Collected Articles from Paul Graham

# Paul Graham

New:  
  
Superlinear Returns |  
  
How to Do Great Work  
  
  
  
  
  
Want to start a startup? Get funded by Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
© mmxxiii pg

# Is It Worth Being Wise?

February 2007A few days ago I finally figured out something I've wondered about  
for 25 years: the relationship between wisdom and intelligence.  
Anyone can see they're not the same by the number of people who are  
smart, but not very wise. And yet intelligence and wisdom do seem  
related. How?What is wisdom? I'd say it's knowing what to do in a lot of  
situations. I'm not trying to make a deep point here about the  
true nature of wisdom, just to figure out how we use the word. A  
wise person is someone who usually knows the right thing to do.And yet isn't being smart also knowing what to do in certain  
situations? For example, knowing what to do when the teacher tells  
your elementary school class to add all the numbers from 1 to 100?  
[1]Some say wisdom and intelligence apply to different types of  
problems—wisdom to human problems and intelligence to abstract  
ones. But that isn't true. Some wisdom has nothing to do with  
people: for example, the wisdom of the engineer who knows certain  
structures are less prone to failure than others. And certainly  
smart people can find clever solutions to human problems as well  
as abstract ones.   
[2]Another popular explanation is that wisdom comes from experience  
while intelligence is innate. But people are not simply wise in  
proportion to how much experience they have. Other things must  
contribute to wisdom besides experience, and some may be innate: a  
reflective disposition, for example.Neither of the conventional explanations of the difference between  
wisdom and intelligence stands up to scrutiny. So what is the  
difference? If we look at how people use the words "wise" and  
"smart," what they seem to mean is different shapes of performance.Curve"Wise" and "smart" are both ways of saying someone knows what to  
do. The difference is that "wise" means one has a high average  
outcome across all situations, and "smart" means one does spectacularly  
well in a few. That is, if you had a graph in which the x axis  
represented situations and the y axis the outcome, the graph of the  
wise person would be high overall, and the graph of the smart person  
would have high peaks.The distinction is similar to the rule that one should judge talent  
at its best and character at its worst. Except you judge intelligence  
at its best, and wisdom by its average. That's how the two are  
related: they're the two different senses in which the same curve  
can be high.So a wise person knows what to do in most situations, while a smart  
person knows what to do in situations where few others could. We  
need to add one more qualification: we should ignore cases where  
someone knows what to do because they have inside information.   
[3]  
But aside from that, I don't think we can get much more specific  
without starting to be mistaken.Nor do we need to. Simple as it is, this explanation predicts, or  
at least accords with, both of the conventional stories about the  
distinction between wisdom and intelligence. Human problems are  
the most common type, so being good at solving those is key in  
achieving a high average outcome. And it seems natural that a  
high average outcome depends mostly on experience, but that dramatic  
peaks can only be achieved by people with certain rare, innate  
qualities; nearly anyone can learn to be a good swimmer, but to be  
an Olympic swimmer you need a certain body type.This explanation also suggests why wisdom is such an elusive concept:  
there's no such thing. "Wise" means something—that one is  
on average good at making the right choice. But giving the name  
"wisdom" to the supposed quality that enables one to do that doesn't  
mean such a thing exists. To the extent "wisdom" means anything,  
it refers to a grab-bag of qualities as various as self-discipline,  
experience, and empathy.   
[4]Likewise, though "intelligent" means something, we're asking for  
trouble if we insist on looking for a single thing called "intelligence."  
And whatever its components, they're not all innate. We use the  
word "intelligent" as an indication of ability: a smart person can  
grasp things few others could. It does seem likely there's some  
inborn predisposition to intelligence (and wisdom too), but this  
predisposition is not itself intelligence.One reason we tend to think of intelligence as inborn is that people  
trying to measure it have concentrated on the aspects of it that  
are most measurable. A quality that's inborn will obviously be  
more convenient to work with than one that's influenced by experience,  
and thus might vary in the course of a study. The problem comes  
when we drag the word "intelligence" over onto what they're measuring.  
If they're measuring something inborn, they can't be measuring  
intelligence. Three year olds aren't smart. When we describe one  
as smart, it's shorthand for "smarter than other three year olds."SplitPerhaps it's a technicality to point out that a predisposition to  
intelligence is not the same as intelligence. But it's an important  
technicality, because it reminds us that we can become smarter,  
just as we can become wiser.The alarming thing is that we may have to choose between the two.If wisdom and intelligence are the average and peaks of the same  
curve, then they converge as the number of points on the curve  
decreases. If there's just one point, they're identical: the average  
and maximum are the same. But as the number of points increases,  
wisdom and intelligence diverge. And historically the number of  
points on the curve seems to have been increasing: our ability is  
tested in an ever wider range of situations.In the time of Confucius and Socrates, people seem to have regarded  
wisdom, learning, and intelligence as more closely related than we  
do. Distinguishing between "wise" and "smart" is a modern habit.  
[5]  
And the reason we do is that they've been diverging. As knowledge  
gets more specialized, there are more points on the curve, and the  
distinction between the spikes and the average becomes sharper,  
like a digital image rendered with more pixels.One consequence is that some old recipes may have become obsolete.  
At the very least we have to go back and figure out if they were  
really recipes for wisdom or intelligence. But the really striking  
change, as intelligence and wisdom drift apart, is that we may have  
to decide which we prefer. We may not be able to optimize for both  
simultaneously.Society seems to have voted for intelligence. We no longer admire  
the sage—not the way people did two thousand years ago. Now  
we admire the genius. Because in fact the distinction we began  
with has a rather brutal converse: just as you can be smart without  
being very wise, you can be wise without being very smart. That  
doesn't sound especially admirable. That gets you James Bond, who  
knows what to do in a lot of situations, but has to rely on Q for  
the ones involving math.Intelligence and wisdom are obviously not mutually exclusive. In  
fact, a high average may help support high peaks. But there are  
reasons to believe that at some point you have to choose between  
them. One is the example of very smart people, who are so often  
unwise that in popular culture this now seems to be regarded as the  
rule rather than the exception. Perhaps the absent-minded professor  
is wise in his way, or wiser than he seems, but he's not wise in  
the way Confucius or Socrates wanted people to be.   
[6]NewFor both Confucius and Socrates, wisdom, virtue, and happiness were  
necessarily related. The wise man was someone who knew what the  
right choice was and always made it; to be the right choice, it had  
to be morally right; he was therefore always happy, knowing he'd  
done the best he could. I can't think of many ancient philosophers  
who would have disagreed with that, so far as it goes."The superior man is always happy; the small man sad," said Confucius.  
[7]Whereas a few years ago I read an interview with a mathematician  
who said that most nights he went to bed discontented, feeling he  
hadn't made enough progress.   
[8]  
The Chinese and Greek words we  
translate as "happy" didn't mean exactly what we do by it, but  
there's enough overlap that this remark contradicts them.Is the mathematician a small man because he's discontented? No;  
he's just doing a kind of work that wasn't very common in Confucius's  
day.Human knowledge seems to grow fractally. Time after time, something  
that seemed a small and uninteresting area—experimental error,  
even—turns out, when examined up close, to have as much in  
it as all knowledge up to that point. Several of the fractal buds  
that have exploded since ancient times involve inventing and  
discovering new things. Math, for example, used to be something a  
handful of people did part-time. Now it's the career of thousands.  
And in work that involves making new things, some old rules don't  
apply.Recently I've spent some time advising people, and there I find the  
ancient rule still works: try to understand the situation as well  
as you can, give the best advice you can based on your experience,  
and then don't worry about it, knowing you did all you could. But  
I don't have anything like this serenity when I'm writing an essay.  
Then I'm worried. What if I run out of ideas? And when I'm writing,  
four nights out of five I go to bed discontented, feeling I didn't  
get enough done.Advising people and writing are fundamentally different types of  
work. When people come to you with a problem and you have to figure  
out the right thing to do, you don't (usually) have to invent  
anything. You just weigh the alternatives and try to judge which  
is the prudent choice. But prudence can't tell me what sentence  
to write next. The search space is too big.Someone like a judge or a military officer can in much of his work  
be guided by duty, but duty is no guide in making things. Makers  
depend on something more precarious: inspiration. And like most  
people who lead a precarious existence, they tend to be worried,  
not contented. In that respect they're more like the small man of  
Confucius's day, always one bad harvest (or ruler) away from  
starvation. Except instead of being at the mercy of weather and  
officials, they're at the mercy of their own imagination.LimitsTo me it was a relief just to realize it might be ok to be discontented.  
The idea that a successful person should be happy has thousands of  
years of momentum behind it. If I was any good, why didn't I have  
the easy confidence winners are supposed to have? But that, I now  
believe, is like a runner asking "If I'm such a good athlete, why  
do I feel so tired?" Good runners still get tired; they just get  
tired at higher speeds.People whose work is to invent or discover things are in the same  
position as the runner. There's no way for them to do the best  
they can, because there's no limit to what they could do. The  
closest you can come is to compare yourself to other people. But  
the better you do, the less this matters. An undergrad who gets  
something published feels like a star. But for someone at the top  
of the field, what's the test of doing well? Runners can at least  
compare themselves to others doing exactly the same thing; if you  
win an Olympic gold medal, you can be fairly content, even if you  
think you could have run a bit faster. But what is a novelist to  
do?Whereas if you're doing the kind of work in which problems are  
presented to you and you have to choose between several alternatives,  
there's an upper bound on your performance: choosing the best every  
time. In ancient societies, nearly all work seems to have been of  
this type. The peasant had to decide whether a garment was worth  
mending, and the king whether or not to invade his neighbor, but  
neither was expected to invent anything. In principle they could  
have; the king could have invented firearms, then invaded his  
neighbor. But in practice innovations were so rare that they weren't  
expected of you, any more than goalkeepers are expected to score  
goals.   
[9]  
In practice, it seemed as if there was a correct decision  
in every situation, and if you made it you'd done your job perfectly,  
just as a goalkeeper who prevents the other team from scoring is  
considered to have played a perfect game.In this world, wisdom seemed paramount.   
[10]  
Even now, most people  
do work in which problems are put before them and they have to  
choose the best alternative. But as knowledge has grown more  
specialized, there are more and more types of work in which people  
have to make up new things, and in which performance is therefore  
unbounded. Intelligence has become increasingly important relative  
to wisdom because there is more room for spikes.RecipesAnother sign we may have to choose between intelligence and wisdom  
is how different their recipes are. Wisdom seems to come largely  
from curing childish qualities, and intelligence largely from  
cultivating them.Recipes for wisdom, particularly ancient ones, tend to have a  
remedial character. To achieve wisdom one must cut away all the  
debris that fills one's head on emergence from childhood, leaving  
only the important stuff. Both self-control and experience have  
this effect: to eliminate the random biases that come from your own  
nature and from the circumstances of your upbringing respectively.  
That's not all wisdom is, but it's a large part of it. Much of  
what's in the sage's head is also in the head of every twelve year  
old. The difference is that in the head of the twelve year old  
it's mixed together with a lot of random junk.The path to intelligence seems to be through working on hard problems.  
You develop intelligence as you might develop muscles, through  
exercise. But there can't be too much compulsion here. No amount  
of discipline can replace genuine curiosity. So cultivating  
intelligence seems to be a matter of identifying some bias in one's  
character—some tendency to be interested in certain types of  
things—and nurturing it. Instead of obliterating your  
idiosyncrasies in an effort to make yourself a neutral vessel for  
the truth, you select one and try to grow it from a seedling into  
a tree.The wise are all much alike in their wisdom, but very smart people  
tend to be smart in distinctive ways.Most of our educational traditions aim at wisdom. So perhaps one  
reason schools work badly is that they're trying to make intelligence  
using recipes for wisdom. Most recipes for wisdom have an element  
of subjection. At the very least, you're supposed to do what the  
teacher says. The more extreme recipes aim to break down your  
individuality the way basic training does. But that's not the route  
to intelligence. Whereas wisdom comes through humility, it may  
actually help, in cultivating intelligence, to have a mistakenly  
high opinion of your abilities, because that encourages you to keep  
working. Ideally till you realize how mistaken you were.(The reason it's hard to learn new skills late in life is not just  
that one's brain is less malleable. Another probably even worse  
obstacle is that one has higher standards.)I realize we're on dangerous ground here. I'm not proposing the  
primary goal of education should be to increase students' "self-esteem."  
That just breeds laziness. And in any case, it doesn't really fool  
the kids, not the smart ones. They can tell at a young age that a  
contest where everyone wins is a fraud.A teacher has to walk a narrow path: you want to encourage kids to  
come up with things on their own, but you can't simply applaud  
everything they produce. You have to be a good audience: appreciative,  
but not too easily impressed. And that's a lot of work. You have  
to have a good enough grasp of kids' capacities at different ages  
to know when to be surprised.That's the opposite of traditional recipes for education. Traditionally  
the student is the audience, not the teacher; the student's job is  
not to invent, but to absorb some prescribed body of material. (The  
use of the term "recitation" for sections in some colleges is a  
fossil of this.) The problem with these old traditions is that  
they're too much influenced by recipes for wisdom.DifferentI deliberately gave this essay a provocative title; of course it's  
worth being wise. But I think it's important to understand the  
relationship between intelligence and wisdom, and particularly what  
seems to be the growing gap between them. That way we can avoid  
applying rules and standards to intelligence that are really meant  
for wisdom. These two senses of "knowing what to do" are more  
different than most people realize. The path to wisdom is through  
discipline, and the path to intelligence through carefully selected  
self-indulgence. Wisdom is universal, and intelligence idiosyncratic.  
And while wisdom yields calmness, intelligence much of the time  
leads to discontentment.That's particularly worth remembering. A physicist friend recently  
told me half his department was on Prozac. Perhaps if we acknowledge  
that some amount of frustration is inevitable in certain kinds  
of work, we can mitigate its effects. Perhaps we can box it up and  
put it away some of the time, instead of letting it flow together  
with everyday sadness to produce what seems an alarmingly large  
pool. At the very least, we can avoid being discontented about  
being discontented.If you feel exhausted, it's not necessarily because there's something  
wrong with you. Maybe you're just running fast.Notes[1]  
Gauss was supposedly asked this when he was 10. Instead of  
laboriously adding together the numbers like the other students,  
he saw that they consisted of 50 pairs that each summed to 101 (100  
+ 1, 99 + 2, etc), and that he could just multiply 101 by 50 to get  
the answer, 5050.[2]  
A variant is that intelligence is the ability to solve problems,  
and wisdom the judgement to know how to use those solutions. But  
while this is certainly an important relationship between wisdom  
and intelligence, it's not the distinction between them. Wisdom  
is useful in solving problems too, and intelligence can help in  
deciding what to do with the solutions.[3]  
In judging both intelligence and wisdom we have to factor out  
some knowledge. People who know the combination of a safe will be  
better at opening it than people who don't, but no one would say  
that was a test of intelligence or wisdom.But knowledge overlaps with wisdom and probably also intelligence.  
A knowledge of human nature is certainly part of wisdom. So where  
do we draw the line?Perhaps the solution is to discount knowledge that at some point  
has a sharp drop in utility. For example, understanding French  
will help you in a large number of situations, but its value drops  
sharply as soon as no one else involved knows French. Whereas the  
value of understanding vanity would decline more gradually.The knowledge whose utility drops sharply is the kind that has  
little relation to other knowledge. This includes mere conventions,  
like languages and safe combinations, and also what we'd call  
"random" facts, like movie stars' birthdays, or how to distinguish  
1956 from 1957 Studebakers.[4]  
People seeking some single thing called "wisdom" have been  
fooled by grammar. Wisdom is just knowing the right thing to do,  
and there are a hundred and one different qualities that help in  
that. Some, like selflessness, might come from meditating in an  
empty room, and others, like a knowledge of human nature, might  
come from going to drunken parties.Perhaps realizing this will help dispel the cloud of semi-sacred  
mystery that surrounds wisdom in so many people's eyes. The mystery  
comes mostly from looking for something that doesn't exist. And  
the reason there have historically been so many different schools  
of thought about how to achieve wisdom is that they've focused on  
different components of it.When I use the word "wisdom" in this essay, I mean no more than  
whatever collection of qualities helps people make the right choice  
in a wide variety of situations.[5]  
Even in English, our sense of the word "intelligence" is  
surprisingly recent. Predecessors like "understanding" seem to  
have had a broader meaning.[6]  
There is of course some uncertainty about how closely the remarks  
attributed to Confucius and Socrates resemble their actual opinions.  
I'm using these names as we use the name "Homer," to mean the  
hypothetical people who said the things attributed to them.[7]  
Analects VII:36, Fung trans.Some translators use "calm" instead of "happy." One source of  
difficulty here is that present-day English speakers have a different  
idea of happiness from many older societies. Every language probably  
has a word meaning "how one feels when things are going well," but  
different cultures react differently when things go well. We react  
like children, with smiles and laughter. But in a more reserved  
society, or in one where life was tougher, the reaction might be a  
quiet contentment.[8]  
It may have been Andrew Wiles, but I'm not sure. If anyone  
remembers such an interview, I'd appreciate hearing from you.[9]  
Confucius claimed proudly that he had never invented  
anything—that he had simply passed on an accurate account of  
ancient traditions. [Analects VII:1] It's hard for us now to  
appreciate how important a duty it must have been in preliterate  
societies to remember and pass on the group's accumulated knowledge.  
Even in Confucius's time it still seems to have been the first duty  
of the scholar.[10]  
The bias toward wisdom in ancient philosophy may be exaggerated  
by the fact that, in both Greece and China, many of the first  
philosophers (including Confucius and Plato) saw themselves as  
teachers of administrators, and so thought disproportionately about  
such matters. The few people who did invent things, like storytellers,  
must have seemed an outlying data point that could be ignored.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Sarah Harlin, Jessica Livingston,  
and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.Polish TranslationFrench TranslationRussian TranslationRussian Translation

# Having Kids

December 2019Before I had kids, I was afraid of having kids. Up to that point I  
felt about kids the way the young Augustine felt about living  
virtuously. I'd have been sad to think I'd never have children.  
But did I want them now? No.If I had kids, I'd become a parent, and parents, as I'd known since  
I was a kid, were uncool. They were dull and responsible and had  
no fun. And while it's not surprising that kids would believe that,  
to be honest I hadn't seen much as an adult to change my mind.  
Whenever I'd noticed parents with kids, the kids seemed to be  
terrors, and the parents pathetic harried creatures, even when they  
prevailed.When people had babies, I congratulated them enthusiastically,  
because that seemed to be what one did. But I didn't feel it at  
all. "Better you than me," I was thinking.Now when people have babies I congratulate them enthusiastically and  
I mean it. Especially the first one. I feel like they just got the best gift in the world.What changed, of course, is that I had kids. Something I dreaded  
turned out to be wonderful.Partly, and I won't deny it, this is because of serious chemical  
changes that happened almost instantly when our first child was  
born. It was like someone flipped a switch. I suddenly felt  
protective not just toward our child, but toward all children. As I was  
driving my wife and new son home from the hospital, I approached a  
crosswalk full of pedestrians, and I found myself thinking "I have  
to be really careful of all these people. Every one of them is  
someone's child!"So to some extent you can't trust me when I say having kids is  
great. To some extent I'm like a religious cultist telling you  
that you'll be happy if you join the cult too  but only because  
joining the cult will alter your mind in a way that will make you  
happy to be a cult member.But not entirely. There were some things  
about having kids that I clearly got wrong before I had them.For example, there was a huge amount of selection bias in my  
observations of parents and children. Some parents may have noticed  
that I wrote "Whenever I'd noticed parents with kids." Of course  
the times I noticed kids were when things were going wrong. I only  
noticed them when they made noise. And where was I when I noticed  
them? Ordinarily I never went to places with kids, so the only  
times I encountered them were in shared bottlenecks like airplanes.  
Which is not exactly a representative sample. Flying with a toddler  
is something very few parents enjoy.What I didn't notice, because they tend to be much quieter, were  
all the great moments parents had with kids. People don't talk about  
these much  the magic is hard to put into words, and all other  
parents know about them anyway  but one of the great things about  
having kids is that there are so many times when you feel there is  
nowhere else you'd rather be, and nothing else you'd rather be  
doing. You don't have to be doing anything special. You could just  
be going somewhere together, or putting them to bed, or pushing  
them on the swings at the park. But you wouldn't trade these moments  
for anything. One doesn't tend to associate kids with peace, but  
that's what you feel. You don't need to look any  
further than where you are right now.Before I had kids, I had moments of this kind of peace, but they  
were rarer. With kids it can happen several times a day.My other source of data about kids was my own childhood, and that  
was similarly misleading. I was pretty bad, and was always in trouble  
for something or other. So it seemed to me that parenthood was  
essentially law enforcement. I didn't realize there were good times  
too.I remember my mother telling me once when I was about 30 that she'd  
really enjoyed having me and my sister. My god, I thought, this  
woman is a saint. She not only endured all the pain we subjected  
her to, but actually enjoyed it? Now I realize she was simply telling  
the truth.She said that one reason she liked having us was that we'd been  
interesting to talk to. That took me by surprise when I had kids.  
You don't just love them. They become your friends too. They're  
really interesting. And while I admit small children are disastrously  
fond of repetition (anything worth doing once is worth doing fifty  
times) it's often genuinely fun to play with them. That surprised  
me too. Playing with a 2 year old was fun when I was 2 and definitely  
not fun when I was 6. Why would it become fun again later? But it  
does.There are of course times that are pure drudgery. Or worse still,  
terror. Having kids is one of those intense types of experience  
that are hard to imagine unless you've had them. But it is not, as I  
implicitly believed before having kids, simply your DNA heading for  
the lifeboats.Some of my worries about having kids were right, though. They  
definitely make you less productive. I know having kids makes some  
people get their act together, but if your act was already together,  
you're going to have less time to do it in. In particular, you're  
going to have to work to a schedule. Kids have schedules. I'm not  
sure if it's because that's how kids are, or because it's the only  
way to integrate their lives with adults', but once you have kids,  
you tend to have to work on their schedule.You will have chunks of time to work. But you can't let work spill  
promiscuously through your whole life, like I used to before I had  
kids. You're going to have to work at the same time every day,  
whether inspiration is flowing or not, and there are going to be  
times when you have to stop, even if it is.I've been able to adapt to working this way. Work, like love, finds  
a way. If there are only certain times it can happen, it happens  
at those times. So while I don't get as much done as before I had  
kids, I get enough done.I hate to say this, because being ambitious has always been a part  
of my identity, but having kids may make one less ambitious. It  
hurts to see that sentence written down. I squirm to avoid it. But  
if there weren't something real there, why would I squirm? The  
fact is, once you have kids, you're probably going to care more  
about them than you do about yourself. And attention is a zero-sum  
game. Only one idea at a time can be the   
top idea in your mind.  
Once you have kids, it will often be your kids, and that means it  
will less often be some project you're working on.I have some hacks for sailing close to this wind. For example, when  
I write essays, I think about what I'd want my kids to know. That  
drives me to get things right. And when I was writing   
Bel, I told  
my kids that once I finished it I'd take them to Africa. When you  
say that sort of thing to a little kid, they treat it as a promise.  
Which meant I had to finish or I'd be taking away their trip to  
Africa. Maybe if I'm really lucky such tricks could put me net  
ahead. But the wind is there, no question.On the other hand, what kind of wimpy ambition do you have if it  
won't survive having kids? Do you have so little to spare?And while having kids may be warping my present judgement, it hasn't  
overwritten my memory. I remember perfectly well what life was like  
before. Well enough to miss some things a lot, like the  
ability to take off for some other country at a moment's notice.  
That was so great. Why did I never do that?See what I did there? The fact is, most of the freedom I had before  
kids, I never used. I paid for it in loneliness, but I never used  
it.I had plenty of happy times before I had kids. But if I count up  
happy moments, not just potential happiness but actual happy moments,  
there are more after kids than before. Now I practically have it  
on tap, almost any bedtime.People's experiences as parents  
vary a lot, and I know I've been lucky. But I think the worries I  
had before having kids must be pretty common, and judging by other  
parents' faces when they see their kids, so must the happiness that  
kids bring.  
Note[1] Adults are sophisticated enough to see 2 year olds for the  
fascinatingly complex characters they are, whereas to most 6 year  
olds, 2 year olds are just defective 6 year olds.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and Robert Morris  
for reading drafts of this.Arabic TranslationSlovak Translation

# How to Lose Time and Money

July 2010When we sold our startup in 1998 I suddenly got a lot of money. I  
now had to think about something I hadn't had to think about before:  
how not to lose it. I knew it was possible to go from rich to  
poor, just as it was possible to go from poor to rich. But while  
I'd spent a lot of the past several years studying the paths from  
poor to rich,   
I knew practically nothing about the paths from rich  
to poor. Now, in order to avoid them, I had to learn where they  
were.So I started to pay attention to how fortunes are lost. If you'd  
asked me as a kid how rich people became poor, I'd have said by  
spending all their money. That's how it happens in books and movies,  
because that's the colorful way to do it. But in fact the way most  
fortunes are lost is not through excessive expenditure, but through  
bad investments.It's hard to spend a fortune without noticing. Someone with ordinary  
tastes would find it hard to blow through more than a few tens of  
thousands of dollars without thinking "wow, I'm spending a lot of  
money." Whereas if you start trading derivatives, you can lose a  
million dollars (as much as you want, really) in the blink of an  
eye.In most people's minds, spending money on luxuries sets off alarms  
that making investments doesn't. Luxuries seem self-indulgent.  
And unless you got the money by inheriting it or winning a lottery,  
you've already been thoroughly trained that self-indulgence leads  
to trouble. Investing bypasses those alarms. You're not spending  
the money; you're just moving it from one asset to another. Which  
is why people trying to sell you expensive things say "it's an  
investment."The solution is to develop new alarms. This can be a tricky business,  
because while the alarms that prevent you from overspending are so  
basic that they may even be in our DNA, the ones that prevent you  
from making bad investments have to be learned, and are sometimes  
fairly counterintuitive.A few days ago I realized something surprising: the situation with  
time is much the same as with money. The most dangerous way to  
lose time is not to spend it having fun, but to spend it doing fake  
work. When you spend time having fun, you know you're being  
self-indulgent. Alarms start to go off fairly quickly. If I woke  
up one morning and sat down on the sofa and watched TV all day, I'd  
feel like something was terribly wrong. Just thinking about it  
makes me wince. I'd start to feel uncomfortable after sitting on  
a sofa watching TV for 2 hours, let alone a whole day.And yet I've definitely had days when I might as well have sat in  
front of a TV all day — days at the end of which, if I asked myself  
what I got done that day, the answer would have been: basically,  
nothing. I feel bad after these days too, but nothing like as bad  
as I'd feel if I spent the whole day on the sofa watching TV. If  
I spent a whole day watching TV I'd feel like I was descending into  
perdition. But the same alarms don't go off on the days when I get  
nothing done, because I'm doing stuff that seems, superficially,  
like real work. Dealing with email, for example. You do it sitting  
at a desk. It's not fun. So it must be work.With time, as with money, avoiding pleasure is no longer enough to  
protect you. It probably was enough to protect hunter-gatherers,  
and perhaps all pre-industrial societies. So nature and nurture  
combine to make us avoid self-indulgence. But the world has gotten  
more complicated: the most dangerous traps now are new behaviors  
that bypass our alarms about self-indulgence by mimicking more  
virtuous types. And the worst thing is, they're not even fun.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison, Jessica  
Livingston, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.

# Superlinear Returns

October 2023One of the most important things I didn't understand about the world  
when I was a child is the degree to which the returns for performance  
are superlinear.Teachers and coaches implicitly told us the returns were linear.  
"You get out," I heard a thousand times, "what you put in." They  
meant well, but this is rarely true. If your product is only half  
as good as your competitor's, you don't get half as many customers.  
You get no customers, and you go out of business.It's obviously true that the returns for performance are superlinear  
in business. Some think this is a flaw of capitalism, and that if  
we changed the rules it would stop being true. But superlinear  
returns for performance are a feature of the world, not an artifact  
of rules we've invented. We see the same pattern in fame, power,  
military victories, knowledge, and even benefit to humanity. In all  
of these, the rich get richer.  
[1]You can't understand the world without understanding the concept  
of superlinear returns. And if you're ambitious you definitely  
should, because this will be the wave you surf on.It may seem as if there are a lot of different situations with  
superlinear returns, but as far as I can tell they reduce to two  
fundamental causes: exponential growth and thresholds.The most obvious case of superlinear returns is when you're working  
on something that grows exponentially. For example, growing bacterial  
cultures. When they grow at all, they grow exponentially. But they're  
tricky to grow. Which means the difference in outcome between someone  
who's adept at it and someone who's not is very great.Startups can also grow exponentially, and we see the same pattern  
there. Some manage to achieve high growth rates. Most don't. And  
as a result you get qualitatively different outcomes: the companies  
with high growth rates tend to become immensely valuable, while the  
ones with lower growth rates may not even survive.Y Combinator encourages founders to focus on growth rate rather  
than absolute numbers. It prevents them from being discouraged early  
on, when the absolute numbers are still low. It also helps them  
decide what to focus on: you can use growth rate as a compass to  
tell you how to evolve the company. But the main advantage is that  
by focusing on growth rate you tend to get something that grows  
exponentially.YC doesn't explicitly tell founders that with growth rate "you get  
out what you put in," but it's not far from the truth. And if growth  
rate were proportional to performance, then the reward for performance  
p over time t would be proportional to pt.Even after decades of thinking about this, I find that sentence  
startling.Whenever how well you do depends on how well you've done, you'll  
get exponential growth. But neither our DNA nor our customs prepare  
us for it. No one finds exponential growth natural; every child is  
surprised, the first time they hear it, by the story of the man who  
asks the king for a single grain of rice the first day and double  
the amount each successive day.What we don't understand naturally we develop customs to deal with,  
but we don't have many customs about exponential growth either,  
because there have been so few instances of it in human history.  
In principle herding should have been one: the more animals you  
had, the more offspring they'd have. But in practice grazing land  
was the limiting factor, and there was no plan for growing that  
exponentially.Or more precisely, no generally applicable plan. There was a way  
to grow one's territory exponentially: by conquest. The more territory  
you control, the more powerful your army becomes, and the easier  
it is to conquer new territory. This is why history is full of  
empires. But so few people created or ran empires that their  
experiences didn't affect customs very much. The emperor was a  
remote and terrifying figure, not a source of lessons one could use  
in one's own life.The most common case of exponential growth in preindustrial times  
was probably scholarship. The more you know, the easier it is to  
learn new things. The result, then as now, was that some people  
were startlingly more knowledgeable than the rest about certain  
topics. But this didn't affect customs much either. Although empires  
of ideas can overlap and there can thus be far more emperors, in  
preindustrial times this type of empire had little practical effect.  
[2]That has changed in the last few centuries. Now the emperors of  
ideas can design bombs that defeat the emperors of territory. But  
this phenomenon is still so new that we haven't fully assimilated  
it. Few even of the participants realize they're benefitting from  
exponential growth or ask what they can learn from other instances  
of it.The other source of superlinear returns is embodied in the expression  
"winner take all." In a sports match the relationship between  
performance and return is a step function: the winning team gets  
one win whether they do much better or just slightly better.  
[3]The source of the step function is not competition per se, however.  
It's that there are thresholds in the outcome. You don't need  
competition to get those. There can be thresholds in situations  
where you're the only participant, like proving a theorem or hitting  
a target.It's remarkable how often a situation with one source of superlinear  
returns also has the other. Crossing thresholds leads to exponential  
growth: the winning side in a battle usually suffers less damage,  
which makes them more likely to win in the future. And exponential  
growth helps you cross thresholds: in a market with network effects,  
a company that grows fast enough can shut out potential competitors.Fame is an interesting example of a phenomenon that combines both  
sources of superlinear returns. Fame grows exponentially because  
existing fans bring you new ones. But the fundamental reason it's  
so concentrated is thresholds: there's only so much room on the  
A-list in the average person's head.The most important case combining both sources of superlinear returns  
may be learning. Knowledge grows exponentially, but there are also  
thresholds in it. Learning to ride a bicycle, for example. Some of  
these thresholds are akin to machine tools: once you learn to read,  
you're able to learn anything else much faster. But the most important  
thresholds of all are those representing new discoveries. Knowledge  
seems to be fractal in the sense that if you push hard at the  
boundary of one area of knowledge, you sometimes discover a whole  
new field. And if you do, you get first crack at all the new  
discoveries to be made in it. Newton did this, and so did Durer and  
Darwin.  
Are there general rules for finding situations with superlinear  
returns? The most obvious one is to seek work that compounds.There are two ways work can compound. It can compound directly, in  
the sense that doing well in one cycle causes you to do better in  
the next. That happens for example when you're building infrastructure,  
or growing an audience or brand. Or work can compound by teaching  
you, since learning compounds. This second case is an interesting  
one because you may feel you're doing badly as it's happening. You  
may be failing to achieve your immediate goal. But if you're learning  
a lot, then you're getting exponential growth nonetheless.This is one reason Silicon Valley is so tolerant of failure. People  
in Silicon Valley aren't blindly tolerant of failure. They'll only  
continue to bet on you if you're learning from your failures. But  
if you are, you are in fact a good bet: maybe your company didn't  
grow the way you wanted, but you yourself have, and that should  
yield results eventually.Indeed, the forms of exponential growth that don't consist of  
learning are so often intermixed with it that we should probably  
treat this as the rule rather than the exception. Which yields  
another heuristic: always be learning. If you're not learning,  
you're probably not on a path that leads to superlinear returns.But don't overoptimize what you're learning. Don't limit yourself  
to learning things that are already known to be valuable. You're  
learning; you don't know for sure yet what's going to be valuable,  
and if you're too strict you'll lop off the outliers.What about step functions? Are there also useful heuristics of the  
form "seek thresholds" or "seek competition?" Here the situation  
is trickier. The existence of a threshold doesn't guarantee the  
game will be worth playing. If you play a round of Russian roulette,  
you'll be in a situation with a threshold, certainly, but in the  
best case you're no better off. "Seek competition" is similarly  
useless; what if the prize isn't worth competing for? Sufficiently  
fast exponential growth guarantees both the shape and magnitude of  
the return curve — because something that grows fast enough will  
grow big even if it's trivially small at first — but thresholds  
only guarantee the shape.  
[4]A principle for taking advantage of thresholds has to include a  
test to ensure the game is worth playing. Here's one that does: if  
you come across something that's mediocre yet still popular, it  
could be a good idea to replace it. For example, if a company makes  
a product that people dislike yet still buy, then presumably they'd  
buy a better alternative if you made one.  
[5]It would be great if there were a way to find promising intellectual  
thresholds. Is there a way to tell which questions have whole new  
fields beyond them? I doubt we could ever predict this with certainty,  
but the prize is so valuable that it would be useful to have  
predictors that were even a little better than random, and there's  
hope of finding those. We can to some degree predict when a research  
problem isn't likely to lead to new discoveries: when it seems  
legit but boring. Whereas the kind that do lead to new discoveries  
tend to seem very mystifying, but perhaps unimportant. (If they  
were mystifying and obviously important, they'd be famous open  
questions with lots of people already working on them.) So one  
heuristic here is to be driven by curiosity rather than careerism  
— to give free rein to your curiosity instead of working on what  
you're supposed to.  
The prospect of superlinear returns for performance is an exciting  
one for the ambitious. And there's good news in this department:  
this territory is expanding in both directions. There are more types  
of work in which you can get superlinear returns, and the returns  
themselves are growing.There are two reasons for this, though they're so closely intertwined  
that they're more like one and a half: progress in technology, and  
the decreasing importance of organizations.Fifty years ago it used to be much more necessary to be part of an  
organization to work on ambitious projects. It was the only way to  
get the resources you needed, the only way to have colleagues, and  
the only way to get distribution. So in 1970 your prestige was in  
most cases the prestige of the organization you belonged to. And  
prestige was an accurate predictor, because if you weren't part of  
an organization, you weren't likely to achieve much. There were a  
handful of exceptions, most notably artists and writers, who worked  
alone using inexpensive tools and had their own brands. But even  
they were at the mercy of organizations for reaching audiences.  
[6]A world dominated by organizations damped variation in the returns  
for performance. But this world has eroded significantly just in  
my lifetime. Now a lot more people can have the freedom that artists  
and writers had in the 20th century. There are lots of ambitious  
projects that don't require much initial funding, and lots of new  
ways to learn, make money, find colleagues, and reach audiences.There's still plenty of the old world left, but the rate of change  
has been dramatic by historical standards. Especially considering  
what's at stake. It's hard to imagine a more fundamental change  
than one in the returns for performance.Without the damping effect of institutions, there will be more  
variation in outcomes. Which doesn't imply everyone will be better  
off: people who do well will do even better, but those who do badly  
will do worse. That's an important point to bear in mind. Exposing  
oneself to superlinear returns is not for everyone. Most people  
will be better off as part of the pool. So who should shoot for  
superlinear returns? Ambitious people of two types: those who know  
they're so good that they'll be net ahead in a world with higher  
variation, and those, particularly the young, who can afford to  
risk trying it to find out.  
[7]The switch away from institutions won't simply be an exodus of their  
current inhabitants. Many of the new winners will be people they'd  
never have let in. So the resulting democratization of opportunity  
will be both greater and more authentic than any tame intramural  
version the institutions themselves might have cooked up.  
Not everyone is happy about this great unlocking of ambition. It  
threatens some vested interests and contradicts some ideologies. [8]  
But if you're an ambitious individual it's good news for you.  
How should you take advantage of it?The most obvious way to take advantage of superlinear returns for  
performance is by doing exceptionally good work. At the far end of  
the curve, incremental effort is a bargain. All the more so because  
there's less competition at the far end — and not just for the  
obvious reason that it's hard to do something exceptionally well,  
but also because people find the prospect so intimidating that few  
even try. Which means it's not just a bargain to do exceptional  
work, but a bargain even to try to.There are many variables that affect how good your work is, and if  
you want to be an outlier you need to get nearly all of them right.  
For example, to do something exceptionally well, you have to be  
interested in it. Mere diligence is not enough. So in a world with  
superlinear returns, it's even more valuable to know what you're  
interested in, and to find ways to work on it.  
[9]  
It will also be  
important to choose work that suits your circumstances. For example,  
if there's a kind of work that inherently requires a huge expenditure  
of time and energy, it will be increasingly valuable to do it when  
you're young and don't yet have children.There's a surprising amount of technique to doing great work.  
It's not just a matter of trying hard. I'm going to take a shot  
giving a recipe in one paragraph.Choose work you have a natural aptitude for and a deep interest in.  
Develop a habit of working on your own projects; it doesn't matter  
what they are so long as you find them excitingly ambitious. Work  
as hard as you can without burning out, and this will eventually  
bring you to one of the frontiers of knowledge. These look smooth  
from a distance, but up close they're full of gaps. Notice and  
explore such gaps, and if you're lucky one will expand into a whole  
new field. Take as much risk as you can afford; if you're not failing  
occasionally you're probably being too conservative. Seek out the  
best colleagues. Develop good taste and learn from the best examples.  
Be honest, especially with yourself. Exercise and eat and sleep  
well and avoid the more dangerous drugs. When in doubt, follow your  
curiosity. It never lies, and it knows more than you do about what's  
worth paying attention to.  
[10]And there is of course one other thing you need: to be lucky. Luck  
is always a factor, but it's even more of a factor when you're  
working on your own rather than as part of an organization. And  
though there are some valid aphorisms about luck being where  
preparedness meets opportunity and so on, there's also a component  
of true chance that you can't do anything about. The solution is  
to take multiple shots. Which is another reason to start taking  
risks early.  
The best example of a field with superlinear returns is probably  
science. It has exponential growth, in the form of learning, combined  
with thresholds at the extreme edge of performance — literally at  
the limits of knowledge.The result has been a level of inequality in scientific discovery  
that makes the wealth inequality of even the most stratified societies  
seem mild by comparison. Newton's discoveries were arguably greater  
than all his contemporaries' combined.  
[11]This point may seem obvious, but it might be just as well to spell  
it out. Superlinear returns imply inequality. The steeper the return  
curve, the greater the variation in outcomes.In fact, the correlation between superlinear returns and inequality  
is so strong that it yields another heuristic for finding work of  
this type: look for fields where a few big winners outperform  
everyone else. A kind of work where everyone does about the same  
is unlikely to be one with superlinear returns.What are fields where a few big winners outperform everyone else?  
Here are some obvious ones: sports, politics, art, music, acting,  
directing, writing, math, science, starting companies, and investing.  
In sports the phenomenon is due to externally imposed thresholds;  
you only need to be a few percent faster to win every race. In  
politics, power grows much as it did in the days of emperors. And  
in some of the other fields (including politics) success is driven  
largely by fame, which has its own source of superlinear growth.  
But when we exclude sports and politics and the effects of fame, a  
remarkable pattern emerges: the remaining list is exactly the same  
as the list of fields where you have to be independent-minded to  
succeed — where your ideas have to be not just correct, but novel  
as well.  
[12]This is obviously the case in science. You can't publish papers  
saying things that other people have already said. But it's just  
as true in investing, for example. It's only useful to believe that  
a company will do well if most other investors don't; if everyone  
else thinks the company will do well, then its stock price will  
already reflect that, and there's no room to make money.What else can we learn from these fields? In all of them you have  
to put in the initial effort. Superlinear returns seem small at  
first. At this rate, you find yourself thinking, I'll never get  
anywhere. But because the reward curve rises so steeply at the far  
end, it's worth taking extraordinary measures to get there.In the startup world, the name for this principle is "do things  
that don't scale." If you pay a ridiculous amount of attention to  
your tiny initial set of customers, ideally you'll kick off exponential  
growth by word of mouth. But this same principle applies to anything  
that grows exponentially. Learning, for example. When you first  
start learning something, you feel lost. But it's worth making the  
initial effort to get a toehold, because the more you learn, the  
easier it will get.There's another more subtle lesson in the list of fields with  
superlinear returns: not to equate work with a job. For most of the  
20th century the two were identical for nearly everyone, and as a  
result we've inherited a custom that equates productivity with  
having a job. Even now to most people the phrase "your work" means  
their job. But to a writer or artist or scientist it means whatever  
they're currently studying or creating. For someone like that, their  
work is something they carry with them from job to job, if they  
have jobs at all. It may be done for an employer, but it's part of  
their portfolio.  
It's an intimidating prospect to enter a field where a few big  
winners outperform everyone else. Some people do this deliberately,  
but you don't need to. If you have sufficient natural ability and  
you follow your curiosity sufficiently far, you'll end up in one.  
Your curiosity won't let you be interested in boring questions, and  
interesting questions tend to create fields with superlinear returns  
if they're not already part of one.The territory of superlinear returns is by no means static. Indeed,  
the most extreme returns come from expanding it. So while both  
ambition and curiosity can get you into this territory, curiosity  
may be the more powerful of the two. Ambition tends to make you  
climb existing peaks, but if you stick close enough to an interesting  
enough question, it may grow into a mountain beneath you.NotesThere's a limit to how sharply you can distinguish between effort,  
performance, and return, because they're not sharply distinguished  
in fact. What counts as return to one person might be performance  
to another. But though the borders of these concepts are blurry,  
they're not meaningless. I've tried to write about them as precisely  
as I could without crossing into error.[1]  
Evolution itself is probably the most pervasive example of  
superlinear returns for performance. But this is hard for us to  
empathize with because we're not the recipients; we're the returns.[2]  
Knowledge did of course have a practical effect before the  
Industrial Revolution. The development of agriculture changed human  
life completely. But this kind of change was the result of broad,  
gradual improvements in technique, not the discoveries of a few  
exceptionally learned people.[3]  
It's not mathematically correct to describe a step function as  
superlinear, but a step function starting from zero works like a  
superlinear function when it describes the reward curve for effort  
by a rational actor. If it starts at zero then the part before the  
step is below any linearly increasing return, and the part after  
the step must be above the necessary return at that point or no one  
would bother.[4]  
Seeking competition could be a good heuristic in the sense that  
some people find it motivating. It's also somewhat of a guide to  
promising problems, because it's a sign that other people find them  
promising. But it's a very imperfect sign: often there's a clamoring  
crowd chasing some problem, and they all end up being trumped by  
someone quietly working on another one.[5]  
Not always, though. You have to be careful with this rule. When  
something is popular despite being mediocre, there's often a hidden  
reason why. Perhaps monopoly or regulation make it hard to compete.  
Perhaps customers have bad taste or have broken procedures for  
deciding what to buy. There are huge swathes of mediocre things  
that exist for such reasons.[6]  
In my twenties I wanted to be an artist   
and even went to art  
school to study painting. Mostly because I liked art, but a nontrivial  
part of my motivation came from the fact that artists seemed least  
at the mercy of organizations.[7]  
In principle everyone is getting superlinear returns. Learning  
compounds, and everyone learns in the course of their life. But in  
practice few push this kind of everyday learning to the point where  
the return curve gets really steep.[8]  
It's unclear exactly what advocates of "equity" mean by it.  
They seem to disagree among themselves. But whatever they mean is  
probably at odds with a world in which institutions have less power  
to control outcomes, and a handful of outliers do much better than  
everyone else.It may seem like bad luck for this concept that it arose at just  
the moment when the world was shifting in the opposite direction,  
but I don't think this was a coincidence. I think one reason it  
arose now is because its adherents feel threatened by rapidly  
increasing variation in performance.[9]  
Corollary: Parents who pressure their kids to work on something  
prestigious, like medicine, even though they have no interest in  
it, will be hosing them even more than they have in the past.[10]  
The original version of this paragraph was the first draft of  
"How to Do Great Work."   
As soon as I wrote it I realized it was a more important topic than superlinear  
returns, so I paused the present essay to expand this paragraph into its  
own. Practically nothing remains of the original version, because  
after I finished "How to Do Great Work" I rewrote it based on that.[11]  
Before the Industrial Revolution, people who got rich usually  
did it like emperors: capturing some resource made them more powerful  
and enabled them to capture more. Now it can be done like a scientist,  
by discovering or building something uniquely valuable. Most people  
who get rich use a mix of the old and the new ways, but in the most  
advanced economies the ratio has shifted dramatically toward discovery  
just in the last half century.[12]  
It's not surprising that conventional-minded people would  
dislike inequality if independent-mindedness is one of the biggest  
drivers of it. But it's not simply that they don't want anyone to  
have what they can't. The conventional-minded literally can't imagine  
what it's like to have novel ideas. So the whole phenomenon of great  
variation in performance seems unnatural to them, and when they  
encounter it they assume it must be due to cheating or to some  
malign external influence.Thanks   
to Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison, Tyler Cowen,  
Jessica Livingston, Harj Taggar, and Garry Tan for reading drafts  
of this.

