeating by stopping eating. I couldn't simply avoid the Internet entirely, as I'd done with previous time sinks.

At first I tried rules. For example, I'd tell myself I was only going to use the Internet twice a day. But these schemes never worked for long. Eventually something would come up that required me to use it more than that. And then I'd gradually slip back into my old ways.

Addictive things have to be treated as if they were sentient adversaries—as if there were a little man in your head always cooking up the most plausible arguments for doing whatever you're trying to stop doing. If you leave a path to it, he'll find it.

The key seems to be visibility. The biggest ingredient in most bad habits is denial. So you have to make it so that you can't merely *slip* into doing the thing you're trying to avoid. It has to set off alarms.

Maybe in the long term the right answer for dealing with Internet distractions will be [software](http://www.paulgraham.com/distraction.html) that watches and controls them. But in the meantime I've found a more drastic solution that definitely works: to set up a separate computer for using the Internet.

I now leave wifi turned off on my main computer except when I need to transfer a file or edit a web page, and I have a separate

laptop on the other side of the room that I use to check mail or browse the web. (Irony of ironies, it's the computer Steve Huffman wrote Reddit on. When Steve and Alexis auctioned off their old laptops for charity, I bought them for the Y Combinator museum.)

My rule is that I can spend as much time online as I want, as long as I do it on that computer. And this turns out to be enough. When I have to sit on the other side of the room to check email or browse the web, I become much more aware of it. Sufficiently aware, in my case at least, that it's hard to spend more than about an hour a day online.

And my main computer is now freed for work. If you try this trick, you'll probably be struck by how different it feels when your computer is disconnected from the Internet. It was alarming to me how foreign it felt to sit in front of a computer that could only be used for work, because that showed how much time I must have been wasting.

Wow. All I can do at this computer is work. Ok, I better work then.

That's the good part. Your old bad habits now help you to work. You're used to sitting in front of that computer for hours at a time. But you can't browse the web or check email now. What are you going to do? You can't just sit there. So you start working.

- [Good and Bad Procrastination](#)
- [Arabic Translation](#)
- [Russian Translation](#)

- [Spanish Translation](#)
- [Catalan Translation](#)
- [Spanish Translation](#)