# How to Do Great Work

July 2023If you collected lists of techniques for doing great work in a lot  
of different fields, what would the intersection look like? I decided  
to find out by making it.Partly my goal was to create a guide that could be used by someone  
working in any field. But I was also curious about the shape of the  
intersection. And one thing this exercise shows is that it does  
have a definite shape; it's not just a point labelled "work hard."The following recipe assumes you're very ambitious.  
The first step is to decide what to work on. The work you choose  
needs to have three qualities: it has to be something you have a  
natural aptitude for, that you have a deep interest in, and that  
offers scope to do great work.In practice you don't have to worry much about the third criterion.  
Ambitious people are if anything already too conservative about it.  
So all you need to do is find something you have an aptitude for  
and great interest in.  
[1]That sounds straightforward, but it's often quite difficult. When  
you're young you don't know what you're good at or what different  
kinds of work are like. Some kinds of work you end up doing may not  
even exist yet. So while some people know what they want to do at  
14, most have to figure it out.The way to figure out what to work on is by working. If you're not  
sure what to work on, guess. But pick something and get going.  
You'll probably guess wrong some of the time, but that's fine. It's  
good to know about multiple things; some of the biggest discoveries  
come from noticing connections between different fields.Develop a habit of working on your own projects. Don't let "work"  
mean something other people tell you to do. If you do manage to do  
great work one day, it will probably be on a project of your own.  
It may be within some bigger project, but you'll be driving your  
part of it.What should your projects be? Whatever seems to you excitingly  
ambitious. As you grow older and your taste in projects evolves,  
exciting and important will converge. At 7 it may seem excitingly  
ambitious to build huge things out of Lego, then at 14 to teach  
yourself calculus, till at 21 you're starting to explore unanswered  
questions in physics. But always preserve excitingness.There's a kind of excited curiosity that's both the engine and the  
rudder of great work. It will not only drive you, but if you let  
it have its way, will also show you what to work on.What are you excessively curious about — curious to a degree that  
would bore most other people? That's what you're looking for.Once you've found something you're excessively interested in, the  
next step is to learn enough about it to get you to one of the  
frontiers of knowledge. Knowledge expands fractally, and from a  
distance its edges look smooth, but once you learn enough to get  
close to one, they turn out to be full of gaps.The next step is to notice them. This takes some skill, because  
your brain wants to ignore such gaps in order to make a simpler  
model of the world. Many discoveries have come from asking questions  
about things that everyone else took for granted.   
[2]If the answers seem strange, so much the better. Great work often  
has a tincture of strangeness. You see this from painting to math.  
It would be affected to try to manufacture it, but if it appears,  
embrace it.Boldly chase outlier ideas, even if other people aren't interested  
in them — in fact, especially if they aren't. If you're excited  
about some possibility that everyone else ignores, and you have  
enough expertise to say precisely what they're all overlooking,  
that's as good a bet as you'll find.  
[3]Four steps: choose a field, learn enough to get to the frontier,  
notice gaps, explore promising ones. This is how practically everyone  
who's done great work has done it, from painters to physicists.Steps two and four will require hard work. It may not be possible  
to prove that you have to work hard to do great things, but the  
empirical evidence is on the scale of the evidence for mortality.  
That's why it's essential to work on something you're deeply  
interested in. Interest will drive you to work harder than mere  
diligence ever could.The three most powerful motives are curiosity, delight, and the  
desire to do something impressive. Sometimes they converge, and  
that combination is the most powerful of all.The big prize is to discover a new fractal bud. You notice a crack  
in the surface of knowledge, pry it open, and there's a whole world  
inside.Let's talk a little more about the complicated business of figuring  
out what to work on. The main reason it's hard is that you can't  
tell what most kinds of work are like except by doing them. Which  
means the four steps overlap: you may have to work at something for  
years before you know how much you like it or how good you are at  
it. And in the meantime you're not doing, and thus not learning  
about, most other kinds of work. So in the worst case you choose  
late based on very incomplete information.  
[4]The nature of ambition exacerbates this problem. Ambition comes in  
two forms, one that precedes interest in the subject and one that  
grows out of it. Most people who do great work have a mix, and the  
more you have of the former, the harder it will be to decide what  
to do.The educational systems in most countries pretend it's easy. They  
expect you to commit to a field long before you could know what  
it's really like. And as a result an ambitious person on an optimal  
trajectory will often read to the system as an instance of breakage.It would be better if they at least admitted it — if they admitted  
that the system not only can't do much to help you figure out what  
to work on, but is designed on the assumption that you'll somehow  
magically guess as a teenager. They don't tell you, but I will:  
when it comes to figuring out what to work on, you're on your own.  
Some people get lucky and do guess correctly, but the rest will  
find themselves scrambling diagonally across tracks laid down on  
the assumption that everyone does.What should you do if you're young and ambitious but don't know  
what to work on? What you should not do is drift along passively,  
assuming the problem will solve itself. You need to take action.  
But there is no systematic procedure you can follow. When you read  
biographies of people who've done great work, it's remarkable how  
much luck is involved. They discover what to work on as a result  
of a chance meeting, or by reading a book they happen to pick up.  
So you need to make yourself a big target for luck, and the way to  
do that is to be curious. Try lots of things, meet lots of people,  
read lots of books, ask lots of questions.  
[5]When in doubt, optimize for interestingness. Fields change as you  
learn more about them. What mathematicians do, for example, is very  
different from what you do in high school math classes. So you need  
to give different types of work a chance to show you what they're  
like. But a field should become increasingly interesting as you  
learn more about it. If it doesn't, it's probably not for you.Don't worry if you find you're interested in different things than  
other people. The stranger your tastes in interestingness, the  
better. Strange tastes are often strong ones, and a strong taste  
for work means you'll be productive. And you're more likely to find  
new things if you're looking where few have looked before.One sign that you're suited for some kind of work is when you like  
even the parts that other people find tedious or frightening.But fields aren't people; you don't owe them any loyalty. If in the  
course of working on one thing you discover another that's more  
exciting, don't be afraid to switch.If you're making something for people, make sure it's something  
they actually want. The best way to do this is to make something  
you yourself want. Write the story you want to read; build the tool  
you want to use. Since your friends probably have similar interests,  
this will also get you your initial audience.This should follow from the excitingness rule. Obviously the most  
exciting story to write will be the one you want to read. The reason  
I mention this case explicitly is that so many people get it wrong.  
Instead of making what they want, they try to make what some  
imaginary, more sophisticated audience wants. And once you go down  
that route, you're lost.  
[6]There are a lot of forces that will lead you astray when you're  
trying to figure out what to work on. Pretentiousness, fashion,  
fear, money, politics, other people's wishes, eminent frauds. But  
if you stick to what you find genuinely interesting, you'll be proof  
against all of them. If you're interested, you're not astray.  
Following your interests may sound like a rather passive strategy,  
but in practice it usually means following them past all sorts of  
obstacles. You usually have to risk rejection and failure. So it  
does take a good deal of boldness.But while you need boldness, you don't usually need much planning.  
In most cases the recipe for doing great work is simply: work hard  
on excitingly ambitious projects, and something good will come of  
it. Instead of making a plan and then executing it, you just try  
to preserve certain invariants.The trouble with planning is that it only works for achievements  
you can describe in advance. You can win a gold medal or get rich  
by deciding to as a child and then tenaciously pursuing that goal,  
but you can't discover natural selection that way.I think for most people who want to do great work, the right strategy  
is not to plan too much. At each stage do whatever seems most  
interesting and gives you the best options for the future. I call  
this approach "staying upwind." This is how most people who've done  
great work seem to have done it.  
Even when you've found something exciting to work on, working on  
it is not always straightforward. There will be times when some new  
idea makes you leap out of bed in the morning and get straight to  
work. But there will also be plenty of times when things aren't  
like that.You don't just put out your sail and get blown forward by inspiration.  
There are headwinds and currents and hidden shoals. So there's a  
technique to working, just as there is to sailing.For example, while you must work hard, it's possible to work too  
hard, and if you do that you'll find you get diminishing returns:  
fatigue will make you stupid, and eventually even damage your health.  
The point at which work yields diminishing returns depends on the  
type. Some of the hardest types you might only be able to do for  
four or five hours a day.Ideally those hours will be contiguous. To the extent you can, try  
to arrange your life so you have big blocks of time to work in.  
You'll shy away from hard tasks if you know you might be interrupted.It will probably be harder to start working than to keep working.  
You'll often have to trick yourself to get over that initial  
threshold. Don't worry about this; it's the nature of work, not a  
flaw in your character. Work has a sort of activation energy, both  
per day and per project. And since this threshold is fake in the  
sense that it's higher than the energy required to keep going, it's  
ok to tell yourself a lie of corresponding magnitude to get over  
it.It's usually a mistake to lie to yourself if you want to do great  
work, but this is one of the rare cases where it isn't. When I'm  
reluctant to start work in the morning, I often trick myself by  
saying "I'll just read over what I've got so far." Five minutes  
later I've found something that seems mistaken or incomplete, and  
I'm off.Similar techniques work for starting new projects. It's ok to lie  
to yourself about how much work a project will entail, for example.  
Lots of great things began with someone saying "How hard could it  
be?"This is one case where the young have an advantage. They're more  
optimistic, and even though one of the sources of their optimism  
is ignorance, in this case ignorance can sometimes beat knowledge.Try to finish what you start, though, even if it turns out to be  
more work than you expected. Finishing things is not just an exercise  
in tidiness or self-discipline. In many projects a lot of the best  
work happens in what was meant to be the final stage.Another permissible lie is to exaggerate the importance of what  
you're working on, at least in your own mind. If that helps you  
discover something new, it may turn out not to have been a lie after  
all.  
[7]  
Since there are two senses of starting work — per day and per  
project — there are also two forms of procrastination. Per-project  
procrastination is far the more dangerous. You put off starting  
that ambitious project from year to year because the time isn't  
quite right. When you're procrastinating in units of years, you can  
get a lot not done.  
[8]One reason per-project procrastination is so dangerous is that it  
usually camouflages itself as work. You're not just sitting around  
doing nothing; you're working industriously on something else. So  
per-project procrastination doesn't set off the alarms that per-day  
procrastination does. You're too busy to notice it.The way to beat it is to stop occasionally and ask yourself: Am I  
working on what I most want to work on? When you're young it's ok  
if the answer is sometimes no, but this gets increasingly dangerous  
as you get older.  
[9]  
Great work usually entails spending what would seem to most people  
an unreasonable amount of time on a problem. You can't think of  
this time as a cost, or it will seem too high. You have to find the  
work sufficiently engaging as it's happening.There may be some jobs where you have to work diligently for years  
at things you hate before you get to the good part, but this is not  
how great work happens. Great work happens by focusing consistently  
on something you're genuinely interested in. When you pause to take  
stock, you're surprised how far you've come.The reason we're surprised is that we underestimate the cumulative  
effect of work. Writing a page a day doesn't sound like much, but  
if you do it every day you'll write a book a year. That's the key:  
consistency. People who do great things don't get a lot done every  
day. They get something done, rather than nothing.If you do work that compounds, you'll get exponential growth. Most  
people who do this do it unconsciously, but it's worth stopping to  
think about. Learning, for example, is an instance of this phenomenon:  
the more you learn about something, the easier it is to learn more.  
Growing an audience is another: the more fans you have, the more  
new fans they'll bring you.The trouble with exponential growth is that the curve feels flat  
in the beginning. It isn't; it's still a wonderful exponential  
curve. But we can't grasp that intuitively, so we underrate exponential  
growth in its early stages.Something that grows exponentially can become so valuable that it's  
worth making an extraordinary effort to get it started. But since  
we underrate exponential growth early on, this too is mostly done  
unconsciously: people push through the initial, unrewarding phase  
of learning something new because they know from experience that  
learning new things always takes an initial push, or they grow their  
audience one fan at a time because they have nothing better to do.  
If people consciously realized they could invest in exponential  
growth, many more would do it.  
Work doesn't just happen when you're trying to. There's a kind of  
undirected thinking you do when walking or taking a shower or lying  
in bed that can be very powerful. By letting your mind wander a  
little, you'll often solve problems you were unable to solve by  
frontal attack.You have to be working hard in the normal way to benefit from this  
phenomenon, though. You can't just walk around daydreaming. The  
daydreaming has to be interleaved with deliberate work that feeds  
it questions.  
[10]Everyone knows to avoid distractions at work, but it's also important  
to avoid them in the other half of the cycle. When you let your  
mind wander, it wanders to whatever you care about most at that  
moment. So avoid the kind of distraction that pushes your work out  
of the top spot, or you'll waste this valuable type of thinking on  
the distraction instead. (Exception: Don't avoid love.)  
Consciously cultivate your taste in the work done in your field.  
Until you know which is the best and what makes it so, you don't  
know what you're aiming for.And that is what you're aiming for, because if you don't try to  
be the best, you won't even be good. This observation has been made  
by so many people in so many different fields that it might be worth  
thinking about why it's true. It could be because ambition is a  
phenomenon where almost all the error is in one direction — where  
almost all the shells that miss the target miss by falling short.  
Or it could be because ambition to be the best is a qualitatively  
different thing from ambition to be good. Or maybe being good is  
simply too vague a standard. Probably all three are true.  
[11]Fortunately there's a kind of economy of scale here. Though it might  
seem like you'd be taking on a heavy burden by trying to be the  
best, in practice you often end up net ahead. It's exciting, and  
also strangely liberating. It simplifies things. In some ways it's  
easier to try to be the best than to try merely to be good.One way to aim high is to try to make something that people will  
care about in a hundred years. Not because their opinions matter  
more than your contemporaries', but because something that still  
seems good in a hundred years is more likely to be genuinely good.  
Don't try to work in a distinctive style. Just try to do the best  
job you can; you won't be able to help doing it in a distinctive  
way.Style is doing things in a distinctive way without trying to. Trying  
to is affectation.Affectation is in effect to pretend that someone other than you is  
doing the work. You adopt an impressive but fake persona, and while  
you're pleased with the impressiveness, the fakeness is what shows  
in the work.  
[12]The temptation to be someone else is greatest for the young. They  
often feel like nobodies. But you never need to worry about that  
problem, because it's self-solving if you work on sufficiently  
ambitious projects. If you succeed at an ambitious project, you're  
not a nobody; you're the person who did it. So just do the work and  
your identity will take care of itself.  
"Avoid affectation" is a useful rule so far as it goes, but how  
would you express this idea positively? How would you say what to  
be, instead of what not to be? The best answer is earnest. If you're  
earnest you avoid not just affectation but a whole set of similar  
vices.The core of being earnest is being intellectually honest. We're  
taught as children to be honest as an unselfish virtue — as a kind  
of sacrifice. But in fact it's a source of power too. To see new  
ideas, you need an exceptionally sharp eye for the truth. You're  
trying to see more truth than others have seen so far. And how can  
you have a sharp eye for the truth if you're intellectually dishonest?One way to avoid intellectual dishonesty is to maintain a slight  
positive pressure in the opposite direction. Be aggressively willing  
to admit that you're mistaken. Once you've admitted you were mistaken  
about something, you're free. Till then you have to carry it.  
[13]Another more subtle component of earnestness is informality.  
Informality is much more important than its grammatically negative  
name implies. It's not merely the absence of something. It means  
focusing on what matters instead of what doesn't.What formality and affectation have in common is that as well as  
doing the work, you're trying to seem a certain way as you're doing  
it. But any energy that goes into how you seem comes out of being  
good. That's one reason nerds have an advantage in doing great work:  
they expend little effort on seeming anything. In fact that's  
basically the definition of a nerd.Nerds have a kind of innocent boldness that's exactly what you need  
in doing great work. It's not learned; it's preserved from childhood.  
So hold onto it. Be the one who puts things out there rather than  
the one who sits back and offers sophisticated-sounding criticisms  
of them. "It's easy to criticize" is true in the most literal sense,  
and the route to great work is never easy.There may be some jobs where it's an advantage to be cynical and  
pessimistic, but if you want to do great work it's an advantage to  
be optimistic, even though that means you'll risk looking like a  
fool sometimes. There's an old tradition of doing the opposite. The  
Old Testament says it's better to keep quiet lest you look like a  
fool. But that's advice for seeming smart. If you actually want  
to discover new things, it's better to take the risk of telling  
people your ideas.Some people are naturally earnest, and with others it takes a  
conscious effort. Either kind of earnestness will suffice. But I  
doubt it would be possible to do great work without being earnest.  
It's so hard to do even if you are. You don't have enough margin  
for error to accommodate the distortions introduced by being affected,  
intellectually dishonest, orthodox, fashionable, or cool.  
[14]  
Great work is consistent not only with who did it, but with itself.  
It's usually all of a piece. So if you face a decision in the middle  
of working on something, ask which choice is more consistent.You may have to throw things away and redo them. You won't necessarily  
have to, but you have to be willing to. And that can take some  
effort; when there's something you need to redo, status quo bias  
and laziness will combine to keep you in denial about it. To beat  
this ask: If I'd already made the change, would I want to revert  
to what I have now?Have the confidence to cut. Don't keep something that doesn't fit  
just because you're proud of it, or because it cost you a lot of  
effort.Indeed, in some kinds of work it's good to strip whatever you're  
doing to its essence. The result will be more concentrated; you'll  
understand it better; and you won't be able to lie to yourself about  
whether there's anything real there.Mathematical elegance may sound like a mere metaphor, drawn from  
the arts. That's what I thought when I first heard the term "elegant"  
applied to a proof. But now I suspect it's conceptually prior —   
that the main ingredient in artistic elegance is mathematical  
elegance. At any rate it's a useful standard well beyond math.Elegance can be a long-term bet, though. Laborious solutions will  
often have more prestige in the short term. They cost a lot of  
effort and they're hard to understand, both of which impress people,  
at least temporarily.Whereas some of the very best work will seem like it took comparatively  
little effort, because it was in a sense already there. It didn't  
have to be built, just seen. It's a very good sign when it's hard  
to say whether you're creating something or discovering it.When you're doing work that could be seen as either creation or  
discovery, err on the side of discovery. Try thinking of yourself  
as a mere conduit through which the ideas take their natural shape.(Strangely enough, one exception is the problem of choosing a problem  
to work on. This is usually seen as search, but in the best case  
it's more like creating something. In the best case you create the  
field in the process of exploring it.)Similarly, if you're trying to build a powerful tool, make it  
gratuitously unrestrictive. A powerful tool almost by definition  
will be used in ways you didn't expect, so err on the side of  
eliminating restrictions, even if you don't know what the benefit  
will be.Great work will often be tool-like in the sense of being something  
others build on. So it's a good sign if you're creating ideas that  
others could use, or exposing questions that others could answer.  
The best ideas have implications in many different areas.If you express your ideas in the most general form, they'll be truer  
than you intended.  
True by itself is not enough, of course. Great ideas have to be  
true and new. And it takes a certain amount of ability to see new  
ideas even once you've learned enough to get to one of the frontiers  
of knowledge.In English we give this ability names like originality, creativity,  
and imagination. And it seems reasonable to give it a separate name,  
because it does seem to some extent a separate skill. It's possible  
to have a great deal of ability in other respects — to have a great  
deal of what's often called "technical ability" — and yet not have  
much of this.I've never liked the term "creative process." It seems misleading.  
Originality isn't a process, but a habit of mind. Original thinkers  
throw off new ideas about whatever they focus on, like an angle  
grinder throwing off sparks. They can't help it.If the thing they're focused on is something they don't understand  
very well, these new ideas might not be good. One of the most  
original thinkers I know decided to focus on dating after he got  
divorced. He knew roughly as much about dating as the average 15  
year old, and the results were spectacularly colorful. But to see  
originality separated from expertise like that made its nature all  
the more clear.I don't know if it's possible to cultivate originality, but there  
are definitely ways to make the most of however much you have. For  
example, you're much more likely to have original ideas when you're  
working on something. Original ideas don't come from trying to have  
original ideas. They come from trying to build or understand something  
slightly too difficult.  
[15]Talking or writing about the things you're interested in is a good  
way to generate new ideas. When you try to put ideas into words, a  
missing idea creates a sort of vacuum that draws it out of you.  
Indeed, there's a kind of thinking that can only be done by writing.Changing your context can help. If you visit a new place, you'll  
often find you have new ideas there. The journey itself often  
dislodges them. But you may not have to go far to get this benefit.  
Sometimes it's enough just to go for a walk.  
[16]It also helps to travel in topic space. You'll have more new ideas  
if you explore lots of different topics, partly because it gives  
the angle grinder more surface area to work on, and partly because  
analogies are an especially fruitful source of new ideas.Don't divide your attention evenly between many topics though,  
or you'll spread yourself too thin. You want to distribute it  
according to something more like a power law.  
[17]  
Be professionally  
curious about a few topics and idly curious about many more.Curiosity and originality are closely related. Curiosity feeds  
originality by giving it new things to work on. But the relationship  
is closer than that. Curiosity is itself a kind of originality;  
it's roughly to questions what originality is to answers. And since  
questions at their best are a big component of answers, curiosity  
at its best is a creative force.  
Having new ideas is a strange game, because it usually consists of  
seeing things that were right under your nose. Once you've seen a  
new idea, it tends to seem obvious. Why did no one think of this  
before?When an idea seems simultaneously novel and obvious, it's probably  
a good one.Seeing something obvious sounds easy. And yet empirically having  
new ideas is hard. What's the source of this apparent contradiction?  
It's that seeing the new idea usually requires you to change the  
way you look at the world. We see the world through models that  
both help and constrain us. When you fix a broken model, new ideas  
become obvious. But noticing and fixing a broken model is hard.  
That's how new ideas can be both obvious and yet hard to discover:  
they're easy to see after you do something hard.One way to discover broken models is to be stricter than other  
people. Broken models of the world leave a trail of clues where  
they bash against reality. Most people don't want to see these  
clues. It would be an understatement to say that they're attached  
to their current model; it's what they think in; so they'll tend  
to ignore the trail of clues left by its breakage, however conspicuous  
it may seem in retrospect.To find new ideas you have to seize on signs of breakage instead  
of looking away. That's what Einstein did. He was able to see the  
wild implications of Maxwell's equations not so much because he was  
looking for new ideas as because he was stricter.The other thing you need is a willingness to break rules. Paradoxical  
as it sounds, if you want to fix your model of the world, it helps  
to be the sort of person who's comfortable breaking rules. From the  
point of view of the old model, which everyone including you initially  
shares, the new model usually breaks at least implicit rules.Few understand the degree of rule-breaking required, because new  
ideas seem much more conservative once they succeed. They seem  
perfectly reasonable once you're using the new model of the world  
they brought with them. But they didn't at the time; it took the  
greater part of a century for the heliocentric model to be generally  
accepted, even among astronomers, because it felt so wrong.Indeed, if you think about it, a good new idea has to seem bad to  
most people, or someone would have already explored it. So what  
you're looking for is ideas that seem crazy, but the right kind of  
crazy. How do you recognize these? You can't with certainty. Often  
ideas that seem bad are bad. But ideas that are the right kind of  
crazy tend to be exciting; they're rich in implications; whereas  
ideas that are merely bad tend to be depressing.There are two ways to be comfortable breaking rules: to enjoy  
breaking them, and to be indifferent to them. I call these two cases  
being aggressively and passively independent-minded.The aggressively independent-minded are the naughty ones. Rules  
don't merely fail to stop them; breaking rules gives them additional  
energy. For this sort of person, delight at the sheer audacity of  
a project sometimes supplies enough activation energy to get it  
started.The other way to break rules is not to care about them, or perhaps  
even to know they exist. This is why novices and outsiders often  
make new discoveries; their ignorance of a field's assumptions acts  
as a source of temporary passive independent-mindedness. Aspies  
also seem to have a kind of immunity to conventional beliefs.  
Several I know say that this helps them to have new ideas.Strictness plus rule-breaking sounds like a strange combination.  
In popular culture they're opposed. But popular culture has a broken  
model in this respect. It implicitly assumes that issues are trivial  
ones, and in trivial matters strictness and rule-breaking are  
opposed. But in questions that really matter, only rule-breakers  
can be truly strict.  
An overlooked idea often doesn't lose till the semifinals. You do  
see it, subconsciously, but then another part of your subconscious  
shoots it down because it would be too weird, too risky, too much  
work, too controversial. This suggests an exciting possibility: if  
you could turn off such filters, you could see more new ideas.One way to do that is to ask what would be good ideas for someone  
else to explore. Then your subconscious won't shoot them down to  
protect you.You could also discover overlooked ideas by working in the other  
direction: by starting from what's obscuring them. Every cherished  
but mistaken principle is surrounded by a dead zone of valuable  
ideas that are unexplored because they contradict it.Religions are collections of cherished but mistaken principles. So  
anything that can be described either literally or metaphorically  
as a religion will have valuable unexplored ideas in its shadow.  
Copernicus and Darwin both made discoveries of this type.  
[18]What are people in your field religious about, in the sense of being  
too attached to some principle that might not be as self-evident  
as they think? What becomes possible if you discard it?  
People show much more originality in solving problems than in  
deciding which problems to solve. Even the smartest can be surprisingly  
conservative when deciding what to work on. People who'd never dream  
of being fashionable in any other way get sucked into working on  
fashionable problems.One reason people are more conservative when choosing problems than  
solutions is that problems are bigger bets. A problem could occupy  
you for years, while exploring a solution might only take days. But  
even so I think most people are too conservative. They're not merely  
responding to risk, but to fashion as well. Unfashionable problems  
are undervalued.One of the most interesting kinds of unfashionable problem is the  
problem that people think has been fully explored, but hasn't.  
Great work often takes something that already exists and shows its  
latent potential. Durer and Watt both did this. So if you're  
interested in a field that others think is tapped out, don't let  
their skepticism deter you. People are often wrong about this.Working on an unfashionable problem can be very pleasing. There's  
no hype or hurry. Opportunists and critics are both occupied  
elsewhere. The existing work often has an old-school solidity. And  
there's a satisfying sense of economy in cultivating ideas that  
would otherwise be wasted.But the most common type of overlooked problem is not explicitly  
unfashionable in the sense of being out of fashion. It just doesn't  
seem to matter as much as it actually does. How do you find these?  
By being self-indulgent — by letting your curiosity have its way,  
and tuning out, at least temporarily, the little voice in your head  
that says you should only be working on "important" problems.You do need to work on important problems, but almost everyone is  
too conservative about what counts as one. And if there's an important  
but overlooked problem in your neighborhood, it's probably already  
on your subconscious radar screen. So try asking yourself: if you  
were going to take a break from "serious" work to work on something  
just because it would be really interesting, what would you do? The  
answer is probably more important than it seems.Originality in choosing problems seems to matter even more than  
originality in solving them. That's what distinguishes the people  
who discover whole new fields. So what might seem to be merely the  
initial step — deciding what to work on — is in a sense the key  
to the whole game.  
Few grasp this. One of the biggest misconceptions about new ideas  
is about the ratio of question to answer in their composition.  
People think big ideas are answers, but often the real insight was  
in the question.Part of the reason we underrate questions is the way they're used  
in schools. In schools they tend to exist only briefly before being  
answered, like unstable particles. But a really good question can  
be much more than that. A really good question is a partial discovery.  
How do new species arise? Is the force that makes objects fall to  
earth the same as the one that keeps planets in their orbits? By  
even asking such questions you were already in excitingly novel  
territory.Unanswered questions can be uncomfortable things to carry around  
with you. But the more you're carrying, the greater the chance of  
noticing a solution — or perhaps even more excitingly, noticing  
that two unanswered questions are the same.Sometimes you carry a question for a long time. Great work often  
comes from returning to a question you first noticed years before  
— in your childhood, even — and couldn't stop thinking about.  
People talk a lot about the importance of keeping your youthful  
dreams alive, but it's just as important to keep your youthful  
questions alive.  
[19]This is one of the places where actual expertise differs most from  
the popular picture of it. In the popular picture, experts are  
certain. But actually the more puzzled you are, the better, so long  
as (a) the things you're puzzled about matter, and (b) no one else  
understands them either.Think about what's happening at the moment just before a new idea  
is discovered. Often someone with sufficient expertise is puzzled  
about something. Which means that originality consists partly of  
puzzlement — of confusion! You have to be comfortable enough with  
the world being full of puzzles that you're willing to see them,  
but not so comfortable that you don't want to solve them.  
[20]It's a great thing to be rich in unanswered questions. And this is  
one of those situations where the rich get richer, because the best  
way to acquire new questions is to try answering existing ones.  
Questions don't just lead to answers, but also to more questions.  
The best questions grow in the answering. You notice a thread  
protruding from the current paradigm and try pulling on it, and it  
just gets longer and longer. So don't require a question to be  
obviously big before you try answering it. You can rarely predict  
that. It's hard enough even to notice the thread, let alone to  
predict how much will unravel if you pull on it.It's better to be promiscuously curious — to pull a little bit on  
a lot of threads, and see what happens. Big things start small. The  
initial versions of big things were often just experiments, or side  
projects, or talks, which then grew into something bigger. So start  
lots of small things.Being prolific is underrated. The more different things you try,  
the greater the chance of discovering something new. Understand,  
though, that trying lots of things will mean trying lots of things  
that don't work. You can't have a lot of good ideas without also  
having a lot of bad ones.  
[21]Though it sounds more responsible to begin by studying everything  
that's been done before, you'll learn faster and have more fun by  
trying stuff. And you'll understand previous work better when you  
do look at it. So err on the side of starting. Which is easier when  
starting means starting small; those two ideas fit together like  
two puzzle pieces.How do you get from starting small to doing something great? By  
making successive versions. Great things are almost always made in  
successive versions. You start with something small and evolve it,  
and the final version is both cleverer and more ambitious than  
anything you could have planned.It's particularly useful to make successive versions when you're  
making something for people — to get an initial version in front  
of them quickly, and then evolve it based on their response.Begin by trying the simplest thing that could possibly work.  
Surprisingly often, it does. If it doesn't, this will at least get  
you started.Don't try to cram too much new stuff into any one version. There  
are names for doing this with the first version (taking too long  
to ship) and the second (the second system effect), but these are  
both merely instances of a more general principle.An early version of a new project will sometimes be dismissed as a  
toy. It's a good sign when people do this. That means it has  
everything a new idea needs except scale, and that tends to follow.  
[22]The alternative to starting with something small and evolving it  
is to plan in advance what you're going to do. And planning does  
usually seem the more responsible choice. It sounds more organized  
to say "we're going to do x and then y and then z" than "we're going  
to try x and see what happens." And it is more organized; it just  
doesn't work as well.Planning per se isn't good. It's sometimes necessary, but it's a  
necessary evil — a response to unforgiving conditions. It's something  
you have to do because you're working with inflexible media, or  
because you need to coordinate the efforts of a lot of people. If  
you keep projects small and use flexible media, you don't have to  
plan as much, and your designs can evolve instead.  
Take as much risk as you can afford. In an efficient market, risk  
is proportionate to reward, so don't look for certainty, but for a  
bet with high expected value. If you're not failing occasionally,  
you're probably being too conservative.Though conservatism is usually associated with the old, it's the  
young who tend to make this mistake. Inexperience makes them fear  
risk, but it's when you're young that you can afford the most.Even a project that fails can be valuable. In the process of working  
on it, you'll have crossed territory few others have seen, and  
encountered questions few others have asked. And there's probably  
no better source of questions than the ones you encounter in trying  
to do something slightly too hard.  
Use the advantages of youth when you have them, and the advantages  
of age once you have those. The advantages of youth are energy,  
time, optimism, and freedom. The advantages of age are knowledge,  
efficiency, money, and power. With effort you can acquire some of  
the latter when young and keep some of the former when old.The old also have the advantage of knowing which advantages they  
have. The young often have them without realizing it. The biggest  
is probably time. The young have no idea how rich they are in time.  
The best way to turn this time to advantage is to use it in slightly  
frivolous ways: to learn about something you don't need to know  
about, just out of curiosity, or to try building something just  
because it would be cool, or to become freakishly good at something.That "slightly" is an important qualification. Spend time lavishly  
when you're young, but don't simply waste it. There's a big difference  
between doing something you worry might be a waste of time and doing  
something you know for sure will be. The former is at least a bet,  
and possibly a better one than you think.  
[23]The most subtle advantage of youth, or more precisely of inexperience,  
is that you're seeing everything with fresh eyes. When your brain  
embraces an idea for the first time, sometimes the two don't fit  
together perfectly. Usually the problem is with your brain, but  
occasionally it's with the idea. A piece of it sticks out awkwardly  
and jabs you when you think about it. People who are used to the  
idea have learned to ignore it, but you have the opportunity not  
to.  
[24]So when you're learning about something for the first time, pay  
attention to things that seem wrong or missing. You'll be tempted  
to ignore them, since there's a 99% chance the problem is with you.  
And you may have to set aside your misgivings temporarily to keep  
progressing. But don't forget about them. When you've gotten further  
into the subject, come back and check if they're still there. If  
they're still viable in the light of your present knowledge, they  
probably represent an undiscovered idea.  
One of the most valuable kinds of knowledge you get from experience  
is to know what you don't have to worry about. The young know all  
the things that could matter, but not their relative importance.  
So they worry equally about everything, when they should worry much  
more about a few things and hardly at all about the rest.But what you don't know is only half the problem with inexperience.  
The other half is what you do know that ain't so. You arrive at  
adulthood with your head full of nonsense — bad habits you've  
acquired and false things you've been taught — and you won't be  
able to do great work till you clear away at least the nonsense in  
the way of whatever type of work you want to do.Much of the nonsense left in your head is left there by schools.  
We're so used to schools that we unconsciously treat going to school  
as identical with learning, but in fact schools have all sorts of  
strange qualities that warp our ideas about learning and thinking.For example, schools induce passivity. Since you were a small child,  
there was an authority at the front of the class telling all of you  
what you had to learn and then measuring whether you did. But neither  
classes nor tests are intrinsic to learning; they're just artifacts  
of the way schools are usually designed.The sooner you overcome this passivity, the better. If you're still  
in school, try thinking of your education as your project, and your  
teachers as working for you rather than vice versa. That may seem  
a stretch, but it's not merely some weird thought experiment. It's  
the truth, economically, and in the best case it's the truth  
intellectually as well. The best teachers don't want to be your  
bosses. They'd prefer it if you pushed ahead, using them as a source  
of advice, rather than being pulled by them through the material.Schools also give you a misleading impression of what work is like.  
In school they tell you what the problems are, and they're almost  
always soluble using no more than you've been taught so far. In  
real life you have to figure out what the problems are, and you  
often don't know if they're soluble at all.But perhaps the worst thing schools do to you is train you to win  
by hacking the test. You can't do great work by doing that. You  
can't trick God. So stop looking for that kind of shortcut. The way  
to beat the system is to focus on problems and solutions that others  
have overlooked, not to skimp on the work itself.  
Don't think of yourself as dependent on some gatekeeper giving you  
a "big break." Even if this were true, the best way to get it would  
be to focus on doing good work rather than chasing influential  
people.And don't take rejection by committees to heart. The qualities that  
impress admissions officers and prize committees are quite different  
from those required to do great work. The decisions of selection  
committees are only meaningful to the extent that they're part of  
a feedback loop, and very few are.  
People new to a field will often copy existing work. There's nothing  
inherently bad about that. There's no better way to learn how  
something works than by trying to reproduce it. Nor does  
copying necessarily make your work unoriginal. Originality is the  
presence of new ideas, not the absence of old ones.There's a good way to copy and a bad way. If you're going to copy  
something, do it openly instead of furtively, or worse still,  
unconsciously. This is what's meant by the famously misattributed  
phrase "Great artists steal." The really dangerous kind of copying,  
the kind that gives copying a bad name, is the kind that's done  
without realizing it, because you're nothing more than a train  
running on tracks laid down by someone else. But at the other  
extreme, copying can be a sign of superiority rather than subordination.  
[25]In many fields it's almost inevitable that your early work will be  
in some sense based on other people's. Projects rarely arise in a  
vacuum. They're usually a reaction to previous work. When you're  
first starting out, you don't have any previous work; if you're  
going to react to something, it has to be someone else's. Once  
you're established, you can react to your own. But while the former  
gets called derivative and the latter doesn't, structurally the two  
cases are more similar than they seem.Oddly enough, the very novelty of the most novel ideas sometimes  
makes them seem at first to be more derivative than they are. New  
discoveries often have to be conceived initially as variations of  
existing things, even by their discoverers, because there isn't  
yet the conceptual vocabulary to express them.There are definitely some dangers to copying, though. One is that  
you'll tend to copy old things — things that were in their day at  
the frontier of knowledge, but no longer are.And when you do copy something, don't copy every feature of it.  
Some will make you ridiculous if you do. Don't copy the manner of  
an eminent 50 year old professor if you're 18, for example, or the  
idiom of a Renaissance poem hundreds of years later.Some of the features of things you admire are flaws they succeeded  
despite. Indeed, the features that are easiest to imitate are the  
most likely to be the flaws.This is particularly true for behavior. Some talented people are  
jerks, and this sometimes makes it seem to the inexperienced that  
being a jerk is part of being talented. It isn't; being talented  
is merely how they get away with it.One of the most powerful kinds of copying is to copy something from  
one field into another. History is so full of chance discoveries  
of this type that it's probably worth giving chance a hand by  
deliberately learning about other kinds of work. You can take ideas  
from quite distant fields if you let them be metaphors.Negative examples can be as inspiring as positive ones. In fact you  
can sometimes learn more from things done badly than from things  
done well; sometimes it only becomes clear what's needed when it's  
missing.  
If a lot of the best people in your field are collected in one  
place, it's usually a good idea to visit for a while. It will  
increase your ambition, and also, by showing you that these people  
are human, increase your self-confidence.  
[26]If you're earnest you'll probably get a warmer welcome than you  
might expect. Most people who are very good at something are happy  
to talk about it with anyone who's genuinely interested. If they're  
really good at their work, then they probably have a hobbyist's  
interest in it, and hobbyists always want to talk about their  
hobbies.It may take some effort to find the people who are really good,  
though. Doing great work has such prestige that in some places,  
particularly universities, there's a polite fiction that everyone  
is engaged in it. And that is far from true. People within universities  
can't say so openly, but the quality of the work being done in  
different departments varies immensely. Some departments have people  
doing great work; others have in the past; others never have.  
Seek out the best colleagues. There are a lot of projects that can't  
be done alone, and even if you're working on one that can be, it's  
good to have other people to encourage you and to bounce ideas off.Colleagues don't just affect your work, though; they also affect  
you. So work with people you want to become like, because you will.Quality is more important than quantity in colleagues. It's better  
to have one or two great ones than a building full of pretty good  
ones. In fact it's not merely better, but necessary, judging from  
history: the degree to which great work happens in clusters suggests  
that one's colleagues often make the difference between doing great  
work and not.How do you know when you have sufficiently good colleagues? In my  
experience, when you do, you know. Which means if you're unsure,  
you probably don't. But it may be possible to give a more concrete  
answer than that. Here's an attempt: sufficiently good colleagues  
offer surprising insights. They can see and do things that you  
can't. So if you have a handful of colleagues good enough to keep  
you on your toes in this sense, you're probably over the threshold.Most of us can benefit from collaborating with colleagues, but some  
projects require people on a larger scale, and starting one of those  
is not for everyone. If you want to run a project like that, you'll  
have to become a manager, and managing well takes aptitude and  
interest like any other kind of work. If you don't have them, there  
is no middle path: you must either force yourself to learn management  
as a second language, or avoid such projects.  
[27]  
Husband your morale. It's the basis of everything when you're working  
on ambitious projects. You have to nurture and protect it like a  
living organism.Morale starts with your view of life. You're more likely to do great  
work if you're an optimist, and more likely to if you think of  
yourself as lucky than if you think of yourself as a victim.Indeed, work can to some extent protect you from your problems. If  
you choose work that's pure, its very difficulties will serve as a  
refuge from the difficulties of everyday life. If this is escapism,  
it's a very productive form of it, and one that has been used by  
some of the greatest minds in history.Morale compounds via work: high morale helps you do good work, which  
increases your morale and helps you do even better work. But this  
cycle also operates in the other direction: if you're not doing  
good work, that can demoralize you and make it even harder to. Since  
it matters so much for this cycle to be running in the right  
direction, it can be a good idea to switch to easier work when  
you're stuck, just so you start to get something done.One of the biggest mistakes ambitious people make is to allow  
setbacks to destroy their morale all at once, like a balloon bursting.  
You can inoculate yourself against this by explicitly considering  
setbacks a part of your process. Solving hard problems always  
involves some backtracking.Doing great work is a depth-first search whose root node is the  
desire to. So "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again" isn't  
quite right. It should be: If at first you don't succeed, either  
try again, or backtrack and then try again."Never give up" is also not quite right. Obviously there are times  
when it's the right choice to eject. A more precise version would  
be: Never let setbacks panic you into backtracking more than you  
need to. Corollary: Never abandon the root node.It's not necessarily a bad sign if work is a struggle, any more  
than it's a bad sign to be out of breath while running. It depends  
how fast you're running. So learn to distinguish good pain from  
bad. Good pain is a sign of effort; bad pain is a sign of damage.  
An audience is a critical component of morale. If you're a scholar,  
your audience may be your peers; in the arts, it may be an audience  
in the traditional sense. Either way it doesn't need to be big.  
The value of an audience doesn't grow anything like linearly with  
its size. Which is bad news if you're famous, but good news if  
you're just starting out, because it means a small but dedicated  
audience can be enough to sustain you. If a handful of people  
genuinely love what you're doing, that's enough.To the extent you can, avoid letting intermediaries come between  
you and your audience. In some types of work this is inevitable,  
but it's so liberating to escape it that you might be better off  
switching to an adjacent type if that will let you go direct.  
[28]The people you spend time with will also have a big effect on your  
morale. You'll find there are some who increase your energy and  
others who decrease it, and the effect someone has is not always  
what you'd expect. Seek out the people who increase your energy and  
avoid those who decrease it. Though of course if there's someone  
you need to take care of, that takes precedence.Don't marry someone who doesn't understand that you need to work,  
or sees your work as competition for your attention. If you're  
ambitious, you need to work; it's almost like a medical condition;  
so someone who won't let you work either doesn't understand you,  
or does and doesn't care.Ultimately morale is physical. You think with your body, so it's  
important to take care of it. That means exercising regularly,  
eating and sleeping well, and avoiding the more dangerous kinds of  
drugs. Running and walking are particularly good forms of exercise  
because they're good for thinking.  
[29]People who do great work are not necessarily happier than everyone  
else, but they're happier than they'd be if they didn't. In fact,  
if you're smart and ambitious, it's dangerous not to be productive.  
People who are smart and ambitious but don't achieve much tend to  
become bitter.  
It's ok to want to impress other people, but choose the right people.  
The opinion of people you respect is signal. Fame, which is the  
opinion of a much larger group you might or might not respect, just  
adds noise.The prestige of a type of work is at best a trailing indicator and  
sometimes completely mistaken. If you do anything well enough,  
you'll make it prestigious. So the question to ask about a type of  
work is not how much prestige it has, but how well it could be done.Competition can be an effective motivator, but don't let it choose  
the problem for you; don't let yourself get drawn into chasing  
something just because others are. In fact, don't let competitors  
make you do anything much more specific than work harder.Curiosity is the best guide. Your curiosity never lies, and it knows  
more than you do about what's worth paying attention to.  
Notice how often that word has come up. If you asked an oracle the  
secret to doing great work and the oracle replied with a single  
word, my bet would be on "curiosity."That doesn't translate directly to advice. It's not enough just to  
be curious, and you can't command curiosity anyway. But you can  
nurture it and let it drive you.Curiosity is the key to all four steps in doing great work: it will  
choose the field for you, get you to the frontier, cause you to  
notice the gaps in it, and drive you to explore them. The whole  
process is a kind of dance with curiosity.  
Believe it or not, I tried to make this essay as short as I could.  
But its length at least means it acts as a filter. If you made it  
this far, you must be interested in doing great work. And if so  
you're already further along than you might realize, because the  
set of people willing to want to is small.The factors in doing great work are factors in the literal,  
mathematical sense, and they are: ability, interest, effort, and  
luck. Luck by definition you can't do anything about, so we can  
ignore that. And we can assume effort, if you do in fact want to  
do great work. So the problem boils down to ability and interest.  
Can you find a kind of work where your ability and interest will  
combine to yield an explosion of new ideas?Here there are grounds for optimism. There are so many different  
ways to do great work, and even more that are still undiscovered.  
Out of all those different types of work, the one you're most suited  
for is probably a pretty close match. Probably a comically close  
match. It's just a question of finding it, and how far into it your  
ability and interest can take you. And you can only answer that by  
trying.Many more people could try to do great work than do. What holds  
them back is a combination of modesty and fear. It seems presumptuous  
to try to be Newton or Shakespeare. It also seems hard; surely if  
you tried something like that, you'd fail. Presumably the calculation  
is rarely explicit. Few people consciously decide not to try to do  
great work. But that's what's going on subconsciously; they shy  
away from the question.So I'm going to pull a sneaky trick on you. Do you want to do great  
work, or not? Now you have to decide consciously. Sorry about that.  
I wouldn't have done it to a general audience. But we already know  
you're interested.Don't worry about being presumptuous. You don't have to tell anyone.  
And if it's too hard and you fail, so what? Lots of people have  
worse problems than that. In fact you'll be lucky if it's the worst  
problem you have.Yes, you'll have to work hard. But again, lots of people have to  
work hard. And if you're working on something you find very  
interesting, which you necessarily will if you're on the right path,  
the work will probably feel less burdensome than a lot of your  
peers'.The discoveries are out there, waiting to be made. Why not by you?  
Notes[1]  
I don't think you could give a precise definition of what  
counts as great work. Doing great work means doing something important  
so well that you expand people's ideas of what's possible. But  
there's no threshold for importance. It's a matter of degree, and  
often hard to judge at the time anyway. So I'd rather people focused  
on developing their interests rather than worrying about whether  
they're important or not. Just try to do something amazing, and  
leave it to future generations to say if you succeeded.[2]  
A lot of standup comedy is based on noticing anomalies in  
everyday life. "Did you ever notice...?" New ideas come from doing  
this about nontrivial things. Which may help explain why people's  
reaction to a new idea is often the first half of laughing: Ha![3]  
That second qualifier is critical. If you're excited about  
something most authorities discount, but you can't give a more  
precise explanation than "they don't get it," then you're starting  
to drift into the territory of cranks.[4]  
Finding something to work on is not simply a matter of finding  
a match between the current version of you and a list of known  
problems. You'll often have to coevolve with the problem. That's  
why it can sometimes be so hard to figure out what to work on. The  
search space is huge. It's the cartesian product of all possible  
types of work, both known and yet to be discovered, and all possible  
future versions of you.There's no way you could search this whole space, so you have to  
rely on heuristics to generate promising paths through it and hope  
the best matches will be clustered. Which they will not always be;  
different types of work have been collected together as much by  
accidents of history as by the intrinsic similarities between them.[5]  
There are many reasons curious people are more likely to do  
great work, but one of the more subtle is that, by casting a wide  
net, they're more likely to find the right thing to work on in the  
first place.[6]  
It can also be dangerous to make things for an audience you  
feel is less sophisticated than you, if that causes you to talk  
down to them. You can make a lot of money doing that, if you do it  
in a sufficiently cynical way, but it's not the route to great work.  
Not that anyone using this m.o. would care.[7]  
This idea I learned from Hardy's A Mathematician's Apology,  
which I recommend to anyone ambitious to do great work, in any  
field.[8]  
Just as we overestimate what we can do in a day and underestimate  
what we can do over several years, we overestimate the damage done  
by procrastinating for a day and underestimate the damage done by  
procrastinating for several years.[9]  
You can't usually get paid for doing exactly what you want,  
especially early on. There are two options: get paid for doing work  
close to what you want and hope to push it closer, or get paid for  
doing something else entirely and do your own projects on the side.  
Both can work, but both have drawbacks: in the first approach your  
work is compromised by default, and in the second you have to fight  
to get time to do it.[10]  
If you set your life up right, it will deliver the focus-relax  
cycle automatically. The perfect setup is an office you work in and  
that you walk to and from.[11]  
There may be some very unworldly people who do great work  
without consciously trying to. If you want to expand this rule to  
cover that case, it becomes: Don't try to be anything except the  
best.[12]  
This gets more complicated in work like acting, where the  
goal is to adopt a fake persona. But even here it's possible to be  
affected. Perhaps the rule in such fields should be to avoid  
unintentional affectation.[13]  
It's safe to have beliefs that you treat as unquestionable  
if and only if they're also unfalsifiable. For example, it's safe  
to have the principle that everyone should be treated equally under  
the law, because a sentence with a "should" in it isn't really a  
statement about the world and is therefore hard to disprove. And  
if there's no evidence that could disprove one of your principles,  
there can't be any facts you'd need to ignore in order to preserve  
it.[14]  
Affectation is easier to cure than intellectual dishonesty.  
Affectation is often a shortcoming of the young that burns off in  
time, while intellectual dishonesty is more of a character flaw.[15]  
Obviously you don't have to be working at the exact moment  
you have the idea, but you'll probably have been working fairly  
recently.[16]  
Some say psychoactive drugs have a similar effect. I'm  
skeptical, but also almost totally ignorant of their effects.[17]  
For example you might give the nth most important topic  
(m-1)/m^n of your attention, for some m > 1. You couldn't allocate  
your attention so precisely, of course, but this at least gives an  
idea of a reasonable distribution.[18]  
The principles defining a religion have to be mistaken.  
Otherwise anyone might adopt them, and there would be nothing to  
distinguish the adherents of the religion from everyone else.[19]  
It might be a good exercise to try writing down a list of  
questions you wondered about in your youth. You might find you're  
now in a position to do something about some of them.[20]  
The connection between originality and uncertainty causes a  
strange phenomenon: because the conventional-minded are more certain  
than the independent-minded, this tends to give them the upper hand  
in disputes, even though they're generally stupider.  
  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity.  
  
[21]  
Derived from Linus Pauling's "If you want to have good ideas,  
you must have many ideas."[22]  
Attacking a project as a "toy" is similar to attacking a  
statement as "inappropriate." It means that no more substantial  
criticism can be made to stick.[23]  
One way to tell whether you're wasting time is to ask if  
you're producing or consuming. Writing computer games is less likely  
to be a waste of time than playing them, and playing games where  
you create something is less likely to be a waste of time than  
playing games where you don't.[24]  
Another related advantage is that if you haven't said anything  
publicly yet, you won't be biased toward evidence that supports  
your earlier conclusions. With sufficient integrity you could achieve  
eternal youth in this respect, but few manage to. For most people,  
having previously published opinions has an effect similar to  
ideology, just in quantity 1.[25]  
In the early 1630s Daniel Mytens made a painting of Henrietta  
Maria handing a laurel wreath to Charles I. Van Dyck then painted  
his own version to show how much better he was.[26]  
I'm being deliberately vague about what a place is. As of  
this writing, being in the same physical place has advantages that  
are hard to duplicate, but that could change.[27]  
This is false when the work the other people have to do is  
very constrained, as with SETI@home or Bitcoin. It may be possible  
to expand the area in which it's false by defining similarly  
restricted protocols with more freedom of action in the nodes.[28]  
Corollary: Building something that enables people to go around  
intermediaries and engage directly with their audience is probably  
a good idea.[29]  
It may be helpful always to walk or run the same route, because  
that frees attention for thinking. It feels that way to me, and  
there is some historical evidence for it.Thanks   
to Trevor Blackwell, Daniel Gackle, Pam Graham, Tom Howard,  
Patrick Hsu, Steve Huffman, Jessica Livingston, Henry Lloyd-Baker,  
Bob Metcalfe, Ben Miller, Robert Morris, Michael Nielsen, Courtenay  
Pipkin, Joris Poort, Mieke Roos, Rajat Suri, Harj Taggar, Garry  
Tan, and my younger son for suggestions and for reading drafts.

# How to Get New Ideas

January 2023(Someone fed my essays into GPT to make something that could answer  
questions based on them, then asked it where good ideas come from. The  
answer was ok, but not what I would have said. This is what I would have said.)The way to get new ideas is to notice anomalies: what seems strange,  
or missing, or broken? You can see anomalies in everyday life (much  
of standup comedy is based on this), but the best place to look for  
them is at the frontiers of knowledge.Knowledge grows fractally.  
From a distance its edges look smooth, but when you learn enough  
to get close to one, you'll notice it's full of gaps. These gaps  
will seem obvious; it will seem inexplicable that no one has tried  
x or wondered about y. In the best case, exploring such gaps yields  
whole new fractal buds.

# The Need to Read

November 2022In the science fiction books I read as a kid, reading had often  
been replaced by some more efficient way of acquiring knowledge.  
Mysterious "tapes" would load it into one's brain like a program  
being loaded into a computer.That sort of thing is unlikely to happen anytime soon. Not just  
because it would be hard to build a replacement for reading, but  
because even if one existed, it would be insufficient. Reading about  
x doesn't just teach you about x; it also teaches you how to write.  
[1]Would that matter? If we replaced reading, would anyone need to be  
good at writing?The reason it would matter is that writing is not just a way to  
convey ideas, but also a way to have them.A good writer doesn't just think, and then write down what he  
thought, as a sort of transcript. A good writer will almost always  
discover new things in the process of writing. And there is, as far  
as I know, no substitute for this kind of discovery. Talking about  
your ideas with other people is a good way to develop them. But  
even after doing this, you'll find you still discover new things  
when you sit down to write. There is a kind of thinking that can  
only be done by writing.There are of course kinds of thinking that can be done without  
writing. If you don't need to go too deeply into a problem, you can  
solve it without writing. If you're thinking about how two pieces  
of machinery should fit together, writing about it probably won't  
help much. And when a problem can be described formally, you can  
sometimes solve it in your head. But if you need to solve a  
complicated, ill-defined problem, it will almost always help to  
write about it. Which in turn means that someone who's not good at  
writing will almost always be at a disadvantage in solving such  
problems.You can't think well without writing well, and you can't write well  
without reading well. And I mean that last "well" in both senses.  
You have to be good at reading, and read good things.  
[2]People who just want information may find other ways to get it.  
But people who want to have ideas can't afford to.Notes[1]  
Audiobooks can give you examples of good writing, but having  
them read to you doesn't teach you as much about writing as reading  
them yourself.[2]  
By "good at reading" I don't mean good at the mechanics of  
reading. You don't have to be good at extracting words from the  
page so much as extracting meaning from the words.Japanese TranslationChinese TranslationItalian TranslationFrench Translation

# What You (Want to)\* Want

November 2022Since I was about 9 I've been puzzled by the apparent contradiction  
between being made of matter that behaves in a predictable way, and  
the feeling that I could choose to do whatever I wanted. At the  
time I had a self-interested motive for exploring the question. At  
that age (like most succeeding ages) I was always in trouble with  
the authorities, and it seemed to me that there might possibly be  
some way to get out of trouble by arguing that I wasn't responsible  
for my actions. I gradually lost hope of that, but the puzzle  
remained: How do you reconcile being a machine made of matter with  
the feeling that you're free to choose what you do?  
[1]The best way to explain the answer may be to start with a slightly  
wrong version, and then fix it. The wrong version is: You can do  
what you want, but you can't want what you want. Yes, you can control  
what you do, but you'll do what you want, and you can't control  
that.The reason this is mistaken is that people do sometimes change what  
they want. People who don't want to want something — drug addicts,  
for example — can sometimes make themselves stop wanting it. And  
people who want to want something — who want to like classical  
music, or broccoli — sometimes succeed.So we modify our initial statement: You can do what you want, but  
you can't want to want what you want.That's still not quite true. It's possible to change what you want  
to want. I can imagine someone saying "I decided to stop wanting  
to like classical music." But we're getting closer to the truth.  
It's rare for people to change what they want to want, and the more  
"want to"s we add, the rarer it gets.We can get arbitrarily close to a true statement by adding more "want  
to"s in much the same way we can get arbitrarily close to 1 by adding  
more 9s to a string of 9s following a decimal point. In practice  
three or four "want to"s must surely be enough. It's hard even to  
envision what it would mean to change what you want to want to want  
to want, let alone actually do it.So one way to express the correct answer is to use a regular  
expression. You can do what you want, but there's some statement  
of the form "you can't (want to)\* want what you want" that's true.  
Ultimately you get back to a want that you don't control.  
[2]  
Notes[1]  
I didn't know when I was 9 that matter might behave randomly,  
but I don't think it affects the problem much. Randomness destroys  
the ghost in the machine as effectively as determinism.[2]  
If you don't like using an expression, you can make the same  
point using higher-order desires: There is some n such that you  
don't control your nth-order desires.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell,  
Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris, and  
Michael Nielsen for reading drafts of this.Irish Translation

# Alien Truth

October 2022If there were intelligent beings elsewhere in the universe, they'd  
share certain truths in common with us. The truths of mathematics  
would be the same, because they're true by definition. Ditto for  
the truths of physics; the mass of a carbon atom would be the same  
on their planet. But I think we'd share other truths with aliens  
besides the truths of math and physics, and that it would be  
worthwhile to think about what these might be.For example, I think we'd share the principle that a controlled  
experiment testing some hypothesis entitles us to have proportionally  
increased belief in it. It seems fairly likely, too, that it would  
be true for aliens that one can get better at something by practicing.  
We'd probably share Occam's razor. There doesn't seem anything  
specifically human about any of these ideas.We can only guess, of course. We can't say for sure what forms  
intelligent life might take. Nor is it my goal here to explore that  
question, interesting though it is. The point of the idea of alien  
truth is not that it gives us a way to speculate about what forms  
intelligent life might take, but that it gives us a threshold, or  
more precisely a target, for truth. If you're trying to find the  
most general truths short of those of math or physics, then presumably  
they'll be those we'd share in common with other forms of intelligent  
life.Alien truth will work best as a heuristic if we err on the side of  
generosity. If an idea might plausibly be relevant to aliens, that's  
enough. Justice, for example. I wouldn't want to bet that all  
intelligent beings would understand the concept of justice, but I  
wouldn't want to bet against it either.The idea of alien truth is related to Erdos's idea of God's book.  
He used to describe a particularly good proof as being in God's  
book, the implication being (a) that a sufficiently good proof was  
more discovered than invented, and (b) that its goodness would be  
universally recognized. If there's such a thing as alien truth,  
then there's more in God's book than math.What should we call the search for alien truth? The obvious choice  
is "philosophy." Whatever else philosophy includes, it should  
probably include this. I'm fairly sure Aristotle would have thought  
so. One could even make the case that the search for alien truth  
is, if not an accurate description of philosophy, a good  
definition for it. I.e. that it's what people who call  
themselves philosophers should be doing, whether or not they currently  
are. But I'm not wedded to that; doing it is what matters, not what  
we call it.We may one day have something like alien life among us in the form  
of AIs. And that may in turn allow us to be precise about what  
truths an intelligent being would have to share with us. We might  
find, for example, that it's impossible to create something we'd  
consider intelligent that doesn't use Occam's razor. We might one  
day even be able to prove that. But though this sort of research  
would be very interesting, it's not necessary for our purposes, or  
even the same field; the goal of philosophy, if we're going to call it that, would be  
to see what ideas we come up with using alien truth as a target,  
not to say precisely where the threshold of it is. Those two questions might one  
day converge, but they'll converge from quite different directions,  
and till they do, it would be too constraining to restrict ourselves  
to thinking only about things we're certain would be alien truths.  
Especially since this will probably be one of those areas where the  
best guesses turn out to be surprisingly close to optimal. (Let's  
see if that one does.)Whatever we call it, the attempt to discover alien truths would be  
a worthwhile undertaking. And curiously enough, that is itself  
probably an alien truth.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Greg Brockman,   
Patrick Collison, Robert Morris, and Michael Nielsen for reading drafts of this.

# What I've Learned from Users

September 2022I recently told applicants to Y Combinator that the best advice I  
could give for getting in, per word, was   
  
 Explain what you've learned from users.  
  
That tests a lot of things: whether you're paying attention to  
users, how well you understand them, and even how much they need  
what you're making.Afterward I asked myself the same question. What have I learned  
from YC's users, the startups we've funded?The first thing that came to mind was that most startups have the  
same problems. No two have exactly the same problems, but it's  
surprising how much the problems remain the same, regardless of  
what they're making. Once you've advised 100 startups all doing  
different things, you rarely encounter problems you haven't seen  
before.This fact is one of the things that makes YC work. But I didn't  
know it when we started YC. I only had a few data points: our own  
startup, and those started by friends. It was a surprise to me how  
often the same problems recur in different forms. Many later stage  
investors might never realize this, because later stage investors  
might not advise 100 startups in their whole career, but a YC partner  
will get this much experience in the first year or two.That's one advantage of funding large numbers of early stage companies  
rather than smaller numbers of later-stage ones. You get a lot of  
data. Not just because you're looking at more companies, but also  
because more goes wrong.But knowing (nearly) all the problems startups can encounter doesn't  
mean that advising them can be automated, or reduced to a formula.  
There's no substitute for individual office hours with a YC partner.  
Each startup is unique, which means they have to be advised  
by specific partners who know them well.  
[1]We learned that the hard way, in the notorious "batch that broke  
YC" in the summer of 2012. Up till that point we treated the partners  
as a pool. When a startup requested office hours, they got the next  
available slot posted by any partner. That meant every partner had  
to know every startup. This worked fine up to 60 startups, but when  
the batch grew to 80, everything broke. The founders probably didn't  
realize anything was wrong, but the partners were confused and  
unhappy because halfway through the batch they still didn't know  
all the companies yet.  
[2]At first I was puzzled. How could things be fine at 60 startups and  
broken at 80? It was only a third more. Then I realized what had  
happened. We were using an O(n2) algorithm. So of course it blew  
up.The solution we adopted was the classic one in these situations.  
We sharded the batch into smaller groups of startups, each overseen  
by a dedicated group of partners. That fixed the problem, and has  
worked fine ever since. But the batch that broke YC was a powerful  
demonstration of how individualized the process of advising startups  
has to be.Another related surprise is how bad founders can be at realizing  
what their problems are. Founders will sometimes come in to talk  
about some problem, and we'll discover another much bigger one in  
the course of the conversation. For example (and this case is all  
too common), founders will come in to talk about the difficulties  
they're having raising money, and after digging into their situation,  
it turns out the reason is that the company is doing badly, and  
investors can tell. Or founders will come in worried that they still  
haven't cracked the problem of user acquisition, and the reason turns out  
to be that their product isn't good enough. There have been times  
when I've asked "Would you use this yourself, if you hadn't built  
it?" and the founders, on thinking about it, said "No." Well, there's  
the reason you're having trouble getting users.Often founders know what their problems are, but not their relative  
importance.  
[3]  
They'll come in to talk about three problems  
they're worrying about. One is of moderate importance, one doesn't  
matter at all, and one will kill the company if it isn't addressed  
immediately. It's like watching one of those horror movies where  
the heroine is deeply upset that her boyfriend cheated on her, and  
only mildly curious about the door that's mysteriously ajar. You  
want to say: never mind about your boyfriend, think about that door!  
Fortunately in office hours you can. So while startups still die  
with some regularity, it's rarely because they wandered into a room  
containing a murderer. The YC partners can warn them where the  
murderers are.Not that founders listen. That was another big surprise: how often  
founders don't listen to us. A couple weeks ago I talked to a partner  
who had been working for YC for a couple batches and was starting  
to see the pattern. "They come back a year later," she said, "and  
say 'We wish we'd listened to you.'"It took me a long time to figure out why founders don't listen. At  
first I thought it was mere stubbornness. That's part of the reason,  
but another and probably more important reason is that so much about  
startups is counterintuitive.   
And when you tell someone something  
counterintuitive, what it sounds to them is wrong. So the reason  
founders don't listen to us is that they don't believe us. At  
least not till experience teaches them otherwise.  
[4]The reason startups are so counterintuitive is that they're so  
different from most people's other experiences. No one knows what  
it's like except those who've done it. Which is why YC partners  
should usually have been founders themselves. But strangely enough,  
the counterintuitiveness of startups turns out to be another of the  
things that make YC work. If it weren't counterintuitive, founders  
wouldn't need our advice about how to do it.Focus is doubly important for early stage startups, because not  
only do they have a hundred different problems, they don't have  
anyone to work on them except the founders. If the founders focus  
on things that don't matter, there's no one focusing on the things  
that do. So the essence of what happens at YC is to figure out which  
problems matter most, then cook up ideas for solving them — ideally  
at a resolution of a week or less — and then try those ideas and  
measure how well they worked. The focus is on action, with measurable,  
near-term results.This doesn't imply that founders should rush forward regardless of  
the consequences. If you correct course at a high enough frequency,  
you can be simultaneously decisive at a micro scale and tentative  
at a macro scale. The result is a somewhat winding path, but executed  
very rapidly, like the path a running back takes downfield. And in  
practice there's less backtracking than you might expect. Founders  
usually guess right about which direction to run in, especially if  
they have someone experienced like a YC partner to bounce their  
hypotheses off. And when they guess wrong, they notice fast, because  
they'll talk about the results at office hours the next week.  
[5]A small improvement in navigational ability can make you a lot  
faster, because it has a double effect: the path is shorter, and  
you can travel faster along it when you're more certain it's the  
right one. That's where a lot of YC's value lies, in helping founders  
get an extra increment of focus that lets them move faster. And  
since moving fast is the essence of a startup, YC in effect makes  
startups more startup-like.Speed defines startups. Focus enables speed. YC improves focus.Why are founders uncertain about what to do? Partly because startups  
almost by definition are doing something new, which means no one  
knows how to do it yet, or in most cases even what "it" is. Partly  
because startups are so counterintuitive generally. And partly  
because many founders, especially young and ambitious ones, have  
been trained to win the wrong way. That took me years to figure  
out. The educational system in most countries trains you to win by  
hacking the test   
instead of actually doing whatever it's supposed  
to measure. But that stops working when you start a startup. So  
part of what YC does is to retrain founders to stop trying to hack  
the test. (It takes a surprisingly long time. A year in, you still  
see them reverting to their old habits.)YC is not simply more experienced founders passing on their knowledge.  
It's more like specialization than apprenticeship. The knowledge  
of the YC partners and the founders have different shapes: It  
wouldn't be worthwhile for a founder to acquire the encyclopedic  
knowledge of startup problems that a YC partner has, just as it  
wouldn't be worthwhile for a YC partner to acquire the depth of  
domain knowledge that a founder has. That's why it can still be  
valuable for an experienced founder to do YC, just as it can still  
be valuable for an experienced athlete to have a coach.The other big thing YC gives founders is colleagues, and this may  
be even more important than the advice of partners. If you look at  
history, great work clusters around certain places and institutions:  
Florence in the late 15th century, the University of Göttingen in  
the late 19th, The New Yorker under Ross, Bell Labs, Xerox PARC.  
However good you are, good colleagues make you better. Indeed, very  
ambitious people probably need colleagues more than anyone else,  
because they're so starved for them in everyday life.Whether or not YC manages one day to be listed alongside those  
famous clusters, it won't be for lack of trying. We were very aware  
of this historical phenomenon and deliberately designed YC to be  
one. By this point it's not bragging to say that it's the biggest  
cluster of great startup founders. Even people trying to attack YC  
concede that.Colleagues and startup founders are two of the most powerful forces  
in the world, so you'd expect it to have a big effect to combine  
them. Before YC, to the extent people thought about the question  
at all, most assumed they couldn't be combined — that loneliness  
was the price of independence. That was how it felt to us when we  
started our own startup in Boston in the 1990s. We had a handful  
of older people we could go to for advice (of varying quality), but  
no peers. There was no one we could commiserate with about the  
misbehavior of investors, or speculate with about the future of  
technology. I often tell founders to make something they themselves  
want, and YC is certainly that: it was designed to be exactly what  
we wanted when we were starting a startup.One thing we wanted was to be able to get seed funding without  
having to make the rounds of random rich people. That has become a  
commodity now, at least in the US. But great colleagues can never  
become a commodity, because the fact that they cluster in some  
places means they're proportionally absent from the rest.Something magical happens where they do cluster though. The energy  
in the room at a YC dinner is like nothing else I've experienced.  
We would have been happy just to have one or two other startups to  
talk to. When you have a whole roomful it's another thing entirely.YC founders aren't just inspired by one another. They also help one  
another. That's the happiest thing I've learned about startup  
founders: how generous they can be in helping one another. We noticed  
this in the first batch and consciously designed YC to magnify it.  
The result is something far more intense than, say, a university.  
Between the partners, the alumni, and their batchmates, founders  
are surrounded by people who want to help them, and can.Notes[1]   
This is why I've never liked it when people refer to YC as a  
"bootcamp." It's intense like a bootcamp, but the opposite in  
structure. Instead of everyone doing the same thing, they're each  
talking to YC partners to figure out what their specific startup  
needs.[2]   
When I say the summer 2012 batch was broken, I mean it felt  
to the partners that something was wrong. Things weren't yet so  
broken that the startups had a worse experience. In fact that batch  
did unusually well.[3]   
This situation reminds me of the research showing that people  
are much better at answering questions than they are at judging how  
accurate their answers are. The two phenomena feel very similar.[4]   
The Airbnbs were   
particularly good at listening — partly  
because they were flexible and disciplined, but also because they'd  
had such a rough time during the preceding year. They were ready  
to listen.[5]   
The optimal unit of decisiveness depends on how long it takes  
to get results, and that depends on the type of problem you're  
solving. When you're negotiating with investors, it could be a  
couple days, whereas if you're building hardware it could be months.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston,   
Harj Taggar, and Garry Tan for reading drafts of this.

# Heresy

April 2022One of the most surprising things I've witnessed in my lifetime is  
the rebirth of the concept of heresy.In his excellent biography of Newton, Richard Westfall writes about the  
moment when he was elected a fellow of Trinity College:  
  
 Supported comfortably, Newton was free to devote himself wholly  
 to whatever he chose. To remain on, he had only to avoid the three  
 unforgivable sins: crime, heresy, and marriage.  
 [1]  
  
The first time I read that, in the 1990s, it sounded amusingly  
medieval. How strange, to have to avoid committing heresy. But when  
I reread it 20 years later it sounded like a description of  
contemporary employment.There are an ever-increasing number of opinions you can be fired  
for. Those doing the firing don't use the word "heresy" to describe  
them, but structurally they're equivalent. Structurally there are  
two distinctive things about heresy: (1) that it takes priority  
over the question of truth or falsity, and (2) that it outweighs  
everything else the speaker has done.For example, when someone calls a statement "x-ist," they're also  
implicitly saying that this is the end of the discussion. They do  
not, having said this, go on to consider whether the statement is  
true or not. Using such labels is the conversational equivalent of  
signalling an exception. That's one of the reasons they're used:  
to end a discussion.If you find yourself talking to someone who uses these labels a  
lot, it might be worthwhile to ask them explicitly if they believe  
any babies are being thrown out with the bathwater. Can a statement  
be x-ist, for whatever value of x, and also true? If the answer is  
yes, then they're admitting to banning the truth. That's obvious  
enough that I'd guess most would answer no. But if they answer no,  
it's easy to show that they're mistaken, and that in practice such  
labels are applied to statements regardless of their truth or  
falsity.The clearest evidence of this is that whether a statement is  
considered x-ist often depends on who said it. Truth doesn't work  
that way. The same statement can't be true when one person says it,  
but x-ist, and therefore false, when another person does.  
[2]The other distinctive thing about heresies, compared to ordinary  
opinions, is that the public expression of them outweighs everything  
else the speaker has done. In ordinary matters, like knowledge of  
history, or taste in music, you're judged by the average of your  
opinions. A heresy is qualitatively different. It's like dropping  
a chunk of uranium onto the scale.Back in the day (and still, in some places) the punishment for  
heresy was death. You could have led a life of exemplary goodness,  
but if you publicly doubted, say, the divinity of Christ, you were  
going to burn. Nowadays, in civilized countries, heretics only get  
fired in the metaphorical sense, by losing their jobs. But the  
structure of the situation is the same: the heresy  
outweighs everything else. You could have spent the last ten years  
saving children's lives, but if you express certain opinions, you're  
automatically fired.It's much the same as if you committed a crime. No matter how  
virtuously you've lived, if you commit a crime, you must still  
suffer the penalty of the law. Having lived a previously blameless  
life might mitigate the punishment, but it doesn't affect whether  
you're guilty or not.A heresy is an opinion whose expression is treated like a crime —  
one that makes some people feel not merely that you're mistaken,  
but that you should be punished. Indeed, their desire to see you  
punished is often stronger than it would be if you'd committed an  
actual crime. There are many on the far left who believe  
strongly in the reintegration of felons (as I do myself), and yet  
seem to feel that anyone guilty of certain heresies should never  
work again.There are always some heresies — some opinions you'd be punished  
for expressing. But there are a lot more now than there were a few  
decades ago, and even those who are happy about this would have to  
agree that it's so.Why? Why has this antiquated-sounding religious concept come back  
in a secular form? And why now?You need two ingredients for a wave of intolerance: intolerant  
people, and an ideology to guide them. The intolerant people are  
always there. They exist in every sufficiently large society. That's  
why waves of intolerance can arise so suddenly; all they need is  
something to set them off.I've already written an essay   
describing the aggressively  
conventional-minded. The short version is that people can be  
classified in two dimensions according to (1) how independent- or  
conventional-minded they are, and (2) how aggressive they are about  
it. The aggressively conventional-minded are the enforcers of  
orthodoxy.Normally they're only locally visible. They're the grumpy, censorious  
people in a group — the ones who are always first to complain when  
something violates the current rules of propriety. But occasionally,  
like a vector field whose elements become aligned, a large number  
of aggressively conventional-minded people unite behind some ideology  
all at once. Then they become much more of a problem, because a mob  
dynamic takes over, where the enthusiasm of each participant is  
increased by the enthusiasm of the others.The most notorious 20th century case may have been the Cultural  
Revolution. Though initiated by Mao to undermine his rivals, the  
Cultural Revolution was otherwise mostly a grass-roots phenomenon.  
Mao said in essence: There are heretics among us. Seek them out and  
punish them. And that's all the aggressively conventional-minded  
ever need to hear. They went at it with the delight of dogs chasing  
squirrels.To unite the conventional-minded, an ideology must have many of the  
features of a religion. In particular it must have strict and  
arbitrary rules that adherents can demonstrate their   
purity   
by obeying, and its adherents must believe that anyone who obeys these  
rules is ipso facto morally superior to anyone who doesn't.  
[3]In the late 1980s a new ideology of this type appeared in US  
universities. It had a very strong component of moral purity, and  
the aggressively conventional-minded seized upon it with their usual  
eagerness — all the more because the relaxation of social norms  
in the preceding decades meant there had been less and less to  
forbid. The resulting wave of intolerance has been eerily similar  
in form to the Cultural Revolution, though fortunately much smaller  
in magnitude.  
[4]I've deliberately avoided mentioning any specific heresies here.  
Partly because one of the universal tactics of heretic hunters, now  
as in the past, is to accuse those who disapprove of the way in  
which they suppress ideas of being heretics themselves. Indeed,  
this tactic is so consistent that you could use it as a way of  
detecting witch hunts in any era.And that's the second reason I've avoided mentioning any specific  
heresies. I want this essay to work in the future, not just now.  
And unfortunately it probably will. The aggressively conventional-minded  
will always be among us, looking for things to forbid. All they  
need is an ideology to tell them what. And it's unlikely the current  
one will be the last.There are aggressively conventional-minded people on both the right  
and the left. The reason the current wave of intolerance comes from  
the left is simply because the new unifying ideology happened to  
come from the left. The next one might come from the right. Imagine  
what that would be like.Fortunately in western countries the suppression of heresies is  
nothing like as bad as it used to be. Though the window of opinions  
you can express publicly has narrowed in the last decade, it's still  
much wider than it was a few hundred years ago. The problem is the  
derivative. Up till about 1985 the window had been growing ever  
wider. Anyone looking into the future in 1985 would have expected  
freedom of expression to continue to increase. Instead it has  
decreased.  
[5]The situation is similar to what's happened with infectious diseases  
like measles. Anyone looking into the future in 2010 would have  
expected the number of measles cases in the US to continue to  
decrease. Instead, thanks to anti-vaxxers, it has increased. The  
absolute number is still not that high. The problem is the derivative.  
[6]In both cases it's hard to know how much to worry. Is it really  
dangerous to society as a whole if a handful of extremists refuse  
to get their kids vaccinated, or shout down speakers at universities?  
The point to start worrying is presumably when their efforts start  
to spill over into everyone else's lives. And in both cases that  
does seem to be happening.So it's probably worth spending some amount of effort on pushing  
back to keep open the window of free expression. My hope is that  
this essay will help form social antibodies not just against current  
efforts to suppress ideas, but against the concept of heresy in  
general. That's the real prize. How do you disable the concept of  
heresy? Since the Enlightenment, western societies have discovered  
many techniques for doing that, but there are surely more to be  
discovered.Overall I'm optimistic. Though the trend in freedom of expression  
has been bad over the last decade, it's been good over the longer  
term. And there are signs that the current wave of intolerance is  
peaking. Independent-minded people I talk to seem more confident  
than they did a few years ago. On the other side, even some of the  
leaders are starting to wonder if things have   
gone too far. And popular culture among the young has already moved on.   
All we have  
to do is keep pushing back, and the wave collapses. And then we'll  
be net ahead, because as well as having defeated this wave, we'll  
also have developed new tactics for resisting the next one.Notes[1]   
Or more accurately, biographies of Newton, since Westfall wrote  
two: a long version called Never at Rest, and a shorter one called  
The Life of Isaac Newton. Both are great. The short version moves  
faster, but the long one is full of interesting and often very funny  
details. This passage is the same in both.[2]  
Another more subtle but equally damning bit of evidence is  
that claims of x-ism are never qualified. You never hear anyone say  
that a statement is "probably x-ist" or "almost certainly y-ist."  
If claims of x-ism were actually claims about truth, you'd expect  
to see "probably" in front of "x-ist" as often as you see it in  
front of "fallacious."[3]   
The rules must be strict, but they need not be demanding. So  
the most effective type of rules are those about superficial matters,  
like doctrinal minutiae, or the precise words adherents must use.  
Such rules can be made extremely complicated, and yet don't repel  
potential converts by requiring significant sacrifice.The superficial demands of orthodoxy make it an inexpensive substitute  
for virtue. And that in turn is one of the reasons orthodoxy is so  
attractive to bad people. You could be a horrible person, and yet  
as long as you're orthodox, you're better than everyone who isn't.[4]   
Arguably there were two. The first had died down somewhat by  
2000, but was followed by a second in the 2010s, probably caused  
by social media.[5]   
Fortunately most of those trying to suppress ideas today still  
respect Enlightenment principles enough to pay lip service to them.  
They know they're not supposed to ban ideas per se, so they have  
to recast the ideas as causing "harm," which sounds like something  
that can be banned. The more extreme try to claim speech itself is  
violence, or even that silence is. But strange as it may sound,  
such gymnastics are a good sign. We'll know we're really in trouble  
when they stop bothering to invent pretenses for banning ideas —  
when, like the medieval church, they say "Damn right we're banning  
ideas, and in fact here's a list of them."[6]   
People only have the luxury of ignoring the medical consensus  
about vaccines because vaccines have worked so well. If we didn't  
have any vaccines at all, the mortality rate would be so high that  
most current anti-vaxxers would be begging for them. And the situation  
with freedom of expression is similar. It's only because they live  
in a world created by the Enlightenment that kids from the suburbs  
can play at banning ideas.Thanks to Marc Andreessen, Chris Best,   
Trevor Blackwell, Nicholas  
Christakis, Daniel Gackle, Jonathan Haidt, Claire Lehmann, Jessica  
Livingston, Greg Lukianoff, Robert Morris, and Garry Tan for reading  
drafts of this.

# Putting Ideas into Words

February 2022Writing about something, even something you know well, usually shows  
you that you didn't know it as well as you thought. Putting ideas  
into words is a severe test. The first words you choose are usually  
wrong; you have to rewrite sentences over and over to  
get them exactly right. And your ideas won't just be imprecise, but  
incomplete too. Half the ideas that end up in an essay will be ones  
you thought of while you were writing it. Indeed, that's why I write  
them.Once you publish something, the convention is that whatever you  
wrote was what you thought before you wrote it. These were your  
ideas, and now you've expressed them. But you know this isn't true.  
You know that putting your ideas into words changed them. And not  
just the ideas you published. Presumably there were others that  
turned out to be too broken to fix, and those you discarded instead.It's not just having to commit your ideas to specific words that  
makes writing so exacting. The real test is reading what you've  
written. You have to pretend to be a neutral reader who knows nothing  
of what's in your head, only what you wrote. When he reads what you  
wrote, does it seem correct? Does it seem complete? If you make an  
effort, you can read your writing as if you were a complete stranger,  
and when you do the news is usually bad. It takes me many cycles  
before I can get an essay past the stranger. But the stranger is  
rational, so you always can, if you ask him what he needs. If he's  
not satisfied because you failed to mention x or didn't qualify  
some sentence sufficiently, then you mention x or add more  
qualifications. Happy now? It may cost you some nice sentences, but  
you have to resign yourself to that. You just have to make them as  
good as you can and still satisfy the stranger.This much, I assume, won't be that controversial. I think it will  
accord with the experience of anyone who has tried to write about  
anything nontrivial. There may exist people whose thoughts are so  
perfectly formed that they just flow straight into words. But I've  
never known anyone who could do this, and if I met someone who said  
they could, it would seem evidence of their limitations rather than  
their ability. Indeed, this is a trope in movies: the guy who claims  
to have a plan for doing some difficult thing, and who when questioned  
further, taps his head and says "It's all up here." Everyone watching  
the movie knows what that means. At best the plan is vague and  
incomplete. Very likely there's some undiscovered flaw that invalidates  
it completely. At best it's a plan for a plan.In precisely defined domains it's possible to form complete ideas  
in your head. People can play chess in their heads, for example.  
And mathematicians can do some amount of math in their heads, though  
they don't seem to feel sure of a proof over a certain length till  
they write it down. But this only seems possible with ideas you can  
express in a formal language. [1] Arguably what such people are  
doing is putting ideas into words in their heads. I can to some  
extent write essays in my head. I'll sometimes think of a paragraph  
while walking or lying in bed that survives nearly unchanged in the  
final version. But really I'm writing when I do this. I'm doing the  
mental part of writing; my fingers just aren't moving as I do it.  
[2]You can know a great deal about something without writing about it.  
Can you ever know so much that you wouldn't learn more from trying  
to explain what you know? I don't think so. I've written about at  
least two subjects I know well — Lisp hacking and startups  
— and in both cases I learned a lot from writing about them.  
In both cases there were things I didn't consciously realize till  
I had to explain them. And I don't think my experience was anomalous.  
A great deal of knowledge is unconscious, and experts have if  
anything a higher proportion of unconscious knowledge than beginners.I'm not saying that writing is the best way to explore all ideas.  
If you have ideas about architecture, presumably the best way to  
explore them is to build actual buildings. What I'm saying is that  
however much you learn from exploring ideas in other ways, you'll  
still learn new things from writing about them.Putting ideas into words doesn't have to mean writing, of course.  
You can also do it the old way, by talking. But in my experience,  
writing is the stricter test. You have to commit to a single, optimal  
sequence of words. Less can go unsaid when you don't have tone of  
voice to carry meaning. And you can focus in a way that would seem  
excessive in conversation. I'll often spend 2 weeks on an essay and  
reread drafts 50 times. If you did that in conversation  
it would seem evidence of some kind of  
mental disorder.   
If you're lazy,  
of course, writing and talking are equally useless. But if you want  
to push yourself to get things right, writing is the steeper hill.  
[3]The reason I've spent so long establishing this rather obvious point  
is that it leads to another that many people will find shocking.  
If writing down your ideas always makes them more precise and more  
complete, then no one who hasn't written about a topic has fully  
formed ideas about it. And someone who never writes has no fully  
formed ideas about anything nontrivial.It feels to them as if they do, especially if they're not in the  
habit of critically examining their own thinking. Ideas can feel  
complete. It's only when you try to put them into words that you  
discover they're not. So if you never subject your ideas to that  
test, you'll not only never have fully formed ideas, but also never  
realize it.Putting ideas into words is certainly no guarantee that they'll be  
right. Far from it. But though it's not a sufficient condition, it  
is a necessary one.Notes[1] Machinery and  
circuits are formal languages.[2] I thought of this  
sentence as I was walking down the street in Palo Alto.[3] There are two  
senses of talking to someone: a strict sense in which the conversation  
is verbal, and a more general sense in which it can take any form,  
including writing. In the limit case (e.g. Seneca's letters),  
conversation in the latter sense becomes essay writing.It can be very useful to talk (in either sense) with other people  
as you're writing something. But a verbal conversation will never  
be more exacting than when you're talking about something you're  
writing. Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Patrick  
Collison, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this. French Translation

# Is There Such a Thing as Good Taste?

November 2021(This essay is derived from a talk at the Cambridge Union.)When I was a kid, I'd have said there wasn't. My father told me so.  
Some people like some things, and other people like other things,  
and who's to say who's right?It seemed so obvious that there was no such thing as good taste  
that it was only through indirect evidence that I realized my father  
was wrong. And that's what I'm going to give you here: a proof by  
reductio ad absurdum. If we start from the premise that there's no  
such thing as good taste, we end up with conclusions that are  
obviously false, and therefore the premise must be wrong.We'd better start by saying what good taste is. There's a narrow  
sense in which it refers to aesthetic judgements and a broader one  
in which it refers to preferences of any kind. The strongest proof  
would be to show that taste exists in the narrowest sense, so I'm  
going to talk about taste in art. You have better taste than me if  
the art you like is better than the art I like.If there's no such thing as good taste, then there's no such thing  
as good art. Because if there is such a  
thing as good art, it's  
easy to tell which of two people has better taste. Show them a lot  
of works by artists they've never seen before and ask them to  
choose the best, and whoever chooses the better art has better  
taste.So if you want to discard the concept of good taste, you also have  
to discard the concept of good art. And that means you have to  
discard the possibility of people being good at making it. Which  
means there's no way for artists to be good at their jobs. And not  
just visual artists, but anyone who is in any sense an artist. You  
can't have good actors, or novelists, or composers, or dancers  
either. You can have popular novelists, but not good ones.We don't realize how far we'd have to go if we discarded the concept  
of good taste, because we don't even debate the most obvious cases.  
But it doesn't just mean we can't say which of two famous painters  
is better. It means we can't say that any painter is better than a  
randomly chosen eight year old.That was how I realized my father was wrong. I started studying  
painting. And it was just like other kinds of work I'd done: you  
could do it well, or badly, and if you tried hard, you could get  
better at it. And it was obvious that Leonardo and Bellini were  
much better at it than me. That gap between us was not imaginary.  
They were so good. And if they could be good, then art could be  
good, and there was such a thing as good taste after all.Now that I've explained how to show there is such a thing as good  
taste, I should also explain why people think there isn't. There  
are two reasons. One is that there's always so much disagreement  
about taste. Most people's response to art is a tangle of unexamined  
impulses. Is the artist famous? Is the subject attractive? Is this  
the sort of art they're supposed to like? Is it hanging in a famous  
museum, or reproduced in a big, expensive book? In practice most  
people's response to art is dominated by such extraneous factors.And the people who do claim to have good taste are so often mistaken.  
The paintings admired by the so-called experts in one generation  
are often so different from those admired a few generations later.  
It's easy to conclude there's nothing real there at all. It's only  
when you isolate this force, for example by trying to paint and  
comparing your work to Bellini's, that you can see that it does in  
fact exist.The other reason people doubt that art can be good is that there  
doesn't seem to be any room in the art for this goodness. The  
argument goes like this. Imagine several people looking at a work  
of art and judging how good it is. If being good art really is a  
property of objects, it should be in the object somehow. But it  
doesn't seem to be; it seems to be something happening in the heads  
of each of the observers. And if they disagree, how do you choose  
between them?The solution to this puzzle is to realize that the purpose of art  
is to work on its human audience, and humans have a lot in common.  
And to the extent the things an object acts upon respond in the  
same way, that's arguably what it means for the object to have the  
corresponding property. If everything a particle interacts with  
behaves as if the particle had a mass of m, then it has a mass of  
m. So the distinction between "objective" and "subjective" is not  
binary, but a matter of degree, depending on how much the subjects  
have in common. Particles interacting with one another are at one  
pole, but people interacting with art are not all the way at the  
other; their reactions aren't random.Because people's responses to art aren't random, art can be designed  
to operate on people, and be good or bad depending on how effectively  
it does so. Much as a vaccine can be. If someone were talking about  
the ability of a vaccine to confer immunity, it would seem very  
frivolous to object that conferring immunity wasn't really a property  
of vaccines, because acquiring immunity is something that happens  
in the immune system of each individual person. Sure, people's  
immune systems vary, and a vaccine that worked on one might not  
work on another, but that doesn't make it meaningless to talk about  
the effectiveness of a vaccine.The situation with art is messier, of course. You can't measure  
effectiveness by simply taking a vote, as you do with vaccines.  
You have to imagine the responses of subjects with a deep knowledge  
of art, and enough clarity of mind to be able to ignore extraneous  
influences like the fame of the artist. And even then you'd still  
see some disagreement. People do vary, and judging art is hard,  
especially recent art. There is definitely not a total order either  
of works or of people's ability to judge them. But there is equally  
definitely a partial order of both. So while it's not possible to  
have perfect taste, it is possible to have good taste.  
Thanks to the Cambridge Union for inviting me, and to Trevor  
Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and Robert Morris for reading drafts  
of this.

# Beyond Smart

October 2021If you asked people what was special about Einstein, most would say  
that he was really smart. Even the ones who tried to give you a  
more sophisticated-sounding answer would probably think this first.  
Till a few years ago I would have given the same answer myself. But  
that wasn't what was special about Einstein. What was special about  
him was that he had important new ideas. Being very smart was a  
necessary precondition for having those ideas, but the two are not  
identical.It may seem a hair-splitting distinction to point out that intelligence  
and its consequences are not identical, but it isn't. There's a big  
gap between them. Anyone who's spent time around universities and  
research labs knows how big. There are a lot of genuinely smart  
people who don't achieve very much.I grew up thinking that being smart was the thing most to be desired.  
Perhaps you did too. But I bet it's not what you really want. Imagine  
you had a choice between being really smart but discovering nothing  
new, and being less smart but discovering lots of new ideas. Surely  
you'd take the latter. I would. The choice makes me uncomfortable,  
but when you see the two options laid out explicitly like that,  
it's obvious which is better.The reason the choice makes me uncomfortable is that being smart  
still feels like the thing that matters, even though I know  
intellectually that it isn't. I spent so many years thinking it  
was. The circumstances of childhood are a perfect storm for fostering  
this illusion. Intelligence is much easier to measure than the value  
of new ideas, and you're constantly being judged by it. Whereas  
even the kids who will ultimately discover new things aren't usually  
discovering them yet. For kids that way inclined, intelligence is  
the only game in town.There are more subtle reasons too, which persist long into adulthood.  
Intelligence wins in conversation, and thus becomes the basis of  
the dominance hierarchy.  
[1]  
Plus having new ideas is such a new  
thing historically, and even now done by so few people, that society  
hasn't yet assimilated the fact that this is the actual destination,  
and intelligence merely a means to an end.  
[2]Why do so many smart people fail to discover anything new? Viewed  
from that direction, the question seems a rather depressing one.  
But there's another way to look at it that's not just more optimistic,  
but more interesting as well. Clearly intelligence is not the only  
ingredient in having new ideas. What are the other ingredients?  
Are they things we could cultivate?Because the trouble with intelligence, they say, is that it's mostly  
inborn. The evidence for this seems fairly convincing, especially  
considering that most of us don't want it to be true, and the  
evidence thus has to face a stiff headwind. But I'm not going  
to get into that question here, because it's the other ingredients  
in new ideas that I care about, and it's clear that many of them  
can be cultivated.That means the truth is excitingly different from the story I got  
as a kid. If intelligence is what matters, and also mostly inborn,  
the natural consequence is a sort of Brave New World fatalism. The  
best you can do is figure out what sort of work you have an "aptitude"  
for, so that whatever intelligence you were born with will at least  
be put to the best use, and then work as hard as you can at it.  
Whereas if intelligence isn't what matters, but only one of several  
ingredients in what does, and many of those aren't inborn, things  
get more interesting. You have a lot more control, but the problem  
of how to arrange your life becomes that much more complicated.So what are the other ingredients in having new ideas? The fact  
that I can even ask this question proves the point I raised earlier  
— that society hasn't assimilated the fact that it's this and not  
intelligence that matters. Otherwise we'd all know the answers  
to such a fundamental question.  
[3]I'm not going to try to provide a complete catalogue of the other  
ingredients here. This is the first time I've posed  
the question to myself this way, and I think it may take a while  
to answer. But I wrote recently about one of the most important:  
an obsessive interest in a particular topic.   
And this can definitely be cultivated.Another quality you need in order to discover new ideas is  
independent-mindedness. I wouldn't want to   
claim that this is  
distinct from intelligence — I'd be reluctant to call someone smart  
who wasn't independent-minded — but though largely inborn, this  
quality seems to be something that can be cultivated to some extent.There are general techniques for having new ideas — for example,  
for working on your own projects  
and  
for overcoming the obstacles you face with early work  
— and these  
can all be learned. Some of them can be learned by societies. And  
there are also collections of techniques for generating specific types  
of new ideas, like startup ideas and   
essay topics.And of course there are a lot of fairly mundane ingredients in  
discovering new ideas, like working hard,   
getting enough sleep, avoiding certain  
kinds of stress, having the right colleagues, and finding tricks  
for working on what you want even when it's not what you're supposed  
to be working on. Anything that prevents people from doing great  
work has an inverse that helps them to. And this class of ingredients  
is not as boring as it might seem at first. For example, having new  
ideas is generally associated with youth. But perhaps it's not youth  
per se that yields new ideas, but specific things that come with  
youth, like good health and lack of responsibilities. Investigating  
this might lead to strategies that will help people of any age to  
have better ideas.One of the most surprising ingredients in having new ideas is writing  
ability. There's a class of new ideas that are best discovered by  
writing essays and books. And that "by" is deliberate: you don't  
think of the ideas first, and then merely write them down. There  
is a kind of thinking that one does by writing, and if you're clumsy  
at writing, or don't enjoy doing it, that will get in your way if  
you try to do this kind of thinking.  
[4]I predict the gap between intelligence and new ideas will turn out  
to be an interesting place. If we think of this gap merely as a measure  
of unrealized potential, it becomes a sort of wasteland that we try to  
hurry through with our eyes averted. But if we flip the question,  
and start inquiring into the other ingredients in new ideas that  
it implies must exist, we can mine this gap for discoveries about  
discovery.  
Notes[1]  
What wins in conversation depends on who with. It ranges from  
mere aggressiveness at the bottom, through quick-wittedness in the  
middle, to something closer to actual intelligence at the top,  
though probably always with some component of quick-wittedness.[2]  
Just as intelligence isn't the only ingredient in having new  
ideas, having new ideas isn't the only thing intelligence is useful  
for. It's also useful, for example, in diagnosing problems and figuring  
out how to fix them. Both overlap with having new ideas, but both  
have an end that doesn't.Those ways of using intelligence are much more common than having  
new ideas. And in such cases intelligence is even harder to distinguish  
from its consequences.[3]  
Some would attribute the difference between intelligence and  
having new ideas to "creativity," but this doesn't seem a very  
useful term. As well as being pretty vague, it's shifted half a frame  
sideways from what we care about: it's neither separable from  
intelligence, nor responsible for all the difference between  
intelligence and having new ideas.[4]  
Curiously enough, this essay is an example. It started out  
as an essay about writing ability. But when I came to the distinction  
between intelligence and having new ideas, that seemed so much more  
important that I turned the original essay inside out, making that  
the topic and my original topic one of the points in it. As in many  
other fields, that level of reworking is easier to contemplate once  
you've had a lot of practice.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison, Jessica Livingston,  
Robert Morris, Michael Nielsen, and Lisa Randall for reading drafts  
of this.

# Weird Languages

August 2021When people say that in their experience all programming languages  
are basically equivalent, they're making a statement not about  
languages but about the kind of programming they've done.99.5% of programming consists of gluing together calls to library  
functions. All popular languages are equally good at this. So one  
can easily spend one's whole career operating in the intersection  
of popular programming languages.But the other .5% of programming is disproportionately interesting.  
If you want to learn what it consists of, the weirdness of weird  
languages is a good clue to follow.Weird languages aren't weird by accident. Not the good ones, at  
least. The weirdness of the good ones usually implies the existence  
of some form of programming that's not just the usual gluing together  
of library calls.A concrete example: Lisp macros. Lisp macros seem weird even to  
many Lisp programmers. They're not only not in the intersection of  
popular languages, but by their nature would be hard to implement  
properly in a language without turning it into a dialect of  
Lisp. And macros are definitely evidence of techniques that go  
beyond glue programming. For example, solving problems by first  
writing a language for problems of that type, and then writing  
your specific application in it. Nor is this all you can do with  
macros; it's just one region in a space of program-manipulating  
techniques that even now is far from fully explored.So if you want to expand your concept of what programming can be,  
one way to do it is by learning weird languages. Pick a language  
that most programmers consider weird but whose median user is smart,  
and then focus on the differences between this language and the  
intersection of popular languages. What can you say in this language  
that would be impossibly inconvenient to say in others? In the  
process of learning how to say things you couldn't previously say,  
you'll probably be learning how to think things you couldn't  
previously think.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison, Daniel Gackle, Amjad  
Masad, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.  
Japanese Translation

# How to Work Hard

June 2021It might not seem there's much to learn about how to work hard.  
Anyone who's been to school knows what it entails, even if they  
chose not to do it. There are 12 year olds who work amazingly hard. And  
yet when I ask if I know more about working hard now than when I  
was in school, the answer is definitely yes.One thing I know is that if you want to do great things, you'll  
have to work very hard. I wasn't sure of that as a kid. Schoolwork  
varied in difficulty; one didn't always have to work super hard to  
do well. And some of the things famous adults did, they seemed to  
do almost effortlessly. Was there, perhaps, some way to evade hard  
work through sheer brilliance? Now I know the answer to that question.  
There isn't.The reason some subjects seemed easy was that my school had low  
standards. And the reason famous adults seemed to do things  
effortlessly was years of practice; they made it look easy.Of course, those famous adults usually had a lot of natural ability  
too. There are three ingredients in great work: natural ability,  
practice, and effort. You can do pretty well with just two, but to  
do the best work you need all three: you need great natural ability  
and to have practiced a lot and to be trying very hard.   
[1]Bill Gates, for example, was among the smartest people in business  
in his era, but he was also among the hardest working. "I never  
took a day off in my twenties," he said. "Not one." It was similar  
with Lionel Messi. He had great natural ability, but when his youth  
coaches talk about him, what they remember is not his talent but  
his dedication and his desire to win. P. G. Wodehouse would probably  
get my vote for best English writer of the 20th century, if I had  
to choose. Certainly no one ever made it look easier. But no one  
ever worked harder. At 74, he wrote  
  
 with each new book of mine I have, as I say, the feeling that  
 this time I have picked a lemon in the garden of literature. A  
 good thing, really, I suppose. Keeps one up on one's toes and  
 makes one rewrite every sentence ten times. Or in many cases  
 twenty times.  
  
Sounds a bit extreme, you think. And yet Bill Gates sounds even  
more extreme. Not one day off in ten years? These two had about  
as much natural ability as anyone could have, and yet they also  
worked about as hard as anyone could work. You need both.That seems so obvious, and yet in practice we find it slightly hard  
to grasp. There's a faint xor between talent and hard work. It comes  
partly from popular culture, where it seems to run very deep, and  
partly from the fact that the outliers are so rare. If great talent  
and great drive are both rare, then people with both are rare  
squared. Most people you meet who have a lot of one will have less  
of the other. But you'll need both if you want to be an outlier  
yourself. And since you can't really change how much natural talent  
you have, in practice doing great work, insofar as you can, reduces  
to working very hard.It's straightforward to work hard if you have clearly defined,  
externally imposed goals, as you do in school. There is some technique  
to it: you have to learn not to lie to yourself, not to procrastinate  
(which is a form of lying to yourself), not to get distracted, and  
not to give up when things go wrong. But this level of discipline  
seems to be within the reach of quite young children, if they want  
it.What I've learned since I was a kid is how to work toward goals  
that are neither clearly defined nor externally imposed. You'll  
probably have to learn both if you want to do really great things.The most basic level of which is simply to feel you should be working  
without anyone telling you to. Now, when I'm not working hard, alarm  
bells go off. I can't be sure I'm getting anywhere when I'm working  
hard, but I can be sure I'm getting nowhere when I'm not, and it  
feels awful.  
[2]There wasn't a single point when I learned this. Like most little  
kids, I enjoyed the feeling of achievement when I learned or did  
something new. As I grew older, this morphed into a feeling of  
disgust when I wasn't achieving anything. The one precisely dateable  
landmark I have is when I stopped watching TV, at age 13.Several people I've talked to remember getting serious about work  
around this age. When I asked Patrick Collison when he started to  
find idleness distasteful, he said  
  
 I think around age 13 or 14. I have a clear memory from around  
 then of sitting in the sitting room, staring outside, and wondering  
 why I was wasting my summer holiday.  
  
Perhaps something changes at adolescence. That would make sense.Strangely enough, the biggest obstacle to getting serious about  
work was probably school, which made work (what they called work)  
seem boring and pointless. I had to learn what real work was before  
I could wholeheartedly desire to do it. That took a while, because  
even in college a lot of the work is pointless; there are entire  
departments that are pointless. But as I learned the shape of real  
work, I found that my desire to do it slotted into it as if they'd  
been made for each other.I suspect most people have to learn what work is before they can  
love it. Hardy wrote eloquently about this in A Mathematician's  
Apology:  
  
 I do not remember having felt, as a boy, any passion for  
 mathematics, and such notions as I may have had of the career of  
 a mathematician were far from noble. I thought of mathematics in  
 terms of examinations and scholarships: I wanted to beat other  
 boys, and this seemed to be the way in which I could do so most  
 decisively.  
  
He didn't learn what math was really about till part way through  
college, when he read Jordan's Cours d'analyse.  
  
 I shall never forget the astonishment with which I read that  
 remarkable work, the first inspiration for so many mathematicians  
 of my generation, and learnt for the first time as I read it what  
 mathematics really meant.  
  
There are two separate kinds of fakeness you need to learn to  
discount in order to understand what real work is. One is the kind  
Hardy encountered in school. Subjects get distorted when they're  
adapted to be taught to kids — often so distorted that they're  
nothing like the work done by actual practitioners.  
[3]  
The other  
kind of fakeness is intrinsic to certain types of work. Some types  
of work are inherently bogus, or at best mere busywork.There's a kind of solidity to real work. It's not all writing the  
Principia, but it all feels necessary. That's a vague criterion,  
but it's deliberately vague, because it has to cover a lot of  
different types.  
[4]Once you know the shape of real work, you have to learn how many  
hours a day to spend on it. You can't solve this problem by simply  
working every waking hour, because in many kinds of work there's a  
point beyond which the quality of the result will start to decline.That limit varies depending on the type of work and the person.  
I've done several different kinds of work, and the limits were  
different for each. My limit for the harder types of writing or  
programming is about five hours a day. Whereas when I was running  
a startup, I could  
work all the time. At least for the three years I did it; if I'd  
kept going much longer, I'd probably have needed to take occasional  
vacations.  
[5]The only way to find the limit is by crossing it. Cultivate a  
sensitivity to the quality of the work you're doing, and then you'll  
notice if it decreases because you're working too hard. Honesty is  
critical here, in both directions: you have to notice when you're  
being lazy, but also when you're working too hard. And if you think  
there's something admirable about working too hard, get that idea  
out of your head. You're not merely getting worse results, but  
getting them because you're showing off — if not to other people,  
then to yourself.  
[6]Finding the limit of working hard is a constant, ongoing process,  
not something you do just once. Both the difficulty of the work and  
your ability to do it can vary hour to hour, so you need to be  
constantly judging both how hard you're trying and how well you're  
doing.Trying hard doesn't mean constantly pushing yourself to work, though.  
There may be some people who do, but I think my experience is fairly  
typical, and I only have to push myself occasionally when I'm  
starting a project or when I encounter some sort of check. That's  
when I'm in danger of procrastinating. But once I get rolling, I  
tend to keep going.What keeps me going depends on the type of work. When I was working  
on Viaweb, I was driven by fear of failure. I barely procrastinated  
at all then, because there was always something that needed doing,  
and if I could put more distance between me and the pursuing beast  
by doing it, why wait? [7]  
Whereas what drives me now, writing  
essays, is the flaws in them. Between essays I fuss for a few days,  
like a dog circling while it decides exactly where to lie down. But  
once I get started on one, I don't have to push myself to work,  
because there's always some error or omission already pushing me.I do make some amount of effort to focus on important topics. Many  
problems have a hard core at the center, surrounded by easier stuff  
at the edges. Working hard means aiming toward the center to the  
extent you can. Some days you may not be able to; some days you'll  
only be able to work on the easier, peripheral stuff. But you should  
always be aiming as close to the center as you can without stalling.The bigger question of what to do with your life is one of these  
problems with a hard core. There are important problems at the  
center, which tend to be hard, and less important, easier ones at  
the edges. So as well as the small, daily adjustments involved in  
working on a specific problem, you'll occasionally have to make  
big, lifetime-scale adjustments about which type of work to do.  
And the rule is the same: working hard means aiming toward the  
center — toward the most ambitious problems.By center, though, I mean the actual center, not merely the current  
consensus about the center. The consensus about which problems are  
most important is often mistaken, both in general and within specific  
fields. If you disagree with it, and you're right, that could  
represent a valuable opportunity to do something new.The more ambitious types of work will usually be harder, but although  
you should not be in denial about this, neither should you treat  
difficulty as an infallible guide in deciding what to do. If you  
discover some ambitious type of work that's a bargain in the sense  
of being easier for you than other people, either because of the  
abilities you happen to have, or because of some new way you've  
found to approach it, or simply because you're more excited about  
it, by all means work on that. Some of the best work is done by  
people who find an easy way to do something hard.As well as learning the shape of real work, you need to figure out  
which kind you're suited for. And that doesn't just mean figuring  
out which kind your natural abilities match the best; it doesn't  
mean that if you're 7 feet tall, you have to play basketball. What  
you're suited for depends not just on your talents but perhaps even  
more on your interests. A deep interest   
in a topic makes people  
work harder than any amount of discipline can.It can be harder to discover your interests than your talents.  
There are fewer types of talent than interest, and they start to  
be judged early in childhood, whereas interest in a topic is a  
subtle thing that may not mature till your twenties, or even later.  
The topic may not even exist earlier. Plus there are some powerful  
sources of error you need to learn to discount. Are you really  
interested in x, or do you want to work on it because you'll make  
a lot of money, or because other people will be impressed with you,  
or because your parents want you to?  
[8]The difficulty of figuring out what to work on varies enormously  
from one person to another. That's one of the most important things  
I've learned about work since I was a kid. As a kid, you get the  
impression that everyone has a calling, and all they have to do is  
figure out what it is. That's how it works in movies, and in the  
streamlined biographies fed to kids. Sometimes it works that way  
in real life. Some people figure out what to do as children and  
just do it, like Mozart. But others, like Newton, turn restlessly  
from one kind of work to another. Maybe in retrospect we can identify  
one as their calling — we can wish Newton spent more time on math  
and physics and less on alchemy and theology — but this is an  
illusion induced by hindsight bias.   
There was no voice calling to him that he could have heard.So while some people's lives converge fast, there will be others  
whose lives never converge. And for these people, figuring out what  
to work on is not so much a prelude to working hard as an ongoing  
part of it, like one of a set of simultaneous equations. For these  
people, the process I described earlier has a third component: along  
with measuring both how hard you're working and how well you're  
doing, you have to think about whether you should keep working in  
this field or switch to another. If you're working hard but not  
getting good enough results, you should switch. It sounds simple  
expressed that way, but in practice it's very difficult. You shouldn't  
give up on the first day just because you work hard and don't get  
anywhere. You need to give yourself time to get going. But how much  
time? And what should you do if work that was going well stops going  
well? How much time do you give yourself then?  
[9]What even counts as good results? That can be really hard to decide.  
If you're exploring an area few others have worked in, you may not  
even know what good results look like. History is full of examples  
of people who misjudged the importance of what they were working  
on.The best test of whether it's worthwhile to work on something is  
whether you find it interesting. That may sound like a dangerously  
subjective measure, but it's probably the most accurate one you're  
going to get. You're the one working on the stuff. Who's in a better  
position than you to judge whether it's important, and what's a  
better predictor of its importance than whether it's interesting?For this test to work, though, you have to be honest with yourself.  
Indeed, that's the most striking thing about the whole question of  
working hard: how at each point it depends on being honest with  
yourself.Working hard is not just a dial you turn up to 11. It's a complicated,  
dynamic system that has to be tuned just right at each point. You  
have to understand the shape of real work, see clearly what kind  
you're best suited for, aim as close to the true core of it as you  
can, accurately judge at each moment both what you're capable of  
and how you're doing, and put in as many hours each day as you can  
without harming the quality of the result. This network is too  
complicated to trick. But if you're consistently honest and  
clear-sighted, it will automatically assume an optimal shape, and  
you'll be productive in a way few people are.Notes[1]  
In "The Bus Ticket Theory of Genius" I said the three ingredients  
in great work were natural ability, determination, and interest.  
That's the formula in the preceding stage; determination and interest  
yield practice and effort.[2]  
I mean this at a resolution of days, not hours. You'll often  
get somewhere while not working in the sense that the solution to  
a problem comes to you while taking a   
shower, or even in your sleep,  
but only because you were working hard on it the day before.It's good to go on vacation occasionally, but when I go on vacation,  
I like to learn new things. I wouldn't like just sitting on a beach.[3]  
The thing kids do in school that's most like the real version  
is sports. Admittedly because many sports originated as games played  
in schools. But in this one area, at least, kids are doing exactly  
what adults do.In the average American high school, you have a choice of pretending  
to do something serious, or seriously doing something pretend.  
Arguably the latter is no worse.[4]  
Knowing what you want to work on doesn't mean you'll be able  
to. Most people have to spend a lot of their time working on things  
they don't want to, especially early on. But if you know what you  
want to do, you at least know what direction to nudge your life in.[5]  
The lower time limits for intense work suggest a solution to  
the problem of having less time to work after you have kids: switch  
to harder problems. In effect I did that, though not deliberately.[6]  
Some cultures have a tradition of performative hard work. I  
don't love this idea, because (a) it makes a parody of something  
important and (b) it causes people to wear themselves out doing  
things that don't matter. I don't know enough to say for sure whether  
it's net good or bad, but my guess is bad.[7]  
One of the reasons people work so hard on startups is that  
startups can fail, and when they do, that failure tends to be both  
decisive and conspicuous.[8]  
It's ok to work on something to make a lot of money. You need  
to solve the money problem somehow, and there's nothing wrong with  
doing that efficiently by trying to make a lot at once. I suppose  
it would even be ok to be interested in money for its own sake;  
whatever floats your boat. Just so long as you're conscious of your  
motivations. The thing to avoid is unconsciously letting the need  
for money warp your ideas about what kind of work you find most  
interesting.[9]  
Many people face this question on a smaller scale with  
individual projects. But it's easier both to recognize and to accept  
a dead end in a single project than to abandon some type of work  
entirely. The more determined you are, the harder it gets. Like a  
Spanish Flu victim, you're fighting your own immune system: Instead  
of giving up, you tell yourself, I should just try harder. And who  
can say you're not right?  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, John Carmack, John Collison, Patrick Collison,  
Robert Morris, Geoff Ralston, and Harj Taggar for reading drafts of this.Arabic Translation

# A Project of One's Own

June 2021A few days ago, on the way home from school, my nine year old son  
told me he couldn't wait to get home to write more of the story he  
was working on. This made me as happy as anything I've heard him  
say — not just because he was excited about his story, but because  
he'd discovered this way of working. Working on a project of your  
own is as different from ordinary work as skating is from walking.  
It's more fun, but also much more productive.What proportion of great work has been done by people who were  
skating in this sense? If not all of it, certainly a lot.There is something special about working on a project of your own.  
I wouldn't say exactly that you're happier. A better word would be  
excited, or engaged. You're happy when things are going well, but  
often they aren't. When I'm writing an essay, most of the time I'm  
worried and puzzled: worried that the essay will turn out badly,  
and puzzled because I'm groping for some idea that I can't see  
clearly enough. Will I be able to pin it down with words? In the  
end I usually can, if I take long enough, but I'm never sure; the  
first few attempts often fail.You have moments of happiness when things work out, but they don't  
last long, because then you're on to the next problem. So why do  
it at all? Because to the kind of people who like working this way,  
nothing else feels as right. You feel as if you're an animal in its  
natural habitat, doing what you were meant to do — not always  
happy, maybe, but awake and alive.Many kids experience the excitement of working on projects of their  
own. The hard part is making this converge with the work you do as  
an adult. And our customs make it harder. We treat "playing" and  
"hobbies" as qualitatively different from "work". It's not clear  
to a kid building a treehouse that there's a direct (though long)  
route from that to architecture or engineering. And instead of  
pointing out the route, we conceal it, by implicitly treating the  
stuff kids do as different from real work.  
[1]Instead of telling kids that their treehouses could be on the path  
to the work they do as adults, we tell them the path goes through  
school. And unfortunately schoolwork tends to be very different from  
working on projects of one's own. It's usually neither a project,  
nor one's own. So as school gets more serious, working on projects  
of one's own is something that survives, if at all, as a thin thread  
off to the side.It's a bit sad to think of all the high school kids turning their  
backs on building treehouses and sitting in class dutifully learning  
about Darwin or Newton to pass some exam, when the work that made  
Darwin and Newton famous was actually closer in spirit to building  
treehouses than studying for exams.If I had to choose between my kids getting good grades and   
working on ambitious projects of their own, I'd pick  
the projects. And not because I'm an indulgent parent, but because  
I've been on the other end and I know which has more predictive  
value. When I was picking startups for Y Combinator, I didn't care  
about applicants' grades. But if they'd worked on projects of their  
own, I wanted to hear all about those.  
[2]It may be inevitable that school is the way it is. I'm not saying  
we have to redesign it (though I'm not saying we don't), just that  
we should understand what it does to our attitudes to work — that  
it steers us toward the dutiful plodding kind of work, often using  
competition as bait, and away from skating.There are occasionally times when schoolwork becomes a project of  
one's own. Whenever I had to write a paper, that would become a  
project of my own — except in English classes, ironically, because  
the things one has to write in English classes are so   
bogus. And  
when I got to college and started taking CS classes, the programs  
I had to write became projects of my own. Whenever I was writing  
or programming, I was usually skating, and that has been true ever  
since.So where exactly is the edge of projects of one's own? That's an  
interesting question, partly because the answer is so complicated,  
and partly because there's so much at stake. There turn out to be  
two senses in which work can be one's own: 1) that you're doing it  
voluntarily, rather than merely because someone told you to, and  
2) that you're doing it by yourself.The edge of the former is quite sharp. People who care a lot about  
their work are usually very sensitive to the difference between  
pulling, and being pushed, and work tends to fall into one category  
or the other. But the test isn't simply whether you're told to do  
something. You can choose to do something you're told to do. Indeed,  
you can own it far more thoroughly than the person who told you to  
do it.For example, math homework is for most people something they're  
told to do. But for my father, who was a mathematician, it wasn't.  
Most of us think of the problems in a math book as a way to test  
or develop our knowledge of the material explained in each section.  
But to my father the problems were the part that mattered, and the  
text was merely a sort of annotation. Whenever he got a new math  
book it was to him like being given a puzzle: here was a new set  
of problems to solve, and he'd immediately set about solving all  
of them.The other sense of a project being one's own — working on it by  
oneself — has a much softer edge. It shades gradually into  
collaboration. And interestingly, it shades into collaboration in  
two different ways. One way to collaborate is to share a single  
project. For example, when two mathematicians collaborate on a proof  
that takes shape in the course of a conversation between them. The  
other way is when multiple people work on separate projects of their  
own that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. For example, when one  
person writes the text of a book and another does the graphic design.  
[3]These two paths into collaboration can of course be combined. But  
under the right conditions, the excitement of working on a project  
of one's own can be preserved for quite a while before disintegrating  
into the turbulent flow of work in a large organization. Indeed,  
the history of successful organizations is partly the history of  
techniques for preserving that excitement.  
[4]The team that made the original Macintosh were a great example of  
this phenomenon. People like Burrell Smith and Andy Hertzfeld and  
Bill Atkinson and Susan Kare were not just following orders. They  
were not tennis balls hit by Steve Jobs, but rockets let loose by  
Steve Jobs. There was a lot of collaboration between them, but  
they all seem to have individually felt the excitement of  
working on a project of one's own.In Andy Hertzfeld's book on the Macintosh, he describes how they'd  
come back into the office after dinner and work late into the night.  
People who've never experienced the thrill of working on a project  
they're excited about can't distinguish this kind of working long  
hours from the kind that happens in sweatshops and boiler rooms,  
but they're at opposite ends of the spectrum. That's why it's a  
mistake to insist dogmatically on "work/life balance." Indeed, the  
mere expression "work/life" embodies a mistake: it assumes work and  
life are distinct. For those to whom the word "work" automatically  
implies the dutiful plodding kind, they are. But for the skaters,  
the relationship between work and life would be better represented  
by a dash than a slash. I wouldn't want to work on anything that I didn't  
want to take over my life.Of course, it's easier to achieve this level of motivation when  
you're making something like the Macintosh. It's easy for something  
new to feel like a project of your own. That's one of the reasons  
for the tendency programmers have to rewrite things that don't need  
rewriting, and to write their own versions of things that already  
exist. This sometimes alarms managers, and measured by total number  
of characters typed, it's rarely the optimal solution. But it's not  
always driven simply by arrogance or cluelessness.  
Writing code from scratch is also much more rewarding — so much  
more rewarding that a good programmer can end up net ahead, despite  
the shocking waste of characters. Indeed, it may be one of the  
advantages of capitalism that it encourages such rewriting. A company  
that needs software to do something can't use the software already  
written to do it at another company, and thus has to write their  
own, which often turns out better.  
[5]The natural alignment between skating and solving new problems is  
one of the reasons the payoffs from startups are so high. Not only  
is the market price of unsolved problems higher, you also get a  
discount on productivity when you work on them. In fact, you get a  
double increase in productivity: when you're doing a clean-sheet  
design, it's easier to recruit skaters, and they get to spend all  
their time skating.Steve Jobs knew a thing or two about skaters from having watched  
Steve Wozniak. If you can find the right people, you only have to  
tell them what to do at the highest level. They'll handle the  
details. Indeed, they insist on it. For a project to feel like your  
own, you must have sufficient autonomy. You can't be working to  
order, or slowed down   
by bureaucracy.One way to ensure autonomy is not to have a boss at all. There are  
two ways to do that: to be the boss yourself, and to work on projects  
outside of work. Though they're at opposite ends of the scale  
financially, startups and open source projects have a lot in common,  
including the fact that they're often run by skaters. And indeed,  
there's a wormhole from one end of the scale to the other: one of  
the best ways to discover   
startup ideas is to work on a project  
just for fun.If your projects are the kind that make money, it's easy to work  
on them. It's harder when they're not. And the hardest part, usually,  
is morale. That's where adults have it harder than kids. Kids just  
plunge in and build their treehouse without worrying about whether  
they're wasting their time, or how it compares to other treehouses.  
And frankly we could learn a lot from kids here. The high standards  
most grownups have for "real" work do not always serve us well.The most important phase in a project of one's own is at the  
beginning: when you go from thinking it might be cool to do x to  
actually doing x. And at that point high standards are not merely  
useless but positively harmful. There are a few people who start  
too many new projects, but far more, I suspect, who are deterred  
by fear of failure from starting projects that would have succeeded  
if they had.But if we couldn't benefit as kids from the knowledge that our  
treehouses were on the path to grownup projects, we can at least  
benefit as grownups from knowing that our projects are on a path  
that stretches back to treehouses. Remember that careless confidence  
you had as a kid when starting something new? That would be a  
powerful thing to recapture.If it's harder as adults to retain that kind of confidence, we at  
least tend to be more aware of what we're doing. Kids bounce, or  
are herded, from one kind of work to the next, barely realizing  
what's happening to them. Whereas we know more about different types  
of work and have more control over which we do. Ideally we can have  
the best of both worlds: to be deliberate in choosing to work on  
projects of our own, and carelessly confident in starting new ones.  
Notes[1]  
"Hobby" is a curious word. Now it means work that isn't real  
work — work that one is not to be judged by — but originally it just  
meant an obsession in a fairly general sense (even a political  
opinion, for example) that one metaphorically rode as a child rides  
a hobby-horse. It's hard to say if its recent, narrower meaning is  
a change for the better or the worse. For sure there are lots of  
false positives — lots of projects that end up being important but  
are dismissed initially as mere hobbies. But on the other hand, the  
concept provides valuable cover for projects in the early, ugly  
duckling phase.[2]  
Tiger parents, as parents so often do, are fighting the last  
war. Grades mattered more in the old days when the route to success  
was to acquire   
credentials   
while ascending some predefined ladder.  
But it's just as well that their tactics are focused on grades. How  
awful it would be if they invaded the territory of projects, and  
thereby gave their kids a distaste for this kind of work by forcing  
them to do it. Grades are already a grim, fake world, and aren't  
harmed much by parental interference, but working on one's own  
projects is a more delicate, private thing that could be damaged  
very easily.[3]  
The complicated, gradual edge between working on one's own  
projects and collaborating with others is one reason there is so  
much disagreement about the idea of the "lone genius." In practice  
people collaborate (or not) in all kinds of different ways, but the  
idea of the lone genius is definitely not a myth. There's a core  
of truth to it that goes with a certain way of working.[4]  
Collaboration is powerful too. The optimal organization would  
combine collaboration and ownership in such a way as to do the least  
damage to each. Interestingly, companies and university departments  
approach this ideal from opposite directions: companies insist on  
collaboration, and occasionally also manage both to recruit skaters  
and allow them to skate, and university departments insist on the  
ability to do independent research (which is by custom treated as  
skating, whether it is or not), and the people they hire collaborate  
as much as they choose.[5]  
If a company could design its software in such a way that the  
best newly arrived programmers always got a clean sheet, it could  
have a kind of eternal youth. That might not be impossible. If you  
had a software backbone defining a game with sufficiently clear  
rules, individual programmers could write their own players.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit, Andy Hertzfeld, Jessica  
Livingston, and Peter Norvig for reading drafts of this.

# Fierce Nerds

May 2021Most people think of nerds as quiet, diffident people. In ordinary  
social situations they are — as quiet and diffident as the star  
quarterback would be if he found himself in the middle of a physics  
symposium. And for the same reason: they are fish out of water.  
But the apparent diffidence of nerds is an illusion due to the fact  
that when non-nerds observe them, it's usually in ordinary social  
situations. In fact some nerds are quite fierce.The fierce nerds are a small but interesting group. They are as a  
rule extremely competitive — more competitive, I'd say, than highly  
competitive non-nerds. Competition is more personal for them. Partly  
perhaps because they're not emotionally mature enough to distance  
themselves from it, but also because there's less randomness in the  
kinds of competition they engage in, and they are thus more justified  
in taking the results personally.Fierce nerds also tend to be somewhat overconfident, especially  
when young. It might seem like it would be a disadvantage to be  
mistaken about one's abilities, but empirically it isn't. Up to a  
point, confidence is a self-fullfilling prophecy.Another quality you find in most fierce nerds is intelligence. Not  
all nerds are smart, but the fierce ones are always at least  
moderately so. If they weren't, they wouldn't have the confidence  
to be fierce.  
[1]There's also a natural connection between nerdiness and  
independent-mindedness. It's hard to be   
independent-minded without  
being somewhat socially awkward, because conventional beliefs are  
so often mistaken, or at least arbitrary. No one who was both  
independent-minded and ambitious would want to waste the effort it  
takes to fit in. And the independent-mindedness of the fierce nerds  
will obviously be of the aggressive   
rather than the passive type:  
they'll be annoyed by rules, rather than dreamily unaware of them.I'm less sure why fierce nerds are impatient, but most seem to be.  
You notice it first in conversation, where they tend to interrupt  
you. This is merely annoying, but in the more promising fierce nerds  
it's connected to a deeper impatience about solving problems. Perhaps  
the competitiveness and impatience of fierce nerds are not separate   
qualities, but two manifestations of a single underlying drivenness.When you combine all these qualities in sufficient quantities, the  
result is quite formidable. The most vivid example of fierce nerds  
in action may be James Watson's The Double Helix. The first sentence  
of the book is "I have never seen Francis Crick in a modest mood,"  
and the portrait he goes on to paint of Crick is the quintessential  
fierce nerd: brilliant, socially awkward, competitive, independent-minded,  
overconfident. But so is the implicit portrait he paints of himself.  
Indeed, his lack of social awareness makes both portraits that much  
more realistic, because he baldly states all sorts of opinions and  
motivations that a smoother person would conceal. And moreover it's  
clear from the story that Crick and Watson's fierce nerdiness was  
integral to their success. Their independent-mindedness caused them  
to consider approaches that most others ignored, their overconfidence  
allowed them to work on problems they only half understood (they  
were literally described as "clowns" by one eminent insider), and  
their impatience and competitiveness got them to the answer ahead  
of two other groups that would otherwise have found it within the  
next year, if not the next several months.  
[2]The idea that there could be fierce nerds is an unfamiliar one not  
just to many normal people but even to some young nerds. Especially  
early on, nerds spend so much of their time in ordinary social  
situations and so little doing real work that they get a lot more  
evidence of their awkwardness than their power. So there will be  
some who read this description of the fierce nerd and realize "Hmm,  
that's me." And it is to you, young fierce nerd, that I now turn.I have some good news, and some bad news. The good news is that  
your fierceness will be a great help in solving difficult problems.  
And not just the kind of scientific and technical problems that  
nerds have traditionally solved. As the world progresses, the number  
of things you can win at by getting the right answer increases.  
Recently getting rich became   
one of them: 7 of the 8 richest people  
in America are now fierce nerds.Indeed, being a fierce nerd is probably even more helpful in business  
than in nerds' original territory of scholarship. Fierceness seems  
optional there. Darwin for example doesn't seem to have been  
especially fierce. Whereas it's impossible to be the CEO of a company  
over a certain size without being fierce, so now that nerds can win  
at business, fierce nerds will increasingly monopolize the really  
big successes.The bad news is that if it's not exercised, your fierceness will  
turn to bitterness, and you will become an intellectual playground  
bully: the grumpy sysadmin, the forum troll, the   
hater, the shooter  
down of new ideas.How do you avoid this fate? Work on ambitious projects. If you  
succeed, it will bring you a kind of satisfaction that neutralizes  
bitterness. But you don't need to have succeeded to feel this;  
merely working on hard projects gives most fierce nerds some  
feeling of satisfaction. And those it doesn't, it at least keeps  
busy.  
[3]Another solution may be to somehow turn off your fierceness, by  
devoting yourself to meditation or psychotherapy or something like  
that. Maybe that's the right answer for some people. I have no idea.  
But it doesn't seem the optimal solution to me. If you're given a  
sharp knife, it seems to me better to use it than to blunt its edge  
to avoid cutting yourself.If you do choose the ambitious route, you'll have a tailwind behind  
you. There has never been a better time to be a nerd. In the past  
century we've seen a continuous transfer of power from dealmakers  
to technicians — from the charismatic to the competent — and I  
don't see anything on the horizon that will end it. At least not  
till the nerds end it themselves by bringing about the singularity.Notes[1]  
To be a nerd is to be socially awkward, and there are two  
distinct ways to do that: to be playing the same game as everyone  
else, but badly, and to be playing a different game. The smart nerds  
are the latter type.[2]  
The same qualities that make fierce nerds so effective can  
also make them very annoying. Fierce nerds would do well to remember  
this, and (a) try to keep a lid on it, and (b) seek out organizations  
and types of work where getting the right answer matters more than  
preserving social harmony. In practice that means small groups  
working on hard problems. Which fortunately is the most fun kind  
of environment anyway.[3]  
If success neutralizes bitterness, why are there some people  
who are at least moderately successful and yet still quite bitter?  
Because people's potential bitterness varies depending on how  
naturally bitter their personality is, and how ambitious they are:  
someone who's naturally very bitter will still have a lot left after  
success neutralizes some of it, and someone who's very ambitious  
will need proportionally more success to satisfy that ambition.So the worst-case scenario is someone who's both naturally bitter  
and extremely ambitious, and yet only moderately successful.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Steve Blank, Patrick Collison, Jessica  
Livingston, Amjad Masad, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.Chinese Translation

# Crazy New Ideas

May 2021There's one kind of opinion I'd be very afraid to express publicly.  
If someone I knew to be both a domain expert and a reasonable person  
proposed an idea that sounded preposterous, I'd be very reluctant  
to say "That will never work."Anyone who has studied the history of ideas, and especially the  
history of science, knows that's how big things start. Someone  
proposes an idea that sounds crazy, most people dismiss it, then  
it gradually takes over the world.Most implausible-sounding ideas are in fact bad and could be safely  
dismissed. But not when they're proposed by reasonable domain  
experts. If the person proposing the idea is reasonable, then they  
know how implausible it sounds. And yet they're proposing it anyway.  
That suggests they know something you don't. And if they have deep  
domain expertise, that's probably the source of it.  
[1]Such ideas are not merely unsafe to dismiss, but disproportionately  
likely to be interesting. When the average person proposes an  
implausible-sounding idea, its implausibility is evidence of their  
incompetence. But when a reasonable domain expert does it, the  
situation is reversed. There's something like an efficient market  
here: on average the ideas that seem craziest will, if correct,  
have the biggest effect. So if you can eliminate the theory that  
the person proposing an implausible-sounding idea is incompetent,  
its implausibility switches from evidence that it's boring to  
evidence that it's exciting.  
[2]Such ideas are not guaranteed to work. But they don't have to be.  
They just have to be sufficiently good bets — to have sufficiently  
high expected value. And I think on average they do. I think if you  
bet on the entire set of implausible-sounding ideas proposed by  
reasonable domain experts, you'd end up net ahead.The reason is that everyone is too conservative. The word "paradigm"  
is overused, but this is a case where it's warranted. Everyone is  
too much in the grip of the current paradigm. Even the people who  
have the new ideas undervalue them initially. Which means that  
before they reach the stage of proposing them publicly, they've  
already subjected them to an excessively strict filter.  
[3]The wise response to such an idea is not to make statements, but  
to ask questions, because there's a real mystery here. Why has this  
smart and reasonable person proposed an idea that seems so wrong?  
Are they mistaken, or are you? One of you has to be. If you're the  
one who's mistaken, that would be good to know, because it means  
there's a hole in your model of the world. But even if they're  
mistaken, it should be interesting to learn why. A trap that an  
expert falls into is one you have to worry about too.This all seems pretty obvious. And yet there are clearly a lot of  
people who don't share my fear of dismissing new ideas. Why do they  
do it? Why risk looking like a jerk now and a fool later, instead  
of just reserving judgement?One reason they do it is envy. If you propose a radical new idea  
and it succeeds, your reputation (and perhaps also your wealth)  
will increase proportionally. Some people would be envious if that  
happened, and this potential envy propagates back into a conviction  
that you must be wrong.Another reason people dismiss new ideas is that it's an easy way  
to seem sophisticated. When a new idea first emerges, it usually  
seems pretty feeble. It's a mere hatchling. Received wisdom is a  
full-grown eagle by comparison. So it's easy to launch a devastating  
attack on a new idea, and anyone who does will seem clever to those  
who don't understand this asymmetry.This phenomenon is exacerbated by the difference between how those  
working on new ideas and those attacking them are rewarded. The  
rewards for working on new ideas are weighted by the value of the  
outcome. So it's worth working on something that only has a 10%  
chance of succeeding if it would make things more than 10x better.  
Whereas the rewards for attacking new ideas are roughly constant;  
such attacks seem roughly equally clever regardless of the target.People will also attack new ideas when they have a vested interest  
in the old ones. It's not surprising, for example, that some of  
Darwin's harshest critics were churchmen. People build whole careers  
on some ideas. When someone claims they're false or obsolete, they  
feel threatened.The lowest form of dismissal is mere factionalism: to automatically  
dismiss any idea associated with the opposing faction. The lowest  
form of all is to dismiss an idea because of who proposed it.But the main thing that leads reasonable people to dismiss new ideas  
is the same thing that holds people back from proposing them: the  
sheer pervasiveness of the current paradigm. It doesn't just affect  
the way we think; it is the Lego blocks we build thoughts out of.  
Popping out of the current paradigm is something only a few people  
can do. And even they usually have to suppress their intuitions at  
first, like a pilot flying through cloud who has to trust his  
instruments over his sense of balance.  
[4]Paradigms don't just define our present thinking. They also vacuum  
up the trail of crumbs that led to them, making our standards for  
new ideas impossibly high. The current paradigm seems so perfect  
to us, its offspring, that we imagine it must have been accepted  
completely as soon as it was discovered — that whatever the church thought  
of the heliocentric model, astronomers must have been convinced as  
soon as Copernicus proposed it. Far, in fact, from it. Copernicus  
published the heliocentric model in 1532, but it wasn't till the  
mid seventeenth century that the balance of scientific opinion  
shifted in its favor.  
[5]Few understand how feeble new ideas look when they first appear.  
So if you want to have new ideas yourself, one of the most valuable  
things you can do is to learn what they look like when they're born.  
Read about how new ideas happened, and try to get yourself into the  
heads of people at the time. How did things look to them, when the  
new idea was only half-finished, and even the person who had it was  
only half-convinced it was right?But you don't have to stop at history. You can observe big new ideas  
being born all around you right now. Just look for a reasonable  
domain expert proposing something that sounds wrong.If you're nice, as well as wise, you won't merely resist attacking  
such people, but encourage them. Having new ideas is a lonely  
business. Only those who've tried it know how lonely. These people  
need your help. And if you help them, you'll probably learn something  
in the process.Notes[1]  
This domain expertise could be in another field. Indeed,  
such crossovers tend to be particularly promising.[2]  
I'm not claiming this principle extends much beyond math,  
engineering, and the hard sciences. In politics, for example,  
crazy-sounding ideas generally are as bad as they sound. Though  
arguably this is not an exception, because the people who propose  
them are not in fact domain experts; politicians are domain experts  
in political tactics, like how to get elected and how to get  
legislation passed, but not in the world that policy acts upon.  
Perhaps no one could be.[3]  
This sense of "paradigm" was defined by Thomas Kuhn in his  
Structure of Scientific Revolutions, but I also recommend his  
Copernican Revolution, where you can see him at work developing the  
idea.[4]  
This is one reason people with a touch of Asperger's may have  
an advantage in discovering new ideas. They're always flying on  
instruments.[5]  
Hall, Rupert. From Galileo to Newton. Collins, 1963. This  
book is particularly good at getting into contemporaries' heads.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison, Suhail Doshi, Daniel  
Gackle, Jessica Livingston, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.

# An NFT That Saves Lives

May 2021Noora Health, a nonprofit I've   
supported for years, just launched  
a new NFT. It has a dramatic name, Save Thousands of Lives,  
because that's what the proceeds will do.Noora has been saving lives for 7 years. They run programs in  
hospitals in South Asia to teach new mothers how to take care of  
their babies once they get home. They're in 165 hospitals now. And  
because they know the numbers before and after they start at a new  
hospital, they can measure the impact they have. It is massive.  
For every 1000 live births, they save 9 babies.This number comes from a study  
of 133,733 families at 28 different  
hospitals that Noora conducted in collaboration with the Better  
Birth team at Ariadne Labs, a joint center for health systems  
innovation at Brigham and Womens Hospital and Harvard T.H. Chan  
School of Public Health.Noora is so effective that even if you measure their costs in the  
most conservative way, by dividing their entire budget by the number  
of lives saved, the cost of saving a life is the lowest I've seen.  
$1,235.For this NFT, they're going to issue a public report tracking how  
this specific tranche of money is spent, and estimating the number  
of lives saved as a result.NFTs are a new territory, and this way of using them is especially  
new, but I'm excited about its potential. And I'm excited to see  
what happens with this particular auction, because unlike an NFT  
representing something that has already happened,  
this NFT gets better as the price gets higher.The reserve price was about $2.5 million, because that's what it  
takes for the name to be accurate: that's what it costs to save  
2000 lives. But the higher the price of this NFT goes, the more  
lives will be saved. What a sentence to be able to write.

# The Real Reason to End the Death Penalty

April 2021When intellectuals talk about the death penalty, they talk about  
things like whether it's permissible for the state to take someone's  
life, whether the death penalty acts as a deterrent, and whether  
more death sentences are given to some groups than others. But in  
practice the debate about the death penalty is not about whether  
it's ok to kill murderers. It's about whether it's ok to kill  
innocent people, because at least 4% of people on death row are  
innocent.When I was a kid I imagined that it was unusual for people to be  
convicted of crimes they hadn't committed, and that in murder cases  
especially this must be very rare. Far from it. Now, thanks to  
organizations like the  
Innocence Project,  
we see a constant stream  
of stories about murder convictions being overturned after new  
evidence emerges. Sometimes the police and prosecutors were just  
very sloppy. Sometimes they were crooked, and knew full well they  
were convicting an innocent person.Kenneth Adams and three other men spent 18 years in prison on a  
murder conviction. They were exonerated after DNA testing implicated  
three different men, two of whom later confessed. The police had  
been told about the other men early in the investigation, but never  
followed up the lead.Keith Harward spent 33 years in prison on a murder conviction. He  
was convicted because "experts" said his teeth matched photos of  
bite marks on one victim. He was exonerated after DNA testing showed  
the murder had been committed by another man, Jerry Crotty.Ricky Jackson and two other men spent 39 years in prison after being  
convicted of murder on the testimony of a 12 year old boy, who later  
recanted and said he'd been coerced by police. Multiple people have  
confirmed the boy was elsewhere at the time. The three men were  
exonerated after the county prosecutor dropped the charges, saying  
"The state is conceding the obvious."Alfred Brown spent 12 years in prison on a murder conviction,  
including 10 years on death row. He was exonerated after it was  
discovered that the assistant district attorney had concealed phone  
records proving he could not have committed the crimes.Glenn Ford spent 29 years on death row after having been convicted  
of murder. He was exonerated after new evidence proved he was not  
even at the scene when the murder occurred. The attorneys assigned  
to represent him had never tried a jury case before.Cameron Willingham was actually executed in 2004 by lethal injection.  
The "expert" who testified that he deliberately set fire to his  
house has since been discredited. A re-examination of the case  
ordered by the state of Texas in 2009 concluded that "a finding of  
arson could not be sustained."Rich Glossip   
has spent 20 years on death row after being convicted  
of murder on the testimony of the actual killer, who escaped with  
a life sentence in return for implicating him. In 2015 he came  
within minutes of execution before it emerged that Oklahoma had  
been planning to kill him with an illegal combination of drugs.  
They still plan to go ahead with the execution, perhaps as soon as  
this summer, despite   
new   
evidence exonerating him.I could go on. There are hundreds of similar cases. In Florida  
alone, 29 death row prisoners have been exonerated so far.Far from being rare, wrongful murder convictions are   
very common.  
Police are under pressure to solve a crime that has gotten a lot  
of attention. When they find a suspect, they want to believe he's  
guilty, and ignore or even destroy evidence suggesting otherwise.  
District attorneys want to be seen as effective and tough on crime,  
and in order to win convictions are willing to manipulate witnesses  
and withhold evidence. Court-appointed defense attorneys are  
overworked and often incompetent. There's a ready supply of criminals  
willing to give false testimony in return for a lighter sentence,  
suggestible witnesses who can be made to say whatever police want,  
and bogus "experts" eager to claim that science proves the defendant  
is guilty. And juries want to believe them, since otherwise some  
terrible crime remains unsolved.This circus of incompetence and dishonesty is the real issue with  
the death penalty. We don't even reach the point where theoretical  
questions about the moral justification or effectiveness of capital  
punishment start to matter, because so many of the people sentenced  
to death are actually innocent. Whatever it means in theory, in  
practice capital punishment means killing innocent people.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and Don Knight for  
reading drafts of this.Related:Will Florida Kill an Innocent Man?Was Kevin Cooper Framed for Murder?Did Texas execute an innocent man?

# How People Get Rich Now

April 2021Every year since 1982, Forbes magazine has published a list of the  
richest Americans. If we compare the 100 richest people in 1982 to  
the 100 richest in 2020, we notice some big differences.In 1982 the most common source of wealth was inheritance. Of the  
100 richest people, 60 inherited from an ancestor. There were 10  
du Pont heirs alone. By 2020 the number of heirs had been cut in  
half, accounting for only 27 of the biggest 100 fortunes.Why would the percentage of heirs decrease? Not because inheritance  
taxes increased. In fact, they decreased significantly during this  
period. The reason the percentage of heirs has decreased is not  
that fewer people are inheriting great fortunes, but that more  
people are making them.How are people making these new fortunes? Roughly 3/4 by starting  
companies and 1/4 by investing. Of the 73 new fortunes in 2020, 56  
derive from founders' or early employees' equity (52 founders, 2  
early employees, and 2 wives of founders), and 17 from managing  
investment funds.There were no fund managers among the 100 richest Americans in 1982.  
Hedge funds and private equity firms existed in 1982, but none of  
their founders were rich enough yet to make it into the top 100.  
Two things changed: fund managers discovered new ways to generate  
high returns, and more investors were willing to trust them with  
their money.  
[1]But the main source of new fortunes now is starting companies, and  
when you look at the data, you see big changes there too. People  
get richer from starting companies now than they did in 1982, because  
the companies do different things.In 1982, there were two dominant sources of new wealth: oil and  
real estate. Of the 40 new fortunes in 1982, at least 24 were due  
primarily to oil or real estate. Now only a small number are: of  
the 73 new fortunes in 2020, 4 were due to real estate and only 2  
to oil.By 2020 the biggest source of new wealth was what are sometimes  
called "tech" companies. Of the 73 new fortunes, about 30 derive  
from such companies. These are particularly common among the richest  
of the rich: 8 of the top 10 fortunes in 2020 were new fortunes of  
this type.Arguably it's slightly misleading to treat tech as a category.  
Isn't Amazon really a retailer, and Tesla a car maker? Yes and no.  
Maybe in 50 years, when what we call tech is taken for granted, it  
won't seem right to put these two businesses in the same category.  
But at the moment at least, there is definitely something they share  
in common that distinguishes them. What retailer starts AWS? What  
car maker is run by someone who also has a rocket company?The tech companies behind the top 100 fortunes also form a  
well-differentiated group in the sense that they're all companies  
that venture capitalists would readily invest in, and the others  
mostly not. And there's a reason why: these are mostly companies  
that win by having better technology, rather than just a CEO who's  
really driven and good at making deals.To that extent, the rise of the tech companies represents a qualitative  
change. The oil and real estate magnates of the 1982 Forbes 400  
didn't win by making better technology. They won by being really  
driven and good at making deals.   
[2]  
And indeed, that way of  
getting rich is so old that it predates the Industrial Revolution.  
The courtiers who got rich in the (nominal) service of European  
royal houses in the 16th and 17th centuries were also, as a rule,  
really driven and good at making deals.People who don't look any deeper than the Gini coefficient look  
back on the world of 1982 as the good old days, because those who  
got rich then didn't get as rich. But if you dig into how they  
got rich, the old days don't look so good. In 1982, 84% of the  
richest 100 people got rich by inheritance, extracting natural  
resources, or doing real estate deals. Is that really better than  
a world in which the richest people get rich by starting tech  
companies?Why are people starting so many more new companies than they used  
to, and why are they getting so rich from it? The answer to the  
first question, curiously enough, is that it's misphrased. We  
shouldn't be asking why people are starting companies, but why  
they're starting companies again.  
[3]In 1892, the New York Herald Tribune compiled a list of all the  
millionaires in America. They found 4047 of them. How many had  
inherited their wealth then? Only about 20%, which is less than the  
proportion of heirs today. And when you investigate the sources of  
the new fortunes, 1892 looks even more like today. Hugh Rockoff  
found that "many of the richest ... gained their initial edge from  
the new technology of mass production."  
[4]So it's not 2020 that's the anomaly here, but 1982. The real question  
is why so few people had gotten rich from starting companies in  
1982. And the answer is that even as the Herald Tribune's list was  
being compiled, a wave of consolidation   
was sweeping through the  
American economy. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries,  
financiers like J. P. Morgan combined thousands of smaller companies  
into a few hundred giant ones with commanding economies of scale.  
By the end of World War II, as Michael Lind writes, "the major  
sectors of the economy were either organized as government-backed  
cartels or dominated by a few oligopolistic corporations."  
[5]In 1960, most of the people who start startups today would have  
gone to work for one of them. You could get rich from starting your  
own company in 1890 and in 2020, but in 1960 it was not really a  
viable option. You couldn't break through the oligopolies to get  
at the markets. So the prestigious route in 1960 was not to start  
your own company, but to work your way up the corporate ladder at  
an existing one.  
[6]Making everyone a corporate employee decreased economic inequality  
(and every other kind of variation), but if your model of normal  
is the mid 20th century, you have a very misleading model in that  
respect. J. P. Morgan's economy turned out to be just a phase, and  
starting in the 1970s, it began to break up.Why did it break up? Partly senescence. The big companies that  
seemed models of scale and efficiency in 1930 had by 1970 become  
slack and bloated. By 1970 the rigid structure of the economy was  
full of cosy nests that various groups had built to insulate  
themselves from market forces. During the Carter administration the  
federal government realized something was amiss and began, in a  
process they called "deregulation," to roll back the policies that  
propped up the oligopolies.But it wasn't just decay from within that broke up J. P. Morgan's  
economy. There was also pressure from without, in the form of new  
technology, and particularly microelectronics. The best way to  
envision what happened is to imagine a pond with a crust of ice on  
top. Initially the only way from the bottom to the surface is around  
the edges. But as the ice crust weakens, you start to be able to  
punch right through the middle.The edges of the pond were pure tech: companies that actually  
described themselves as being in the electronics or software business.  
When you used the word "startup" in 1990, that was what you meant.  
But now startups are punching right through the middle of the ice  
crust and displacing incumbents like retailers and TV networks and  
car companies.  
[7]But though the breakup of J. P. Morgan's economy created a new world  
in the technological sense, it was a reversion to the norm in the  
social sense. If you only look back as far as the mid 20th century,  
it seems like people getting rich by starting their own companies  
is a recent phenomenon. But if you look back further, you realize  
it's actually the default. So what we should expect in the future  
is more of the same. Indeed, we should expect both the number and  
wealth of founders to grow, because every decade it gets easier to  
start a startup.Part of the reason it's getting easier to start a startup is social.  
Society is (re)assimilating the concept. If you start one now, your  
parents won't freak out the way they would have a generation ago,  
and knowledge about how to do it is much more widespread. But the  
main reason it's easier to start a startup now is that it's cheaper.  
Technology has driven down the cost of both building products and  
acquiring customers.The decreasing cost of starting a startup has in turn changed the  
balance of power between founders and investors. Back when starting  
a startup meant building a factory, you needed investors' permission  
to do it at all. But now investors need founders more than founders  
need investors, and that, combined with the increasing amount of  
venture capital available, has driven up valuations.  
[8]So the decreasing cost of starting a startup increases the number  
of rich people in two ways: it means that more people start them,  
and that those who do can raise money on better terms.But there's also a third factor at work: the companies themselves  
are more valuable, because newly founded companies grow faster than  
they used to. Technology hasn't just made it cheaper to build and  
distribute things, but faster too.This trend has been running for a long time. IBM, founded in 1896,  
took 45 years to reach a billion 2020 dollars in revenue.  
Hewlett-Packard, founded in 1939, took 25 years. Microsoft, founded  
in 1975, took 13 years. Now the norm for fast-growing companies is  
7 or 8 years.  
[9]Fast growth has a double effect on the value of founders' stock.  
The value of a company is a function of its revenue and its growth  
rate. So if a company grows faster, you not only get to a billion  
dollars in revenue sooner, but the company is more valuable when  
it reaches that point than it would be if it were growing slower.That's why founders sometimes get so rich so young now. The low  
initial cost of starting a startup means founders can start young,  
and the fast growth of companies today means that if they succeed  
they could be surprisingly rich just a few years later.It's easier now to start and grow a company than it has ever been.  
That means more people start them, that those who do get better  
terms from investors, and that the resulting companies become more  
valuable. Once you understand how these mechanisms work, and that  
startups were suppressed for most of the 20th century, you don't  
have to resort to some vague right turn the country took under  
Reagan to explain why America's Gini coefficient is increasing. Of  
course the Gini coefficient is increasing. With more people starting  
more valuable companies, how could it not be?Notes[1]  
Investment firms grew rapidly after a regulatory change by  
the Labor Department in 1978 allowed pension funds to invest in  
them, but the effects of this growth were not yet visible in the  
top 100 fortunes in 1982.[2]  
George Mitchell deserves mention as an exception. Though  
really driven and good at making deals, he was also the first to  
figure out how to use fracking to get natural gas out of shale.[3]  
When I say people are starting more companies, I mean the  
type of company meant to grow   
very big. There has actually been a  
decrease in the last couple decades in the overall number of new  
companies. But the vast majority of companies are small retail and  
service businesses. So what the statistics about the decreasing  
number of new businesses mean is that people are starting fewer  
shoe stores and barber shops.People sometimes get confused when they see a graph labelled  
"startups" that's going down, because there are two senses of the  
word "startup": (1) the founding of a company, and (2) a particular  
type of company designed to grow big fast. The statistics mean  
startup in sense (1), not sense (2).[4]  
Rockoff, Hugh. "Great Fortunes of the Gilded Age." NBER Working  
Paper 14555, 2008.[5]  
Lind, Michael. Land of Promise. HarperCollins, 2012.It's also likely that the high tax rates in the mid 20th century  
deterred people from starting their own companies. Starting one's  
own company is risky, and when risk isn't rewarded, people opt for  
safety instead.But it wasn't simply cause and effect. The oligopolies and high tax  
rates of the mid 20th century were all of a piece. Lower taxes are  
not just a cause of entrepreneurship, but an effect as well: the  
people getting rich in the mid 20th century from real estate and  
oil exploration lobbied for and got huge tax loopholes that made  
their effective tax rate much lower, and presumably if it had been  
more common to grow big companies by building new technology, the  
people doing that would have lobbied for their own loopholes as  
well.[6]  
That's why the people who did get rich in the mid 20th century  
so often got rich from oil exploration or real estate. Those were  
the two big areas of the economy that weren't susceptible to  
consolidation.[7]  
The pure tech companies used to be called "high technology" startups.  
But now that startups can punch through the middle of the ice crust,  
we don't need a separate name for the edges, and the term "high-tech"  
has a decidedly retro   
sound.[8]  
Higher valuations mean you either sell less stock to get a  
given amount of money, or get more money for a given amount of  
stock. The typical startup does some of each. Obviously you end up  
richer if you keep more stock, but you should also end up richer  
if you raise more money, because (a) it should make the company  
more successful, and (b) you should be able to last longer before  
the next round, or not even need one. Notice all those shoulds  
though. In practice a lot of money slips through them.It might seem that the huge rounds raised by startups nowadays  
contradict the claim that it has become cheaper to start one. But  
there's no contradiction here; the startups that raise the most are  
the ones doing it by choice, in order to grow faster, not the ones  
doing it because they need the money to survive. There's nothing  
like not needing money to make people offer it to you.You would think, after having been on the side of labor in its fight  
with capital for almost two centuries, that the far left would be  
happy that labor has finally prevailed. But none of them seem to  
be. You can almost hear them saying "No, no, not that way."[9]  
IBM was created in 1911 by merging three companies, the most  
important of which was Herman Hollerith's Tabulating Machine Company,  
founded in 1896. In 1941 its revenues were $60 million.Hewlett-Packard's revenues in 1964 were $125 million.Microsoft's revenues in 1988 were $590 million.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, Bob Lesko, Robert Morris,   
Russ Roberts, and Alex Tabarrok for reading drafts of this, and to Jon Erlichman for growth data.

# Write Simply

March 2021I try to write using ordinary words and simple sentences.That kind of writing is easier to read, and the easier something  
is to read, the more deeply readers will engage with it. The less  
energy they expend on your prose, the more they'll have left for  
your ideas.And the further they'll read. Most readers' energy tends to flag  
part way through an article or essay. If the friction of reading  
is low enough, more keep going till the end.There's an Italian dish called saltimbocca, which means "leap  
into the mouth." My goal when writing might be called saltintesta:  
the ideas leap into your head and you barely notice the words that  
got them there.It's too much to hope that writing could ever be pure ideas. You  
might not even want it to be. But for most writers, most of the  
time, that's the goal to aim for. The gap between most writing and  
pure ideas is not filled with poetry.Plus it's more considerate to write simply. When you write in a  
fancy way to impress people, you're making them do extra work just  
so you can seem cool. It's like trailing a long train behind you  
that readers have to carry.And remember, if you're writing in English, that a lot of your  
readers won't be native English speakers. Their understanding of  
ideas may be way ahead of their understanding of English. So you  
can't assume that writing about a difficult topic means you can  
use difficult words.Of course, fancy writing doesn't just conceal ideas. It can also  
conceal the lack of them. That's why some people write that way,  
to conceal the fact that they have   
 nothing to say. Whereas writing  
simply keeps you honest. If you say nothing simply, it will be  
obvious to everyone, including you.Simple writing also lasts better. People reading your stuff in the  
future will be in much the same position as people from other  
countries reading it today. The culture and the language will have  
changed. It's not vain to care about that, any more than it's vain  
for a woodworker to build a chair to last.Indeed, lasting is not merely an accidental quality of chairs, or  
writing. It's a sign you did a good job.But although these are all real advantages of writing simply, none  
of them are why I do it. The main reason I write simply is that it  
offends me not to. When I write a sentence that seems too complicated,  
or that uses unnecessarily intellectual words, it doesn't seem fancy  
to me. It seems clumsy.There are of course times when you want to use a complicated sentence  
or fancy word for effect. But you should never do it by accident.The other reason my writing ends up being simple is the way I do  
it. I write the first draft fast, then spend days editing it, trying  
to get everything just right. Much of this editing is cutting, and  
that makes simple writing even simpler.

# Donate Unrestricted

March 2021The secret curse of the nonprofit world is restricted donations.  
If you haven't been involved with nonprofits, you may never have  
heard this phrase before. But if you have been, it probably made  
you wince.Restricted donations mean donations where the donor limits what can  
be done with the money. This is common with big donations, perhaps  
the default. And yet it's usually a bad idea. Usually the way the  
donor wants the money spent is not the way the nonprofit would have  
chosen. Otherwise there would have been no need to restrict the  
donation. But who has a better understanding of where money needs  
to be spent, the nonprofit or the donor?If a nonprofit doesn't understand better than its donors where money  
needs to be spent, then it's incompetent and you shouldn't be  
donating to it at all.Which means a restricted donation is inherently suboptimal. It's  
either a donation to a bad nonprofit, or a donation for the wrong  
things.There are a couple exceptions to this principle. One is when the  
nonprofit is an umbrella organization. It's reasonable to make a  
restricted donation to a university, for example, because a university  
is only nominally a single nonprofit. Another exception is when the  
donor actually does know as much as the nonprofit about where money  
needs to be spent. The Gates Foundation, for example, has specific  
goals and often makes restricted donations to individual nonprofits  
to accomplish them. But unless you're a domain expert yourself or  
donating to an umbrella organization, your donation would do more  
good if it were unrestricted.If restricted donations do less good than unrestricted ones, why  
do donors so often make them? Partly because doing good isn't donors'  
only motive. They often have other motives as well — to make a mark,  
or to generate good publicity  
[1],  
or to comply with regulations  
or corporate policies. Many donors may simply never have considered  
the distinction between restricted and unrestricted donations. They  
may believe that donating money for some specific purpose is just  
how donation works. And to be fair, nonprofits don't try very hard  
to discourage such illusions. They can't afford to. People running  
nonprofits are almost always anxious about money. They can't afford  
to talk back to big donors.You can't expect candor in a relationship so asymmetric. So I'll  
tell you what nonprofits wish they could tell you. If you want to  
donate to a nonprofit, donate unrestricted. If you trust them to  
spend your money, trust them to decide how.  
Note[1]  
Unfortunately restricted donations tend to generate more  
publicity than unrestricted ones. "X donates money to build a school  
in Africa" is not only more interesting than "X donates money to Y  
nonprofit to spend as Y chooses," but also focuses more attention  
on X.  
Thanks to Chase Adam, Ingrid Bassett, Trevor Blackwell, and Edith  
Elliot for reading drafts of this.

# What I Worked On

February 2021Before college the two main things I worked on, outside of school,  
were writing and programming. I didn't write essays. I wrote what  
beginning writers were supposed to write then, and probably still  
are: short stories. My stories were awful. They had hardly any plot,  
just characters with strong feelings, which I imagined made them  
deep.The first programs I tried writing were on the IBM 1401 that our  
school district used for what was then called "data processing."  
This was in 9th grade, so I was 13 or 14. The school district's  
1401 happened to be in the basement of our junior high school, and  
my friend Rich Draves and I got permission to use it. It was like  
a mini Bond villain's lair down there, with all these alien-looking  
machines  CPU, disk drives, printer, card reader  sitting up  
on a raised floor under bright fluorescent lights.The language we used was an early version of Fortran. You had to  
type programs on punch cards, then stack them in the card reader  
and press a button to load the program into memory and run it. The  
result would ordinarily be to print something on the spectacularly  
loud printer.I was puzzled by the 1401. I couldn't figure out what to do with  
it. And in retrospect there's not much I could have done with it.  
The only form of input to programs was data stored on punched cards,  
and I didn't have any data stored on punched cards. The only other  
option was to do things that didn't rely on any input, like calculate  
approximations of pi, but I didn't know enough math to do anything  
interesting of that type. So I'm not surprised I can't remember any  
programs I wrote, because they can't have done much. My clearest  
memory is of the moment I learned it was possible for programs not  
to terminate, when one of mine didn't. On a machine without  
time-sharing, this was a social as well as a technical error, as  
the data center manager's expression made clear.With microcomputers, everything changed. Now you could have a  
computer sitting right in front of you, on a desk, that could respond  
to your keystrokes as it was running instead of just churning through  
a stack of punch cards and then stopping.   
[1]The first of my friends to get a microcomputer built it himself.  
It was sold as a kit by Heathkit. I remember vividly how impressed  
and envious I felt watching him sitting in front of it, typing  
programs right into the computer.Computers were expensive in those days and it took me years of  
nagging before I convinced my father to buy one, a TRS-80, in about  
1980. The gold standard then was the Apple II, but a TRS-80 was  
good enough. This was when I really started programming. I wrote  
simple games, a program to predict how high my model rockets would  
fly, and a word processor that my father used to write at least one  
book. There was only room in memory for about 2 pages of text, so  
he'd write 2 pages at a time and then print them out, but it was a  
lot better than a typewriter.Though I liked programming, I didn't plan to study it in college.  
In college I was going to study philosophy, which sounded much more  
powerful. It seemed, to my naive high school self, to be the study  
of the ultimate truths, compared to which the things studied in  
other fields would be mere domain knowledge. What I discovered when  
I got to college was that the other fields took up so much of the  
space of ideas that there wasn't much left for these supposed  
ultimate truths. All that seemed left for philosophy were edge cases  
that people in other fields felt could safely be ignored.I couldn't have put this into words when I was 18. All I knew at  
the time was that I kept taking philosophy courses and they kept  
being boring. So I decided to switch to AI.AI was in the air in the mid 1980s, but there were two things  
especially that made me want to work on it: a novel by Heinlein  
called The Moon is a Harsh Mistress, which featured an intelligent  
computer called Mike, and a PBS documentary that showed Terry  
Winograd using SHRDLU. I haven't tried rereading The Moon is a Harsh  
Mistress, so I don't know how well it has aged, but when I read it  
I was drawn entirely into its world. It seemed only a matter of  
time before we'd have Mike, and when I saw Winograd using SHRDLU,  
it seemed like that time would be a few years at most. All you had  
to do was teach SHRDLU more words.There weren't any classes in AI at Cornell then, not even graduate  
classes, so I started trying to teach myself. Which meant learning  
Lisp, since in those days Lisp was regarded as the language of AI.  
The commonly used programming languages then were pretty primitive,  
and programmers' ideas correspondingly so. The default language at  
Cornell was a Pascal-like language called PL/I, and the situation  
was similar elsewhere. Learning Lisp expanded my concept of a program  
so fast that it was years before I started to have a sense of where  
the new limits were. This was more like it; this was what I had  
expected college to do. It wasn't happening in a class, like it was  
supposed to, but that was ok. For the next couple years I was on a  
roll. I knew what I was going to do.For my undergraduate thesis, I reverse-engineered SHRDLU. My God  
did I love working on that program. It was a pleasing bit of code,  
but what made it even more exciting was my belief  hard to imagine  
now, but not unique in 1985  that it was already climbing the  
lower slopes of intelligence.I had gotten into a program at Cornell that didn't make you choose  
a major. You could take whatever classes you liked, and choose  
whatever you liked to put on your degree. I of course chose "Artificial  
Intelligence." When I got the actual physical diploma, I was dismayed  
to find that the quotes had been included, which made them read as  
scare-quotes. At the time this bothered me, but now it seems amusingly  
accurate, for reasons I was about to discover.I applied to 3 grad schools: MIT and Yale, which were renowned for  
AI at the time, and Harvard, which I'd visited because Rich Draves  
went there, and was also home to Bill Woods, who'd invented the  
type of parser I used in my SHRDLU clone. Only Harvard accepted me,  
so that was where I went.I don't remember the moment it happened, or if there even was a  
specific moment, but during the first year of grad school I realized  
that AI, as practiced at the time, was a hoax. By which I mean the  
sort of AI in which a program that's told "the dog is sitting on  
the chair" translates this into some formal representation and adds  
it to the list of things it knows.What these programs really showed was that there's a subset of  
natural language that's a formal language. But a very proper subset.  
It was clear that there was an unbridgeable gap between what they  
could do and actually understanding natural language. It was not,  
in fact, simply a matter of teaching SHRDLU more words. That whole  
way of doing AI, with explicit data structures representing concepts,  
was not going to work. Its brokenness did, as so often happens,  
generate a lot of opportunities to write papers about various  
band-aids that could be applied to it, but it was never going to  
get us Mike.So I looked around to see what I could salvage from the wreckage  
of my plans, and there was Lisp. I knew from experience that Lisp  
was interesting for its own sake and not just for its association  
with AI, even though that was the main reason people cared about  
it at the time. So I decided to focus on Lisp. In fact, I decided  
to write a book about Lisp hacking. It's scary to think how little  
I knew about Lisp hacking when I started writing that book. But  
there's nothing like writing a book about something to help you  
learn it. The book, On Lisp, wasn't published till 1993, but I wrote  
much of it in grad school.Computer Science is an uneasy alliance between two halves, theory  
and systems. The theory people prove things, and the systems people  
build things. I wanted to build things. I had plenty of respect for  
theory  indeed, a sneaking suspicion that it was the more admirable  
of the two halves  but building things seemed so much more exciting.The problem with systems work, though, was that it didn't last.  
Any program you wrote today, no matter how good, would be obsolete  
in a couple decades at best. People might mention your software in  
footnotes, but no one would actually use it. And indeed, it would  
seem very feeble work. Only people with a sense of the history of  
the field would even realize that, in its time, it had been good.There were some surplus Xerox Dandelions floating around the computer  
lab at one point. Anyone who wanted one to play around with could  
have one. I was briefly tempted, but they were so slow by present  
standards; what was the point? No one else wanted one either, so  
off they went. That was what happened to systems work.I wanted not just to build things, but to build things that would  
last.In this dissatisfied state I went in 1988 to visit Rich Draves at  
CMU, where he was in grad school. One day I went to visit the  
Carnegie Institute, where I'd spent a lot of time as a kid. While  
looking at a painting there I realized something that might seem  
obvious, but was a big surprise to me. There, right on the wall,  
was something you could make that would last. Paintings didn't  
become obsolete. Some of the best ones were hundreds of years old.And moreover this was something you could make a living doing. Not  
as easily as you could by writing software, of course, but I thought  
if you were really industrious and lived really cheaply, it had to  
be possible to make enough to survive. And as an artist you could  
be truly independent. You wouldn't have a boss, or even need to get  
research funding.I had always liked looking at paintings. Could I make them? I had  
no idea. I'd never imagined it was even possible. I knew intellectually  
that people made art  that it didn't just appear spontaneously  
 but it was as if the people who made it were a different species.  
They either lived long ago or were mysterious geniuses doing strange  
things in profiles in Life magazine. The idea of actually being  
able to make art, to put that verb before that noun, seemed almost  
miraculous.That fall I started taking art classes at Harvard. Grad students  
could take classes in any department, and my advisor, Tom Cheatham,  
was very easy going. If he even knew about the strange classes I  
was taking, he never said anything.So now I was in a PhD program in computer science, yet planning to  
be an artist, yet also genuinely in love with Lisp hacking and  
working away at On Lisp. In other words, like many a grad student,  
I was working energetically on multiple projects that were not my  
thesis.I didn't see a way out of this situation. I didn't want to drop out  
of grad school, but how else was I going to get out? I remember  
when my friend Robert Morris got kicked out of Cornell for writing  
the internet worm of 1988, I was envious that he'd found such a  
spectacular way to get out of grad school.Then one day in April 1990 a crack appeared in the wall. I ran into  
professor Cheatham and he asked if I was far enough along to graduate  
that June. I didn't have a word of my dissertation written, but in  
what must have been the quickest bit of thinking in my life, I  
decided to take a shot at writing one in the 5 weeks or so that  
remained before the deadline, reusing parts of On Lisp where I  
could, and I was able to respond, with no perceptible delay "Yes,  
I think so. I'll give you something to read in a few days."I picked applications of continuations as the topic. In retrospect  
I should have written about macros and embedded languages. There's  
a whole world there that's barely been explored. But all I wanted  
was to get out of grad school, and my rapidly written dissertation  
sufficed, just barely.Meanwhile I was applying to art schools. I applied to two: RISD in  
the US, and the Accademia di Belli Arti in Florence, which, because  
it was the oldest art school, I imagined would be good. RISD accepted  
me, and I never heard back from the Accademia, so off to Providence  
I went.I'd applied for the BFA program at RISD, which meant in effect that  
I had to go to college again. This was not as strange as it sounds,  
because I was only 25, and art schools are full of people of different  
ages. RISD counted me as a transfer sophomore and said I had to do  
the foundation that summer. The foundation means the classes that  
everyone has to take in fundamental subjects like drawing, color,  
and design.Toward the end of the summer I got a big surprise: a letter from  
the Accademia, which had been delayed because they'd sent it to  
Cambridge England instead of Cambridge Massachusetts, inviting me  
to take the entrance exam in Florence that fall. This was now only  
weeks away. My nice landlady let me leave my stuff in her attic. I  
had some money saved from consulting work I'd done in grad school;  
there was probably enough to last a year if I lived cheaply. Now  
all I had to do was learn Italian.Only stranieri (foreigners) had to take this entrance exam. In  
retrospect it may well have been a way of excluding them, because  
there were so many stranieri attracted by the idea of studying  
art in Florence that the Italian students would otherwise have been  
outnumbered. I was in decent shape at painting and drawing from the  
RISD foundation that summer, but I still don't know how I managed  
to pass the written exam. I remember that I answered the essay  
question by writing about Cezanne, and that I cranked up the  
intellectual level as high as I could to make the most of my limited  
vocabulary.   
[2]I'm only up to age 25 and already there are such conspicuous patterns.  
Here I was, yet again about to attend some august institution in  
the hopes of learning about some prestigious subject, and yet again  
about to be disappointed. The students and faculty in the painting  
department at the Accademia were the nicest people you could imagine,  
but they had long since arrived at an arrangement whereby the  
students wouldn't require the faculty to teach anything, and in  
return the faculty wouldn't require the students to learn anything.  
And at the same time all involved would adhere outwardly to the  
conventions of a 19th century atelier. We actually had one of those  
little stoves, fed with kindling, that you see in 19th century  
studio paintings, and a nude model sitting as close to it as possible  
without getting burned. Except hardly anyone else painted her besides  
me. The rest of the students spent their time chatting or occasionally  
trying to imitate things they'd seen in American art magazines.Our model turned out to live just down the street from me. She made  
a living from a combination of modelling and making fakes for a  
local antique dealer. She'd copy an obscure old painting out of a  
book, and then he'd take the copy and maltreat it to make it look  
old.   
[3]While I was a student at the Accademia I started painting still  
lives in my bedroom at night. These paintings were tiny, because  
the room was, and because I painted them on leftover scraps of  
canvas, which was all I could afford at the time. Painting still  
lives is different from painting people, because the subject, as  
its name suggests, can't move. People can't sit for more than about  
15 minutes at a time, and when they do they don't sit very still.  
So the traditional m.o. for painting people is to know how to paint  
a generic person, which you then modify to match the specific person  
you're painting. Whereas a still life you can, if you want, copy  
pixel by pixel from what you're seeing. You don't want to stop  
there, of course, or you get merely photographic accuracy, and what  
makes a still life interesting is that it's been through a head.  
You want to emphasize the visual cues that tell you, for example,  
that the reason the color changes suddenly at a certain point is  
that it's the edge of an object. By subtly emphasizing such things  
you can make paintings that are more realistic than photographs not  
just in some metaphorical sense, but in the strict information-theoretic  
sense.   
[4]I liked painting still lives because I was curious about what I was  
seeing. In everyday life, we aren't consciously aware of much we're  
seeing. Most visual perception is handled by low-level processes  
that merely tell your brain "that's a water droplet" without telling  
you details like where the lightest and darkest points are, or  
"that's a bush" without telling you the shape and position of every  
leaf. This is a feature of brains, not a bug. In everyday life it  
would be distracting to notice every leaf on every bush. But when  
you have to paint something, you have to look more closely, and  
when you do there's a lot to see. You can still be noticing new  
things after days of trying to paint something people usually take  
for granted, just as you can after  
days of trying to write an essay about something people usually  
take for granted.This is not the only way to paint. I'm not 100% sure it's even a  
good way to paint. But it seemed a good enough bet to be worth  
trying.Our teacher, professor Ulivi, was a nice guy. He could see I worked  
hard, and gave me a good grade, which he wrote down in a sort of  
passport each student had. But the Accademia wasn't teaching me  
anything except Italian, and my money was running out, so at the  
end of the first year I went back to the US.I wanted to go back to RISD, but I was now broke and RISD was very  
expensive, so I decided to get a job for a year and then return to  
RISD the next fall. I got one at a company called Interleaf, which  
made software for creating documents. You mean like Microsoft Word?  
Exactly. That was how I learned that low end software tends to eat  
high end software. But Interleaf still had a few years to live yet.  
[5]Interleaf had done something pretty bold. Inspired by Emacs, they'd  
added a scripting language, and even made the scripting language a  
dialect of Lisp. Now they wanted a Lisp hacker to write things in  
it. This was the closest thing I've had to a normal job, and I  
hereby apologize to my boss and coworkers, because I was a bad  
employee. Their Lisp was the thinnest icing on a giant C cake, and  
since I didn't know C and didn't want to learn it, I never understood  
most of the software. Plus I was terribly irresponsible. This was  
back when a programming job meant showing up every day during certain  
working hours. That seemed unnatural to me, and on this point the  
rest of the world is coming around to my way of thinking, but at  
the time it caused a lot of friction. Toward the end of the year I  
spent much of my time surreptitiously working on On Lisp, which I  
had by this time gotten a contract to publish.The good part was that I got paid huge amounts of money, especially  
by art student standards. In Florence, after paying my part of the  
rent, my budget for everything else had been $7 a day. Now I was  
getting paid more than 4 times that every hour, even when I was  
just sitting in a meeting. By living cheaply I not only managed to  
save enough to go back to RISD, but also paid off my college loans.I learned some useful things at Interleaf, though they were mostly  
about what not to do. I learned that it's better for technology  
companies to be run by product people than sales people (though  
sales is a real skill and people who are good at it are really good  
at it), that it leads to bugs when code is edited by too many people,  
that cheap office space is no bargain if it's depressing, that  
planned meetings are inferior to corridor conversations, that big,  
bureaucratic customers are a dangerous source of money, and that  
there's not much overlap between conventional office hours and the  
optimal time for hacking, or conventional offices and the optimal  
place for it.But the most important thing I learned, and which I used in both  
Viaweb and Y Combinator, is that the low end eats the high end:  
that it's good to be the "entry level" option, even though that  
will be less prestigious, because if you're not, someone else will  
be, and will squash you against the ceiling. Which in turn means  
that prestige is a danger sign.When I left to go back to RISD the next fall, I arranged to do  
freelance work for the group that did projects for customers, and  
this was how I survived for the next several years. When I came  
back to visit for a project later on, someone told me about a new  
thing called HTML, which was, as he described it, a derivative of  
SGML. Markup language enthusiasts were an occupational hazard at  
Interleaf and I ignored him, but this HTML thing later became a big  
part of my life.In the fall of 1992 I moved back to Providence to continue at RISD.  
The foundation had merely been intro stuff, and the Accademia had  
been a (very civilized) joke. Now I was going to see what real art  
school was like. But alas it was more like the Accademia than not.  
Better organized, certainly, and a lot more expensive, but it was  
now becoming clear that art school did not bear the same relationship  
to art that medical school bore to medicine. At least not the  
painting department. The textile department, which my next door  
neighbor belonged to, seemed to be pretty rigorous. No doubt  
illustration and architecture were too. But painting was post-rigorous.  
Painting students were supposed to express themselves, which to the  
more worldly ones meant to try to cook up some sort of distinctive  
signature style.A signature style is the visual equivalent of what in show business  
is known as a "schtick": something that immediately identifies the  
work as yours and no one else's. For example, when you see a painting  
that looks like a certain kind of cartoon, you know it's by Roy  
Lichtenstein. So if you see a big painting of this type hanging in  
the apartment of a hedge fund manager, you know he paid millions  
of dollars for it. That's not always why artists have a signature  
style, but it's usually why buyers pay a lot for such work.  
[6]There were plenty of earnest students too: kids who "could draw"  
in high school, and now had come to what was supposed to be the  
best art school in the country, to learn to draw even better. They  
tended to be confused and demoralized by what they found at RISD,  
but they kept going, because painting was what they did. I was not  
one of the kids who could draw in high school, but at RISD I was  
definitely closer to their tribe than the tribe of signature style  
seekers.I learned a lot in the color class I took at RISD, but otherwise I  
was basically teaching myself to paint, and I could do that for  
free. So in 1993 I dropped out. I hung around Providence for a bit,  
and then my college friend Nancy Parmet did me a big favor. A  
rent-controlled apartment in a building her mother owned in New  
York was becoming vacant. Did I want it? It wasn't much more than  
my current place, and New York was supposed to be where the artists  
were. So yes, I wanted it!  
[7]Asterix comics begin by zooming in on a tiny corner of Roman Gaul  
that turns out not to be controlled by the Romans. You can do  
something similar on a map of New York City: if you zoom in on the  
Upper East Side, there's a tiny corner that's not rich, or at least  
wasn't in 1993. It's called Yorkville, and that was my new home.  
Now I was a New York artist  in the strictly technical sense of  
making paintings and living in New York.I was nervous about money, because I could sense that Interleaf was  
on the way down. Freelance Lisp hacking work was very rare, and I  
didn't want to have to program in another language, which in those  
days would have meant C++ if I was lucky. So with my unerring nose  
for financial opportunity, I decided to write another book on Lisp.  
This would be a popular book, the sort of book that could be used  
as a textbook. I imagined myself living frugally off the royalties  
and spending all my time painting. (The painting on the cover of  
this book, ANSI Common Lisp, is one that I painted around this  
time.)The best thing about New York for me was the presence of Idelle and  
Julian Weber. Idelle Weber was a painter, one of the early  
photorealists, and I'd taken her painting class at Harvard. I've  
never known a teacher more beloved by her students. Large numbers  
of former students kept in touch with her, including me. After I  
moved to New York I became her de facto studio assistant.She liked to paint on big, square canvases, 4 to 5 feet on a side.  
One day in late 1994 as I was stretching one of these monsters there  
was something on the radio about a famous fund manager. He wasn't  
that much older than me, and was super rich. The thought suddenly  
occurred to me: why don't I become rich? Then I'll be able to work  
on whatever I want.Meanwhile I'd been hearing more and more about this new thing called  
the World Wide Web. Robert Morris showed it to me when I visited  
him in Cambridge, where he was now in grad school at Harvard. It  
seemed to me that the web would be a big deal. I'd seen what graphical  
user interfaces had done for the popularity of microcomputers. It  
seemed like the web would do the same for the internet.If I wanted to get rich, here was the next train leaving the station.  
I was right about that part. What I got wrong was the idea. I decided  
we should start a company to put art galleries online. I can't  
honestly say, after reading so many Y Combinator applications, that  
this was the worst startup idea ever, but it was up there. Art  
galleries didn't want to be online, and still don't, not the fancy  
ones. That's not how they sell. I wrote some software to generate  
web sites for galleries, and Robert wrote some to resize images and  
set up an http server to serve the pages. Then we tried to sign up  
galleries. To call this a difficult sale would be an understatement.  
It was difficult to give away. A few galleries let us make sites  
for them for free, but none paid us.Then some online stores started to appear, and I realized that  
except for the order buttons they were identical to the sites we'd  
been generating for galleries. This impressive-sounding thing called  
an "internet storefront" was something we already knew how to build.So in the summer of 1995, after I submitted the camera-ready copy  
of ANSI Common Lisp to the publishers, we started trying to write  
software to build online stores. At first this was going to be  
normal desktop software, which in those days meant Windows software.  
That was an alarming prospect, because neither of us knew how to  
write Windows software or wanted to learn. We lived in the Unix  
world. But we decided we'd at least try writing a prototype store  
builder on Unix. Robert wrote a shopping cart, and I wrote a new  
site generator for stores  in Lisp, of course.We were working out of Robert's apartment in Cambridge. His roommate  
was away for big chunks of time, during which I got to sleep in his  
room. For some reason there was no bed frame or sheets, just a  
mattress on the floor. One morning as I was lying on this mattress  
I had an idea that made me sit up like a capital L. What if we ran  
the software on the server, and let users control it by clicking  
on links? Then we'd never have to write anything to run on users'  
computers. We could generate the sites on the same server we'd serve  
them from. Users wouldn't need anything more than a browser.This kind of software, known as a web app, is common now, but at  
the time it wasn't clear that it was even possible. To find out,  
we decided to try making a version of our store builder that you  
could control through the browser. A couple days later, on August  
12, we had one that worked. The UI was horrible, but it proved you  
could build a whole store through the browser, without any client  
software or typing anything into the command line on the server.Now we felt like we were really onto something. I had visions of a  
whole new generation of software working this way. You wouldn't  
need versions, or ports, or any of that crap. At Interleaf there  
had been a whole group called Release Engineering that seemed to  
be at least as big as the group that actually wrote the software.  
Now you could just update the software right on the server.We started a new company we called Viaweb, after the fact that our  
software worked via the web, and we got $10,000 in seed funding  
from Idelle's husband Julian. In return for that and doing the  
initial legal work and giving us business advice, we gave him 10%  
of the company. Ten years later this deal became the model for Y  
Combinator's. We knew founders needed something like this, because  
we'd needed it ourselves.At this stage I had a negative net worth, because the thousand  
dollars or so I had in the bank was more than counterbalanced by  
what I owed the government in taxes. (Had I diligently set aside  
the proper proportion of the money I'd made consulting for Interleaf?  
No, I had not.) So although Robert had his graduate student stipend,  
I needed that seed funding to live on.We originally hoped to launch in September, but we got more ambitious  
about the software as we worked on it. Eventually we managed to  
build a WYSIWYG site builder, in the sense that as you were creating  
pages, they looked exactly like the static ones that would be  
generated later, except that instead of leading to static pages,  
the links all referred to closures stored in a hash table on the  
server.It helped to have studied art, because the main goal of an online  
store builder is to make users look legit, and the key to looking  
legit is high production values. If you get page layouts and fonts  
and colors right, you can make a guy running a store out of his  
bedroom look more legit than a big company.(If you're curious why my site looks so old-fashioned, it's because  
it's still made with this software. It may look clunky today, but  
in 1996 it was the last word in slick.)In September, Robert rebelled. "We've been working on this for a  
month," he said, "and it's still not done." This is funny in  
retrospect, because he would still be working on it almost 3 years  
later. But I decided it might be prudent to recruit more programmers,  
and I asked Robert who else in grad school with him was really good.  
He recommended Trevor Blackwell, which surprised me at first, because  
at that point I knew Trevor mainly for his plan to reduce everything  
in his life to a stack of notecards, which he carried around with  
him. But Rtm was right, as usual. Trevor turned out to be a  
frighteningly effective hacker.It was a lot of fun working with Robert and Trevor. They're the two  
most independent-minded people   
I know, and in completely different  
ways. If you could see inside Rtm's brain it would look like a  
colonial New England church, and if you could see inside Trevor's  
it would look like the worst excesses of Austrian Rococo.We opened for business, with 6 stores, in January 1996. It was just  
as well we waited a few months, because although we worried we were  
late, we were actually almost fatally early. There was a lot of  
talk in the press then about ecommerce, but not many people actually  
wanted online stores.  
[8]There were three main parts to the software: the editor, which  
people used to build sites and which I wrote, the shopping cart,  
which Robert wrote, and the manager, which kept track of orders and  
statistics, and which Trevor wrote. In its time, the editor was one  
of the best general-purpose site builders. I kept the code tight  
and didn't have to integrate with any other software except Robert's  
and Trevor's, so it was quite fun to work on. If all I'd had to do  
was work on this software, the next 3 years would have been the  
easiest of my life. Unfortunately I had to do a lot more, all of  
it stuff I was worse at than programming, and the next 3 years were  
instead the most stressful.There were a lot of startups making ecommerce software in the second  
half of the 90s. We were determined to be the Microsoft Word, not  
the Interleaf. Which meant being easy to use and inexpensive. It  
was lucky for us that we were poor, because that caused us to make  
Viaweb even more inexpensive than we realized. We charged $100 a  
month for a small store and $300 a month for a big one. This low  
price was a big attraction, and a constant thorn in the sides of  
competitors, but it wasn't because of some clever insight that we  
set the price low. We had no idea what businesses paid for things.  
$300 a month seemed like a lot of money to us.We did a lot of things right by accident like that. For example,  
we did what's now called "doing things that   
don't scale," although  
at the time we would have described it as "being so lame that we're  
driven to the most desperate measures to get users." The most common  
of which was building stores for them. This seemed particularly  
humiliating, since the whole raison d'etre of our software was that  
people could use it to make their own stores. But anything to get  
users.We learned a lot more about retail than we wanted to know. For  
example, that if you could only have a small image of a man's shirt  
(and all images were small then by present standards), it was better  
to have a closeup of the collar than a picture of the whole shirt.  
The reason I remember learning this was that it meant I had to  
rescan about 30 images of men's shirts. My first set of scans were  
so beautiful too.Though this felt wrong, it was exactly the right thing to be doing.  
Building stores for users taught us about retail, and about how it  
felt to use our software. I was initially both mystified and repelled  
by "business" and thought we needed a "business person" to be in  
charge of it, but once we started to get users, I was converted,  
in much the same way I was converted to   
fatherhood once I had kids.  
Whatever users wanted, I was all theirs. Maybe one day we'd have  
so many users that I couldn't scan their images for them, but in  
the meantime there was nothing more important to do.Another thing I didn't get at the time is that   
growth rate is the  
ultimate test of a startup. Our growth rate was fine. We had about  
70 stores at the end of 1996 and about 500 at the end of 1997. I  
mistakenly thought the thing that mattered was the absolute number  
of users. And that is the thing that matters in the sense that  
that's how much money you're making, and if you're not making enough,  
you might go out of business. But in the long term the growth rate  
takes care of the absolute number. If we'd been a startup I was  
advising at Y Combinator, I would have said: Stop being so stressed  
out, because you're doing fine. You're growing 7x a year. Just don't  
hire too many more people and you'll soon be profitable, and then  
you'll control your own destiny.Alas I hired lots more people, partly because our investors wanted  
me to, and partly because that's what startups did during the  
Internet Bubble. A company with just a handful of employees would  
have seemed amateurish. So we didn't reach breakeven until about  
when Yahoo bought us in the summer of 1998. Which in turn meant we  
were at the mercy of investors for the entire life of the company.  
And since both we and our investors were noobs at startups, the  
result was a mess even by startup standards.It was a huge relief when Yahoo bought us. In principle our Viaweb  
stock was valuable. It was a share in a business that was profitable  
and growing rapidly. But it didn't feel very valuable to me; I had  
no idea how to value a business, but I was all too keenly aware of  
the near-death experiences we seemed to have every few months. Nor  
had I changed my grad student lifestyle significantly since we  
started. So when Yahoo bought us it felt like going from rags to  
riches. Since we were going to California, I bought a car, a yellow  
1998 VW GTI. I remember thinking that its leather seats alone were  
by far the most luxurious thing I owned.The next year, from the summer of 1998 to the summer of 1999, must  
have been the least productive of my life. I didn't realize it at  
the time, but I was worn out from the effort and stress of running  
Viaweb. For a while after I got to California I tried to continue  
my usual m.o. of programming till 3 in the morning, but fatigue  
combined with Yahoo's prematurely aged  
culture and grim cube farm  
in Santa Clara gradually dragged me down. After a few months it  
felt disconcertingly like working at Interleaf.Yahoo had given us a lot of options when they bought us. At the  
time I thought Yahoo was so overvalued that they'd never be worth  
anything, but to my astonishment the stock went up 5x in the next  
year. I hung on till the first chunk of options vested, then in the  
summer of 1999 I left. It had been so long since I'd painted anything  
that I'd half forgotten why I was doing this. My brain had been  
entirely full of software and men's shirts for 4 years. But I had  
done this to get rich so I could paint, I reminded myself, and now  
I was rich, so I should go paint.When I said I was leaving, my boss at Yahoo had a long conversation  
with me about my plans. I told him all about the kinds of pictures  
I wanted to paint. At the time I was touched that he took such an  
interest in me. Now I realize it was because he thought I was lying.  
My options at that point were worth about $2 million a month. If I  
was leaving that kind of money on the table, it could only be to  
go and start some new startup, and if I did, I might take people  
with me. This was the height of the Internet Bubble, and Yahoo was  
ground zero of it. My boss was at that moment a billionaire. Leaving  
then to start a new startup must have seemed to him an insanely,  
and yet also plausibly, ambitious plan.But I really was quitting to paint, and I started immediately.  
There was no time to lose. I'd already burned 4 years getting rich.  
Now when I talk to founders who are leaving after selling their  
companies, my advice is always the same: take a vacation. That's  
what I should have done, just gone off somewhere and done nothing  
for a month or two, but the idea never occurred to me.So I tried to paint, but I just didn't seem to have any energy or  
ambition. Part of the problem was that I didn't know many people  
in California. I'd compounded this problem by buying a house up in  
the Santa Cruz Mountains, with a beautiful view but miles from  
anywhere. I stuck it out for a few more months, then in desperation  
I went back to New York, where unless you understand about rent  
control you'll be surprised to hear I still had my apartment, sealed  
up like a tomb of my old life. Idelle was in New York at least, and  
there were other people trying to paint there, even though I didn't  
know any of them.When I got back to New York I resumed my old life, except now I was  
rich. It was as weird as it sounds. I resumed all my old patterns,  
except now there were doors where there hadn't been. Now when I was  
tired of walking, all I had to do was raise my hand, and (unless  
it was raining) a taxi would stop to pick me up. Now when I walked  
past charming little restaurants I could go in and order lunch. It  
was exciting for a while. Painting started to go better. I experimented  
with a new kind of still life where I'd paint one painting in the  
old way, then photograph it and print it, blown up, on canvas, and  
then use that as the underpainting for a second still life, painted  
from the same objects (which hopefully hadn't rotted yet).Meanwhile I looked for an apartment to buy. Now I could actually  
choose what neighborhood to live in. Where, I asked myself and  
various real estate agents, is the Cambridge of New York? Aided by  
occasional visits to actual Cambridge, I gradually realized there  
wasn't one. Huh.Around this time, in the spring of 2000, I had an idea. It was clear  
from our experience with Viaweb that web apps were the future. Why  
not build a web app for making web apps? Why not let people edit  
code on our server through the browser, and then host the resulting  
applications for them?  
[9]  
You could run all sorts of services  
on the servers that these applications could use just by making an  
API call: making and receiving phone calls, manipulating images,  
taking credit card payments, etc.I got so excited about this idea that I couldn't think about anything  
else. It seemed obvious that this was the future. I didn't particularly  
want to start another company, but it was clear that this idea would  
have to be embodied as one, so I decided to move to Cambridge and  
start it. I hoped to lure Robert into working on it with me, but  
there I ran into a hitch. Robert was now a postdoc at MIT, and  
though he'd made a lot of money the last time I'd lured him into  
working on one of my schemes, it had also been a huge time sink.  
So while he agreed that it sounded like a plausible idea, he firmly  
refused to work on it.Hmph. Well, I'd do it myself then. I recruited Dan Giffin, who had  
worked for Viaweb, and two undergrads who wanted summer jobs, and  
we got to work trying to build what it's now clear is about twenty  
companies and several open source projects worth of software. The  
language for defining applications would of course be a dialect of  
Lisp. But I wasn't so naive as to assume I could spring an overt  
Lisp on a general audience; we'd hide the parentheses, like Dylan  
did.By then there was a name for the kind of company Viaweb was, an  
"application service provider," or ASP. This name didn't last long  
before it was replaced by "software as a service," but it was current  
for long enough that I named this new company after it: it was going  
to be called Aspra.I started working on the application builder, Dan worked on network  
infrastructure, and the two undergrads worked on the first two  
services (images and phone calls). But about halfway through the  
summer I realized I really didn't want to run a company  especially  
not a big one, which it was looking like this would have to be. I'd  
only started Viaweb because I needed the money. Now that I didn't  
need money anymore, why was I doing this? If this vision had to be  
realized as a company, then screw the vision. I'd build a subset  
that could be done as an open source project.Much to my surprise, the time I spent working on this stuff was not  
wasted after all. After we started Y Combinator, I would often  
encounter startups working on parts of this new architecture, and  
it was very useful to have spent so much time thinking about it and  
even trying to write some of it.The subset I would build as an open source project was the new Lisp,  
whose parentheses I now wouldn't even have to hide. A lot of Lisp  
hackers dream of building a new Lisp, partly because one of the  
distinctive features of the language is that it has dialects, and  
partly, I think, because we have in our minds a Platonic form of  
Lisp that all existing dialects fall short of. I certainly did. So  
at the end of the summer Dan and I switched to working on this new  
dialect of Lisp, which I called Arc, in a house I bought in Cambridge.The following spring, lightning struck. I was invited to give a  
talk at a Lisp conference, so I gave one about how we'd used Lisp  
at Viaweb. Afterward I put a postscript file of this talk online,  
on paulgraham.com, which I'd created years before using Viaweb but  
had never used for anything. In one day it got 30,000 page views.  
What on earth had happened? The referring urls showed that someone  
had posted it on Slashdot.  
[10]Wow, I thought, there's an audience. If I write something and put  
it on the web, anyone can read it. That may seem obvious now, but  
it was surprising then. In the print era there was a narrow channel  
to readers, guarded by fierce monsters known as editors. The only  
way to get an audience for anything you wrote was to get it published  
as a book, or in a newspaper or magazine. Now anyone could publish  
anything.This had been possible in principle since 1993, but not many people  
had realized it yet. I had been intimately involved with building  
the infrastructure of the web for most of that time, and a writer  
as well, and it had taken me 8 years to realize it. Even then it  
took me several years to understand the implications. It meant there  
would be a whole new generation of   
essays.  
[11]In the print era, the channel for publishing essays had been  
vanishingly small. Except for a few officially anointed thinkers  
who went to the right parties in New York, the only people allowed  
to publish essays were specialists writing about their specialties.  
There were so many essays that had never been written, because there  
had been no way to publish them. Now they could be, and I was going  
to write them.  
[12]I've worked on several different things, but to the extent there  
was a turning point where I figured out what to work on, it was  
when I started publishing essays online. From then on I knew that  
whatever else I did, I'd always write essays too.I knew that online essays would be a   
marginal medium at first.  
Socially they'd seem more like rants posted by nutjobs on their  
GeoCities sites than the genteel and beautifully typeset compositions  
published in The New Yorker. But by this point I knew enough to  
find that encouraging instead of discouraging.One of the most conspicuous patterns I've noticed in my life is how  
well it has worked, for me at least, to work on things that weren't  
prestigious. Still life has always been the least prestigious form  
of painting. Viaweb and Y Combinator both seemed lame when we started  
them. I still get the glassy eye from strangers when they ask what  
I'm writing, and I explain that it's an essay I'm going to publish  
on my web site. Even Lisp, though prestigious intellectually in  
something like the way Latin is, also seems about as hip.It's not that unprestigious types of work are good per se. But when  
you find yourself drawn to some kind of work despite its current  
lack of prestige, it's a sign both that there's something real to  
be discovered there, and that you have the right kind of motives.  
Impure motives are a big danger for the ambitious. If anything is  
going to lead you astray, it will be the desire to impress people.  
So while working on things that aren't prestigious doesn't guarantee  
you're on the right track, it at least guarantees you're not on the  
most common type of wrong one.Over the next several years I wrote lots of essays about all kinds  
of different topics. O'Reilly reprinted a collection of them as a  
book, called Hackers & Painters after one of the essays in it. I  
also worked on spam filters, and did some more painting. I used to  
have dinners for a group of friends every thursday night, which  
taught me how to cook for groups. And I bought another building in  
Cambridge, a former candy factory (and later, twas said, porn  
studio), to use as an office.One night in October 2003 there was a big party at my house. It was  
a clever idea of my friend Maria Daniels, who was one of the thursday  
diners. Three separate hosts would all invite their friends to one  
party. So for every guest, two thirds of the other guests would be  
people they didn't know but would probably like. One of the guests  
was someone I didn't know but would turn out to like a lot: a woman  
called Jessica Livingston. A couple days later I asked her out.Jessica was in charge of marketing at a Boston investment bank.  
This bank thought it understood startups, but over the next year,  
as she met friends of mine from the startup world, she was surprised  
how different reality was. And how colorful their stories were. So  
she decided to compile a book of   
interviews with startup founders.When the bank had financial problems and she had to fire half her  
staff, she started looking for a new job. In early 2005 she interviewed  
for a marketing job at a Boston VC firm. It took them weeks to make  
up their minds, and during this time I started telling her about  
all the things that needed to be fixed about venture capital. They  
should make a larger number of smaller investments instead of a  
handful of giant ones, they should be funding younger, more technical  
founders instead of MBAs, they should let the founders remain as  
CEO, and so on.One of my tricks for writing essays had always been to give talks.  
The prospect of having to stand up in front of a group of people  
and tell them something that won't waste their time is a great  
spur to the imagination. When the Harvard Computer Society, the  
undergrad computer club, asked me to give a talk, I decided I would  
tell them how to start a startup. Maybe they'd be able to avoid the  
worst of the mistakes we'd made.So I gave this talk, in the course of which I told them that the  
best sources of seed funding were successful startup founders,  
because then they'd be sources of advice too. Whereupon it seemed  
they were all looking expectantly at me. Horrified at the prospect  
of having my inbox flooded by business plans (if I'd only known),  
I blurted out "But not me!" and went on with the talk. But afterward  
it occurred to me that I should really stop procrastinating about  
angel investing. I'd been meaning to since Yahoo bought us, and now  
it was 7 years later and I still hadn't done one angel investment.Meanwhile I had been scheming with Robert and Trevor about projects  
we could work on together. I missed working with them, and it seemed  
like there had to be something we could collaborate on.As Jessica and I were walking home from dinner on March 11, at the  
corner of Garden and Walker streets, these three threads converged.  
Screw the VCs who were taking so long to make up their minds. We'd  
start our own investment firm and actually implement the ideas we'd  
been talking about. I'd fund it, and Jessica could quit her job and  
work for it, and we'd get Robert and Trevor as partners too.  
[13]Once again, ignorance worked in our favor. We had no idea how to  
be angel investors, and in Boston in 2005 there were no Ron Conways  
to learn from. So we just made what seemed like the obvious choices,  
and some of the things we did turned out to be novel.There are multiple components to Y Combinator, and we didn't figure  
them all out at once. The part we got first was to be an angel firm.  
In those days, those two words didn't go together. There were VC  
firms, which were organized companies with people whose job it was  
to make investments, but they only did big, million dollar investments.  
And there were angels, who did smaller investments, but these were  
individuals who were usually focused on other things and made  
investments on the side. And neither of them helped founders enough  
in the beginning. We knew how helpless founders were in some respects,  
because we remembered how helpless we'd been. For example, one thing  
Julian had done for us that seemed to us like magic was to get us  
set up as a company. We were fine writing fairly difficult software,  
but actually getting incorporated, with bylaws and stock and all  
that stuff, how on earth did you do that? Our plan was not only to  
make seed investments, but to do for startups everything Julian had  
done for us.YC was not organized as a fund. It was cheap enough to run that we  
funded it with our own money. That went right by 99% of readers,  
but professional investors are thinking "Wow, that means they got  
all the returns." But once again, this was not due to any particular  
insight on our part. We didn't know how VC firms were organized.  
It never occurred to us to try to raise a fund, and if it had, we  
wouldn't have known where to start.  
[14]The most distinctive thing about YC is the batch model: to fund a  
bunch of startups all at once, twice a year, and then to spend three  
months focusing intensively on trying to help them. That part we  
discovered by accident, not merely implicitly but explicitly due  
to our ignorance about investing. We needed to get experience as  
investors. What better way, we thought, than to fund a whole bunch  
of startups at once? We knew undergrads got temporary jobs at tech  
companies during the summer. Why not organize a summer program where  
they'd start startups instead? We wouldn't feel guilty for being  
in a sense fake investors, because they would in a similar sense  
be fake founders. So while we probably wouldn't make much money out  
of it, we'd at least get to practice being investors on them, and  
they for their part would probably have a more interesting summer  
than they would working at Microsoft.We'd use the building I owned in Cambridge as our headquarters.  
We'd all have dinner there once a week  on tuesdays, since I was  
already cooking for the thursday diners on thursdays  and after  
dinner we'd bring in experts on startups to give talks.We knew undergrads were deciding then about summer jobs, so in a  
matter of days we cooked up something we called the Summer Founders  
Program, and I posted an   
announcement   
on my site, inviting undergrads  
to apply. I had never imagined that writing essays would be a way  
to get "deal flow," as investors call it, but it turned out to be  
the perfect source.  
[15]  
We got 225 applications for the Summer  
Founders Program, and we were surprised to find that a lot of them  
were from people who'd already graduated, or were about to that  
spring. Already this SFP thing was starting to feel more serious  
than we'd intended.We invited about 20 of the 225 groups to interview in person, and  
from those we picked 8 to fund. They were an impressive group. That  
first batch included reddit, Justin Kan and Emmett Shear, who went  
on to found Twitch, Aaron Swartz, who had already helped write the  
RSS spec and would a few years later become a martyr for open access,  
and Sam Altman, who would later become the second president of YC.  
I don't think it was entirely luck that the first batch was so good.  
You had to be pretty bold to sign up for a weird thing like the  
Summer Founders Program instead of a summer job at a legit place  
like Microsoft or Goldman Sachs.The deal for startups was based on a combination of the deal we did  
with Julian ($10k for 10%) and what Robert said MIT grad students  
got for the summer ($6k). We invested $6k per founder, which in the  
typical two-founder case was $12k, in return for 6%. That had to  
be fair, because it was twice as good as the deal we ourselves had  
taken. Plus that first summer, which was really hot, Jessica brought  
the founders free air conditioners.  
[16]Fairly quickly I realized that we had stumbled upon the way to scale  
startup funding. Funding startups in batches was more convenient  
for us, because it meant we could do things for a lot of startups  
at once, but being part of a batch was better for the startups too.  
It solved one of the biggest problems faced by founders: the  
isolation. Now you not only had colleagues, but colleagues who  
understood the problems you were facing and could tell you how they  
were solving them.As YC grew, we started to notice other advantages of scale. The  
alumni became a tight community, dedicated to helping one another,  
and especially the current batch, whose shoes they remembered being  
in. We also noticed that the startups were becoming one another's  
customers. We used to refer jokingly to the "YC GDP," but as YC  
grows this becomes less and less of a joke. Now lots of startups  
get their initial set of customers almost entirely from among their  
batchmates.I had not originally intended YC to be a full-time job. I was going  
to do three things: hack, write essays, and work on YC. As YC grew,  
and I grew more excited about it, it started to take up a lot more  
than a third of my attention. But for the first few years I was  
still able to work on other things.In the summer of 2006, Robert and I started working on a new version  
of Arc. This one was reasonably fast, because it was compiled into  
Scheme. To test this new Arc, I wrote Hacker News in it. It was  
originally meant to be a news aggregator for startup founders and  
was called Startup News, but after a few months I got tired of  
reading about nothing but startups. Plus it wasn't startup founders  
we wanted to reach. It was future startup founders. So I changed  
the name to Hacker News and the topic to whatever engaged one's  
intellectual curiosity.HN was no doubt good for YC, but it was also by far the biggest  
source of stress for me. If all I'd had to do was select and help  
founders, life would have been so easy. And that implies that HN  
was a mistake. Surely the biggest source of stress in one's work  
should at least be something close to the core of the work. Whereas  
I was like someone who was in pain while running a marathon not  
from the exertion of running, but because I had a blister from an  
ill-fitting shoe. When I was dealing with some urgent problem during  
YC, there was about a 60% chance it had to do with HN, and a 40%  
chance it had do with everything else combined.  
[17]As well as HN, I wrote all of YC's internal software in Arc. But  
while I continued to work a good deal in Arc, I gradually stopped  
working on Arc, partly because I didn't have time to, and partly  
because it was a lot less attractive to mess around with the language  
now that we had all this infrastructure depending on it. So now my  
three projects were reduced to two: writing essays and working on  
YC.YC was different from other kinds of work I've done. Instead of  
deciding for myself what to work on, the problems came to me. Every  
6 months there was a new batch of startups, and their problems,  
whatever they were, became our problems. It was very engaging work,  
because their problems were quite varied, and the good founders  
were very effective. If you were trying to learn the most you could  
about startups in the shortest possible time, you couldn't have  
picked a better way to do it.There were parts of the job I didn't like. Disputes between cofounders,  
figuring out when people were lying to us, fighting with people who  
maltreated the startups, and so on. But I worked hard even at the  
parts I didn't like. I was haunted by something Kevin Hale once  
said about companies: "No one works harder than the boss." He meant  
it both descriptively and prescriptively, and it was the second  
part that scared me. I wanted YC to be good, so if how hard I worked  
set the upper bound on how hard everyone else worked, I'd better  
work very hard.One day in 2010, when he was visiting California for interviews,  
Robert Morris did something astonishing: he offered me unsolicited  
advice. I can only remember him doing that once before. One day at  
Viaweb, when I was bent over double from a kidney stone, he suggested  
that it would be a good idea for him to take me to the hospital.  
That was what it took for Rtm to offer unsolicited advice. So I  
remember his exact words very clearly. "You know," he said, "you  
should make sure Y Combinator isn't the last cool thing you do."At the time I didn't understand what he meant, but gradually it  
dawned on me that he was saying I should quit. This seemed strange  
advice, because YC was doing great. But if there was one thing rarer  
than Rtm offering advice, it was Rtm being wrong. So this set me  
thinking. It was true that on my current trajectory, YC would be  
the last thing I did, because it was only taking up more of my  
attention. It had already eaten Arc, and was in the process of  
eating essays too. Either YC was my life's work or I'd have to leave  
eventually. And it wasn't, so I would.In the summer of 2012 my mother had a stroke, and the cause turned  
out to be a blood clot caused by colon cancer. The stroke destroyed  
her balance, and she was put in a nursing home, but she really  
wanted to get out of it and back to her house, and my sister and I  
were determined to help her do it. I used to fly up to Oregon to  
visit her regularly, and I had a lot of time to think on those  
flights. On one of them I realized I was ready to hand YC over to  
someone else.I asked Jessica if she wanted to be president, but she didn't, so  
we decided we'd try to recruit Sam Altman. We talked to Robert and  
Trevor and we agreed to make it a complete changing of the guard.  
Up till that point YC had been controlled by the original LLC we  
four had started. But we wanted YC to last for a long time, and to  
do that it couldn't be controlled by the founders. So if Sam said  
yes, we'd let him reorganize YC. Robert and I would retire, and  
Jessica and Trevor would become ordinary partners.When we asked Sam if he wanted to be president of YC, initially he  
said no. He wanted to start a startup to make nuclear reactors.  
But I kept at it, and in October 2013 he finally agreed. We decided  
he'd take over starting with the winter 2014 batch. For the rest  
of 2013 I left running YC more and more to Sam, partly so he could  
learn the job, and partly because I was focused on my mother, whose  
cancer had returned.She died on January 15, 2014. We knew this was coming, but it was  
still hard when it did.I kept working on YC till March, to help get that batch of startups  
through Demo Day, then I checked out pretty completely. (I still  
talk to alumni and to new startups working on things I'm interested  
in, but that only takes a few hours a week.)What should I do next? Rtm's advice hadn't included anything about  
that. I wanted to do something completely different, so I decided  
I'd paint. I wanted to see how good I could get if I really focused  
on it. So the day after I stopped working on YC, I started painting.  
I was rusty and it took a while to get back into shape, but it was  
at least completely engaging.  
[18]I spent most of the rest of 2014 painting. I'd never been able to  
work so uninterruptedly before, and I got to be better than I had  
been. Not good enough, but better. Then in November, right in the  
middle of a painting, I ran out of steam. Up till that point I'd  
always been curious to see how the painting I was working on would  
turn out, but suddenly finishing this one seemed like a chore. So  
I stopped working on it and cleaned my brushes and haven't painted  
since. So far anyway.I realize that sounds rather wimpy. But attention is a zero sum  
game. If you can choose what to work on, and you choose a project  
that's not the best one (or at least a good one) for you, then it's  
getting in the way of another project that is. And at 50 there was  
some opportunity cost to screwing around.I started writing essays again, and wrote a bunch of new ones over  
the next few months. I even wrote a couple that   
weren't about  
startups. Then in March 2015 I started working on Lisp again.The distinctive thing about Lisp is that its core is a language  
defined by writing an interpreter in itself. It wasn't originally  
intended as a programming language in the ordinary sense. It was  
meant to be a formal model of computation, an alternative to the  
Turing machine. If you want to write an interpreter for a language  
in itself, what's the minimum set of predefined operators you need?  
The Lisp that John McCarthy invented, or more accurately discovered,  
is an answer to that question.  
[19]McCarthy didn't realize this Lisp could even be used to program  
computers till his grad student Steve Russell suggested it. Russell  
translated McCarthy's interpreter into IBM 704 machine language,  
and from that point Lisp started also to be a programming language  
in the ordinary sense. But its origins as a model of computation  
gave it a power and elegance that other languages couldn't match.  
It was this that attracted me in college, though I didn't understand  
why at the time.McCarthy's 1960 Lisp did nothing more than interpret Lisp expressions.  
It was missing a lot of things you'd want in a programming language.  
So these had to be added, and when they were, they weren't defined  
using McCarthy's original axiomatic approach. That wouldn't have  
been feasible at the time. McCarthy tested his interpreter by  
hand-simulating the execution of programs. But it was already getting  
close to the limit of interpreters you could test that way  indeed,  
there was a bug in it that McCarthy had overlooked. To test a more  
complicated interpreter, you'd have had to run it, and computers  
then weren't powerful enough.Now they are, though. Now you could continue using McCarthy's  
axiomatic approach till you'd defined a complete programming language.  
And as long as every change you made to McCarthy's Lisp was a  
discoveredness-preserving transformation, you could, in principle,  
end up with a complete language that had this quality. Harder to  
do than to talk about, of course, but if it was possible in principle,  
why not try? So I decided to take a shot at it. It took 4 years,  
from March 26, 2015 to October 12, 2019. It was fortunate that I  
had a precisely defined goal, or it would have been hard to keep  
at it for so long.I wrote this new Lisp, called Bel,   
in itself in Arc. That may sound  
like a contradiction, but it's an indication of the sort of trickery  
I had to engage in to make this work. By means of an egregious  
collection of hacks I managed to make something close enough to an  
interpreter written in itself that could actually run. Not fast,  
but fast enough to test.I had to ban myself from writing essays during most of this time,  
or I'd never have finished. In late 2015 I spent 3 months writing  
essays, and when I went back to working on Bel I could barely  
understand the code. Not so much because it was badly written as  
because the problem is so convoluted. When you're working on an  
interpreter written in itself, it's hard to keep track of what's  
happening at what level, and errors can be practically encrypted  
by the time you get them.So I said no more essays till Bel was done. But I told few people  
about Bel while I was working on it. So for years it must have  
seemed that I was doing nothing, when in fact I was working harder  
than I'd ever worked on anything. Occasionally after wrestling for  
hours with some gruesome bug I'd check Twitter or HN and see someone  
asking "Does Paul Graham still code?"Working on Bel was hard but satisfying. I worked on it so intensively  
that at any given time I had a decent chunk of the code in my head  
and could write more there. I remember taking the boys to the  
coast on a sunny day in 2015 and figuring out how to deal with some  
problem involving continuations while I watched them play in the  
tide pools. It felt like I was doing life right. I remember that  
because I was slightly dismayed at how novel it felt. The good news  
is that I had more moments like this over the next few years.In the summer of 2016 we moved to England. We wanted our kids to  
see what it was like living in another country, and since I was a  
British citizen by birth, that seemed the obvious choice. We only  
meant to stay for a year, but we liked it so much that we still  
live there. So most of Bel was written in England.In the fall of 2019, Bel was finally finished. Like McCarthy's  
original Lisp, it's a spec rather than an implementation, although  
like McCarthy's Lisp it's a spec expressed as code.Now that I could write essays again, I wrote a bunch about topics  
I'd had stacked up. I kept writing essays through 2020, but I also  
started to think about other things I could work on. How should I  
choose what to do? Well, how had I chosen what to work on in the  
past? I wrote an essay for myself to answer that question, and I  
was surprised how long and messy the answer turned out to be. If  
this surprised me, who'd lived it, then I thought perhaps it would  
be interesting to other people, and encouraging to those with  
similarly messy lives. So I wrote a more detailed version for others  
to read, and this is the last sentence of it.  
Notes[1]  
My experience skipped a step in the evolution of computers:  
time-sharing machines with interactive OSes. I went straight from  
batch processing to microcomputers, which made microcomputers seem  
all the more exciting.[2]  
Italian words for abstract concepts can nearly always be  
predicted from their English cognates (except for occasional traps  
like polluzione). It's the everyday words that differ. So if you  
string together a lot of abstract concepts with a few simple verbs,  
you can make a little Italian go a long way.[3]  
I lived at Piazza San Felice 4, so my walk to the Accademia  
went straight down the spine of old Florence: past the Pitti, across  
the bridge, past Orsanmichele, between the Duomo and the Baptistery,  
and then up Via Ricasoli to Piazza San Marco. I saw Florence at  
street level in every possible condition, from empty dark winter  
evenings to sweltering summer days when the streets were packed with  
tourists.[4]  
You can of course paint people like still lives if you want  
to, and they're willing. That sort of portrait is arguably the apex  
of still life painting, though the long sitting does tend to produce  
pained expressions in the sitters.[5]  
Interleaf was one of many companies that had smart people and  
built impressive technology, and yet got crushed by Moore's Law.  
In the 1990s the exponential growth in the power of commodity (i.e.  
Intel) processors rolled up high-end, special-purpose hardware and  
software companies like a bulldozer.[6]  
The signature style seekers at RISD weren't specifically  
mercenary. In the art world, money and coolness are tightly coupled.  
Anything expensive comes to be seen as cool, and anything seen as  
cool will soon become equally expensive.[7]  
Technically the apartment wasn't rent-controlled but  
rent-stabilized, but this is a refinement only New Yorkers would  
know or care about. The point is that it was really cheap, less  
than half market price.[8]  
Most software you can launch as soon as it's done. But when  
the software is an online store builder and you're hosting the  
stores, if you don't have any users yet, that fact will be painfully  
obvious. So before we could launch publicly we had to launch  
privately, in the sense of recruiting an initial set of users and  
making sure they had decent-looking stores.[9]  
We'd had a code editor in Viaweb for users to define their  
own page styles. They didn't know it, but they were editing Lisp  
expressions underneath. But this wasn't an app editor, because the  
code ran when the merchants' sites were generated, not when shoppers  
visited them.[10]  
This was the first instance of what is now a familiar experience,  
and so was what happened next, when I read the comments and found  
they were full of angry people. How could I claim that Lisp was  
better than other languages? Weren't they all Turing complete?  
People who see the responses to essays I write sometimes tell me  
how sorry they feel for me, but I'm not exaggerating when I reply  
that it has always been like this, since the very beginning. It  
comes with the territory. An essay must tell readers things they  
don't already know, and some   
people dislike being told such things.[11]  
People put plenty of stuff on the internet in the 90s of  
course, but putting something online is not the same as publishing  
it online. Publishing online means you treat the online version as  
the (or at least a) primary version.[12]  
There is a general lesson here that our experience with Y  
Combinator also teaches: Customs continue to constrain you long  
after the restrictions that caused them have disappeared. Customary  
VC practice had once, like the customs about publishing essays,  
been based on real constraints. Startups had once been much more  
expensive to start, and proportionally rare. Now they could be cheap  
and common, but the VCs' customs still reflected the old world,  
just as customs about writing essays still reflected the constraints  
of the print era.Which in turn implies that people who are independent-minded (i.e.  
less influenced by custom) will have an advantage in fields affected  
by rapid change (where customs are more likely to be obsolete).Here's an interesting point, though: you can't always predict which  
fields will be affected by rapid change. Obviously software and  
venture capital will be, but who would have predicted that essay  
writing would be?[13]  
Y Combinator was not the original name. At first we were  
called Cambridge Seed. But we didn't want a regional name, in case  
someone copied us in Silicon Valley, so we renamed ourselves after  
one of the coolest tricks in the lambda calculus, the Y combinator.I picked orange as our color partly because it's the warmest, and  
partly because no VC used it. In 2005 all the VCs used staid colors  
like maroon, navy blue, and forest green, because they were trying  
to appeal to LPs, not founders. The YC logo itself is an inside  
joke: the Viaweb logo had been a white V on a red circle, so I made  
the YC logo a white Y on an orange square.[14]  
YC did become a fund for a couple years starting in 2009,  
because it was getting so big I could no longer afford to fund it  
personally. But after Heroku got bought we had enough money to go  
back to being self-funded.[15]  
I've never liked the term "deal flow," because it implies  
that the number of new startups at any given time is fixed. This  
is not only false, but it's the purpose of YC to falsify it, by  
causing startups to be founded that would not otherwise have existed.[16]  
She reports that they were all different shapes and sizes,  
because there was a run on air conditioners and she had to get  
whatever she could, but that they were all heavier than she could  
carry now.[17]  
Another problem with HN was a bizarre edge case that occurs  
when you both write essays and run a forum. When you run a forum,  
you're assumed to see if not every conversation, at least every  
conversation involving you. And when you write essays, people post  
highly imaginative misinterpretations of them on forums. Individually  
these two phenomena are tedious but bearable, but the combination  
is disastrous. You actually have to respond to the misinterpretations,  
because the assumption that you're present in the conversation means  
that not responding to any sufficiently upvoted misinterpretation  
reads as a tacit admission that it's correct. But that in turn  
encourages more; anyone who wants to pick a fight with you senses  
that now is their chance.[18]  
The worst thing about leaving YC was not working with Jessica  
anymore. We'd been working on YC almost the whole time we'd known  
each other, and we'd neither tried nor wanted to separate it from  
our personal lives, so leaving was like pulling up a deeply rooted  
tree.[19]  
One way to get more precise about the concept of invented vs  
discovered is to talk about space aliens. Any sufficiently advanced  
alien civilization would certainly know about the Pythagorean  
theorem, for example. I believe, though with less certainty, that  
they would also know about the Lisp in McCarthy's 1960 paper.But if so there's no reason to suppose that this is the limit of  
the language that might be known to them. Presumably aliens need  
numbers and errors and I/O too. So it seems likely there exists at  
least one path out of McCarthy's Lisp along which discoveredness  
is preserved.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, John Collison, Patrick Collison, Daniel  
Gackle, Ralph Hazell, Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris, and Harj  
Taggar for reading drafts of this.

# Earnestness

December 2020Jessica and I have certain words that have special significance  
when we're talking about startups. The highest compliment we can  
pay to founders is to describe them as "earnest." This is not by  
itself a guarantee of success. You could be earnest but incapable.  
But when founders are both formidable (another of our words) and  
earnest, they're as close to unstoppable as you get.Earnestness sounds like a boring, even Victorian virtue. It seems  
a bit of an anachronism that people in Silicon Valley would care  
about it. Why does this matter so much?When you call someone earnest, you're making a statement about their  
motives. It means both that they're doing something for the right  
reasons, and that they're trying as hard as they can. If we imagine  
motives as vectors, it means both the direction and the magnitude  
are right. Though these are of course related: when people are doing  
something for the right reasons, they try harder.  
[1]The reason motives matter so much in Silicon Valley is that so many  
people there have the wrong ones. Starting a successful startup  
makes you rich and famous. So a lot of the people trying to start  
them are doing it for those reasons. Instead of what? Instead of  
interest in the problem for its own sake. That is the root of  
earnestness.   
[2]It's also the hallmark of a nerd. Indeed, when people describe  
themselves as "x nerds," what they mean is that they're interested  
in x for its own sake, and not because it's cool to be interested  
in x, or because of what they can get from it. They're saying they  
care so much about x that they're willing to sacrifice seeming cool  
for its sake.A genuine interest   
in something is a very powerful motivator  for  
some people, the most powerful motivator of all.  
[3]  
Which is why  
it's what Jessica and I look for in founders. But as well as being  
a source of strength, it's also a source of vulnerability. Caring  
constrains you. The earnest can't easily reply in kind to mocking  
banter, or put on a cool facade of nihil admirari. They care too  
much. They are doomed to be the straight man. That's a real  
disadvantage in your   
teenage years,   
when mocking banter and nihil  
admirari often have the upper hand. But it becomes an advantage  
later.It's a commonplace now that the kids who were   
nerds in high school  
become the cool kids' bosses later on. But people misunderstand why  
this happens. It's not just because the nerds are smarter, but also  
because they're more earnest. When the problems get harder than the  
fake ones you're given in high school, caring about them starts to  
matter.Does it always matter? Do the earnest always win? Not always. It  
probably doesn't matter much in politics, or in crime, or in certain  
types of business that are similar to crime, like gambling, personal  
injury law, patent trolling, and so on. Nor does it matter in  
academic fields at the more   
bogus end of the spectrum. And though  
I don't know enough to say for sure, it may not matter in some kinds  
of humor: it may be possible to be completely cynical and still be  
very funny.  
[4]Looking at the list of fields I mentioned, there's an obvious  
pattern. Except possibly for humor, these are all types of work I'd  
avoid like the plague. So that could be a useful heuristic for  
deciding which fields to work in: how much does earnestness matter?  
Which can in turn presumably be inferred from the prevalence of  
nerds at the top.Along with "nerd," another word that tends to be associated with  
earnestness is "naive." The earnest often seem naive. It's not  
just that they don't have the motives other people have. They often  
don't fully grasp that such motives exist. Or they may know  
intellectually that they do, but because they don't feel them, they  
forget about them.  
[5]It works to be slightly naive not just about motives but also,  
believe it or not, about the problems you're working on. Naive  
optimism can compensate for the bit rot that   
rapid change causes  
in established beliefs. You plunge into some problem saying "How  
hard can it be?", and then after solving it you learn that it was  
till recently insoluble.Naivete is an obstacle for anyone who wants to seem sophisticated,  
and this is one reason would-be intellectuals find it so difficult  
to understand Silicon Valley. It hasn't been safe for such people  
to use the word "earnest" outside scare quotes since Oscar Wilde  
wrote "The Importance of Being Earnest" in 1895. And yet when you  
zoom in on Silicon Valley, right into   
Jessica Livingston's brain,  
that's what her x-ray vision  
is seeking out in founders. Earnestness!  
Who'd have guessed? Reporters literally can't believe it when  
founders making piles of money say that they started their companies  
to make the world better. The situation seems made for mockery.  
How can these founders be so naive as not to realize how implausible  
they sound?Though those asking this question don't realize it, that's not a  
rhetorical question.A lot of founders are faking it, of course, particularly the smaller  
fry, and the soon to be smaller fry. But not all of them. There are  
a significant number of founders who really are interested in the  
problem they're solving mainly for its own sake.Why shouldn't there be? We have no difficulty believing that people  
would be interested in history or math or even old bus tickets for  
their own sake. Why can't there be people interested in self-driving  
cars or social networks for their own sake? When you look at the  
question from this side, it seems obvious there would be. And isn't  
it likely that having a deep interest in something would be a source  
of great energy and resilience? It is in every other field.The question really is why we have a blind spot about business.  
And the answer to that is obvious if you know enough history. For  
most of history, making large amounts of money has not been very  
intellectually interesting. In preindustrial times it was never far  
from robbery, and some areas of business still retain that character,  
except using lawyers instead of soldiers.But there are other areas of business where the work is genuinely  
interesting. Henry Ford got to spend much of his time working on  
interesting technical problems, and for the last several decades  
the trend in that direction has been accelerating. It's much easier  
now to make a lot of money by working on something you're interested  
in than it was 50 years ago.   
And that, rather than how fast they  
grow, may be the most important change that startups represent.  
Though indeed, the fact that the work is genuinely interesting is  
a big part of why it gets done so fast.  
[6]Can you imagine a more important change than one in the relationship  
between intellectual curiosity and money? These are two of the most  
powerful forces in the world, and in my lifetime they've become  
significantly more aligned. How could you not be fascinated to watch  
something like this happening in real time?I meant this essay to be about earnestness generally, and now I've  
gone and talked about startups again. But I suppose at least it  
serves as an example of an x nerd in the wild.Notes[1]  
It's interesting how many different ways there are not to  
be earnest: to be cleverly cynical, to be superficially brilliant,  
to be conspicuously virtuous, to be cool, to be sophisticated, to  
be orthodox, to be a snob, to bully, to pander, to be on the make.  
This pattern suggests that earnestness is not one end of a continuum,  
but a target one can fall short of in multiple dimensions.Another thing I notice about this list is that it sounds like a  
list of the ways people behave on Twitter. Whatever else social  
media is, it's a vivid catalogue of ways not to be earnest.[2]  
People's motives are as mixed in Silicon Valley as anywhere  
else. Even the founders motivated mostly by money tend to be at  
least somewhat interested in the problem they're solving, and even  
the founders most interested in the problem they're solving also  
like the idea of getting rich. But there's great variation in the  
relative proportions of different founders' motivations.And when I talk about "wrong" motives, I don't mean morally wrong.  
There's nothing morally wrong with starting a startup to make money.  
I just mean that those startups don't do as well.[3]  
The most powerful motivator for most people is probably family.  
But there are some for whom intellectual curiosity comes first. In  
his (wonderful) autobiography, Paul Halmos says explicitly that for  
a mathematician, math must come before anything else, including  
family. Which at least implies that it did for him.[4]  
Interestingly, just as the word "nerd" implies earnestness even  
when used as a metaphor, the word "politics" implies the opposite.  
It's not only in actual politics that earnestness seems to be a  
handicap, but also in office politics and academic politics.[5]  
It's a bigger social error to seem naive in most European  
countries than it is in America, and this may be one of subtler  
reasons startups are less common there. Founder culture is completely  
at odds with sophisticated cynicism.The most earnest part of Europe is Scandinavia, and not surprisingly  
this is also the region with the highest number of successful  
startups per capita.[6]  
Much of business is schleps, and probably always will be. But  
even being a professor is largely schleps. It would be interesting  
to collect statistics about the schlep ratios of different jobs,  
but I suspect they'd rarely be less than 30%.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison, Suhail Doshi, Jessica  
Livingston, Mattias Ljungman, Harj Taggar, and Kyle Vogt for reading  
drafts of this.

# Billionaires Build

December 2020As I was deciding what to write about next, I was surprised to find  
that two separate essays I'd been planning to write were actually  
the same.The first is about how to ace your Y Combinator interview. There  
has been so much nonsense written about this topic that I've been  
meaning for years to write something telling founders the truth.The second is about something politicians sometimes say  that the  
only way to become a billionaire is by exploiting people  and why  
this is mistaken.Keep reading, and you'll learn both simultaneously.I know the politicians are mistaken because it was my job to predict  
which people will become billionaires. I think I can truthfully say  
that I know as much about how to do this as anyone. If the key to  
becoming a billionaire  the defining feature of billionaires   
was to exploit people, then I, as a professional billionaire scout,  
would surely realize this and look for people who would be good at  
it, just as an NFL scout looks for speed in wide receivers.But aptitude for exploiting people is not what Y Combinator looks  
for at all. In fact, it's the opposite of what they look for. I'll  
tell you what they do look for, by explaining how to convince   
Y Combinator to fund you, and you can see for yourself.What YC looks for, above all, is founders who understand some group  
of users and can make what they want. This is so important that  
it's YC's motto: "Make something people want."A big company can to some extent force unsuitable products on  
unwilling customers, but a startup doesn't have the power to do  
that. A startup must sing for its supper, by making things that  
genuinely delight its customers. Otherwise it will never get off  
the ground.Here's where things get difficult, both for you as a founder and  
for the YC partners trying to decide whether to fund you. In a  
market economy, it's hard to make something people want that they  
don't already have. That's the great thing about market economies.  
If other people both knew about this need and were able to satisfy  
it, they already would be, and there would be no room for your  
startup.Which means the conversation during your YC interview will have to  
be about something new: either a new need, or a new way to satisfy  
one. And not just new, but uncertain. If it were certain that the  
need existed and that you could satisfy it, that certainty would  
be reflected in large and rapidly growing revenues, and you wouldn't  
be seeking seed funding.So the YC partners have to guess both whether you've discovered a  
real need, and whether you'll be able to satisfy it. That's what they  
are, at least in this part of their job: professional guessers.  
They have 1001 heuristics for doing this, and I'm not going to tell  
you all of them, but I'm happy to tell you the most important ones,  
because these can't be faked; the only way to "hack" them would be  
to do what you should be doing anyway as a founder.The first thing the partners will try to figure out, usually, is  
whether what you're making will ever be something a lot of people  
want. It doesn't have to be something a lot of people want now.  
The product and the market will both evolve, and will influence  
each other's evolution. But in the end there has to be something  
with a huge market. That's what the partners will be trying to  
figure out: is there a path to a huge market?  
[1]Sometimes it's obvious there will be a huge market. If   
Boom manages  
to ship an airliner at all, international airlines will have to buy  
it. But usually it's not obvious. Usually the path to a huge market  
is by growing a small market. This idea is important enough that  
it's worth coining a phrase for, so let's call one of these small  
but growable markets a "larval market."The perfect example of a larval market might be Apple's market when  
they were founded in 1976. In 1976, not many people wanted their  
own computer. But more and more started to want one, till now every  
10 year old on the planet wants a computer (but calls it a "phone").The ideal combination is the group of founders who are   
"living in  
the future" in the sense of being at the leading edge of some kind  
of change, and who are building something they themselves want.  
Most super-successful startups are of this type. Steve Wozniak  
wanted a computer. Mark Zuckerberg wanted to engage online with his  
college friends. Larry and Sergey wanted to find things on the web.  
All these founders were building things they and their peers wanted,  
and the fact that they were at the leading edge of change meant  
that more people would want these things in the future.But although the ideal larval market is oneself and one's peers,  
that's not the only kind. A larval market might also be regional,  
for example. You build something to serve one location, and then  
expand to others.The crucial feature of the initial market is that it exist. That  
may seem like an obvious point, but the lack of it is the biggest  
flaw in most startup ideas. There have to be some people who want  
what you're building right now, and want it so urgently that they're  
willing to use it, bugs and all, even though you're a small company  
they've never heard of. There don't have to be many, but there have  
to be some. As long as you have some users, there are straightforward  
ways to get more: build new features they want, seek out more people  
like them, get them to refer you to their friends, and so on. But  
these techniques all require some initial seed group of users.So this is one thing the YC partners will almost certainly dig into  
during your interview. Who are your first users going to be, and  
how do you know they want this? If I had to decide whether to fund  
startups based on a single question, it would be "How do you know  
people want this?"The most convincing answer is "Because we and our friends want it."  
It's even better when this is followed by the news that you've  
already built a prototype, and even though it's very crude, your  
friends are using it, and it's spreading by word of mouth. If you  
can say that and you're not lying, the partners will switch from  
default no to default yes. Meaning you're in unless there's some  
other disqualifying flaw.That is a hard standard to meet, though. Airbnb didn't meet it.  
They had the first part. They had made something they themselves  
wanted. But it wasn't spreading. So don't feel bad if you don't hit  
this gold standard of convincingness. If Airbnb didn't hit it, it  
must be too high.In practice, the YC partners will be satisfied if they feel that  
you have a deep understanding of your users' needs. And the Airbnbs  
did have that. They were able to tell us all about what motivated  
hosts and guests. They knew from first-hand experience, because  
they'd been the first hosts. We couldn't ask them a question they  
didn't know the answer to. We ourselves were not very excited about  
the idea as users, but we knew this didn't prove anything, because  
there were lots of successful startups we hadn't been excited about  
as users. We were able to say to ourselves "They seem to know what  
they're talking about. Maybe they're onto something. It's not growing  
yet, but maybe they can figure out how to make it grow during YC."  
Which they did, about three weeks into the batch.The best thing you can do in a YC interview is to teach the partners  
about your users. So if you want to prepare for your interview, one of the best   
ways to do it is to go talk to your users and find out exactly what  
they're thinking. Which is what you should be doing anyway.This may sound strangely credulous, but the YC partners want to  
rely on the founders to tell them about the market. Think about  
how VCs typically judge the potential market for an idea. They're  
not ordinarily domain experts themselves, so they forward the idea  
to someone who is, and ask for their opinion. YC doesn't have time  
to do this, but if the YC partners can convince themselves that the  
founders both (a) know what they're talking about and (b) aren't  
lying, they don't need outside domain experts. They can use the  
founders themselves as domain experts when evaluating their own  
idea.This is why YC interviews aren't pitches. To give as many founders  
as possible a chance to get funded, we made interviews as short as  
we could: 10 minutes. That is not enough time for the partners to  
figure out, through the indirect evidence in a pitch, whether you  
know what you're talking about and aren't lying. They need to dig  
in and ask you questions. There's not enough time for sequential  
access. They need random access.  
[2]The worst advice I ever heard about how to succeed in a YC interview  
is that you should take control of the interview and make sure to  
deliver the message you want to. In other words, turn the interview  
into a pitch. ⟨elaborate expletive⟩. It is so annoying when people  
try to do that. You ask them a question, and instead of answering  
it, they deliver some obviously prefabricated blob of pitch. It  
eats up 10 minutes really fast.There is no one who can give you accurate advice about what to do  
in a YC interview except a current or former YC partner. People  
who've merely been interviewed, even successfully, have no idea of  
this, but interviews take all sorts of different forms depending  
on what the partners want to know about most. Sometimes they're all  
about the founders, other times they're all about the idea. Sometimes  
some very narrow aspect of the idea. Founders sometimes walk away  
from interviews complaining that they didn't get to explain their  
idea completely. True, but they explained enough.Since a YC interview consists of questions, the way to do it well  
is to answer them well. Part of that is answering them candidly.  
The partners don't expect you to know everything. But if you don't  
know the answer to a question, don't try to bullshit your way out  
of it. The partners, like most experienced investors, are professional  
bullshit detectors, and you are (hopefully) an amateur bullshitter.  
And if you try to bullshit them and fail, they may not even tell  
you that you failed. So it's better to be honest than to try to  
sell them. If you don't know the answer to a question, say you  
don't, and tell them how you'd go about finding it, or tell them  
the answer to some related question.If you're asked, for example, what could go wrong, the worst possible  
answer is "nothing." Instead of convincing them that your idea is  
bullet-proof, this will convince them that you're a fool or a liar.  
Far better to go into gruesome detail. That's what experts do when  
you ask what could go wrong. The partners know that your idea is  
risky. That's what a good bet looks like at this stage: a tiny  
probability of a huge outcome.Ditto if they ask about competitors. Competitors are rarely what  
kills startups. Poor execution does. But you should know who your  
competitors are, and tell the YC partners candidly what your relative  
strengths and weaknesses are. Because the YC partners know that  
competitors don't kill startups, they won't hold competitors against  
you too much. They will, however, hold it against you if you seem  
either to be unaware of competitors, or to be minimizing the threat  
they pose. They may not be sure whether you're clueless or lying,  
but they don't need to be.The partners don't expect your idea to be perfect. This is seed  
investing. At this stage, all they can expect are promising hypotheses.  
But they do expect you to be thoughtful and honest. So if trying  
to make your idea seem perfect causes you to come off as glib or  
clueless, you've sacrificed something you needed for something you  
didn't.If the partners are sufficiently convinced that there's a path to  
a big market, the next question is whether you'll be able to find  
it. That in turn depends on three things: the general qualities of  
the founders, their specific expertise in this domain, and the  
relationship between them. How determined are the founders? Are  
they good at building things? Are they resilient enough to keep  
going when things go wrong? How strong is their friendship?Though the Airbnbs only did ok in the idea department, they did  
spectacularly well in this department. The story of how they'd  
funded themselves by making Obama- and McCain-themed breakfast  
cereal was the single most important factor in our decision to fund  
them. They didn't realize it at the time, but what seemed to them  
an irrelevant story was in fact fabulously good evidence of their  
qualities as founders. It showed they were resourceful and determined,  
and could work together.It wasn't just the cereal story that showed that, though. The whole  
interview showed that they cared. They weren't doing this just for  
the money, or because startups were cool. The reason they were  
working so hard on this company was because it was their project.  
They had discovered an interesting new idea, and they just couldn't  
let it go.Mundane as it sounds, that's the most powerful motivator of all,  
not just in startups, but in most ambitious undertakings: to be  
genuinely interested in what   
you're building. This is what really  
drives billionaires, or at least the ones who become billionaires  
from starting companies. The company is their project.One thing few people realize about billionaires is that all of them  
could have stopped sooner. They could have gotten acquired, or found  
someone else to run the company. Many founders do. The ones who  
become really rich are the ones who keep working. And what makes  
them keep working is not just money. What keeps them working is the  
same thing that keeps anyone else working when they could stop if  
they wanted to: that there's nothing else they'd rather do.That, not exploiting people, is the defining quality of people who  
become billionaires from starting companies. So that's what YC looks  
for in founders: authenticity. People's motives for starting startups  
are usually mixed. They're usually doing it from some combination  
of the desire to make money, the desire to seem cool, genuine  
interest in the problem, and unwillingness to work for someone else.  
The last two are more powerful motivators than the first two. It's  
ok for founders to want to make money or to seem cool. Most do.  
But if the founders seem like they're doing it just to make money  
or just to seem cool, they're not likely to succeed on a big  
scale. The founders who are doing it for the money will take the  
first sufficiently large acquisition offer, and the ones who are  
doing it to seem cool will rapidly discover that there are much  
less painful ways of seeming cool.  
[3]Y Combinator certainly sees founders whose m.o. is to exploit people.  
YC is a magnet for them, because they want the YC brand. But when  
the YC partners detect someone like that, they reject them. If bad  
people made good founders, the YC partners would face a moral  
dilemma. Fortunately they don't, because bad people make bad founders.  
This exploitative type of founder is not going to succeed on a large  
scale, and in fact probably won't even succeed on a small one,  
because they're always going to be taking shortcuts. They see YC  
itself as a shortcut.Their exploitation usually begins with their own cofounders, which  
is disastrous, since the cofounders' relationship is the foundation  
of the company. Then it moves on to the users, which is also  
disastrous, because the sort of early adopters a successful startup  
wants as its initial users are the hardest to fool. The best this  
kind of founder can hope for is to keep the edifice of deception  
tottering along until some acquirer can be tricked into buying it.  
But that kind of acquisition is never very big.  
[4]If professional billionaire scouts know that exploiting people is  
not the skill to look for, why do some politicians think this is  
the defining quality of billionaires?I think they start from the feeling that it's wrong that one person  
could have so much more money than another. It's understandable  
where that feeling comes from. It's in our DNA, and even in the DNA  
of other species.If they limited themselves to saying that it made them feel bad  
when one person had so much more money than other people, who would  
disagree? It makes me feel bad too, and I think people who make a  
lot of money have a moral obligation to use it for the common good.  
The mistake they make is to jump from feeling bad that some people  
are much richer than others to the conclusion that there's no  
legitimate way to make a very large amount of money. Now we're  
getting into statements that are not only falsifiable, but false.There are certainly some people who become rich by doing bad things.  
But there are also plenty of people who behave badly and don't make  
that much from it. There is no correlation  in fact, probably an  
inverse correlation  between how badly you behave and how much  
money you make.The greatest danger of this nonsense may not even be that it sends  
policy astray, but that it misleads ambitious people. Can you imagine  
a better way to destroy social mobility than by telling poor kids  
that the way to get rich is by exploiting people, while the rich  
kids know, from having watched the preceding generation do it, how  
it's really done?I'll tell you how it's really done, so you can at least tell your  
own kids the truth. It's all about users. The most reliable way to  
become a billionaire is to start a company that   
grows fast, and the  
way to grow fast is to make what users want. Newly started startups  
have no choice but to delight users, or they'll never even get  
rolling. But this never stops being the lodestar, and bigger companies  
take their eye off it at their peril. Stop delighting users, and  
eventually someone else will.Users are what the partners want to  
know about in YC interviews, and what I want to know about when I  
talk to founders that we funded ten years ago and who are billionaires  
now. What do users want? What new things could you build for them?  
Founders who've become billionaires are always eager to talk about  
that topic. That's how they became billionaires.Notes[1]  
The YC partners have so much practice doing this that they  
sometimes see paths that the founders themselves haven't seen yet.  
The partners don't try to seem skeptical, as buyers in transactions  
often do to increase their leverage. Although the founders feel  
their job is to convince the partners of the potential of their  
idea, these roles are not infrequently reversed, and the founders  
leave the interview feeling their idea has more potential than they  
realized.[2]  
In practice, 7 minutes would be enough. You rarely change your  
mind at minute 8. But 10 minutes is socially convenient.[3]  
I myself took the first sufficiently large acquisition offer  
in my first startup, so I don't blame founders for doing this.  
There's nothing wrong with starting a startup to make money. You  
need to make money somehow, and for some people startups are the  
most efficient way to do it. I'm just saying that these are not the  
startups that get really big.[4]  
Not these days, anyway. There were some big ones during the  
Internet Bubble, and indeed some big IPOs.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris, Geoff Ralston, and  
Harj Taggar for reading drafts of this.

# The Airbnbs

December 2020To celebrate Airbnb's IPO and to help future founders, I thought  
it might be useful to explain what was special about Airbnb.What was special about the Airbnbs was how earnest they were. They  
did nothing half-way, and we could sense this even in the interview.  
Sometimes after we interviewed a startup we'd be uncertain what to  
do, and have to talk it over. Other times we'd just look at one  
another and smile. The Airbnbs' interview was that kind. We didn't  
even like the idea that much. Nor did users, at that stage; they  
had no growth. But the founders seemed so full of energy that it  
was impossible not to like them.That first impression was not misleading. During the batch our  
nickname for Brian Chesky was The Tasmanian Devil, because like the  
cartoon  
character he seemed a tornado of energy. All three of them were  
like that. No one ever worked harder during YC than the Airbnbs  
did. When you talked to the Airbnbs, they took notes. If you suggested  
an idea to them in office hours, the next time you talked to them  
they'd not only have implemented it, but also implemented two new  
ideas they had in the process. "They probably have the best attitude  
of any startup we've funded" I wrote to Mike Arrington during the  
batch.They're still like that. Jessica and I had dinner with Brian in the  
summer of 2018, just the three of us. By this point the company is  
ten years old. He took a page of notes about ideas for new things  
Airbnb could do.What we didn't realize when we first met Brian and Joe and Nate was  
that Airbnb was on its last legs. After working on the company for  
a year and getting no growth, they'd agreed to give it one last  
shot. They'd try this Y Combinator thing, and if the company still  
didn't take off, they'd give up.Any normal person would have given up already. They'd been funding  
the company with credit cards. They had a binder full of  
credit cards they'd maxed out. Investors didn't think much of the  
idea. One investor they met in a cafe walked out in the middle of  
meeting with them. They thought he was going to the bathroom, but  
he never came back. "He didn't even finish his smoothie," Brian  
said. And now, in late 2008, it was the worst recession in decades.  
The stock market was in free fall and wouldn't hit bottom for another  
four months.Why hadn't they given up? This is a useful question to ask. People,  
like matter, reveal their nature under extreme conditions. One thing  
that's clear is that they weren't doing this just for the money.  
As a money-making scheme, this was pretty lousy: a year's work and  
all they had to show for it was a binder full of maxed-out credit  
cards. So why were they still working on this startup? Because of  
the experience they'd had as the first hosts.When they first tried renting out airbeds on their floor during a  
design convention, all they were hoping for was to make enough money  
to pay their rent that month. But something surprising happened:  
they enjoyed having those first three guests staying with them. And  
the guests enjoyed it too. Both they and the guests had done it  
because they were in a sense forced to, and yet they'd all had a  
great experience. Clearly there was something new here: for hosts,  
a new way to make money that had literally been right under their  
noses, and for guests, a new way to travel that was in many ways  
better than hotels.That experience was why the Airbnbs didn't give up. They knew they'd  
discovered something. They'd seen a glimpse of the future, and they  
couldn't let it go.They knew that once people tried staying in what is now called "an  
airbnb," they would also realize that this was the future. But only  
if they tried it, and they weren't. That was the problem during Y  
Combinator: to get growth started.Airbnb's goal during YC was to reach what we call ramen profitability,  
which means making enough money that the company can pay the founders'  
living expenses, if they live on ramen noodles. Ramen profitability  
is not, obviously, the end goal of any startup, but it's the most  
important threshold on the way, because this is the point where  
you're airborne. This is the point where you no longer need investors'  
permission to continue existing. For the Airbnbs, ramen profitability  
was $4000 a month: $3500 for rent, and $500 for food. They taped  
this goal to the mirror in the bathroom of their apartment.The way to get growth started in something like Airbnb is to focus  
on the hottest subset of the market. If you can get growth started  
there, it will spread to the rest. When I asked the Airbnbs where  
there was most demand, they knew from searches: New York City. So  
they focused on New York. They went there in person to visit their  
hosts and help them make their listings more attractive. A big part  
of that was better pictures. So Joe and Brian rented a professional  
camera and took pictures of the hosts' places themselves.This didn't just make the listings better. It also taught them about  
their hosts. When they came back from their first trip to New York,  
I asked what they'd noticed about hosts that surprised them, and  
they said the biggest surprise was how many of the hosts were in  
the same position they'd been in: they needed this money to pay  
their rent. This was, remember, the worst recession in decades, and  
it had hit New York first. It definitely added to the Airbnbs' sense  
of mission to feel that people needed them.In late January 2009, about three weeks into Y Combinator, their  
efforts started to show results, and their numbers crept upward.  
But it was hard to say for sure whether it was growth or just random  
fluctuation. By February it was clear that it was real growth. They  
made $460 in fees in the first week of February, $897 in the second,  
and $1428 in the third. That was it: they were airborne. Brian sent  
me an email on February 22 announcing that they were ramen profitable  
and giving the last three weeks' numbers."I assume you know what you've now set yourself up for next week,"  
I responded.Brian's reply was seven words: "We are not going to slow down."

# How to Think for Yourself

November 2020There are some kinds of work that you can't do well without thinking  
differently from your peers. To be a successful scientist, for  
example, it's not enough just to be correct. Your ideas have to be  
both correct and novel. You can't publish papers saying things other  
people already know. You need to say things no one else has realized  
yet.The same is true for investors. It's not enough for a public market  
investor to predict correctly how a company will do. If a lot of  
other people make the same prediction, the stock price will already  
reflect it, and there's no room to make money. The only valuable  
insights are the ones most other investors don't share.You see this pattern with startup founders too. You don't want to  
start a startup to do something that everyone agrees is a good idea,  
or there will already be other companies doing it. You have to do  
something that sounds to most other people like a bad idea, but  
that you know isn't  like writing software for a tiny computer  
used by a few thousand hobbyists, or starting a site to let people  
rent airbeds on strangers' floors.Ditto for essayists. An essay that told people things they already  
knew would be boring. You have to tell them something new.But this pattern isn't universal. In fact, it doesn't hold for most  
kinds of work. In most kinds of work  to be an administrator, for  
example  all you need is the first half. All you need is to be  
right. It's not essential that everyone else be wrong.There's room for a little novelty in most kinds of work, but in  
practice there's a fairly sharp distinction between the kinds of  
work where it's essential to be independent-minded, and the kinds  
where it's not.I wish someone had told me about this distinction when I was a kid,  
because it's one of the most important things to think about when  
you're deciding what kind of work you want to do. Do you want to  
do the kind of work where you can only win by thinking differently  
from everyone else? I suspect most people's unconscious mind will  
answer that question before their conscious mind has a chance to.  
I know mine does.Independent-mindedness seems to be more a matter of nature than  
nurture. Which means if you pick the wrong type of work, you're  
going to be unhappy. If you're naturally independent-minded, you're  
going to find it frustrating to be a middle manager. And if you're  
naturally conventional-minded, you're going to be sailing into a  
headwind if you try to do original research.One difficulty here, though, is that people are often mistaken about  
where they fall on the spectrum from conventional- to independent-minded.  
Conventional-minded people don't like to think of themselves as  
conventional-minded. And in any case, it genuinely feels to them  
as if they make up their own minds about everything. It's just a  
coincidence that their beliefs are identical to their peers'. And  
the independent-minded, meanwhile, are often unaware how different  
their ideas are from conventional ones, at least till they state  
them publicly.  
[1]By the time they reach adulthood, most people know roughly how smart  
they are (in the narrow sense of ability to solve pre-set problems),  
because they're constantly being tested and ranked according to it.  
But schools generally ignore independent-mindedness, except to the  
extent they try to suppress it. So we don't get anything like the  
same kind of feedback about how independent-minded we are.There may even be a phenomenon like Dunning-Kruger at work, where  
the most conventional-minded people are confident that they're  
independent-minded, while the genuinely independent-minded worry  
they might not be independent-minded enough.  
\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
Can you make yourself more independent-minded? I think so. This  
quality may be largely inborn, but there seem to be ways to magnify  
it, or at least not to suppress it.One of the most effective techniques is one practiced unintentionally  
by most nerds: simply to be less aware what conventional beliefs  
are. It's hard to be a conformist if you don't know what you're  
supposed to conform to. Though again, it may be that such people  
already are independent-minded. A conventional-minded person would  
probably feel anxious not knowing what other people thought, and  
make more effort to find out.It matters a lot who you surround yourself with. If you're surrounded  
by conventional-minded people, it will constrain which ideas you  
can express, and that in turn will constrain which ideas you have.  
But if you surround yourself with independent-minded people, you'll  
have the opposite experience: hearing other people say surprising  
things will encourage you to, and to think of more.Because the independent-minded find it uncomfortable to be surrounded  
by conventional-minded people, they tend to self-segregate once  
they have a chance to. The problem with high school is that they  
haven't yet had a chance to. Plus high school tends to be an  
inward-looking little world whose inhabitants lack confidence, both  
of which magnify the forces of conformism. So high school is  
often a bad time for the  
independent-minded. But there is some advantage even here: it  
teaches you what to avoid. If you later find yourself in a situation  
that makes you think "this is like high school," you know you should  
get out.  
[2]Another place where the independent- and conventional-minded are  
thrown together is in successful startups. The founders and early  
employees are almost always independent-minded; otherwise the startup  
wouldn't be successful. But conventional-minded people greatly  
outnumber independent-minded ones, so as the company grows, the  
original spirit of independent-mindedness is inevitably diluted.  
This causes all kinds of problems besides the obvious one that the  
company starts to suck. One of the strangest is that the founders  
find themselves able to speak more freely with founders of other  
companies than with their own employees.  
[3]Fortunately you don't have to spend all your time with independent-minded  
people. It's enough to have one or two you can talk to regularly.  
And once you find them, they're usually as eager to talk as you  
are; they need you too. Although universities no longer have the  
kind of monopoly they used to have on education, good universities  
are still an excellent way to meet independent-minded people. Most  
students will still be conventional-minded, but you'll at least  
find clumps of independent-minded ones, rather than the near zero  
you may have found in high school.It also works to go in the other direction: as well as cultivating  
a small collection of independent-minded friends, to try to meet  
as many different types of people as you can. It will decrease the  
influence of your immediate peers if you have several other groups  
of peers. Plus if you're part of several different worlds, you can  
often import ideas from one to another.But by different types of people, I don't mean demographically  
different. For this technique to work, they have to think differently.  
So while it's an excellent idea to go and visit other countries,  
you can probably find people who think differently right around the  
corner. When I meet someone who knows a lot about something unusual  
(which includes practically everyone, if you dig deep enough), I  
try to learn what they know that other people don't. There are  
almost always surprises here. It's a good way to make conversation  
when you meet strangers, but I don't do it to make conversation.  
I really want to know.You can expand the source of influences in time as well as space,  
by reading history. When I read history I do it not just to learn  
what happened, but to try to get inside the heads of people who  
lived in the past. How did things look to them? This is hard to do,  
but worth the effort for the same reason it's worth travelling far  
to triangulate a point.You can also take more explicit measures to prevent yourself from  
automatically adopting conventional opinions. The most general is  
to cultivate an attitude of skepticism. When you hear someone say  
something, stop and ask yourself "Is that true?" Don't say it out  
loud. I'm not suggesting that you impose on everyone who talks to  
you the burden of proving what they say, but rather that you take  
upon yourself the burden of evaluating what they say.Treat it as a puzzle. You know that some accepted ideas will later  
turn out to be wrong. See if you can guess which. The end goal is  
not to find flaws in the things you're told, but to find the new  
ideas that had been concealed by the broken ones. So this game  
should be an exciting quest for novelty, not a boring protocol for  
intellectual hygiene. And you'll be surprised, when you start asking  
"Is this true?", how often the answer is not an immediate yes. If  
you have any imagination, you're more likely to have too many leads  
to follow than too few.More generally your goal should be not to let anything into your  
head unexamined, and things don't always enter your head in the  
form of statements. Some of the most powerful influences are implicit.  
How do you even notice these? By standing back and watching how  
other people get their ideas.When you stand back at a sufficient distance, you can see ideas  
spreading through groups of people like waves. The most obvious are  
in fashion: you notice a few people wearing a certain kind of shirt,  
and then more and more, until half the people around you are wearing  
the same shirt. You may not care much what you wear, but there are  
intellectual fashions too, and you definitely don't want to participate  
in those. Not just because you want sovereignty over your own  
thoughts, but because unfashionable  
ideas are disproportionately likely to lead somewhere interesting.  
The best place to find undiscovered ideas is where no one else is  
looking.  
[4]  
\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
To go beyond this general advice, we need to look at the internal  
structure of independent-mindedness  at the individual muscles  
we need to exercise, as it were. It seems to me that it has three  
components: fastidiousness about truth, resistance to being told  
what to think, and curiosity.Fastidiousness about truth means more than just not believing things  
that are false. It means being careful about degree of belief. For  
most people, degree of belief rushes unexamined toward the extremes:  
the unlikely becomes impossible, and the probable becomes certain.  
[5]  
To the independent-minded, this seems unpardonably sloppy.  
They're willing to have anything in their heads, from highly  
speculative hypotheses to (apparent) tautologies, but on subjects  
they care about, everything has to be labelled with a carefully  
considered degree of belief.  
[6]The independent-minded thus have a horror of ideologies, which  
require one to accept a whole collection of beliefs at once, and  
to treat them as articles of faith. To an independent-minded person  
that would seem revolting, just as it would seem to someone fastidious  
about food to take a bite of a submarine sandwich filled with a  
large variety of ingredients of indeterminate age and provenance.Without this fastidiousness about truth, you can't be truly  
independent-minded. It's not enough just to have resistance to being  
told what to think. Those kind of people reject conventional ideas  
only to replace them with the most random conspiracy theories. And  
since these conspiracy theories have often been manufactured to  
capture them, they end up being less independent-minded than ordinary  
people, because they're subject to a much more exacting master than  
mere convention.  
[7]Can you increase your fastidiousness about truth? I would think so.  
In my experience, merely thinking about something you're fastidious  
about causes that fastidiousness to grow. If so, this is one of  
those rare virtues we can have more of merely by wanting it. And  
if it's like other forms of fastidiousness, it should also be  
possible to encourage in children. I certainly got a strong dose  
of it from my father.  
[8]The second component of independent-mindedness, resistance to being  
told what to think, is the most visible of the three. But even this  
is often misunderstood. The big mistake people make about it is to  
think of it as a merely negative quality. The language we use  
reinforces that idea. You're unconventional. You don't care  
what other people think. But it's not just a kind of immunity. In  
the most independent-minded people, the desire not to be told what  
to think is a positive force. It's not mere skepticism, but an  
active delight in ideas that subvert  
the conventional wisdom, the more counterintuitive the better.Some of the most novel ideas seemed at the time almost like practical  
jokes. Think how often your reaction to a novel idea is to laugh.  
I don't think it's because novel ideas are funny per se, but because  
novelty and humor share a certain kind of surprisingness. But while  
not identical, the two are close enough that there is a definite  
correlation between having a sense of humor and being independent-minded  
 just as there is between being humorless and being conventional-minded.  
[9]I don't think we can significantly increase our resistance to being  
told what to think. It seems the most innate of the three components  
of independent-mindedness; people who have this quality as adults  
usually showed all too visible signs of it as children. But if we  
can't increase our resistance to being told what to think, we can  
at least shore it up, by surrounding ourselves with other  
independent-minded people.The third component of independent-mindedness, curiosity, may be  
the most interesting. To the extent that we can give a brief answer  
to the question of where novel ideas come from, it's curiosity. That's  
what people are usually feeling before having them.In my experience, independent-mindedness and curiosity predict one  
another perfectly. Everyone I know who's independent-minded is  
deeply curious, and everyone I know who's conventional-minded isn't.  
Except, curiously, children. All small children are curious. Perhaps  
the reason is that even the conventional-minded have to be curious  
in the beginning, in order to learn what the conventions are. Whereas  
the independent-minded are the gluttons of curiosity, who keep  
eating even after they're full.  
[10]The three components of independent-mindedness work in concert:  
fastidiousness about truth and resistance to being told what to  
think leave space in your brain, and curiosity finds new ideas to  
fill it.Interestingly, the three components can substitute for one another  
in much the same way muscles can. If you're sufficiently fastidious  
about truth, you don't need to be as resistant to being told what  
to think, because fastidiousness alone will create sufficient gaps  
in your knowledge. And either one can compensate for curiosity,  
because if you create enough space in your brain, your discomfort  
at the resulting vacuum will add force to your curiosity. Or curiosity  
can compensate for them: if you're sufficiently curious, you don't  
need to clear space in your brain, because the new ideas you discover  
will push out the conventional ones you acquired by default.Because the components of independent-mindedness are so interchangeable,  
you can have them to varying degrees and still get the same result.  
So there is not just a single model of independent-mindedness. Some  
independent-minded people are openly subversive, and others are  
quietly curious. They all know the secret handshake though.Is there a way to cultivate curiosity? To start with, you want to  
avoid situations that suppress it. How much does the work you're  
currently doing engage your curiosity? If the answer is "not much,"  
maybe you should change something.The most important active step you can take to cultivate your  
curiosity is probably to seek out the topics that engage it. Few  
adults are equally curious about everything, and it doesn't seem  
as if you can choose which topics interest you. So it's up to you  
to find them. Or invent them, if  
necessary.Another way to increase your curiosity is to indulge it, by  
investigating things you're interested in. Curiosity is unlike  
most other appetites in this respect: indulging it tends to increase  
rather than to sate it. Questions lead to more questions.Curiosity seems to be more individual than fastidiousness about  
truth or resistance to being told what to think. To the degree  
people have the latter two, they're usually pretty general, whereas  
different people can be curious about very different things. So  
perhaps curiosity is the compass here. Perhaps, if your goal is to  
discover novel ideas, your motto should not be "do what you love"  
so much as "do what you're curious about."Notes[1]  
One convenient consequence of the fact that no one identifies  
as conventional-minded is that you can say what you like about  
conventional-minded people without getting in too much trouble.  
When I wrote "The Four Quadrants of  
Conformism" I expected a firestorm of rage from the  
aggressively conventional-minded, but in fact it was quite muted.  
They sensed that there was something about the essay that they  
disliked intensely, but they had a hard time finding a specific  
passage to pin it on.[2]  
When I ask myself what in my life is like high school, the  
answer is Twitter. It's not just full of conventional-minded people,  
as anything its size will inevitably be, but subject to violent  
storms of conventional-mindedness that remind me of descriptions  
of Jupiter. But while it probably is a net loss to spend time there,  
it has at least made me think more about the distinction between  
independent- and conventional-mindedness, which I probably wouldn't  
have done otherwise.[3]  
The decrease in independent-mindedness in growing startups is  
still an open problem, but there may be solutions.Founders can delay the problem by making a conscious effort only  
to hire independent-minded people. Which of course also has the  
ancillary benefit that they have better ideas.Another possible solution is to create policies that somehow disrupt  
the force of conformism, much as control rods slow chain reactions,  
so that the conventional-minded aren't as dangerous. The physical  
separation of Lockheed's Skunk Works may have had this as a side  
benefit. Recent examples suggest employee forums like Slack may not  
be an unmitigated good.The most radical solution would be to grow revenues without growing  
the company. You think hiring that junior PR person will be cheap,  
compared to a programmer, but what will be the effect on the average  
level of independent-mindedness in your company? (The growth in  
staff relative to faculty seems to have had a similar effect on  
universities.) Perhaps the rule about outsourcing work that's not  
your "core competency" should be augmented by one about outsourcing  
work done by people who'd ruin your culture as employees.Some investment firms already seem to be able to grow revenues  
without growing the number of employees. Automation plus the ever  
increasing articulation of the "tech stack" suggest this may one  
day be possible for product companies.[4]  
There are intellectual fashions in every field, but their  
influence varies. One of the reasons politics, for example, tends  
to be boring is that it's so extremely subject to them. The threshold  
for having opinions about politics is much lower than the one for having  
opinions about set theory. So while there are some ideas in politics,  
in practice they tend to be swamped by waves of intellectual fashion.[5]  
The conventional-minded are often fooled by the strength of  
their opinions into believing that they're independent-minded. But  
strong convictions are not a sign of independent-mindedness. Rather  
the opposite.[6]  
Fastidiousness about truth doesn't imply that an independent-minded  
person won't be dishonest, but that he won't be deluded. It's sort  
of like the definition of a gentleman as someone who is never  
unintentionally rude.[7]  
You see this especially among political extremists. They think  
themselves nonconformists, but actually they're niche conformists.  
Their opinions may be different from the average person's, but they  
are often more influenced by their peers' opinions than the average  
person's are.[8]  
If we broaden the concept of fastidiousness about truth so that  
it excludes pandering, bogusness, and pomposity as well as falsehood  
in the strict sense, our model of independent-mindedness can expand  
further into the arts.[9]  
This correlation is far from perfect, though. Gödel and Dirac  
don't seem to have been very strong in the humor department. But  
someone who is both "neurotypical" and humorless is very likely to  
be conventional-minded.[10]  
Exception: gossip. Almost everyone is curious about gossip.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit, Patrick Collison, Jessica  
Livingston, Robert Morris, Harj Taggar, and Peter Thiel for reading  
drafts of this.Italian Translation

# Early Work

October 2020One of the biggest things holding people back from doing great work  
is the fear of making something lame. And this fear is not an  
irrational one. Many great projects go through a stage early on  
where they don't seem very impressive, even to their creators. You  
have to push through this stage to reach the great work that lies  
beyond. But many people don't. Most people don't even reach the  
stage of making something they're embarrassed by, let alone continue  
past it. They're too frightened even to start.Imagine if we could turn off the fear of making something lame.  
Imagine how much more we'd do.Is there any hope of turning it off? I think so. I think the habits  
at work here are not very deeply rooted.Making new things is itself a new thing for us as a species. It has  
always happened, but till the last few centuries it happened so  
slowly as to be invisible to individual humans. And since we didn't  
need customs for dealing with new ideas, we didn't develop any.We just don't have enough experience with early versions of ambitious  
projects to know how to respond to them. We judge them as we would  
judge more finished work, or less ambitious projects. We don't  
realize they're a special case.Or at least, most of us don't. One reason I'm confident we can do  
better is that it's already starting to happen. There are already  
a few places that are living in the future in this respect. Silicon  
Valley is one of them: an unknown person working on a strange-sounding  
idea won't automatically be dismissed the way they would back home.  
In Silicon Valley, people have learned how dangerous that is.The right way to deal with new ideas is to treat them as a challenge  
to your imagination  not just to have lower standards, but to  
switch polarity entirely, from listing   
the reasons an idea won't  
work to trying to think of ways it could. That's what I do when I  
meet people with new ideas. I've become quite good at it, but I've  
had a lot of practice. Being a partner at Y Combinator means being  
practically immersed in strange-sounding ideas proposed by unknown  
people. Every six months you get thousands of new ones thrown at  
you and have to sort through them, knowing that in a world with a  
power-law distribution of outcomes, it will be painfully obvious  
if you miss the needle in this haystack. Optimism becomes  
urgent.But I'm hopeful that, with time, this kind of optimism can become  
widespread enough that it becomes a social custom, not just a trick  
used by a few specialists. It is after all an extremely lucrative  
trick, and those tend to spread quickly.Of course, inexperience is not the only reason people are too harsh  
on early versions of ambitious projects. They also do it to seem  
clever. And in a field where the new ideas are risky, like startups,  
those who dismiss them are in fact more likely to be right. Just  
not when their predictions are   
weighted by outcome.But there is another more sinister reason people dismiss new ideas.  
If you try something ambitious, many of those around you will hope,  
consciously or unconsciously, that you'll fail. They worry that if  
you try something ambitious and succeed, it will put you above them.  
In some countries this is not just an individual failing but part  
of the national culture.I wouldn't claim that people in Silicon Valley overcome these  
impulses because they're morally better.   
[1]  
The reason many hope  
you'll succeed is that they hope to rise with you. For investors  
this incentive is particularly explicit. They want you to succeed  
because they hope you'll make them rich in the process. But many  
other people you meet can hope to benefit in some way from your  
success. At the very least they'll be able to say, when you're  
famous, that they've known you since way back.But even if Silicon Valley's encouraging attitude  
is rooted in self-interest, it has over time actually grown into a  
sort of benevolence. Encouraging startups has been practiced for  
so long that it has become a custom. Now it just seems that that's  
what one does with startups.Maybe Silicon Valley is too optimistic. Maybe it's too easily fooled  
by impostors. Many less optimistic journalists want to believe that.  
But the lists of impostors they cite are suspiciously short, and  
plagued with asterisks.   
[2] If you use revenue as the test, Silicon  
Valley's optimism seems better tuned than the rest of the world's.  
And because it works, it will spread.There's a lot more to new ideas than new startup ideas, of course.  
The fear of making something lame holds people back in every field.  
But Silicon Valley shows how quickly customs can evolve to support  
new ideas. And that in turn proves that dismissing new ideas is not  
so deeply rooted in human nature that it can't be unlearnt.  
\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  
Unfortunately, if you want to do new things, you'll face a force  
more powerful than other people's skepticism: your own skepticism.  
You too will judge your early work too harshly. How do you avoid  
that?This is a difficult problem, because you don't want to completely  
eliminate your horror of making something lame. That's what steers  
you toward doing good work. You just want to turn it off temporarily,  
the way a painkiller temporarily turns off pain.People have already discovered several techniques that work. Hardy  
mentions two in A Mathematician's Apology:  
  
 Good work is not done by "humble" men. It is one of the first  
 duties of a professor, for example, in any subject, to exaggerate  
 a little both the importance of his subject and his importance  
 in it.  
  
If you overestimate the importance of what you're working on, that  
will compensate for your mistakenly harsh judgment of your initial  
results. If you look at something that's 20% of the way to a goal  
worth 100 and conclude that it's 10% of the way to a goal worth  
200, your estimate of its expected value is correct even though  
both components are wrong.It also helps, as Hardy suggests, to be slightly overconfident.  
I've noticed in many fields that the most successful people are  
slightly overconfident. On the face of it this seems implausible.  
Surely it would be optimal to have exactly the right estimate of  
one's abilities. How could it be an advantage to be mistaken?  
Because this error compensates for other sources of error in the  
opposite direction: being slightly overconfident armors you against  
both other people's skepticism and your own.Ignorance has a similar effect. It's safe to make the mistake of  
judging early work as finished work if you're a sufficiently lax  
judge of finished work. I doubt it's possible to cultivate this  
kind of ignorance, but empirically it's a real advantage, especially  
for the young.Another way to get through the lame phase of ambitious projects is  
to surround yourself with the right people  to create an eddy in  
the social headwind. But it's not enough to collect people who are  
always encouraging. You'd learn to discount that. You need colleagues  
who can actually tell an ugly duckling from a baby swan. The people  
best able to do this are those working on similar projects of their  
own, which is why university departments and research labs work so  
well. You don't need institutions to collect colleagues. They  
naturally coalesce, given the chance. But it's very much worth  
accelerating this process by seeking out other people trying to do  
new things.Teachers are in effect a special case of colleagues. It's a teacher's  
job both to see the promise of early work and to encourage you to  
continue. But teachers who are good at this are unfortunately quite  
rare, so if you have the opportunity to learn from one, take it.  
[3]For some it might work to rely on sheer discipline: to tell yourself  
that you just have to press on through the initial crap phase and  
not get discouraged. But like a lot of "just tell yourself" advice,  
this is harder than it sounds. And it gets still harder as you get  
older, because your standards rise. The old do have one compensating  
advantage though: they've been through this before.It can help if you focus less on where you are and more on the rate  
of change. You won't worry so much about doing bad work if you can  
see it improving. Obviously the faster it improves, the easier this  
is. So when you start something new, it's good if you can spend a  
lot of time on it. That's another advantage of being young: you  
tend to have bigger blocks of time.Another common trick is to start by considering new work to be of  
a different, less exacting type. To start a painting saying that  
it's just a sketch, or a new piece of software saying that it's  
just a quick hack. Then you judge your initial results by a lower  
standard. Once the project is rolling you can sneakily convert it  
to something more.  
[4]This will be easier if you use a medium that lets you work fast and  
doesn't require too much commitment up front. It's easier to convince  
yourself that something is just a sketch when you're drawing in a  
notebook than when you're carving stone. Plus you get initial results  
faster.   
[5]  
[6]It will be easier to try out a risky project if you think of it as  
a way to learn and not just as a way to make something. Then even  
if the project truly is a failure, you'll still have gained by it.  
If the problem is sharply enough defined, failure itself is  
knowledge: if the theorem you're trying to prove turns out to  
be false, or you use a structural member of a certain size and  
it fails under stress, you've learned something, even if it  
isn't what you wanted to learn.  
[7]One motivation that works particularly well for me is curiosity.  
I like to try new things just to see how they'll turn out. We started  
Y Combinator in this spirit, and it was one of main things that  
kept me going while I was working on   
Bel. Having worked for so long  
with various dialects of Lisp, I was very curious to see what its  
inherent shape was: what you'd end up with if you followed the  
axiomatic approach all the way.But it's a bit strange that you have to play mind games with yourself  
to avoid being discouraged by lame-looking early efforts. The thing  
you're trying to trick yourself into believing is in fact the truth.  
A lame-looking early version of an ambitious project truly is more  
valuable than it seems. So the ultimate solution may be to teach  
yourself that.One way to do it is to study the histories of people who've  
done great work. What were they thinking early on? What was the  
very first thing they did? It can sometimes be hard to get an  
accurate answer to this question, because people are often embarrassed  
by their earliest work and make little effort to publish it. (They  
too misjudge it.) But when you can get an accurate picture of the  
first steps someone made on the path to some great work, they're  
often pretty feeble.  
[8]Perhaps if you study enough such cases, you can teach yourself to  
be a better judge of early work. Then you'll be immune both to other  
people's skepticism and your own fear of making something lame.  
You'll see early work for what it is.Curiously enough, the solution to the problem of judging early work  
too harshly is to realize that our attitudes toward it are themselves  
early work. Holding everything to the same standard is a crude  
version 1. We're already evolving better customs, and we can already  
see signs of how big the payoff will be.  
Notes[1]  
This assumption may be too conservative. There is some evidence  
that historically the Bay Area has attracted a   
different sort of person than,   
say, New York City.[2]  
One of their great favorites is Theranos. But the most conspicuous  
feature of Theranos's cap table is the absence of Silicon Valley  
firms. Journalists were fooled by Theranos, but Silicon Valley  
investors weren't.[3]  
I made two mistakes about teachers when I was younger. I  
cared more about professors' research than their reputations as  
teachers, and I was also wrong about what it meant to be a good  
teacher. I thought it simply meant to be good at explaining things.[4]  
Patrick Collison points out that you can go past treating  
something as a hack in the sense of a prototype and onward to the  
sense of the word that means something closer to a practical joke:  
  
 I think there may be something related to being a hack that can  
 be powerful  the idea of making the tenuousness and implausibility  
 a feature. "Yes, it's a bit ridiculous, right? I'm just trying  
 to see how far such a naive approach can get." YC seemed to me  
 to have this characteristic.  
  
[5]  
Much of the advantage of switching from physical to digital  
media is not the software per se but that it lets you start something  
new with little upfront commitment.[6]  
John Carmack adds:  
  
 The value of a medium without a vast gulf between the early work  
 and the final work is exemplified in game mods. The original  
 Quake game was a golden age for mods, because everything was very  
 flexible, but so crude due to technical limitations, that quick  
 hacks to try out a gameplay idea weren't all that far from the  
 official game. Many careers were born from that, but as the  
 commercial game quality improved over the years, it became almost  
 a full time job to make a successful mod that would be appreciated  
 by the community. This was dramatically reversed with Minecraft  
 and later Roblox, where the entire esthetic of the experience was  
 so explicitly crude that innovative gameplay concepts became the  
 overriding value. These "crude" game mods by single authors are  
 now often bigger deals than massive professional teams' work.  
  
[7]  
Lisa Randall suggests that we  
  
 treat new things as experiments. That way there's no such thing  
 as failing, since you learn something no matter what. You treat  
 it like an experiment in the sense that if it really rules something  
 out, you give up and move on, but if there's some way to vary it  
 to make it work better, go ahead and do that  
  
[8]  
Michael Nielsen points out that the internet has made this  
easier, because you can see programmers' first commits, musicians'  
first videos, and so on.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, John Carmack, Patrick Collison, Jessica  
Livingston, Michael Nielsen, and Lisa Randall for reading drafts  
of this.

# Modeling a Wealth Tax

August 2020Some politicians are proposing to introduce wealth taxes in addition  
to income and capital gains taxes. Let's try modeling the effects of various levels  
of wealth tax to see what they would mean in practice for a startup  
founder.Suppose you start a successful startup in your twenties, and then  
live for another 60 years. How much of your stock will a wealth tax  
consume?If the wealth tax applies to all your assets, it's easy to  
calculate its effect. A wealth tax of 1% means you get to keep  
99% of your stock each year. After 60 years the proportion  
of stock you'll have left will be .99^60, or .547. So a  
straight 1% wealth tax means the government will over the  
course of your life take 45% of your stock.(Losing shares does not, obviously, mean becoming net  
poorer unless the value per share is increasing by less than the   
wealth tax rate.)Here's how much stock the government would take over 60  
years at various levels of wealth tax:  
wealth taxgovernment takes  
0.1%6%0.5%26%  
1.0%45%  
2.0%70%  
3.0%84%  
4.0%91%5.0%95%  
  
  
  
A wealth tax will usually have a threshold at which it starts.  
How much difference would a high threshold make? To model that,  
we need to make some assumptions about the initial value of  
your stock and the growth rate.Suppose your stock is initially  
worth $2 million, and the company's trajectory is as follows:  
the value of your stock grows 3x for 2 years, then 2x for 2 years,  
then 50% for 2 years, after  
which you just get a typical public company growth rate,  
which we'll call 8%.   
[1]  
Suppose the wealth tax threshold is  
$50 million. How much stock does the government take now?  
  
wealth taxgovernment takes  
0.1%5%0.5%23%  
1.0%41%  
2.0%65%  
3.0%79%  
4.0%88%5.0%93%  
  
  
  
It may at first seem surprising that such apparently small tax rates  
produce such dramatic effects. A 2% wealth tax with a $50 million  
threshold takes about two thirds of a successful founder's stock.The reason wealth taxes have such dramatic effects is that they're  
applied over and over to the same money. Income tax  
happens every year, but only to that year's income. Whereas if you  
live for 60 years after acquiring some asset, a wealth tax will tax  
that same asset 60 times. A wealth tax compounds.Note[1]  
In practice, eventually some of this 8% would come in the form of   
dividends, which are taxed as income at issue, so this model actually  
represents the most optimistic case for the founder.

# The Four Quadrants of Conformism

July 2020One of the most revealing ways to classify people is by the degree  
and aggressiveness of their conformism. Imagine a Cartesian coordinate  
system whose horizontal axis runs from conventional-minded on the  
left to independent-minded on the right, and whose vertical axis  
runs from passive at the bottom to aggressive at the top. The  
resulting four quadrants define four types of people. Starting in  
the upper left and going counter-clockwise: aggressively  
conventional-minded, passively conventional-minded, passively  
independent-minded, and aggressively independent-minded.I think that you'll find all four types in most societies, and that  
which quadrant people fall into depends more on their own personality  
than the beliefs prevalent in their society.  
[1]Young children offer some of the best evidence for both points.  
Anyone who's been to primary school has seen the four types, and  
the fact that school rules are so arbitrary is strong evidence that  
which quadrant people fall into depends more on them than the rules.The kids in the upper left quadrant, the aggressively conventional-minded  
ones, are the tattletales. They believe not only that rules must  
be obeyed, but that those who disobey them must be punished.The kids in the lower left quadrant, the passively conventional-minded,  
are the sheep. They're careful to obey the rules, but when other  
kids break them, their impulse is to worry that those kids will be  
punished, not to ensure that they will.The kids in the lower right quadrant, the passively independent-minded,  
are the dreamy ones. They don't care much about rules and probably  
aren't 100% sure what the rules even are.And the kids in the upper right quadrant, the aggressively  
independent-minded, are the naughty ones. When they see a rule,  
their first impulse is to question it. Merely being told what to  
do makes them inclined to do the opposite.When measuring conformism, of course, you have to say with respect  
to what, and this changes as kids get older. For younger kids it's  
the rules set by adults. But as kids get older, the source of rules  
becomes their peers. So a pack of teenagers who all flout school  
rules in the same way are not independent-minded; rather the opposite.In adulthood we can recognize the four types by their distinctive  
calls, much as you could recognize four species of birds. The call  
of the aggressively conventional-minded is "Crush <outgroup>!" (It's  
rather alarming to see an exclamation point after a variable, but  
that's the whole problem with the aggressively conventional-minded.)  
The call of the passively conventional-minded is "What will the  
neighbors think?" The call of the passively independent-minded is  
"To each his own." And the call of the aggressively independent-minded  
is "Eppur si muove."The four types are not equally common. There are more passive people  
than aggressive ones, and far more conventional-minded people than  
independent-minded ones. So the passively conventional-minded are  
the largest group, and the aggressively independent-minded the  
smallest.Since one's quadrant depends more on one's personality than the  
nature of the rules, most people would occupy the same quadrant  
even if they'd grown up in a quite different society.Princeton professor Robert George recently wrote:  
  
 I sometimes ask students what their position on slavery would  
 have been had they been white and living in the South before  
 abolition. Guess what? They all would have been abolitionists!  
 They all would have bravely spoken out against slavery, and  
 worked tirelessly against it.  
  
He's too polite to say so, but of course they wouldn't. And indeed,  
our default assumption should not merely be that his students would,  
on average, have behaved the same way people did at the time, but  
that the ones who are aggressively conventional-minded today would  
have been aggressively conventional-minded then too. In other words,  
that they'd not only not have fought against slavery, but that  
they'd have been among its staunchest defenders.I'm biased, I admit, but it seems to me that aggressively  
conventional-minded people are responsible for a disproportionate  
amount of the trouble in the world, and that a lot of the customs  
we've evolved since the Enlightenment have been designed to protect  
the rest of us from them. In particular, the retirement of the  
concept of heresy and its replacement by the principle of freely  
debating all sorts of different ideas, even ones that are currently  
considered unacceptable, without any punishment for those who try  
them out to see if they work.  
[2]Why do the independent-minded need to be protected, though? Because  
they have all the new ideas. To be a successful scientist, for  
example, it's not enough just to be right. You have to be right  
when everyone else is wrong. Conventional-minded people can't do  
that. For similar reasons, all successful startup CEOs are not  
merely independent-minded, but aggressively so. So it's no coincidence  
that societies prosper only to the extent that they have customs  
for keeping the conventional-minded at bay.  
[3]In the last few years, many of us have noticed that the customs  
protecting free inquiry have been weakened. Some say we're overreacting  
 that they haven't been weakened very much, or that they've been  
weakened in the service of a greater good. The latter I'll dispose  
of immediately. When the conventional-minded get the upper hand,  
they always say it's in the service of a greater good. It just  
happens to be a different, incompatible greater good each time.As for the former worry, that the independent-minded are being  
oversensitive, and that free inquiry hasn't been shut down that  
much, you can't judge that unless you are yourself independent-minded.  
You can't know how much of the space of ideas is being lopped off  
unless you have them, and only the independent-minded have the ones  
at the edges. Precisely because of this, they tend to be very  
sensitive to changes in how freely one can explore ideas. They're  
the canaries in this coalmine.The conventional-minded say, as they always do, that they don't  
want to shut down the discussion of all ideas, just the bad ones.You'd think it would be obvious just from that sentence what a  
dangerous game they're playing. But I'll spell it out. There are  
two reasons why we need to be able to discuss even "bad" ideas.The first is that any process for deciding which ideas to ban is  
bound to make mistakes. All the more so because no one intelligent  
wants to undertake that kind of work, so it ends up being done by  
the stupid. And when a process makes a lot of mistakes, you need  
to leave a margin for error. Which in this case means you need to  
ban fewer ideas than you'd like to. But that's hard for the  
aggressively conventional-minded to do, partly because they enjoy  
seeing people punished, as they have since they were children, and  
partly because they compete with one another. Enforcers of orthodoxy  
can't allow a borderline idea to exist, because that gives other  
enforcers an opportunity to one-up them in the moral purity department,  
and perhaps even to turn enforcer upon them. So instead of getting  
the margin for error we need, we get the opposite: a race to the  
bottom in which any idea that seems at all bannable ends up being  
banned.   
[4]The second reason it's dangerous to ban the discussion of ideas is  
that ideas are more closely related than they look. Which means if  
you restrict the discussion of some topics, it doesn't only affect  
those topics. The restrictions propagate back into any topic that  
yields implications in the forbidden ones. And that is not an edge  
case. The best ideas do exactly that: they have consequences  
in fields far removed from their origins. Having ideas in a world  
where some ideas are banned is like playing soccer on a pitch that  
has a minefield in one corner. You don't just play the same game  
you would have, but on a different shaped pitch. You play a much  
more subdued game even on the ground that's safe.In the past, the way the independent-minded protected themselves  
was to congregate in a handful of places  first in courts, and  
later in universities  where they could to some extent make their  
own rules. Places where people work with ideas tend to have customs  
protecting free inquiry, for the same reason wafer fabs have powerful  
air filters, or recording studios good sound insulation. For the  
last couple centuries at least, when the aggressively conventional-minded  
were on the rampage for whatever reason, universities were the  
safest places to be.That may not work this time though, due to the unfortunate fact  
that the latest wave of intolerance began in universities. It began  
in the mid 1980s, and by 2000 seemed to have died down, but it has  
recently flared up again with the arrival of social media. This  
seems, unfortunately, to have been an own goal by Silicon Valley.  
Though the people who run Silicon Valley are almost all independent-minded,  
they've handed the aggressively conventional-minded a tool such as  
they could only have dreamed of.On the other hand, perhaps the decline in the spirit of free inquiry  
within universities is as much the symptom of the departure of the  
independent-minded as the cause. People who would have become  
professors 50 years ago have other options now. Now they can become  
quants or start startups. You have to be independent-minded to  
succeed at either of those. If these people had been professors,  
they'd have put up a stiffer resistance on behalf of academic  
freedom. So perhaps the picture of the independent-minded fleeing  
declining universities is too gloomy. Perhaps the universities are  
declining because so many have already left.  
[5]Though I've spent a lot of time thinking about this situation, I  
can't predict how it plays out. Could some universities reverse the  
current trend and remain places where the independent-minded want  
to congregate? Or will the independent-minded gradually abandon  
them? I worry a lot about what we might lose if that happened.But I'm hopeful long term. The independent-minded are good at  
protecting themselves. If existing institutions are compromised,  
they'll create new ones. That may require some imagination. But  
imagination is, after all, their specialty.  
Notes[1]  
I realize of course that if people's personalities vary in any  
two ways, you can use them as axes and call the resulting four  
quadrants personality types. So what I'm really claiming is that  
the axes are orthogonal and that there's significant variation in  
both.[2]  
The aggressively conventional-minded aren't responsible for all  
the trouble in the world. Another big source of trouble is the sort  
of charismatic leader who gains power by appealing to them. They  
become much more dangerous when such leaders emerge.[3]  
I never worried about writing things that offended the  
conventional-minded when I was running Y Combinator. If YC were a  
cookie company, I'd have faced a difficult moral choice.  
Conventional-minded people eat cookies too. But they don't start  
successful startups. So if I deterred them from applying to YC, the  
only effect was to save us work reading applications.[4]  
There has been progress in one area: the punishments for talking  
about banned ideas are less severe than in the past. There's little  
danger of being killed, at least in richer countries. The aggressively  
conventional-minded are mostly satisfied with getting people fired.[5]  
Many professors are independent-minded  especially in math,  
the hard sciences, and engineering, where you have to be to succeed.  
But students are more representative of the general population, and  
thus mostly conventional-minded. So when professors and students  
are in conflict, it's not just a conflict between generations but  
also between different types of people.Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Nicholas Christakis, Patrick  
Collison, Sam Gichuru, Jessica Livingston, Patrick McKenzie, Geoff  
Ralston, and Harj Taggar for reading drafts of this.German TranslationKorean TranslationSerbian Translation

# Orthodox Privilege

July 2020  
  
  
  
  
"Few people are capable of expressing with equanimity opinions which differ from the prejudices of their social environment. Most people are even incapable of forming such opinions." Einstein  
  
  
  
  
There has been a lot of talk about privilege lately. Although the  
  
concept is overused, there is something to it, and in particular  
  
to the idea that privilege makes you blind  that you can't see  
  
things that are visible to someone whose life is very different  
  
from yours.But one of the most pervasive examples of this kind of blindness  
  
is one that I haven't seen mentioned explicitly. I'm going to call  
  
it orthodox privilege: The more conventional-minded someone is, the  
  
more it seems to them that it's safe for everyone to express their  
  
opinions.It's safe for them to express their opinions, because the source  
  
of their opinions is whatever it's currently acceptable to believe.  
  
So it seems to them that it must be safe for everyone. They literally  
  
can't imagine a true statement that would get you in trouble.And yet at every point in history, there were  
  
true things that would  
  
get you in trouble to say.   
  
Is ours the first where this  
  
isn't so? What an amazing coincidence that would be.Surely it should at least be the default assumption that our time  
  
is not unique, and that there are true things you can't say now,  
  
just as there have always been. You would think. But even in the  
  
face of such overwhelming historical evidence, most people will go  
  
with their gut on this one.In the most extreme cases, people suffering from orthodox  
  
privilege will not only deny that there's anything true that   
  
you can't say, but will accuse you of heresy merely for saying there is.   
  
Though if there's more than one heresy current in  
  
your time, these accusations will be weirdly non-deterministic:  
  
you must either be an xist or a yist.Frustrating as it is to deal with these people, it's important to  
  
realize that they're in earnest. They're not pretending they think  
  
it's impossible for an idea to be both unorthodox and true. The  
  
world really looks that way to them.Indeed, this is a uniquely tenacious form of privilege. People can  
  
overcome the blindness induced by most forms of privilege by learning  
  
more about whatever they're not. But they can't overcome orthodox  
  
privilege just by learning more. They'd have to become more  
  
independent-minded. If that happens at all, it doesn't happen on  
  
the time scale of one conversation.It may be possible to convince some people that orthodox privilege  
  
must exist even though they can't sense it, just as one can with,  
  
say, dark matter. There may be some who could be convinced, for  
  
example, that it's very unlikely that this is the first point in  
  
history at which there's nothing true you can't say, even if they  
  
can't imagine specific examples.But in general I don't think it will work to say  
  
"check your privilege" about this type of privilege, because those  
  
in its demographic don't realize they're in it. It doesn't seem to  
  
conventional-minded people that they're conventional-minded. It  
  
just seems to them that they're right. Indeed, they tend to be  
  
particularly sure of it.Perhaps the solution is to appeal to politeness. If someone says  
  
they can hear a high-pitched noise that you can't, it's only polite  
  
to take them at their word, instead of demanding evidence that's  
  
impossible to produce, or simply denying that they hear anything.  
  
Imagine how rude that would seem. Similarly, if someone says they  
  
can think of things that are true but that cannot be said, it's  
  
only polite to take them at their word, even if you can't think of  
  
any yourself.  
  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison, Antonio Garcia-Martinez,  
  
Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris, Michael Nielsen, Geoff Ralston, Max Roser, and  
  
Harj Taggar for reading drafts of this.

# Coronavirus and Credibility

April 2020I recently saw a   
video   
of TV journalists and politicians confidently  
saying that the coronavirus would be no worse than the flu. What  
struck me about it was not just how mistaken they seemed, but how  
daring. How could they feel safe saying such things?The answer, I realized, is that they didn't think they could get  
caught. They didn't realize there was any danger in making false  
predictions. These people constantly make false predictions, and  
get away with it, because the things they make predictions about  
either have mushy enough outcomes that they can bluster their way  
out of trouble, or happen so far in the future that few remember  
what they said.An epidemic is different. It falsifies your predictions rapidly and  
unequivocally.But epidemics are rare enough that these people clearly  
didn't realize this was even a possibility. Instead they just  
continued to use their ordinary m.o., which, as the epidemic has  
made clear, is to talk confidently about things they don't  
understand.An event like this is thus a uniquely powerful way of taking people's  
measure. As Warren Buffett said, "It's only when the tide goes out  
that you learn who's been swimming naked." And the tide has just  
gone out like never before.Now that we've seen the results, let's remember what we saw, because  
this is the most accurate test of credibility we're ever likely to have. I hope.Finnish TranslationGerman TranslationFrench Translation

# How to Write Usefully

February 2020What should an essay be? Many people would say persuasive. That's  
what a lot of us were taught essays should be. But I think we can  
aim for something more ambitious: that an essay should be useful.To start with, that means it should be correct. But it's not enough  
merely to be correct. It's easy to make a statement correct by  
making it vague. That's a common flaw in academic writing, for  
example. If you know nothing at all about an issue, you can't go  
wrong by saying that the issue is a complex one, that there are  
many factors to be considered, that it's a mistake to take too  
simplistic a view of it, and so on.Though no doubt correct, such statements tell the reader nothing.  
Useful writing makes claims that are as strong as they can be made  
without becoming false.For example, it's more useful to say that Pike's Peak is near the  
middle of Colorado than merely somewhere in Colorado. But if I say  
it's in the exact middle of Colorado, I've now gone too far, because  
it's a bit east of the middle.Precision and correctness are like opposing forces. It's easy to  
satisfy one if you ignore the other. The converse of vaporous  
academic writing is the bold, but false, rhetoric of demagogues.  
Useful writing is bold, but true.It's also two other things: it tells people something important,  
and that at least some of them didn't already know.Telling people something they didn't know doesn't always mean  
surprising them. Sometimes it means telling them something they  
knew unconsciously but had never put into words. In fact those may  
be the more valuable insights, because they tend to be more  
fundamental.Let's put them all together. Useful writing tells people something  
true and important that they didn't already know, and tells them  
as unequivocally as possible.Notice these are all a matter of degree. For example, you can't  
expect an idea to be novel to everyone. Any insight that you have  
will probably have already been had by at least one of the world's  
7 billion people. But it's sufficient if an idea is novel to a lot  
of readers.Ditto for correctness, importance, and strength. In effect the four  
components are like numbers you can multiply together to get a score  
for usefulness. Which I realize is almost awkwardly reductive, but  
nonetheless true.\_\_\_\_\_  
How can you ensure that the things you say are true and novel and  
important? Believe it or not, there is a trick for doing this. I  
learned it from my friend Robert Morris, who has a horror of saying  
anything dumb. His trick is not to say anything unless he's sure  
it's worth hearing. This makes it hard to get opinions out of him,  
but when you do, they're usually right.Translated into essay writing, what this means is that if you write  
a bad sentence, you don't publish it. You delete it and try again.  
Often you abandon whole branches of four or five paragraphs. Sometimes  
a whole essay.You can't ensure that every idea you have is good, but you can  
ensure that every one you publish is, by simply not publishing the  
ones that aren't.In the sciences, this is called publication bias, and is considered  
bad. When some hypothesis you're exploring gets inconclusive results,  
you're supposed to tell people about that too. But with essay  
writing, publication bias is the way to go.My strategy is loose, then tight. I write the first draft of an  
essay fast, trying out all kinds of ideas. Then I spend days rewriting  
it very carefully.I've never tried to count how many times I proofread essays, but  
I'm sure there are sentences I've read 100 times before publishing  
them. When I proofread an essay, there are usually passages that  
stick out in an annoying way, sometimes because they're clumsily  
written, and sometimes because I'm not sure they're true. The  
annoyance starts out unconscious, but after the tenth reading or  
so I'm saying "Ugh, that part" each time I hit it. They become like  
briars that catch your sleeve as you walk past. Usually I won't  
publish an essay till they're all gone  till I can read through  
the whole thing without the feeling of anything catching.I'll sometimes let through a sentence that seems clumsy, if I can't  
think of a way to rephrase it, but I will never knowingly let through  
one that doesn't seem correct. You never have to. If a sentence  
doesn't seem right, all you have to do is ask why it doesn't, and  
you've usually got the replacement right there in your head.This is where essayists have an advantage over journalists. You  
don't have a deadline. You can work for as long on an essay as you  
need to get it right. You don't have to publish the essay at all,  
if you can't get it right. Mistakes seem to lose courage in the  
face of an enemy with unlimited resources. Or that's what it feels  
like. What's really going on is that you have different expectations  
for yourself. You're like a parent saying to a child "we can sit  
here all night till you eat your vegetables." Except you're the  
child too.I'm not saying no mistake gets through. For example, I added condition  
(c) in "A Way to Detect Bias"   
after readers pointed out that I'd  
omitted it. But in practice you can catch nearly all of them.There's a trick for getting importance too. It's like the trick I  
suggest to young founders for getting startup ideas: to make something  
you yourself want. You can use yourself as a proxy for the reader.  
The reader is not completely unlike you, so if you write about  
topics that seem important to you, they'll probably seem important  
to a significant number of readers as well.Importance has two factors. It's the number of people something  
matters to, times how much it matters to them. Which means of course  
that it's not a rectangle, but a sort of ragged comb, like a Riemann  
sum.The way to get novelty is to write about topics you've thought about  
a lot. Then you can use yourself as a proxy for the reader in this  
department too. Anything you notice that surprises you, who've  
thought about the topic a lot, will probably also surprise a  
significant number of readers. And here, as with correctness and  
importance, you can use the Morris technique to ensure that you  
will. If you don't learn anything from writing an essay, don't  
publish it.You need humility to measure novelty, because acknowledging the  
novelty of an idea means acknowledging your previous ignorance of  
it. Confidence and humility are often seen as opposites, but in  
this case, as in many others, confidence helps you to be humble.  
If you know you're an expert on some topic, you can freely admit  
when you learn something you didn't know, because you can be confident  
that most other people wouldn't know it either.The fourth component of useful writing, strength, comes from two  
things: thinking well, and the skillful use of qualification. These  
two counterbalance each other, like the accelerator and clutch in  
a car with a manual transmission. As you try to refine the expression  
of an idea, you adjust the qualification accordingly. Something  
you're sure of, you can state baldly with no qualification at all,  
as I did the four components of useful writing. Whereas points that  
seem dubious have to be held at arm's length with perhapses.As you refine an idea, you're pushing in the direction of less  
qualification. But you can rarely get it down to zero. Sometimes  
you don't even want to, if it's a side point and a fully refined  
version would be too long.Some say that qualifications weaken writing. For example, that you  
should never begin a sentence in an essay with "I think," because  
if you're saying it, then of course you think it. And it's true  
that "I think x" is a weaker statement than simply "x." Which is  
exactly why you need "I think." You need it to express your degree  
of certainty.But qualifications are not scalars. They're not just experimental  
error. There must be 50 things they can express: how broadly something  
applies, how you know it, how happy you are it's so, even how it  
could be falsified. I'm not going to try to explore the structure  
of qualification here. It's probably more complex than the whole  
topic of writing usefully. Instead I'll just give you a practical  
tip: Don't underestimate qualification. It's an important skill in  
its own right, not just a sort of tax you have to pay in order to  
avoid saying things that are false. So learn and use its full range.  
It may not be fully half of having good ideas, but it's part of  
having them.There's one other quality I aim for in essays: to say things as  
simply as possible. But I don't think this is a component of  
usefulness. It's more a matter of consideration for the reader. And  
it's a practical aid in getting things right; a mistake is more  
obvious when expressed in simple language. But I'll admit that the  
main reason I write simply is not for the reader's sake or because  
it helps get things right, but because it bothers me to use more  
or fancier words than I need to. It seems inelegant, like a program  
that's too long.I realize florid writing works for some people. But unless you're  
sure you're one of them, the best advice is to write as simply as  
you can.\_\_\_\_\_  
I believe the formula I've given you, importance + novelty +  
correctness + strength, is the recipe for a good essay. But I should  
warn you that it's also a recipe for making people mad.The root of the problem is novelty. When you tell people something  
they didn't know, they don't always thank you for it. Sometimes the  
reason people don't know something is because they don't want to  
know it. Usually because it contradicts some cherished belief. And  
indeed, if you're looking for novel ideas, popular but mistaken  
beliefs are a good place to find them. Every popular mistaken belief  
creates a dead zone of ideas around   
it that are relatively unexplored because they contradict it.The strength component just makes things worse. If there's anything  
that annoys people more than having their cherished assumptions  
contradicted, it's having them flatly contradicted.Plus if you've used the Morris technique, your writing will seem  
quite confident. Perhaps offensively confident, to people who  
disagree with you. The reason you'll seem confident is that you are  
confident: you've cheated, by only publishing the things you're  
sure of. It will seem to people who try to disagree with you that  
you never admit you're wrong. In fact you constantly admit you're  
wrong. You just do it before publishing instead of after.And if your writing is as simple as possible, that just makes things  
worse. Brevity is the diction of command. If you watch someone  
delivering unwelcome news from a position of inferiority, you'll  
notice they tend to use lots of words, to soften the blow. Whereas  
to be short with someone is more or less to be rude to them.It can sometimes work to deliberately phrase statements more weakly  
than you mean. To put "perhaps" in front of something you're actually  
quite sure of. But you'll notice that when writers do this, they  
usually do it with a wink.I don't like to do this too much. It's cheesy to adopt an ironic  
tone for a whole essay. I think we just have to face the fact that  
elegance and curtness are two names for the same thing.You might think that if you work sufficiently hard to ensure that  
an essay is correct, it will be invulnerable to attack. That's sort  
of true. It will be invulnerable to valid attacks. But in practice  
that's little consolation.In fact, the strength component of useful writing will make you  
particularly vulnerable to misrepresentation. If you've stated an  
idea as strongly as you could without making it false, all anyone  
has to do is to exaggerate slightly what you said, and now it is  
false.Much of the time they're not even doing it deliberately. One of the  
most surprising things you'll discover, if you start writing essays,  
is that people who disagree with you rarely disagree with what  
you've actually written. Instead they make up something you said  
and disagree with that.For what it's worth, the countermove is to ask someone who does  
this to quote a specific sentence or passage you wrote that they  
believe is false, and explain why. I say "for what it's worth"  
because they never do. So although it might seem that this could  
get a broken discussion back on track, the truth is that it was  
never on track in the first place.Should you explicitly forestall likely misinterpretations? Yes, if  
they're misinterpretations a reasonably smart and well-intentioned  
person might make. In fact it's sometimes better to say something  
slightly misleading and then add the correction than to try to get  
an idea right in one shot. That can be more efficient, and can also  
model the way such an idea would be discovered.But I don't think you should explicitly forestall intentional  
misinterpretations in the body of an essay. An essay is a place to  
meet honest readers. You don't want to spoil your house by putting  
bars on the windows to protect against dishonest ones. The place  
to protect against intentional misinterpretations is in end-notes.  
But don't think you can predict them all. People are as ingenious  
at misrepresenting you when you say something they don't want to  
hear as they are at coming up with rationalizations for things they  
want to do but know they shouldn't. I suspect it's the same skill.\_\_\_\_\_  
As with most other things, the way to get better at writing essays  
is to practice. But how do you start? Now that we've examined the  
structure of useful writing, we can rephrase that question more  
precisely. Which constraint do you relax initially? The answer is,  
the first component of importance: the number of people who care  
about what you write.If you narrow the topic sufficiently, you can probably find something  
you're an expert on. Write about that to start with. If you only  
have ten readers who care, that's fine. You're helping them, and  
you're writing. Later you can expand the breadth of topics you write  
about.The other constraint you can relax is a little surprising: publication.  
Writing essays doesn't have to mean publishing them. That may seem  
strange now that the trend is to publish every random thought, but  
it worked for me. I wrote what amounted to essays in notebooks for  
about 15 years. I never published any of them and never expected  
to. I wrote them as a way of figuring things out. But when the web  
came along I'd had a lot of practice.Incidentally,   
Steve   
Wozniak did the same thing. In high school he  
designed computers on paper for fun. He couldn't build them because  
he couldn't afford the components. But when Intel launched 4K DRAMs  
in 1975, he was ready.\_\_\_\_\_  
How many essays are there left to write though? The answer to that  
question is probably the most exciting thing I've learned about  
essay writing. Nearly all of them are left to write.Although the essay   
is an old form, it hasn't been assiduously  
cultivated. In the print era, publication was expensive, and there  
wasn't enough demand for essays to publish that many. You could  
publish essays if you were already well known for writing something  
else, like novels. Or you could write book reviews that you took  
over to express your own ideas. But there was not really a direct  
path to becoming an essayist. Which meant few essays got written,  
and those that did tended to be about a narrow range of subjects.Now, thanks to the internet, there's a path. Anyone can publish  
essays online. You start in obscurity, perhaps, but at least you  
can start. You don't need anyone's permission.It sometimes happens that an area of knowledge sits quietly for  
years, till some change makes it explode. Cryptography did this to  
number theory. The internet is doing it to the essay.The exciting thing is not that there's a lot left to write, but  
that there's a lot left to discover. There's a certain kind of idea  
that's best discovered by writing essays. If most essays are still  
unwritten, most such ideas are still undiscovered.Notes[1] Put railings on the balconies, but don't put bars on the windows.[2] Even now I sometimes write essays that are not meant for  
publication. I wrote several to figure out what Y Combinator should  
do, and they were really helpful.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Daniel Gackle, Jessica Livingston, and  
Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.Spanish TranslationJapanese Translation

# Being a Noob

January 2020When I was young, I thought old people had everything figured out.  
Now that I'm old, I know this isn't true.I constantly feel like a noob. It seems like I'm always talking to  
some startup working in a new field I know nothing about, or reading  
a book about a topic I don't understand well enough, or visiting some new  
country where I don't know how things work.It's not pleasant to feel like a noob. And the word "noob" is  
certainly not a compliment. And yet today I realized something  
encouraging about being a noob: the more of a noob you are locally,  
the less of a noob you are globally.For example, if you stay in your home country, you'll feel less  
of a noob than if you move to Farawavia, where everything works  
differently. And yet you'll know more if you move.  
So the feeling of being a noob is inversely correlated with actual  
ignorance.But if the feeling of being a noob is good for us, why do we dislike  
it? What evolutionary purpose could such an aversion serve?I think the answer is that there are two sources of feeling like a  
noob: being stupid, and doing something novel. Our dislike of feeling  
like a noob is our brain telling us "Come on, come on, figure this  
out." Which was the right thing to be thinking for most of human  
history. The life of hunter-gatherers was complex, but it didn't  
change as much as life does now. They didn't suddenly have to figure  
out what to do about cryptocurrency. So it made sense to be biased  
toward competence at existing problems over the discovery of new  
ones. It made sense for humans to dislike the feeling of being a  
noob, just as, in a world where food was scarce, it made sense for  
them to dislike the feeling of being hungry.Now that too much food is more of a problem than too little, our  
dislike of feeling hungry leads us astray. And I think our dislike  
of feeling like a noob does too.Though it feels unpleasant, and people will sometimes ridicule you  
for it, the more you feel like a noob, the better.Japanese TranslationArabic TranslationFrench TranslationKorean TranslationPolish TranslationChinese TranslationSerbian TranslationFrench Translation

# Haters

January 2020(I originally intended this for startup founders, who are often  
surprised by the attention they get as their companies grow, but  
it applies equally to anyone who becomes famous.)If you become sufficiently famous, you'll acquire some fans who  
like you too much. These people are sometimes called "fanboys," and  
though I dislike that term, I'm going to have to use it here. We  
need some word for them, because this is a distinct phenomenon from  
someone simply liking your work.A fanboy is obsessive and uncritical. Liking you becomes part of  
their identity, and they create an image of you in their own head  
that is much better than reality. Everything you do is good, because  
you do it. If you do something bad, they find a way to see it as  
good. And their love for you is not, usually, a quiet, private one.  
They want everyone to know how great you are.Well, you may be thinking, I could do without this kind of obsessive  
fan, but I know there are all kinds of people in the world, and if  
this is the worst consequence of fame, that's not so bad.Unfortunately this is not the worst consequence of fame. As well  
as fanboys, you'll have haters.A hater is obsessive and uncritical. Disliking you becomes part of  
their identity, and they create an image of you in their own head  
that is much worse than reality. Everything you do is bad, because  
you do it. If you do something good, they find a way to see it as  
bad. And their dislike for you is not, usually, a quiet, private  
one. They want everyone to know how awful you are.If you're thinking of checking, I'll save you the trouble. The  
second and fifth paragraphs are identical except for "good" being  
switched to "bad" and so on.I spent years puzzling about haters. What are they, and where do  
they come from? Then one day it dawned on me. Haters are just fanboys  
with the sign switched.Note that by haters, I don't simply mean trolls. I'm not talking about   
people who say bad things about you and then move on. I'm talking  
about the much smaller group of people for whom this becomes a   
kind of obsession and who do it repeatedly over a long period.Like fans, haters seem to be an automatic consequence of fame.  
Anyone sufficiently famous will have them. And like fans, haters  
are energized by the fame of whoever they hate. They hear a song  
by some pop singer. They don't like it much. If the singer were an  
obscure one, they'd just forget about it. But instead they keep  
hearing her name, and this seems to drive some people crazy.  
Everyone's always going on about this singer, but she's no good!  
She's a fraud!That word "fraud" is an important one. It's the spectral signature  
of a hater to regard the object of their hatred as a   
fraud. They  
can't deny their fame. Indeed, their fame is if anything exaggerated  
in the hater's mind. They notice every mention of the singer's name,  
because every mention makes them angrier. In their own minds they  
exaggerate both the singer's fame and her lack of talent, and the  
only way to reconcile those two ideas is to conclude that she has  
tricked everyone.What sort of people become haters? Can anyone become one? I'm not  
sure about this, but I've noticed some patterns. Haters are generally  
losers in a very specific sense: although they are occasionally  
talented, they have never achieved much. And indeed, anyone  
successful enough to have achieved significant fame would be unlikely  
to regard another famous person as a fraud on that account, because  
anyone famous knows how random fame is.But haters are not always complete losers. They are not always the  
proverbial guy living in his mom's basement. Many are, but some  
have some amount of talent. In fact I suspect that a sense of  
frustrated talent is what drives some people to become haters.  
They're not just saying "It's unfair that so-and-so is famous," but  
"It's unfair that so-and-so is famous, and not me."Could a hater be cured if they achieved something impressive? My  
guess is that's a moot point, because they   
never will. I've been  
able to observe for long enough that I'm fairly confident the pattern  
works both ways: not only do people who do great work never become  
haters, haters never do great work. Although I dislike the word  
"fanboy," it's evocative of something important about both haters  
and fanboys. It implies that the fanboy is so slavishly predictable in his admiration  
that he's diminished as a result, that he's less than a man.Haters seem even more diminished. I can imagine being a fanboy.  
I can think of people whose work I admire so much that I could abase  
myself before them out of sheer gratitude. If P. G. Wodehouse were  
still alive, I could see myself being a Wodehouse fanboy. But I  
could not imagine being a hater.Knowing that haters are just fanboys with the sign bit flipped makes  
it much easier to deal with them. We don't need a separate theory  
of haters. We can just use existing techniques for dealing with  
obsessive fans.The most important of which is simply not to think much about them.  
If you're like most people who become famous enough to acquire  
haters, your initial reaction will be one of mystification. Why  
does this guy seem to have it in for me? Where does his obsessive  
energy come from, and what makes him so appallingly nasty? What did  
I do to set him off? Is it something I can fix?The mistake here is to think of the hater as someone you have a  
dispute with. When you have a dispute with someone, it's usually a  
good idea to try to understand why they're upset and then fix things  
if you can. Disputes are distracting. But it's a false analogy to  
think of a hater as someone you have a dispute with. It's an  
understandable mistake, if you've never encountered haters before.  
But when you realize that you're dealing with a hater, and what a  
hater is, it's clear that it's a waste of time even to think about  
them. If you have obsessive fans, do you spend any time wondering  
what makes them love you so much? No, you just think "some  
people are kind of crazy," and that's the end of it.Since haters are equivalent to fanboys, that's the way to deal with  
them too. There may have been something that set them off. But it's  
not something that would have set off a normal person, so there's  
no reason to spend any time thinking about it. It's not you, it's  
them.Notes[1] There are of course some people who are genuine frauds. How can  
you distinguish between x calling y a fraud because x is a hater,  
and because y is a fraud? Look at neutral opinion. Actual frauds  
are usually pretty conspicuous. Thoughtful people are rarely taken  
in by them. So if there are some thoughtful people who like y, you  
can usually assume y is not a fraud.[2] I would make an exception for teenagers, who sometimes act in  
such extreme ways that they are literally not themselves. I can  
imagine a teenage kid being a hater and then growing out of it. But  
not anyone over 25.[3] I have a much worse memory for misdeeds than my wife Jessica,  
who is a connoisseur of character, but I don't wish it were better.  
Most disputes are a waste of time even if you're in the right, and  
it's easy to bury the hatchet with someone if you can't remember  
why you were mad at them.[4] A competent hater will not merely attack you individually but  
will try to get mobs after you. In some cases you may want to refute  
whatever bogus claim they made in order to do so. But err on the  
side of not, because ultimately it probably won't matter.Thanks to Austen Allred, Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison,  
Christine Ford, Daniel Gackle, Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris,   
Elon Musk, Harj Taggar, and Peter Thiel for reading drafts of this.Japanese TranslationArabic TranslationPolish Translation

# The Two Kinds of Moderate

December 2019There are two distinct ways to be politically moderate: on purpose  
and by accident. Intentional moderates are trimmers, deliberately  
choosing a position mid-way between the extremes of right and left.  
Accidental moderates end up in the middle, on average, because they  
make up their own minds about each question, and the far right and  
far left are roughly equally wrong.You can distinguish intentional from accidental moderates by the  
distribution of their opinions. If the far left opinion on some  
matter is 0 and the far right opinion 100, an intentional moderate's  
opinion on every question will be near 50. Whereas an accidental  
moderate's opinions will be scattered over a broad range, but will,  
like those of the intentional moderate, average to about 50.Intentional moderates are similar to those on the far left and the  
far right in that their opinions are, in a sense, not their own.  
The defining quality of an ideologue, whether on the left or the  
right, is to acquire one's opinions in bulk. You don't get to pick  
and choose. Your opinions about taxation can be predicted from your  
opinions about sex. And although intentional moderates  
might seem to be the opposite of ideologues, their beliefs (though  
in their case the word "positions" might be more accurate) are also  
acquired in bulk. If the median opinion shifts to the right or left,  
the intentional moderate must shift with it. Otherwise they stop  
being moderate.Accidental moderates, on the other hand, not only choose their own  
answers, but choose their own questions. They may not care at all  
about questions that the left and right both think are terribly  
important. So you can only even measure the politics of an accidental  
moderate from the intersection of the questions they care about and  
those the left and right care about, and this can  
sometimes be vanishingly small.It is not merely a manipulative rhetorical trick to say "if you're  
not with us, you're against us," but often simply false.Moderates are sometimes derided as cowards, particularly by   
the extreme left. But while it may be accurate to call intentional  
moderates cowards, openly being an accidental moderate requires the  
most courage of all, because you get attacked from both right and  
left, and you don't have the comfort of being an orthodox member  
of a large group to sustain you.Nearly all the most impressive people I know are accidental moderates.  
If I knew a lot of professional athletes, or people in the entertainment  
business, that might be different. Being on the far left or far  
right doesn't affect how fast you run or how well you sing. But  
someone who works with ideas has to be independent-minded to do it  
well.Or more precisely, you have to be independent-minded about the ideas  
you work with. You could be mindlessly doctrinaire in your politics  
and still be a good mathematician. In the 20th century, a lot of  
very smart people were Marxists  just no one who was smart about  
the subjects Marxism involves. But if the ideas you use in your  
work intersect with the politics of your time, you have two choices:  
be an accidental moderate, or be mediocre.Notes[1] It's possible in theory for one side to be entirely right and  
the other to be entirely wrong. Indeed, ideologues must always  
believe this is the case. But historically it rarely has been.[2] For some reason the far right tend to ignore moderates rather  
than despise them as backsliders. I'm not sure why. Perhaps it  
means that the far right is less ideological than the far left. Or  
perhaps that they are more confident, or more resigned, or simply  
more disorganized. I just don't know.[3] Having heretical opinions doesn't mean you have to express  
them openly. It may be  
easier to have them if you don't.  
Thanks to Austen Allred, Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison, Jessica Livingston,  
Amjad Masad, Ryan Petersen, and Harj Taggar for reading drafts of this.Japanese Translation

# Fashionable Problems

December 2019I've seen the same pattern in many different fields: even though  
lots of people have worked hard in the field, only a small fraction  
of the space of possibilities has been explored, because they've  
all worked on similar things.Even the smartest, most imaginative people are surprisingly  
conservative when deciding what to work on. People who would never  
dream of being fashionable in any other way get sucked into working  
on fashionable problems.If you want to try working on unfashionable problems, one of the  
best places to look is in fields that people think have already been  
fully explored: essays, Lisp, venture funding  you may notice a  
pattern here. If you can find a new approach into a big but apparently  
played out field, the value of whatever you discover will be  
multiplied by its enormous surface area.The best protection against getting drawn into working on the same  
things as everyone else may be to genuinely   
love what you're doing.  
Then you'll continue to work on it even if you make the same mistake  
as other people and think that it's too marginal to matter.Japanese TranslationArabic TranslationFrench Translation

# Having Kids

December 2019Before I had kids, I was afraid of having kids. Up to that point I  
felt about kids the way the young Augustine felt about living  
virtuously. I'd have been sad to think I'd never have children.  
But did I want them now? No.If I had kids, I'd become a parent, and parents, as I'd known since  
I was a kid, were uncool. They were dull and responsible and had  
no fun. And while it's not surprising that kids would believe that,  
to be honest I hadn't seen much as an adult to change my mind.  
Whenever I'd noticed parents with kids, the kids seemed to be  
terrors, and the parents pathetic harried creatures, even when they  
prevailed.When people had babies, I congratulated them enthusiastically,  
because that seemed to be what one did. But I didn't feel it at  
all. "Better you than me," I was thinking.Now when people have babies I congratulate them enthusiastically and  
I mean it. Especially the first one. I feel like they just got the best gift in the world.What changed, of course, is that I had kids. Something I dreaded  
turned out to be wonderful.Partly, and I won't deny it, this is because of serious chemical  
changes that happened almost instantly when our first child was  
born. It was like someone flipped a switch. I suddenly felt  
protective not just toward our child, but toward all children. As I was  
driving my wife and new son home from the hospital, I approached a  
crosswalk full of pedestrians, and I found myself thinking "I have  
to be really careful of all these people. Every one of them is  
someone's child!"So to some extent you can't trust me when I say having kids is  
great. To some extent I'm like a religious cultist telling you  
that you'll be happy if you join the cult too  but only because  
joining the cult will alter your mind in a way that will make you  
happy to be a cult member.But not entirely. There were some things  
about having kids that I clearly got wrong before I had them.For example, there was a huge amount of selection bias in my  
observations of parents and children. Some parents may have noticed  
that I wrote "Whenever I'd noticed parents with kids." Of course  
the times I noticed kids were when things were going wrong. I only  
noticed them when they made noise. And where was I when I noticed  
them? Ordinarily I never went to places with kids, so the only  
times I encountered them were in shared bottlenecks like airplanes.  
Which is not exactly a representative sample. Flying with a toddler  
is something very few parents enjoy.What I didn't notice, because they tend to be much quieter, were  
all the great moments parents had with kids. People don't talk about  
these much  the magic is hard to put into words, and all other  
parents know about them anyway  but one of the great things about  
having kids is that there are so many times when you feel there is  
nowhere else you'd rather be, and nothing else you'd rather be  
doing. You don't have to be doing anything special. You could just  
be going somewhere together, or putting them to bed, or pushing  
them on the swings at the park. But you wouldn't trade these moments  
for anything. One doesn't tend to associate kids with peace, but  
that's what you feel. You don't need to look any  
further than where you are right now.Before I had kids, I had moments of this kind of peace, but they  
were rarer. With kids it can happen several times a day.My other source of data about kids was my own childhood, and that  
was similarly misleading. I was pretty bad, and was always in trouble  
for something or other. So it seemed to me that parenthood was  
essentially law enforcement. I didn't realize there were good times  
too.I remember my mother telling me once when I was about 30 that she'd  
really enjoyed having me and my sister. My god, I thought, this  
woman is a saint. She not only endured all the pain we subjected  
her to, but actually enjoyed it? Now I realize she was simply telling  
the truth.She said that one reason she liked having us was that we'd been  
interesting to talk to. That took me by surprise when I had kids.  
You don't just love them. They become your friends too. They're  
really interesting. And while I admit small children are disastrously  
fond of repetition (anything worth doing once is worth doing fifty  
times) it's often genuinely fun to play with them. That surprised  
me too. Playing with a 2 year old was fun when I was 2 and definitely  
not fun when I was 6. Why would it become fun again later? But it  
does.There are of course times that are pure drudgery. Or worse still,  
terror. Having kids is one of those intense types of experience  
that are hard to imagine unless you've had them. But it is not, as I  
implicitly believed before having kids, simply your DNA heading for  
the lifeboats.Some of my worries about having kids were right, though. They  
definitely make you less productive. I know having kids makes some  
people get their act together, but if your act was already together,  
you're going to have less time to do it in. In particular, you're  
going to have to work to a schedule. Kids have schedules. I'm not  
sure if it's because that's how kids are, or because it's the only  
way to integrate their lives with adults', but once you have kids,  
you tend to have to work on their schedule.You will have chunks of time to work. But you can't let work spill  
promiscuously through your whole life, like I used to before I had  
kids. You're going to have to work at the same time every day,  
whether inspiration is flowing or not, and there are going to be  
times when you have to stop, even if it is.I've been able to adapt to working this way. Work, like love, finds  
a way. If there are only certain times it can happen, it happens  
at those times. So while I don't get as much done as before I had  
kids, I get enough done.I hate to say this, because being ambitious has always been a part  
of my identity, but having kids may make one less ambitious. It  
hurts to see that sentence written down. I squirm to avoid it. But  
if there weren't something real there, why would I squirm? The  
fact is, once you have kids, you're probably going to care more  
about them than you do about yourself. And attention is a zero-sum  
game. Only one idea at a time can be the   
top idea in your mind.  
Once you have kids, it will often be your kids, and that means it  
will less often be some project you're working on.I have some hacks for sailing close to this wind. For example, when  
I write essays, I think about what I'd want my kids to know. That  
drives me to get things right. And when I was writing   
Bel, I told  
my kids that once I finished it I'd take them to Africa. When you  
say that sort of thing to a little kid, they treat it as a promise.  
Which meant I had to finish or I'd be taking away their trip to  
Africa. Maybe if I'm really lucky such tricks could put me net  
ahead. But the wind is there, no question.On the other hand, what kind of wimpy ambition do you have if it  
won't survive having kids? Do you have so little to spare?And while having kids may be warping my present judgement, it hasn't  
overwritten my memory. I remember perfectly well what life was like  
before. Well enough to miss some things a lot, like the  
ability to take off for some other country at a moment's notice.  
That was so great. Why did I never do that?See what I did there? The fact is, most of the freedom I had before  
kids, I never used. I paid for it in loneliness, but I never used  
it.I had plenty of happy times before I had kids. But if I count up  
happy moments, not just potential happiness but actual happy moments,  
there are more after kids than before. Now I practically have it  
on tap, almost any bedtime.People's experiences as parents  
vary a lot, and I know I've been lucky. But I think the worries I  
had before having kids must be pretty common, and judging by other  
parents' faces when they see their kids, so must the happiness that  
kids bring.  
Note[1] Adults are sophisticated enough to see 2 year olds for the  
fascinatingly complex characters they are, whereas to most 6 year  
olds, 2 year olds are just defective 6 year olds.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and Robert Morris  
for reading drafts of this.Arabic TranslationSlovak Translation

# The Lesson to Unlearn

December 2019  
The most damaging thing you learned in school wasn't something you  
learned in any specific class. It was learning to get good grades.When I was in college, a particularly earnest philosophy grad student  
once told me that he never cared what grade he got in a class, only  
what he learned in it. This stuck in my mind because it was the  
only time I ever heard anyone say such a thing.For me, as for most students, the measurement of what I was learning  
completely dominated actual learning in college. I was fairly  
earnest; I was genuinely interested in most of the classes I took,  
and I worked hard. And yet I worked by far the hardest when I was  
studying for a test.In theory, tests are merely what their name implies: tests of what  
you've learned in the class. In theory you shouldn't have to prepare  
for a test in a class any more than you have to prepare for a blood  
test. In theory you learn from taking the class, from going to the  
lectures and doing the reading and/or assignments, and the test  
that comes afterward merely measures how well you learned.In practice, as almost everyone reading this will know, things are  
so different that hearing this explanation of how classes and tests  
are meant to work is like hearing the etymology of a word whose  
meaning has changed completely. In practice, the phrase "studying  
for a test" was almost redundant, because that was when one really  
studied. The difference between diligent and slack students was  
that the former studied hard for tests and the latter didn't. No  
one was pulling all-nighters two weeks into the semester.Even though I was a diligent student, almost all the work I did in  
school was aimed at getting a good grade on something.To many people, it would seem strange that the preceding sentence  
has a "though" in it. Aren't I merely stating a tautology? Isn't  
that what a diligent student is, a straight-A student? That's how  
deeply the conflation of learning with grades has infused our  
culture.Is it so bad if learning is conflated with grades? Yes, it is bad.  
And it wasn't till decades after college, when I was running Y Combinator, that I realized how bad it is.I knew of course when I was a student that studying for a test is  
far from identical with actual learning. At the very least, you  
don't retain knowledge you cram into your head the night before an  
exam. But the problem is worse than that. The real problem is that  
most tests don't come close to measuring what they're supposed to.If tests truly were tests of learning, things wouldn't be so bad.  
Getting good grades and learning would converge, just a little late.  
The problem is that nearly all tests given to students are terribly  
hackable. Most people who've gotten good grades know this, and know  
it so well they've ceased even to question it. You'll see when you  
realize how naive it sounds to act otherwise.Suppose you're taking a class on medieval history and the final  
exam is coming up. The final exam is supposed to be a test of your  
knowledge of medieval history, right? So if you have a couple days  
between now and the exam, surely the best way to spend the time,  
if you want to do well on the exam, is to read the best books you  
can find about medieval history. Then you'll know a lot about it,  
and do well on the exam.No, no, no, experienced students are saying to themselves. If you  
merely read good books on medieval history, most of the stuff you  
learned wouldn't be on the test. It's not good books you want to  
read, but the lecture notes and assigned reading in this class.  
And even most of that you can ignore, because you only have to worry  
about the sort of thing that could turn up as a test question.  
You're looking for sharply-defined chunks of information. If one  
of the assigned readings has an interesting digression on some  
subtle point, you can safely ignore that, because it's not the sort  
of thing that could be turned into a test question. But if the  
professor tells you that there were three underlying causes of the  
Schism of 1378, or three main consequences of the Black Death, you'd  
better know them. And whether they were in fact the causes or  
consequences is beside the point. For the purposes of this class  
they are.At a university there are often copies of old exams floating around,  
and these narrow still further what you have to learn. As well as  
learning what kind of questions this professor asks, you'll often  
get actual exam questions. Many professors re-use them. After  
teaching a class for 10 years, it would be hard not to, at least  
inadvertently.In some classes, your professor will have had some sort of political  
axe to grind, and if so you'll have to grind it too. The need for  
this varies. In classes in math or the hard sciences or engineering  
it's rarely necessary, but at the other end of the spectrum there  
are classes where you couldn't get a good grade without it.Getting a good grade in a class on x is so different from learning  
a lot about x that you have to choose one or the other, and you  
can't blame students if they choose grades. Everyone judges them  
by their grades  graduate programs, employers, scholarships, even  
their own parents.I liked learning, and I really enjoyed some of the papers and  
programs I wrote in college. But did I ever, after turning in a  
paper in some class, sit down and write another just for fun? Of  
course not. I had things due in other classes. If it ever came to  
a choice of learning or grades, I chose grades. I hadn't come to  
college to do badly.Anyone who cares about getting good grades has to play this game,  
or they'll be surpassed by those who do. And at elite universities,  
that means nearly everyone, since someone who didn't care about  
getting good grades probably wouldn't be there in the first place.  
The result is that students compete to maximize the difference  
between learning and getting good grades.Why are tests so bad? More precisely, why are they so hackable?  
Any experienced programmer could answer that. How hackable is  
software whose author hasn't paid any attention to preventing it  
from being hacked? Usually it's as porous as a colander.Hackable is the default for any test imposed by an authority. The  
reason the tests you're given are so consistently bad  so consistently  
far from measuring what they're supposed to measure  is simply  
that the people creating them haven't made much effort to prevent  
them from being hacked.But you can't blame teachers if their tests are hackable. Their job  
is to teach, not to create unhackable tests. The real problem is  
grades, or more precisely, that grades have been overloaded. If  
grades were merely a way for teachers to tell students what they  
were doing right and wrong, like a coach giving advice to an athlete,  
students wouldn't be tempted to hack tests. But unfortunately after  
a certain age grades become more than advice. After a certain age,  
whenever you're being taught, you're usually also being judged.I've used college tests as an example, but those are actually the  
least hackable. All the tests most students take their whole lives  
are at least as bad, including, most spectacularly of all, the test  
that gets them into college. If getting into college were merely a  
matter of having the quality of one's mind measured by admissions  
officers the way scientists measure the mass of an object, we could  
tell teenage kids "learn a lot" and leave it at that. You can tell  
how bad college admissions are, as a test, from how unlike high  
school that sounds. In practice, the freakishly specific nature of  
the stuff ambitious kids have to do in high school is directly  
proportionate to the hackability of college admissions. The classes  
you don't care about that are mostly memorization, the random  
"extracurricular activities" you have to participate in to show  
you're "well-rounded," the standardized tests as artificial as  
chess, the "essay" you have to write that's presumably meant to hit  
some very specific target, but you're not told what.As well as being bad in what it does to kids, this test is also bad  
in the sense of being very hackable. So hackable that whole industries  
have grown up to hack it. This is the explicit purpose of test-prep  
companies and admissions counsellors, but it's also a significant  
part of the function of private schools.Why is this particular test so hackable? I think because of what  
it's measuring. Although the popular story is that the way to get  
into a good college is to be really smart, admissions officers at  
elite colleges neither are, nor claim to be, looking only for that.  
What are they looking for? They're looking for people who are not  
simply smart, but admirable in some more general sense. And how  
is this more general admirableness measured? The admissions officers  
feel it. In other words, they accept who they like.So what college admissions is a test of is whether you suit the  
taste of some group of people. Well, of course a test like that is  
going to be hackable. And because it's both very hackable and there's  
(thought to be) a lot at stake, it's hacked like nothing else.  
That's why it distorts your life so much for so long.It's no wonder high school students often feel alienated. The shape  
of their lives is completely artificial.But wasting your time is not the worst thing the educational system  
does to you. The worst thing it does is to train you that the way  
to win is by hacking bad tests. This is a much subtler problem  
that I didn't recognize until I saw it happening to other people.When I started advising startup founders at Y Combinator, especially  
young ones, I was puzzled by the way they always seemed to make  
things overcomplicated. How, they would ask, do you raise money?  
What's the trick for making venture capitalists want to invest in  
you? The best way to make VCs want to invest in you, I would explain,  
is to actually be a good investment. Even if you could trick VCs  
into investing in a bad startup, you'd be tricking yourselves too.  
You're investing time in the same company you're asking them to  
invest money in. If it's not a good investment, why are you even  
doing it?Oh, they'd say, and then after a pause to digest this revelation,  
they'd ask: What makes a startup a good investment?So I would explain that what makes a startup promising, not just  
in the eyes of investors but in fact, is   
growth.   
Ideally in revenue,  
but failing that in usage. What they needed to do was get lots of  
users.How does one get lots of users? They had all kinds of ideas about  
that. They needed to do a big launch that would get them "exposure."  
They needed influential people to talk about them. They even knew  
they needed to launch on a tuesday, because that's when one gets  
the most attention.No, I would explain, that is not how to get lots of users. The way  
you get lots of users is to make the product really great. Then  
people will not only use it but recommend it to their friends, so  
your growth will be exponential once you   
get it started.At this point I've told the founders something you'd think would  
be completely obvious: that they should make a good company by  
making a good product. And yet their reaction would be something  
like the reaction many physicists must have had when they first  
heard about the theory of relativity: a mixture of astonishment at  
its apparent genius, combined with a suspicion that anything so  
weird couldn't possibly be right. Ok, they would say, dutifully.  
And could you introduce us to such-and-such influential person? And  
remember, we want to launch on Tuesday.It would sometimes take founders years to grasp these simple lessons.  
And not because they were lazy or stupid. They just seemed blind  
to what was right in front of them.Why, I would ask myself, do they always make things so complicated?  
And then one day I realized this was not a rhetorical question.Why did founders tie themselves in knots doing the wrong things  
when the answer was right in front of them? Because that was what  
they'd been trained to do. Their education had taught them that the  
way to win was to hack the test. And without even telling them they  
were being trained to do this. The younger ones, the recent graduates,  
had never faced a non-artificial test. They thought this was just  
how the world worked: that the first thing you did, when facing any  
kind of challenge, was to figure out what the trick was for hacking  
the test. That's why the conversation would always start with how  
to raise money, because that read as the test. It came at the end  
of YC. It had numbers attached to it, and higher numbers seemed to  
be better. It must be the test.There are certainly big chunks of the world where the way to win  
is to hack the test. This phenomenon isn't limited to schools. And  
some people, either due to ideology or ignorance, claim that this  
is true of startups too. But it isn't. In fact, one of the most  
striking things about startups is the degree to which you win by  
simply doing good work. There are edge cases, as there are in  
anything, but in general you win by getting users, and what users  
care about is whether the product does what they want.Why did it take me so long to understand why founders made startups  
overcomplicated? Because I hadn't realized explicitly that schools  
train us to win by hacking bad tests. And not just them, but me!  
I'd been trained to hack bad tests too, and hadn't realized it till  
decades later.I had lived as if I realized it, but without knowing why. For  
example, I had avoided working for big companies. But if you'd asked  
why, I'd have said it was because they were bogus, or bureaucratic.  
Or just yuck. I never understood how much of my dislike of big  
companies was due to the fact that you win by hacking bad tests.Similarly, the fact that the tests were unhackable was a lot of  
what attracted me to startups. But again, I hadn't realized that  
explicitly.I had in effect achieved by successive approximations something  
that may have a closed-form solution. I had gradually undone my  
training in hacking bad tests without knowing I was doing it. Could  
someone coming out of school banish this demon just by knowing its  
name, and saying begone? It seems worth trying.Merely talking explicitly about this phenomenon is likely to make  
things better, because much of its power comes from the fact that  
we take it for granted. After you've noticed it, it seems the  
elephant in the room, but it's a pretty well camouflaged elephant.  
The phenomenon is so old, and so pervasive. And it's simply the  
result of neglect. No one meant things to be this way. This is just  
what happens when you combine learning with grades, competition,  
and the naive assumption of unhackability.It was mind-blowing to realize that two of the things I'd puzzled  
about the most  the bogusness of high school, and the difficulty  
of getting founders to see the obvious  both had the same cause.  
It's rare for such a big block to slide into place so late.Usually when that happens it has implications in a lot of different  
areas, and this case seems no exception. For example, it suggests  
both that education could be done better, and how you might fix it.  
But it also suggests a potential answer to the question all big  
companies seem to have: how can we be more like a startup? I'm not  
going to chase down all the implications now. What I want to focus  
on here is what it means for individuals.To start with, it means that most ambitious kids graduating from  
college have something they may want to unlearn. But it also changes  
how you look at the world. Instead of looking at all the different  
kinds of work people do and thinking of them vaguely as more or  
less appealing, you can now ask a very specific question that will  
sort them in an interesting way: to what extent do you win at this  
kind of work by hacking bad tests?It would help if there was a way to recognize bad tests quickly.  
Is there a pattern here? It turns out there is.Tests can be divided into two kinds: those that are imposed by  
authorities, and those that aren't. Tests that aren't imposed by  
authorities are inherently unhackable, in the sense that no one is  
claiming they're tests of anything more than they actually test. A  
football match, for example, is simply a test of who wins, not which  
team is better. You can tell that from the fact that commentators  
sometimes say afterward that the better team won. Whereas tests  
imposed by authorities are usually proxies for something else. A  
test in a class is supposed to measure not just how well you did  
on that particular test, but how much you learned in the class.  
While tests that aren't imposed by authorities are inherently  
unhackable, those imposed by authorities have to be made unhackable.  
Usually they aren't. So as a first approximation, bad tests are  
roughly equivalent to tests imposed by authorities.You might actually like to win by hacking bad tests. Presumably  
some people do. But I bet most people who find themselves doing  
this kind of work don't like it. They just take it for granted that  
this is how the world works, unless you want to drop out and be  
some kind of hippie artisan.I suspect many people implicitly assume that working in a  
field with bad tests is the price of making lots of money. But that,  
I can tell you, is false. It used to be true. In the mid-twentieth  
century, when the economy was   
composed of oligopolies,   
the only way  
to the top was by playing their game. But it's not true now. There  
are now ways to get rich by doing good work, and that's part of the  
reason people are so much more excited about getting rich than they  
used to be. When I was a kid, you could either become an engineer  
and make cool things, or make lots of money by becoming an "executive."  
Now you can make lots of money by making cool things.Hacking bad tests is becoming less important as the link between  
work and authority erodes. The erosion of that link is one of the  
most important trends happening now, and we see its effects in  
almost every kind of work people do. Startups are one of the most  
visible examples, but we see much the same thing in writing. Writers  
no longer have to submit to publishers and editors to reach readers;  
now they can go direct.The more I think about this question, the more optimistic I get.  
This seems one of those situations where we don't realize how much  
something was holding us back until it's eliminated. And I can  
foresee the whole bogus edifice crumbling. Imagine what happens as  
more and more people start to ask themselves if they want to win  
by hacking bad tests, and decide that they don't. The kinds of  
work where you win by hacking bad tests will be starved of talent,  
and the kinds where you win by doing good work will see an influx  
of the most ambitious people. And as hacking bad tests shrinks in  
importance, education will evolve to stop training us to do it.  
Imagine what the world could look like if that happened.This is not just a lesson for individuals to unlearn, but one for  
society to unlearn, and we'll be amazed at the energy that's liberated  
when we do.  
Notes[1] If using tests only to measure learning sounds impossibly  
utopian, that is already the way things work at Lambda School.  
Lambda School doesn't have grades. You either graduate or you don't.  
The only purpose of tests is to decide at each stage of the curriculum  
whether you can continue to the next. So in effect the whole school  
is pass/fail.[2] If the final exam consisted of a long conversation with the  
professor, you could prepare for it by reading good books on medieval  
history. A lot of the hackability of tests in schools is due to the  
fact that the same test has to be given to large numbers of students.[3] Learning is the naive algorithm for getting good grades.[4] Hacking has   
multiple senses. There's a narrow sense in which  
it means to compromise something. That's the sense in which one  
hacks a bad test. But there's another, more general sense, meaning  
to find a surprising solution to a problem, often by thinking  
differently about it. Hacking in this sense is a wonderful thing.  
And indeed, some of the hacks people use on bad tests are impressively  
ingenious; the problem is not so much the hacking as that, because  
the tests are hackable, they don't test what they're meant to.[5] The people who pick startups at Y Combinator are similar to  
admissions officers, except that instead of being arbitrary, their  
acceptance criteria are trained by a very tight feedback loop. If  
you accept a bad startup or reject a good one, you will usually know it  
within a year or two at the latest, and often within a month.[6] I'm sure admissions officers are tired of reading applications  
from kids who seem to have no personality beyond being willing to  
seem however they're supposed to seem to get accepted. What they  
don't realize is that they are, in a sense, looking in a mirror.  
The lack of authenticity in the applicants is a reflection of the  
arbitrariness of the application process. A dictator might just as  
well complain about the lack of authenticity in the people around  
him.[7] By good work, I don't mean morally good, but good in the sense  
in which a good craftsman does good work.[8] There are borderline cases where it's hard to say which category  
a test falls in. For example, is raising venture capital like college  
admissions, or is it like selling to a customer?[9] Note that a good test is merely one that's unhackable. Good  
here doesn't mean morally good, but good in the sense of working  
well. The difference between fields with bad tests and good ones  
is not that the former are bad and the latter are good, but that  
the former are bogus and the latter aren't. But those two measures  
are not unrelated. As Tara Ploughman said, the path from good to  
evil goes through bogus.[10] People who think the recent increase in   
economic inequality is  
due to changes in tax policy seem very naive to anyone with experience  
in startups. Different people are getting rich now than used to,  
and they're getting much richer than mere tax savings could make  
them.[11] Note to tiger parents: you may think you're training your kids  
to win, but if you're training them to win by hacking bad tests,  
you are, as parents so often do, training them to fight the last  
war.Thanks to Austen Allred, Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison,  
Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris, and Harj Taggar for reading  
drafts of this.Russian TranslationArabic TranslationSwedish Translation

# Novelty and Heresy

November 2019If you discover something new, there's a significant chance you'll be  
accused of some form of heresy.To discover new things, you have  
to work on ideas that are good but non-obvious; if an idea is  
obviously good, other people are probably already working on it.  
One common way for a good idea to be non-obvious is for it to be hidden in the  
shadow of some mistaken assumption that people are very attached to.  
But anything you discover from working on such an idea will tend to  
contradict the mistaken assumption that was concealing it. And you  
will thus get a lot of heat from people attached to the mistaken  
assumption. Galileo and Darwin are famous examples of this phenomenon,  
but it's probably always an ingredient in the resistance to new  
ideas.So it's particularly dangerous for an organization or society to  
have a culture of pouncing on heresy. When you suppress heresies,  
you don't just prevent people from contradicting the mistaken  
assumption you're trying to protect. You also suppress any idea  
that implies indirectly that it's false.  
Every cherished mistaken assumption has  
a dead zone of unexplored ideas around it. And the more preposterous  
the assumption, the bigger the dead zone it creates.There is a positive side to this phenomenon though. If you're  
looking for new ideas, one way to find them is by looking for  
heresies. When you look at the question this way, the depressingly  
large dead zones around mistaken assumptions become excitingly large  
mines of new ideas.Japanese TranslationRussian TranslationSimplified Chinese Translation

# The Bus Ticket Theory of Genius

November 2019Everyone knows that to do great work you need both natural ability  
and determination. But there's a third ingredient that's not as  
well understood: an obsessive interest in a particular topic.To explain this point I need to burn my reputation with some group  
of people, and I'm going to choose bus ticket collectors. There  
are people who collect old bus tickets. Like many collectors, they  
have an obsessive interest in the minutiae of what they collect.  
They can keep track of distinctions between different types of bus  
tickets that would be hard for the rest of us to remember. Because  
we don't care enough. What's the point of spending so much time  
thinking about old bus tickets?Which leads us to the second feature of this kind of obsession:  
there is no point. A bus ticket collector's love is disinterested.  
They're not doing it to impress us or to make themselves rich, but  
for its own sake.When you look at the lives of people who've done great work, you  
see a consistent pattern. They often begin with a bus ticket  
collector's obsessive interest in something that would have seemed  
pointless to most of their contemporaries. One of the most striking  
features of Darwin's book about his voyage on the Beagle is the  
sheer depth of his interest in natural history. His curiosity seems  
infinite. Ditto for Ramanujan, sitting by the hour working out on  
his slate what happens to series.It's a mistake to think they were "laying the groundwork" for the  
discoveries they made later. There's too much intention in that  
metaphor. Like bus ticket collectors, they were doing it  
because they liked it.But there is a difference between Ramanujan and a bus ticket  
collector. Series matter, and bus tickets don't.If I had to put the recipe for genius into one sentence, that might  
be it: to have a disinterested obsession with something that matters.Aren't I forgetting about the other two ingredients? Less than you  
might think. An obsessive interest in a topic is both a proxy for  
ability and a substitute for determination. Unless you have  
sufficient mathematical aptitude, you won't find series interesting.  
And when you're obsessively interested in something, you don't need  
as much determination: you don't need to push yourself as hard when  
curiosity is pulling you.An obsessive interest will even bring you luck, to the extent  
anything can. Chance, as Pasteur said, favors the prepared mind,  
and if there's one thing an obsessed mind is, it's prepared.The disinterestedness of this kind of obsession is its most important  
feature. Not just because it's a filter for earnestness, but because  
it helps you discover new ideas.The paths that lead to new ideas tend to look unpromising. If they  
looked promising, other people would already have explored them.  
How do the people who do great work discover these paths that others  
overlook? The popular story is that they simply have better vision:  
because they're so talented, they see paths that others miss. But  
if you look at the way great discoveries are made, that's not what  
happens. Darwin didn't pay closer attention to individual species  
than other people because he saw that this would lead to great  
discoveries, and they didn't. He was just really, really interested  
in such things.Darwin couldn't turn it off. Neither could Ramanujan. They didn't  
discover the hidden paths that they did because they seemed promising,  
but because they couldn't help it. That's what allowed them to  
follow paths that someone who was merely ambitious would have  
ignored.What rational person would decide that the way to write great novels  
was to begin by spending several years creating an imaginary elvish  
language, like Tolkien, or visiting every household in southwestern  
Britain, like Trollope? No one, including Tolkien and Trollope.The bus ticket theory is similar to Carlyle's famous definition of  
genius as an infinite capacity for taking pains. But there are two  
differences. The bus ticket theory makes it clear that the source  
of this infinite capacity for taking pains is not infinite diligence,  
as Carlyle seems to have meant, but the sort of infinite interest  
that collectors have. It also adds an important qualification: an  
infinite capacity for taking pains about something that matters.So what matters? You can never be sure. It's precisely because no  
one can tell in advance which paths are promising that you can  
discover new ideas by working on what you're interested in.But there are some heuristics you can use to guess whether an  
obsession might be one that matters. For example, it's more promising  
if you're creating something, rather than just consuming something  
someone else creates. It's more promising if something you're  
interested in is difficult, especially if it's more difficult for  
other people than it is for you. And the obsessions of talented  
people are more likely to be promising. When talented people become  
interested in random things, they're not truly random.But you can never be sure. In fact, here's an interesting idea  
that's also rather alarming if it's true: it may be that to do great  
work, you also have to waste a lot of time.In many different areas, reward is proportionate to risk. If that  
rule holds here, then the way to find paths that lead to truly great  
work is to be willing to expend a lot of effort on things that turn  
out to be every bit as unpromising as they seem.I'm not sure if this is true. On one hand, it seems surprisingly  
difficult to waste your time so long as you're working hard on  
something interesting. So much of what you do ends up being useful.  
But on the other hand, the rule about the relationship between risk  
and reward is so powerful that it seems to hold wherever risk occurs.  
Newton's case, at least, suggests that the risk/reward rule holds  
here. He's famous for one particular obsession of his that turned  
out to be unprecedentedly fruitful: using math to describe the  
world. But he had two other obsessions, alchemy and theology, that  
seem to have been complete wastes of time. He ended up net ahead.  
His bet on what we now call physics paid off so well that it more  
than compensated for the other two. But were the other two necessary,  
in the sense that he had to take big risks to make such big  
discoveries? I don't know.Here's an even more alarming idea: might one make all bad bets? It  
probably happens quite often. But we don't know how often, because  
these people don't become famous.It's not merely that the returns from following a path are hard to  
predict. They change dramatically over time. 1830 was a really good  
time to be obsessively interested in natural history. If Darwin had  
been born in 1709 instead of 1809, we might never have heard of  
him.What can one do in the face of such uncertainty? One solution is  
to hedge your bets, which in this case means to follow the obviously  
promising paths instead of your own private obsessions. But as with  
any hedge, you're decreasing reward when you decrease risk. If you  
forgo working on what you like in order to follow some more  
conventionally ambitious path, you might miss something wonderful  
that you'd otherwise have discovered. That too must happen all the  
time, perhaps even more often than the genius whose bets all fail.The other solution is to let yourself be interested in lots of  
different things. You don't decrease your upside if you switch  
between equally genuine interests based on which seems to be working  
so far. But there is a danger here too: if you work on too many  
different projects, you might not get deeply enough into any of  
them.One interesting thing about the bus ticket theory is that it may  
help explain why different types of people excel at different kinds  
of work. Interest is much more unevenly distributed than ability.  
If natural ability is all you need to do great work, and natural  
ability is evenly distributed, you have to invent elaborate theories  
to explain the skewed distributions we see among those who actually  
do great work in various fields. But it may be that much of the  
skew has a simpler explanation: different people are interested in  
different things.The bus ticket theory also explains why people are less likely to  
do great work after they have children. Here interest has to compete  
not just with external obstacles, but with another interest, and  
one that for most people is extremely powerful. It's harder to find  
time for work after you have kids, but that's the easy part. The  
real change is that you don't want to.But the most exciting implication of the bus ticket theory is that  
it suggests ways to encourage great work. If the recipe for genius  
is simply natural ability plus hard work, all we can do is hope we  
have a lot of ability, and work as hard as we can. But if interest  
is a critical ingredient in genius, we may be able, by cultivating  
interest, to cultivate genius.For example, for the very ambitious, the bus ticket theory suggests  
that the way to do great work is to relax a little. Instead of  
gritting your teeth and diligently pursuing what all your peers  
agree is the most promising line of research, maybe you should try  
doing something just for fun. And if you're stuck, that may be the  
vector along which to break out.I've always liked Hamming's famous double-barrelled question: what  
are the most important problems in your field, and why aren't you  
working on one of them? It's a great way to shake yourself up. But  
it may be overfitting a bit. It might be at least as useful to ask  
yourself: if you could take a year off to work on something that  
probably wouldn't be important but would be really interesting,  
what would it be?The bus ticket theory also suggests a way to avoid slowing down as  
you get older. Perhaps the reason people have fewer new ideas as  
they get older is not simply that they're losing their edge. It may  
also be because once you become established, you can no longer mess  
about with irresponsible side projects the way you could when you  
were young and no one cared what you did.The solution to that is obvious: remain irresponsible. It will be  
hard, though, because the apparently random projects you take up  
to stave off decline will read to outsiders as evidence of it. And  
you yourself won't know for sure that they're wrong. But it will  
at least be more fun to work on what you want.It may even be that we can cultivate a habit of intellectual bus  
ticket collecting in kids. The usual plan in education is to start  
with a broad, shallow focus, then gradually become more specialized.  
But I've done the opposite with my kids. I know I can count on their  
school to handle the broad, shallow part, so I take them deep.When they get interested in something, however random, I encourage  
them to go preposterously, bus ticket collectorly, deep. I don't  
do this because of the bus ticket theory. I do it because I want  
them to feel the joy of learning, and they're never going to feel  
that about something I'm making them learn. It has to be something  
they're interested in. I'm just following the path of least resistance;  
depth is a byproduct. But if in trying to show them the joy of  
learning I also end up training them to go deep, so much the better.Will it have any effect? I have no idea. But that uncertainty may  
be the most interesting point of all. There is so much more to learn  
about how to do great work. As old as human civilization feels,  
it's really still very young if we haven't nailed something so  
basic. It's exciting to think there are still discoveries to make  
about discovery. If that's the sort of thing you're interested in.  
Notes[1] There are other types of collecting that illustrate this point  
better than bus tickets, but they're also more popular. It seemed  
just as well to use an inferior example rather than offend more  
people by telling them their hobby doesn't matter.[2] I worried a little about using the word "disinterested," since  
some people mistakenly believe it means not interested. But anyone  
who expects to be a genius will have to know the meaning of such a  
basic word, so I figure they may as well start now.[3] Think how often genius must have been nipped in the bud by  
people being told, or telling themselves, to stop messing about and  
be responsible. Ramanujan's mother was a huge enabler. Imagine if  
she hadn't been. Imagine if his parents had made him go out and get  
a job instead of sitting around at home doing math.On the other hand, anyone quoting the preceding paragraph to justify  
not getting a job is probably mistaken.[4] 1709 Darwin is to time what the Milanese Leonardo is to space.[5] "An infinite capacity for taking pains" is a paraphrase of what  
Carlyle wrote. What he wrote, in his History of Frederick the Great,  
was "... it is the fruit of 'genius' (which means transcendent  
capacity of taking trouble, first of all)...." Since the paraphrase  
seems the name of the idea at this point, I kept it.Carlyle's History was published in 1858. In 1785 Hérault de Séchelles  
quoted Buffon as saying "Le génie n'est qu'une plus grande aptitude  
à la patience." (Genius is only a greater aptitude for patience.)[6] Trollope was establishing the system of postal routes. He himself  
sensed the obsessiveness with which he pursued this goal.  
  
 It is amusing to watch how a passion will grow upon a man. During  
 those two years it was the ambition of my life to cover the  
 country with rural letter-carriers.  
  
Even Newton occasionally sensed the degree of his obsessiveness.  
After computing pi to 15 digits, he wrote in a letter to a friend:  
  
 I am ashamed to tell you to how many figures I carried these  
 computations, having no other business at the time.  
  
Incidentally, Ramanujan was also a compulsive calculator. As Kanigel  
writes in his excellent biography:  
  
 One Ramanujan scholar, B. M. Wilson, later told how Ramanujan's  
 research into number theory was often "preceded by a table of  
 numerical results, carried usually to a length from which most  
 of us would shrink."  
  
[7] Working to understand the natural world counts as creating  
rather than consuming.Newton tripped over this distinction when he chose  
to work on theology. His beliefs did not allow him to see it, but  
chasing down paradoxes in nature is fruitful in a way that chasing  
down paradoxes in sacred texts is not.[8] How much of people's propensity to become interested in a topic  
is inborn? My experience so far suggests the answer is: most of  
it. Different kids get interested in different things, and it's  
hard to make a child interested in something they wouldn't otherwise  
be. Not in a way that sticks. The most you can do on behalf of a  
topic is to make sure it gets a fair showing  to make it clear to  
them, for example, that there's more to math than the dull drills  
they do in school. After that it's up to the child.Thanks to Marc Andreessen, Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison, Kevin  
Lacker, Jessica Livingston, Jackie McDonough, Robert Morris, Lisa  
Randall, Zak Stone, and my 7 year old for reading drafts of this.Spanish TranslationRussian TranslationKorean TranslationArmenian Translation

# General and Surprising

September 2017The most valuable insights are both general and surprising.   
F = ma for example. But general and surprising is a hard  
combination to achieve. That territory tends to be picked  
clean, precisely because those insights are so valuable.Ordinarily, the best that people can do is one without the  
other: either surprising without being general (e.g.  
gossip), or general without being surprising (e.g.  
platitudes).Where things get interesting is the moderately valuable  
insights. You get those from small additions of whichever  
quality was missing. The more common case is a small  
addition of generality: a piece of gossip that's more than  
just gossip, because it teaches something interesting about  
the world. But another less common approach is to focus on  
the most general ideas and see if you can find something new  
to say about them. Because these start out so general, you  
only need a small delta of novelty to produce a useful  
insight.A small delta of novelty is all you'll be able to get most  
of the time. Which means if you take this route, your ideas  
will seem a lot like ones that already exist. Sometimes  
you'll find you've merely rediscovered an idea that did  
already exist. But don't be discouraged. Remember the huge  
multiplier that kicks in when you do manage to think of  
something even a little new.Corollary: the more general the ideas you're talking about,  
the less you should worry about repeating yourself. If you  
write enough, it's inevitable you will. Your brain is much  
the same from year to year and so are the stimuli that hit  
it. I feel slightly bad when I find I've said something  
close to what I've said before, as if I were plagiarizing  
myself. But rationally one shouldn't. You won't say  
something exactly the same way the second time, and that  
variation increases the chance you'll get that tiny but  
critical delta of novelty.And of course, ideas beget ideas. (That sounds   
familiar.)  
An idea with a small amount of novelty could lead to one  
with more. But only if you keep going. So it's doubly  
important not to let yourself be discouraged by people who  
say there's not much new about something you've discovered.  
"Not much new" is a real achievement when you're talking  
about the most general ideas. It's not true that there's nothing new under the sun. There  
are some domains where there's almost nothing new. But  
there's a big difference between nothing and almost nothing,  
when it's multiplied by the area under the sun.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Patrick Collison, and Jessica  
Livingston for reading drafts of this.Japanese Translation

# Charisma / Power

January 2017People who are powerful but uncharismatic will tend to be disliked.  
Their power makes them a target for criticism that they don't have  
the charisma to disarm. That was Hillary Clinton's problem. It also  
tends to be a problem for any CEO who is more of a builder than a  
schmoozer. And yet the builder-type CEO is (like Hillary) probably  
the best person for the job.I don't think there is any solution to this problem. It's human  
nature. The best we can do is to recognize that it's happening, and  
to understand that being a magnet for criticism is sometimes a sign  
not that someone is the wrong person for a job, but that they're  
the right one.

# The Risk of Discovery

January 2017Because biographies of famous scientists tend to   
edit out their mistakes, we underestimate the   
degree of risk they were willing to take.  
And because anything a famous scientist did that  
wasn't a mistake has probably now become the  
conventional wisdom, those choices don't  
seem risky either.Biographies of Newton, for example, understandably focus  
more on physics than alchemy or theology.  
The impression we get is that his unerring judgment  
led him straight to truths no one else had noticed.  
How to explain all the time he spent on alchemy  
and theology? Well, smart people are often kind of  
crazy.But maybe there is a simpler explanation. Maybe  
the smartness and the craziness were not as separate  
as we think. Physics seems to us a promising thing  
to work on, and alchemy and theology obvious wastes  
of time. But that's because we know how things  
turned out. In Newton's day the three problems   
seemed roughly equally promising. No one knew yet  
what the payoff would be for inventing what we  
now call physics; if they had, more people would   
have been working on it. And alchemy and theology  
were still then in the category Marc Andreessen would   
describe as "huge, if true."Newton made three bets. One of them worked. But   
they were all risky.Japanese Translation

# How to Make Pittsburgh a Startup Hub

April 2016(This is a talk I gave at an event called Opt412 in Pittsburgh.  
Much of it will apply to other towns. But not all, because  
as I say in the talk, Pittsburgh has some important advantages over  
most would-be startup hubs.)What would it take to make Pittsburgh into a startup hub, like  
Silicon Valley? I understand Pittsburgh pretty well,  
because I grew up here, in Monroeville. And I understand Silicon  
Valley pretty well because that's where I live now. Could you get  
that kind of startup ecosystem going here?When I agreed to speak here, I didn't think I'd be able to give a  
very optimistic talk. I thought I'd be talking about what Pittsburgh  
could do to become a startup hub, very much in the subjunctive.  
Instead I'm going to talk about what Pittsburgh can do.What changed my mind was an article I read in, of all places, the New  
York Times food section. The title was "Pittsburgh's Youth-Driven  
Food Boom." To most people that might not even sound interesting,  
let alone something related to startups. But it was electrifying  
to me to read that title. I don't think I could pick a more promising  
one if I tried. And when I read the article I got even more excited.  
It said "people ages 25 to 29 now make up 7.6 percent of all  
residents, up from 7 percent about a decade ago." Wow, I thought,  
Pittsburgh could be the next Portland. It could become the cool  
place all the people in their twenties want to go live.When I got here a couple days ago, I could feel the difference. I  
lived here from 1968 to 1984. I didn't realize it at the time, but  
during that whole period the city was in free fall. On top of the  
flight to the suburbs that happened everywhere, the steel and nuclear  
businesses were both dying. Boy are things different now. It's not  
just that downtown seems a lot more prosperous. There is an energy  
here that was not here when I was a kid.When I was a kid, this was a place young people left. Now it's a  
place that attracts them.What does that have to do with startups? Startups are made  
of people, and the average age of the people in a typical startup  
is right in that 25 to 29 bracket.I've seen how powerful it is for a city to have those people. Five  
years ago they shifted the center of gravity of Silicon Valley from  
the peninsula to San Francisco. Google and Facebook are on the  
peninsula, but the next generation of big winners are all in SF.  
The reason the center of gravity shifted was the talent war, for  
programmers especially. Most 25 to 29 year olds want to live in  
the city, not down in the boring suburbs. So whether they like it  
or not, founders know they have to be in the city. I know multiple  
founders who would have preferred to live down in the Valley proper,  
but who made themselves move to SF because they knew otherwise  
they'd lose the talent war.So being a magnet for people in their twenties is a very promising  
thing to be. It's hard to imagine a place becoming a startup hub  
without also being that. When I read that statistic about the  
increasing percentage of 25 to 29 year olds, I had exactly the same  
feeling of excitement I get when I see a startup's graphs start to  
creep upward off the x axis.Nationally the percentage of 25 to 29 year olds is 6.8%. That means  
you're .8% ahead. The population is 306,000, so we're talking about  
a surplus of about 2500 people. That's the population of a small  
town, and that's just the surplus. So you have a toehold. Now you  
just have to expand it.And though "youth-driven food boom" may sound frivolous, it is  
anything but. Restaurants and cafes are a big part of the personality  
of a city. Imagine walking down a street in Paris. What are you  
walking past? Little restaurants and cafes. Imagine driving through  
some depressing random exurb. What are you driving past? Starbucks  
and McDonalds and Pizza Hut. As Gertrude Stein said, there is no  
there there. You could be anywhere.These independent restaurants and cafes are not just feeding people.  
They're making there be a there here.So here is my first concrete recommendation for turning Pittsburgh  
into the next Silicon Valley: do everything you can to encourage  
this youth-driven food boom. What could the city do? Treat the  
people starting these little restaurants and cafes as your users,  
and go ask them what they want. I can guess at least one thing  
they might want: a fast permit process. San Francisco has left you  
a huge amount of room to beat them in that department.I know restaurants aren't the prime mover though. The prime mover,  
as the Times article said, is cheap housing. That's a big advantage.  
But that phrase "cheap housing" is a bit misleading. There are  
plenty of places that are cheaper. What's special about Pittsburgh  
is not that it's cheap, but that it's a cheap place you'd actually  
want to live.Part of that is the buildings themselves. I realized a long time  
ago, back when I was a poor twenty-something myself, that the best  
deals were places that had once been rich, and then became poor.  
If a place has always been rich, it's nice but too expensive. If  
a place has always been poor, it's cheap but grim. But if a place  
was once rich and then got poor, you can find palaces for cheap.  
And that's what's bringing people here. When Pittsburgh was rich,  
a hundred years ago, the people who lived here built big solid  
buildings. Not always in the best taste, but definitely solid. So  
here is another piece of advice for becoming a startup hub: don't  
destroy the buildings that are bringing people here. When cities  
are on the way back up, like Pittsburgh is now, developers race to  
tear down the old buildings. Don't let that happen. Focus on  
historic preservation. Big real estate development projects are  
not what's bringing the twenty-somethings here. They're the opposite  
of the new restaurants and cafes; they subtract personality from  
the city.The empirical evidence suggests you cannot be too strict about  
historic preservation. The tougher cities are about it, the better  
they seem to do.But the appeal of Pittsburgh is not just the buildings themselves.  
It's the neighborhoods they're in. Like San Francisco and New York,  
Pittsburgh is fortunate in being a pre-car city. It's not too  
spread out. Because those 25 to 29 year olds do not like driving.  
They prefer walking, or bicycling, or taking public transport. If  
you've been to San Francisco recently you can't help noticing the  
huge number of bicyclists. And this is not just a fad that the  
twenty-somethings have adopted. In this respect they have discovered  
a better way to live. The beards will go, but not the bikes. Cities  
where you can get around without driving are just better period.  
So I would suggest you do everything you can to capitalize on this.  
As with historic preservation, it seems impossible to go too far.Why not make Pittsburgh the most bicycle and pedestrian friendly  
city in the country? See if you can go so far that you make San  
Francisco seem backward by comparison. If you do, it's very unlikely  
you'll regret it. The city will seem like a paradise to the young  
people you want to attract. If they do leave to get jobs elsewhere,  
it will be with regret at leaving behind such a place. And what's  
the downside? Can you imagine a headline "City ruined by becoming  
too bicycle-friendly?" It just doesn't happen.So suppose cool old neighborhoods and cool little restaurants make  
this the next Portland. Will that be enough? It will put you in  
a way better position than Portland itself, because Pittsburgh has  
something Portland lacks: a first-rate research university. CMU  
plus little cafes means you have more than hipsters drinking lattes.  
It means you have hipsters drinking lattes while talking about  
distributed systems. Now you're getting really close to San  
Francisco.In fact you're better off than San Francisco in one way, because  
CMU is downtown, but Stanford and Berkeley are out in the suburbs.What can CMU do to help Pittsburgh become a startup hub? Be an  
even better research university. CMU is one of the best universities  
in the world, but imagine what things would be like if it were the  
very best, and everyone knew it. There are a lot of ambitious  
people who must go to the best place, wherever it is. If CMU were it, they would all come here. There would be  
kids in Kazakhstan dreaming of one day living in Pittsburgh.Being that kind of talent magnet is the most important contribution  
universities can make toward making their city a startup hub. In  
fact it is practically the only contribution they can make.But wait, shouldn't universities be setting up programs with words  
like "innovation" and "entrepreneurship" in their names? No, they  
should not. These kind of things almost always turn out to be  
disappointments. They're pursuing the wrong targets. The way to  
get innovation is not to aim for innovation but to aim for something  
more specific, like better batteries or better 3D printing. And  
the way to learn about entrepreneurship is to do it, which you   
can't  
in school.I know it may disappoint some administrators to hear that the best  
thing a university can do to encourage startups is to be a great  
university. It's like telling people who want to lose weight that  
the way to do it is to eat less.But if you want to know where startups come from, look at the  
empirical evidence. Look at the histories of the most successful  
startups, and you'll find they grow organically out of a couple of  
founders building something that starts as an interesting side  
project. Universities are great at bringing together founders, but  
beyond that the best thing they can do is get out of the way. For  
example, by not claiming ownership of "intellectual property" that  
students and faculty develop, and by having liberal rules about  
deferred admission and leaves of absence.In fact, one of the most effective things a university could do to  
encourage startups is an elaborate form of getting out of the way  
invented by Harvard. Harvard used to have exams for the fall  
semester after Christmas. At the beginning of January they had  
something called "Reading Period" when you were supposed to be  
studying for exams. And Microsoft and Facebook have something in  
common that few people realize: they were both started during Reading  
Period. It's the perfect situation for producing the sort of side  
projects that turn into startups. The students are all on campus,  
but they don't have to do anything because they're supposed to be  
studying for exams.Harvard may have closed this window, because a few years ago they  
moved exams before Christmas and shortened reading period from 11  
days to 7. But if a university really wanted to help its students  
start startups, the empirical evidence, weighted by market cap,  
suggests the best thing they can do is literally nothing.The culture of Pittsburgh is another of its strengths. It seems  
like a city has to be socially liberal to be a startup hub,  
and it's pretty clear why. A city has to tolerate strangeness to  
be a home for startups, because startups are so strange. And you  
can't choose to allow just the forms of strangeness that will turn  
into big startups, because they're all intermingled. You have to  
tolerate all strangeness.That immediately rules out big chunks of the US. I'm optimistic  
it doesn't rule out Pittsburgh. One of the things I remember from  
growing up here, though I didn't realize at the time that there was  
anything unusual about it, is how well people got along. I'm still  
not sure why. Maybe one reason was that everyone felt like an  
immigrant. When I was a kid in Monroeville, people didn't call  
themselves American. They called themselves Italian or Serbian or  
Ukranian. Just imagine what it must have been like here a hundred  
years ago, when people were pouring in from twenty different  
countries. Tolerance was the only option.What I remember about the culture of Pittsburgh is that it was  
both tolerant and pragmatic. That's how I'd describe the culture  
of Silicon Valley too. And it's not a coincidence, because Pittsburgh  
was the Silicon Valley of its time. This was a city where people  
built new things. And while the things people build have changed,  
the spirit you need to do that kind of work is the same.So although an influx of latte-swilling hipsters may be annoying  
in some ways, I would go out of my way to encourage them. And more  
generally to tolerate strangeness, even unto the degree wacko  
Californians do. For Pittsburgh that is a conservative choice:  
it's a return to the city's roots.Unfortunately I saved the toughest part for last. There is one more  
thing you need to be a startup hub, and Pittsburgh hasn't got it:  
investors. Silicon Valley has a big investor community because  
it's had 50 years to grow one. New York has a big investor community  
because it's full of people who like money a lot and are quick to  
notice new ways to get it. But Pittsburgh has neither of these.  
And the cheap housing that draws other people here has no effect  
on investors.If an investor community grows up here, it will happen the same way  
it did in Silicon Valley: slowly and organically. So I would not  
bet on having a big investor community in the short term. But  
fortunately there are three trends that make that less necessary  
than it used to be. One is that startups are increasingly cheap  
to start, so you just don't need as much outside money as you used  
to. The second is that thanks to things like Kickstarter, a startup  
can get to revenue faster. You can put something on Kickstarter  
from anywhere. The third is programs like Y Combinator. A startup  
from anywhere in the world can go to YC for 3 months, pick up  
funding, and then return home if they want.My advice is to make Pittsburgh a great place for startups, and  
gradually more of them will stick. Some of those will succeed;  
some of their founders will become investors; and still more startups  
will stick.This is not a fast path to becoming a startup hub. But it is at  
least a path, which is something few other cities have. And it's  
not as if you have to make painful sacrifices in the meantime.  
Think about what I've suggested you should do. Encourage local  
restaurants, save old buildings, take advantage of density, make  
CMU the best, promote tolerance. These are the things that make  
Pittsburgh good to live in now. All I'm saying is that you should  
do even more of them.And that's an encouraging thought. If Pittsburgh's path to becoming  
a startup hub is to be even more itself, then it has a good chance  
of succeeding. In fact it probably has the best chance of any city  
its size. It will take some effort, and a lot of time, but if any  
city can do it, Pittsburgh can.Thanks to Charlie Cheever and Jessica Livingston for reading  
drafts of this, and to Meg Cheever for organizing Opt412 and inviting  
me to speak.

# Life is Short

January 2016Life is short, as everyone knows. When I was a kid I used to wonder  
about this. Is life actually short, or are we really complaining  
about its finiteness? Would we be just as likely to feel life was  
short if we lived 10 times as long?Since there didn't seem any way to answer this question, I stopped  
wondering about it. Then I had kids. That gave me a way to answer  
the question, and the answer is that life actually is short.Having kids showed me how to convert a continuous quantity, time,  
into discrete quantities. You only get 52 weekends with your 2 year  
old. If Christmas-as-magic lasts from say ages 3 to 10, you only  
get to watch your child experience it 8 times. And while it's  
impossible to say what is a lot or a little of a continuous quantity  
like time, 8 is not a lot of something. If you had a handful of 8  
peanuts, or a shelf of 8 books to choose from, the quantity would  
definitely seem limited, no matter what your lifespan was.Ok, so life actually is short. Does it make any difference to know  
that?It has for me. It means arguments of the form "Life is too short  
for x" have great force. It's not just a figure of speech to say  
that life is too short for something. It's not just a synonym for  
annoying. If you find yourself thinking that life is too short for  
something, you should try to eliminate it if you can.When I ask myself what I've found life is too short for, the word  
that pops into my head is "bullshit." I realize that answer is  
somewhat tautological. It's almost the definition of bullshit that  
it's the stuff that life is too short for. And yet bullshit does  
have a distinctive character. There's something fake about it.  
It's the junk food of experience.  
[1]If you ask yourself what you spend your time on that's bullshit,  
you probably already know the answer. Unnecessary meetings, pointless  
disputes, bureaucracy, posturing, dealing with other people's  
mistakes, traffic jams, addictive but unrewarding pastimes.There are two ways this kind of thing gets into your life: it's  
either forced on you, or it tricks you. To some extent you have to  
put up with the bullshit forced on you by circumstances. You need  
to make money, and making money consists mostly of errands. Indeed,  
the law of supply and demand ensures that: the more rewarding some  
kind of work is, the cheaper people will do it. It may be that  
less bullshit is forced on you than you think, though. There has  
always been a stream of people who opt out of the default grind and  
go live somewhere where opportunities are fewer in the conventional  
sense, but life feels more authentic. This could become more common.You can do it on a smaller scale without moving. The amount of  
time you have to spend on bullshit varies between employers. Most  
large organizations (and many small ones) are steeped in it. But  
if you consciously prioritize bullshit avoidance over other factors  
like money and prestige, you can probably find employers that will  
waste less of your time.If you're a freelancer or a small company, you can do this at the  
level of individual customers. If you fire or avoid toxic customers,  
you can decrease the amount of bullshit in your life by more than  
you decrease your income.But while some amount of bullshit is inevitably forced on you, the  
bullshit that sneaks into your life by tricking you is no one's  
fault but your own. And yet the bullshit you choose may be harder  
to eliminate than the bullshit that's forced on you. Things that  
lure you into wasting your time have to be really good at  
tricking you. An example that will be familiar to a lot of people  
is arguing online. When someone  
contradicts you, they're in a sense attacking you. Sometimes pretty  
overtly. Your instinct when attacked is to defend yourself. But  
like a lot of instincts, this one wasn't designed for the world we  
now live in. Counterintuitive as it feels, it's better most of  
the time not to defend yourself. Otherwise these people are literally  
taking your life.  
[2]Arguing online is only incidentally addictive. There are more  
dangerous things than that. As I've written before, one byproduct  
of technical progress is that things we like tend to become more  
addictive. Which means we will increasingly have to make a conscious  
effort to avoid addictions  to stand outside ourselves and ask "is  
this how I want to be spending my time?"As well as avoiding bullshit, one should actively seek out things  
that matter. But different things matter to different people, and  
most have to learn what matters to them. A few are lucky and realize  
early on that they love math or taking care of animals or writing,  
and then figure out a way to spend a lot of time doing it. But  
most people start out with a life that's a mix of things that  
matter and things that don't, and only gradually learn to distinguish  
between them.For the young especially, much of this confusion is induced by the  
artificial situations they find themselves in. In middle school and  
high school, what the other kids think of you seems the most important  
thing in the world. But when you ask adults what they got wrong  
at that age, nearly all say they cared too much what other kids  
thought of them.One heuristic for distinguishing stuff that matters is to ask  
yourself whether you'll care about it in the future. Fake stuff  
that matters usually has a sharp peak of seeming to matter. That's  
how it tricks you. The area under the curve is small, but its shape  
jabs into your consciousness like a pin.The things that matter aren't necessarily the ones people would  
call "important." Having coffee with a friend matters. You won't  
feel later like that was a waste of time.One great thing about having small children is that they make you  
spend time on things that matter: them. They grab your sleeve as  
you're staring at your phone and say "will you play with me?" And  
odds are that is in fact the bullshit-minimizing option.If life is short, we should expect its shortness to take us by  
surprise. And that is just what tends to happen. You take things  
for granted, and then they're gone. You think you can always write  
that book, or climb that mountain, or whatever, and then you realize  
the window has closed. The saddest windows close when other people  
die. Their lives are short too. After my mother died, I wished I'd  
spent more time with her. I lived as if she'd always be there.  
And in her typical quiet way she encouraged that illusion. But an  
illusion it was. I think a lot of people make the same mistake I  
did.The usual way to avoid being taken by surprise by something is to  
be consciously aware of it. Back when life was more precarious,  
people used to be aware of death to a degree that would now seem a  
bit morbid. I'm not sure why, but it doesn't seem the right answer  
to be constantly reminding oneself of the grim reaper hovering at  
everyone's shoulder. Perhaps a better solution is to look at the  
problem from the other end. Cultivate a habit of impatience about  
the things you most want to do. Don't wait before climbing that  
mountain or writing that book or visiting your mother. You don't  
need to be constantly reminding yourself why you shouldn't wait.  
Just don't wait.I can think of two more things one does when one doesn't have much  
of something: try to get more of it, and savor what one has. Both  
make sense here.How you live affects how long you live. Most people could do better.  
Me among them.But you can probably get even more effect by paying closer attention  
to the time you have. It's easy to let the days rush by. The  
"flow" that imaginative people love so much has a darker cousin  
that prevents you from pausing to savor life amid the daily slurry  
of errands and alarms. One of the most striking things I've read  
was not in a book, but the title of one: James Salter's Burning  
the Days.It is possible to slow time somewhat. I've gotten better at it.  
Kids help. When you have small children, there are a lot of moments  
so perfect that you can't help noticing.It does help too to feel that you've squeezed everything out of  
some experience. The reason I'm sad about my mother is not just  
that I miss her but that I think of all the things we could have  
done that we didn't. My oldest son will be 7 soon. And while I  
miss the 3 year old version of him, I at least don't have any regrets  
over what might have been. We had the best time a daddy and a 3  
year old ever had.Relentlessly prune bullshit, don't wait to do things that matter,  
and savor the time you have. That's what you do when life is short.Notes[1]  
At first I didn't like it that the word that came to mind was  
one that had other meanings. But then I realized the other meanings  
are fairly closely related. Bullshit in the sense of things you  
waste your time on is a lot like intellectual bullshit.[2]  
I chose this example deliberately as a note to self. I get  
attacked a lot online. People tell the craziest lies about me.  
And I have so far done a pretty mediocre job of suppressing the  
natural human inclination to say "Hey, that's not true!"Thanks to Jessica Livingston and Geoff Ralston for reading drafts  
of this.Korean TranslationJapanese TranslationChinese Translation

# Economic Inequality

January 2016Since the 1970s, economic inequality in the US has increased  
dramatically. And in particular, the rich have gotten a lot richer.  
Nearly everyone who writes about the topic says that economic inequality  
should be decreased.I'm interested in this question because I was one of the founders of  
a company called Y Combinator that helps people start startups.  
Almost by definition, if a startup succeeds, its founders become  
rich. Which means by helping startup founders I've been helping to  
increase economic inequality. If economic inequality should be   
decreased, I shouldn't be helping founders. No one should  
be.But that doesn't sound right. What's going on here? What's going  
on is that while economic inequality is a single measure (or more  
precisely, two: variation in income, and variation in wealth), it  
has multiple causes. Many of these causes are bad, like tax loopholes  
and drug addiction. But some are good, like Larry Page and  
Sergey Brin starting the company you use to find things online.If you want to understand economic inequality — and more importantly,  
if you actually want to fix the bad aspects of it — you have to  
tease apart the components. And yet the trend in nearly everything  
written about the subject is to do the opposite: to squash together  
all the aspects of economic inequality as if it were a single  
phenomenon.Sometimes this is done for ideological reasons. Sometimes it's  
because the writer only has very high-level data and so draws  
conclusions from that, like the proverbial drunk who looks for his  
keys under the lamppost, instead of where he dropped them, because the  
light is better there. Sometimes it's because the writer doesn't  
understand critical aspects of inequality, like the role of technology  
in wealth creation. Much of the time, perhaps most of the time,  
writing about economic inequality combines all three.\_\_\_The most common mistake people make about economic inequality is  
to treat it as a single phenomenon. The most naive version of which  
is the one based on the pie fallacy: that the rich get rich by  
taking money from the poor.Usually this is an assumption people start from rather than a  
conclusion they arrive at by examining the evidence. Sometimes the  
pie fallacy is stated explicitly:  
  
 ...those at the top are grabbing an increasing fraction of the  
 nation's income — so much of a larger share that what's left over  
 for the rest is diminished....  
[1]  
  
Other times it's more unconscious. But the unconscious form is very  
widespread. I think because we grow up in a world where the pie  
fallacy is actually true. To kids, wealth is a fixed pie  
that's shared out, and if one person gets more, it's at the expense  
of another. It takes a conscious effort to remind oneself that the  
real world doesn't work that way.In the real world you can create wealth as well as taking it from  
others. A woodworker creates wealth. He makes a chair, and you  
willingly give him money in return for it. A high-frequency trader  
does not. He makes a dollar only when someone on the other end of  
a trade loses a dollar.If the rich people in a society got that way by taking wealth from  
the poor, then you have the degenerate case of economic inequality,  
where the cause of poverty is the same as the cause of wealth. But  
instances of inequality don't have to be instances of the degenerate  
case. If one woodworker makes 5 chairs and another makes none, the  
second woodworker will have less money, but not because anyone took  
anything from him.Even people sophisticated enough to know about the pie fallacy are  
led toward it by the custom of describing economic inequality as a  
ratio of one quantile's income or wealth to another's. It's so  
easy to slip from talking about income shifting from one quantile  
to another, as a figure of speech, into believing that is literally  
what's happening.Except in the degenerate case, economic inequality can't be described  
by a ratio or even a curve. In the general case it consists of  
multiple ways people become poor, and multiple ways people become  
rich. Which means to understand economic inequality in a country,  
you have to go find individual people who are poor or rich and  
figure out why.  
[2]If you want to understand change in economic inequality, you  
should ask what those people would have done when it was different.  
This is one way I know the rich aren't all getting richer simply  
from some new system for transferring wealth to them from  
everyone else. When you use the would-have method with startup  
founders, you find what most would have done   
back in 1960, when  
economic inequality was lower, was to join big companies or become  
professors. Before Mark Zuckerberg started Facebook, his default  
expectation was that he'd end up working at Microsoft. The reason  
he and most other startup founders are richer than they would have  
been in the mid 20th century is not because of some right turn the  
country took during the Reagan administration, but because progress  
in technology has made it much easier to start a new company that  
grows fast.Traditional economists seem strangely averse to studying individual  
humans. It seems to be a rule with them that everything has to start  
with statistics. So they give you very precise numbers about  
variation in wealth and income, then follow it with the most naive  
speculation about the underlying causes.But while there are a lot of people who get rich through rent-seeking  
of various forms, and a lot who get rich by playing zero-sum games,   
there are also a significant number  
who get rich by creating wealth. And creating wealth, as a source  
of economic inequality, is different from taking it — not just  
morally, but also practically, in the sense that it is harder to  
eradicate. One reason is that variation in productivity is  
accelerating. The rate at which individuals can create wealth  
depends on the technology available to them, and that grows  
exponentially. The other reason creating wealth is such a tenacious  
source of inequality is that it can expand to accommodate a lot of  
people.\_\_\_I'm all for shutting down the crooked ways to get rich. But that  
won't eliminate great variations in wealth, because as long as you leave  
open the option of getting rich by creating wealth, people who want  
to get rich will do that instead.Most people who get rich tend to be fairly driven. Whatever their  
other flaws, laziness is usually not one of them. Suppose new  
policies make it hard to make a fortune in finance. Does it seem  
plausible that the people who currently go into finance to make  
their fortunes will continue to do so, but be content to work for  
ordinary salaries? The reason they go into finance is not because  
they love finance but because they want to get rich. If the only  
way left to get rich is to start startups, they'll start startups.  
They'll do well at it too, because determination is the main factor  
in the success of a startup.   
[3]  
And while it would probably be  
a good thing for the world if people who wanted to get rich switched  
from playing zero-sum games to creating wealth, that would not only  
not eliminate great variations in wealth, but might even   
exacerbate them.  
In a zero-sum game there is at least a limit to the upside. Plus  
a lot of the new startups would create new technology that further  
accelerated variation in productivity.Variation in productivity is far from the only source of economic  
inequality, but it is the irreducible core of it, in the sense that  
you'll have that left when you eliminate all other sources. And if  
you do, that core will be big, because it will have expanded to  
include the efforts of all the refugees. Plus it will have a large  
Baumol penumbra around it: anyone who could get rich by creating  
wealth on their own account will have to be paid enough to prevent  
them from doing it.You can't prevent great variations in wealth without preventing people  
from getting rich, and you can't do that without preventing them  
from starting startups.So let's be clear about that. Eliminating great variations in wealth would  
mean eliminating startups. And that doesn't seem a wise move.  
Especially since it would only mean you eliminated  
startups in your own country. Ambitious people already move halfway  
around the world to further their careers, and startups can operate  
from anywhere nowadays. So if you made it impossible to get rich  
by creating wealth in your country, people who wanted to do that  
would just leave and do it somewhere else. Which would  
certainly get you a lower Gini coefficient, along with a lesson in  
being careful what you ask for.   
[4]I think rising economic inequality is the inevitable fate of countries  
that don't choose something worse. We had a 40 year stretch in the  
middle of the 20th century that convinced some people otherwise.  
But as I explained in The Refragmentation,  
that was an anomaly — a  
unique combination of circumstances that compressed American society  
not just economically but culturally too.  
[5]And while some of the growth in economic inequality we've seen since  
then has been due to bad behavior of various kinds, there has  
simultaneously been a huge increase in individuals' ability to  
create wealth. Startups are almost entirely a product of this  
period. And even within the startup world, there has been a qualitative  
change in the last 10 years. Technology has decreased the cost of  
starting a startup so much that founders now have the upper hand  
over investors. Founders get less diluted, and it is now common  
for them to retain   
board control as well. Both further increase  
economic inequality, the former because founders own more stock,  
and the latter because, as investors have learned, founders tend  
to be better at running their companies than investors.While the surface manifestations change, the underlying forces are  
very, very old. The acceleration of productivity we see in Silicon  
Valley has been happening for thousands of years. If you look at  
the history of stone tools, technology was already accelerating in  
the Mesolithic. The acceleration would have been too slow to  
perceive in one lifetime. Such is the nature of the leftmost part  
of an exponential curve. But it was the same curve.You do not want to design your society in a way that's incompatible  
with this curve. The evolution of technology is one of the most  
powerful forces in history.Louis Brandeis said "We may have democracy, or we may have wealth  
concentrated in the hands of a few, but we can't have both." That  
sounds plausible. But if I have to choose between ignoring him and  
ignoring an exponential curve that has been operating for thousands  
of years, I'll bet on the curve. Ignoring any trend that has been  
operating for thousands of years is dangerous. But exponential  
growth, especially, tends to bite you.\_\_\_If accelerating variation in productivity is always going to produce  
some baseline growth in economic inequality, it would be a good  
idea to spend some time thinking about that future. Can you have  
a healthy society with great variation in wealth? What would it  
look like?Notice how novel it feels to think about that. The public conversation  
so far has been exclusively about the need to decrease economic  
inequality. We've barely given a thought to how to live with it.I'm hopeful we'll be able to. Brandeis was a product of the Gilded  
Age, and things have changed since then. It's harder to hide  
wrongdoing now. And to get rich now you don't have to buy politicians  
the way railroad or oil magnates did.   
[6]  
The great concentrations  
of wealth I see around me in Silicon Valley don't seem to be  
destroying democracy.There are lots of things wrong with the US that have economic  
inequality as a symptom. We should fix those things. In the process  
we may decrease economic inequality. But we can't start from the  
symptom and hope to fix the underlying causes.  
[7]The most obvious is poverty. I'm sure most of those who want to  
decrease economic inequality want to do it mainly to help the poor,  
not to hurt the rich.   
[8]  
Indeed, a good number are merely being  
sloppy by speaking of decreasing economic inequality when what they  
mean is decreasing poverty. But this is a situation where it would  
be good to be precise about what we want. Poverty and economic  
inequality are not identical. When the city is turning off your  
water  
because you can't pay the bill, it doesn't make any difference  
what Larry Page's net worth is compared to yours. He might only  
be a few times richer than you, and it would still be just as much  
of a problem that your water was getting turned off.Closely related to poverty is lack of social mobility. I've seen  
this myself: you don't have to grow up rich or even upper middle  
class to get rich as a startup founder, but few successful founders  
grew up desperately poor. But again, the problem here is not simply  
economic inequality. There is an enormous difference in wealth  
between the household Larry Page grew up in and that of a successful  
startup founder, but that didn't prevent him from joining their  
ranks. It's not economic inequality per se that's blocking social  
mobility, but some specific combination of things that go wrong  
when kids grow up sufficiently poor.One of the most important principles in Silicon Valley is that "you  
make what you measure." It means that if you pick some number to  
focus on, it will tend to improve, but that you have to choose the  
right number, because only the one you choose will improve; another  
that seems conceptually adjacent might not. For example, if you're  
a university president and you decide to focus on graduation rates,  
then you'll improve graduation rates. But only graduation rates,  
not how much students learn. Students could learn less, if to  
improve graduation rates you made classes easier.Economic inequality is sufficiently far from identical with the  
various problems that have it as a symptom that we'll probably only  
hit whichever of the two we aim at. If we aim at economic inequality,  
we won't fix these problems. So I say let's aim at the problems.For example, let's attack poverty, and if necessary damage wealth  
in the process. That's much more likely to work than attacking  
wealth in the hope that you will thereby fix poverty.  
[9]  
And if  
there are people getting rich by tricking consumers or lobbying the  
government for anti-competitive regulations or tax loopholes, then  
let's stop them. Not because it's causing economic inequality, but  
because it's stealing.  
[10]If all you have is statistics, it seems like that's what you need  
to fix. But behind a broad statistical measure like economic  
inequality there are some things that are good and some that are  
bad, some that are historical trends with immense momentum and  
others that are random accidents. If we want to fix the world  
behind the statistics, we have to understand it, and focus our  
efforts where they'll do the most good.Notes[1]  
Stiglitz, Joseph. The Price of Inequality. Norton, 2012. p.  
32.[2]  
Particularly since economic inequality is a matter of outliers,  
and outliers are disproportionately likely to have gotten where  
they are by ways that have little do with the sort of things  
economists usually think about, like wages and productivity, but  
rather by, say, ending up on the wrong side of the "War on Drugs."[3]  
Determination is the most important factor in deciding between  
success and failure, which in startups tend to be sharply differentiated.  
But it takes more than determination to create one of the hugely  
successful startups. Though most founders start out excited about  
the idea of getting rich, purely mercenary founders will usually  
take one of the big acquisition offers most successful startups get  
on the way up. The founders who go on to the next stage tend to  
be driven by a sense of mission. They have the same attachment to  
their companies that an artist or writer has to their work. But  
it is very hard to predict at the outset which founders will do  
that. It's not simply a function of their initial attitude. Starting  
a company changes people.[4]  
After reading a draft of this essay, Richard Florida told me  
how he had once talked to a group of Europeans "who said  
 they wanted to make Europe more entrepreneurial and more  
 like Silicon Valley. I said by definition this will give you more  
 inequality. They thought I was insane — they could not process  
 it."[5]  
Economic inequality has been decreasing globally. But this  
is mainly due to the erosion of the kleptocracies that formerly  
dominated all the poorer countries. Once the playing field is  
leveler politically, we'll see economic inequality start to rise  
again. The US is the bellwether. The situation we face here, the  
rest of the world will sooner or later.[6]  
Some people still get rich by buying politicians. My point is that  
it's no longer a precondition.[7]  
As well as problems that have economic inequality as a symptom,  
there are those that have it as a cause. But in most if not all,  
economic inequality is not the primary cause. There is usually  
some injustice that is allowing economic inequality to turn into  
other forms of inequality, and that injustice is what we need to  
fix. For example, the police in the US treat the poor worse than  
the rich. But the solution is not to make people richer. It's to  
make the police treat people more equitably. Otherwise they'll  
continue to maltreat people who are weak in other ways.[8]  
Some who read this essay will say that I'm clueless or even  
being deliberately misleading by focusing so much on the richer end  
of economic inequality — that economic inequality is really about  
poverty. But that is exactly the point I'm making, though sloppier  
language than I'd use to make it. The real problem is poverty, not  
economic inequality. And if you conflate them you're aiming at the  
wrong target.Others will say I'm clueless or being misleading by focusing on  
people who get rich by creating wealth — that startups aren't the  
problem, but corrupt practices in finance, healthcare, and so on.  
Once again, that is exactly my point. The problem is not economic  
inequality, but those specific abuses.It's a strange task to write an essay about why something isn't the  
problem, but that's the situation you find yourself in when so many  
people mistakenly think it is.[9]  
Particularly since many causes of poverty are only partially  
driven by people trying to make money from them. For example,  
America's abnormally high incarceration rate is a major cause of  
poverty. But although for-profit prison companies and   
prison guard unions both spend   
a lot lobbying for harsh sentencing laws, they  
are not the original source of them.[10]  
Incidentally, tax loopholes are definitely not a product  
of some power shift due to recent increases in economic inequality.  
The golden age of economic equality in the mid 20th century was  
also the golden age of tax avoidance. Indeed, it was so widespread  
and so effective that I'm skeptical whether economic inequality was  
really so low then as we think. In a period when people are trying  
to hide wealth from the government, it will tend to be hidden from  
statistics too. One sign of the potential magnitude of the problem  
is the discrepancy between government receipts as a percentage of  
GDP, which have remained more or less constant during the entire  
period from the end of World War II to the present, and tax rates,  
which have varied dramatically.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Tiffani Ashley Bell, Patrick Collison, Ron  
Conway, Richard Florida, Ben Horowitz, Jessica Livingston, Robert  
Morris, Tim O'Reilly, Max Roser, and Alexia Tsotsis for reading  
drafts of this.Note: This is a new version from which I  
removed a pair of metaphors that made a lot of people mad,   
essentially by macroexpanding them. If anyone wants to see   
the old version, I put it here.Related:The Short VersionA Reply to Ezra KleinA Reply to Russell OkungFrench Translation

# The Refragmentation

January 2016One advantage of being old is that you can see change happen in  
your lifetime. A lot of the change I've seen is fragmentation. US  
politics is much more polarized than it used to be. Culturally we  
have ever less common ground. The creative class flocks to a handful  
of happy cities, abandoning the rest. And increasing economic  
inequality means the spread between rich and poor is growing too.  
I'd like to propose a hypothesis: that all these trends are instances  
of the same phenomenon. And moreover, that the cause is not some  
force that's pulling us apart, but rather the erosion of forces  
that had been pushing us together.Worse still, for those who worry about these trends, the forces  
that were pushing us together were an anomaly, a one-time combination  
of circumstances that's unlikely to be repeated — and indeed, that  
we would not want to repeat.The two forces were war (above all World War II), and the rise of  
large corporations.The effects of World War II were both economic and social.  
Economically, it decreased variation in income. Like all modern  
armed forces, America's were socialist economically. From each  
according to his ability, to each according to his need. More or  
less. Higher ranking members of the military got more (as higher  
ranking members of socialist societies always do), but what they  
got was fixed according to their rank. And the flattening effect  
wasn't limited to those under arms, because the US economy was  
conscripted too. Between 1942 and 1945 all wages were set by the  
National War Labor Board. Like the military, they defaulted to  
flatness. And this national standardization of wages was so pervasive  
that its effects could still be seen years after the war ended.  
[1]Business owners weren't supposed to be making money either. FDR  
said "not a single war millionaire" would be permitted. To ensure  
that, any increase in a company's profits over prewar levels was  
taxed at 85%. And when what was left after corporate taxes reached  
individuals, it was taxed again at a marginal rate of 93%.  
[2]Socially too the war tended to decrease variation. Over 16 million  
men and women from all sorts of different backgrounds were brought  
together in a way of life that was literally uniform. Service rates  
for men born in the early 1920s approached 80%. And working toward  
a common goal, often under stress, brought them still closer together.Though strictly speaking World War II lasted less than 4 years for  
the US, its effects lasted longer. Wars make central governments  
more powerful, and World War II was an extreme case of this. In  
the US, as in all the other Allied countries, the federal government  
was slow to give up the new powers it had acquired. Indeed, in  
some respects the war didn't end in 1945; the enemy just switched  
to the Soviet Union. In tax rates, federal power, defense spending,  
conscription, and nationalism, the decades after the war looked more  
like wartime than prewar peacetime.  
[3]  
And the social effects  
lasted too. The kid pulled into the army from behind a mule team  
in West Virginia didn't simply go back to the farm afterward.  
Something else was waiting for him, something that looked a lot  
like the army.If total war was the big political story of the 20th century, the  
big economic story was the rise of a new kind of company. And this  
too tended to produce both social and economic cohesion.  
[4]The 20th century was the century of the big, national corporation.  
General Electric, General Foods, General Motors. Developments in  
finance, communications, transportation, and manufacturing enabled  
a new type of company whose goal was above all scale. Version 1  
of this world was low-res: a Duplo world of a few giant companies  
dominating each big market.  
[5]The late 19th and early 20th centuries had been a time of consolidation,  
led especially by J. P. Morgan. Thousands of companies run by their  
founders were merged into a couple hundred giant ones run by  
professional managers. Economies of scale ruled the day. It seemed  
to people at the time that this was the final state of things. John  
D. Rockefeller said in 1880  
  
 The day of combination is here to stay. Individualism has gone,  
 never to return.  
  
He turned out to be mistaken, but he seemed right for the next  
hundred years.The consolidation that began in the late 19th century continued for  
most of the 20th. By the end of World War II, as Michael Lind  
writes, "the major sectors of the economy were either organized  
as government-backed cartels or dominated by a few oligopolistic  
corporations."For consumers this new world meant the same choices everywhere, but  
only a few of them. When I grew up there were only 2 or 3 of most  
things, and since they were all aiming at the middle of the market  
there wasn't much to differentiate them.One of the most important instances of this phenomenon was in TV.  
Here there were 3 choices: NBC, CBS, and ABC. Plus public TV for  
eggheads and communists. The programs that the 3 networks offered were  
indistinguishable. In fact, here there was a triple pressure toward  
the center. If one show did try something daring, local affiliates  
in conservative markets would make them stop. Plus since TVs were  
expensive, whole families watched the same shows together, so they  
had to be suitable for everyone.And not only did everyone get the same thing, they got it at the  
same time. It's difficult to imagine now, but every night tens of  
millions of families would sit down together in front of their TV  
set watching the same show, at the same time, as their next door  
neighbors. What happens now with the Super Bowl used to happen  
every night. We were literally in sync.  
[6]In a way mid-century TV culture was good. The view it gave of the  
world was like you'd find in a children's book, and it probably had  
something of the effect that (parents hope) children's books have  
in making people behave better. But, like children's books, TV was  
also misleading. Dangerously misleading, for adults. In his  
autobiography, Robert MacNeil talks of seeing gruesome images that  
had just come in from Vietnam and thinking, we can't show these to  
families while they're having dinner.I know how pervasive the common culture was, because I tried to opt  
out of it, and it was practically impossible to find alternatives.  
When I was 13 I realized, more from internal evidence than any  
outside source, that the ideas we were being fed on TV were crap,  
and I stopped watching it.  
[7]  
But it wasn't just TV. It seemed  
like everything around me was crap. The politicians all saying the  
same things, the consumer brands making almost identical products  
with different labels stuck on to indicate how prestigious they  
were meant to be, the balloon-frame houses with fake "colonial"  
skins, the cars with several feet of gratuitous metal on each end  
that started to fall apart after a couple years, the "red delicious"  
apples that were red but only nominally   
apples. And in retrospect, it was crap.  
[8]But when I went looking for alternatives to fill this void, I found  
practically nothing. There was no Internet then. The only place  
to look was in the chain bookstore in our local shopping mall.   
[9]  
There I found a copy of The Atlantic. I wish I could say it became  
a gateway into a wider world, but in fact I found it boring and  
incomprehensible. Like a kid tasting whisky for the first time and  
pretending to like it, I preserved that magazine as carefully as  
if it had been a book. I'm sure I still have it somewhere. But  
though it was evidence that there was, somewhere, a world that  
wasn't red delicious, I didn't find it till college.It wasn't just as consumers that the big companies made us similar.  
They did as employers too. Within companies there were powerful  
forces pushing people toward a single model of how to look and act.  
IBM was particularly notorious for this, but they were only a little  
more extreme than other big companies. And the models of how to  
look and act varied little between companies. Meaning everyone  
within this world was expected to seem more or less the same. And  
not just those in the corporate world, but also everyone who aspired  
to it — which in the middle of the 20th century meant most people  
who weren't already in it. For most of the 20th century, working-class  
people tried hard to look middle class. You can see it in old  
photos. Few adults aspired to look dangerous in 1950.But the rise of national corporations didn't just compress us  
culturally. It compressed us economically too, and on both ends.Along with giant national corporations, we got giant national labor  
unions. And in the mid 20th century the corporations cut deals  
with the unions where they paid over market price for labor. Partly  
because the unions were monopolies.   
[10]  
Partly because, as  
components of oligopolies themselves, the corporations knew they  
could safely pass the cost on to their customers, because their  
competitors would have to as well. And partly because in mid-century  
most of the giant companies were still focused on finding new ways  
to milk economies of scale. Just as startups rightly pay AWS a  
premium over the cost of running their own servers so they can focus  
on growth, many of the big national corporations were willing to  
pay a premium for labor.   
[11]As well as pushing incomes up from the bottom, by overpaying unions,  
the big companies of the 20th century also pushed incomes down at  
the top, by underpaying their top management. Economist J. K.  
Galbraith wrote in 1967 that "There are few corporations in which  
it would be suggested that executive salaries are at a maximum."  
[12]To some extent this was an illusion. Much of the de facto pay of  
executives never showed up on their income tax returns, because it  
took the form of perks. The higher the rate of income tax, the  
more pressure there was to pay employees upstream of it. (In the  
UK, where taxes were even higher than in the US, companies would  
even pay their kids' private school tuitions.) One of the most  
valuable things the big companies of the mid 20th century gave their  
employees was job security, and this too didn't show up in tax  
returns or income statistics. So the nature of employment in these  
organizations tended to yield falsely low numbers about economic  
inequality. But even accounting for that, the big companies paid  
their best people less than market price. There was no market; the  
expectation was that you'd work for the same company for decades  
if not your whole career.   
[13]Your work was so illiquid there was little chance of getting market  
price. But that same illiquidity also encouraged you not to seek  
it. If the company promised to employ you till you retired and  
give you a pension afterward, you didn't want to extract as much  
from it this year as you could. You needed to take care of the  
company so it could take care of you. Especially when you'd been  
working with the same group of people for decades. If you tried  
to squeeze the company for more money, you were squeezing the  
organization that was going to take care of them. Plus if  
you didn't put the company first you wouldn't be promoted, and if  
you couldn't switch ladders, promotion on this one was the only way  
up.   
[14]To someone who'd spent several formative years in the armed forces,  
this situation didn't seem as strange as it does to us now. From  
their point of view, as big company executives, they were high-ranking  
officers. They got paid a lot more than privates. They got to  
have expense account lunches at the best restaurants and fly around  
on the company's Gulfstreams. It probably didn't occur to most of  
them to ask if they were being paid market price.The ultimate way to get market price is to work for yourself, by  
starting your own company. That seems obvious to any ambitious  
person now. But in the mid 20th century it was an alien concept.  
Not because starting one's own company seemed too ambitious, but  
because it didn't seem ambitious enough. Even as late as the 1970s,  
when I grew up, the ambitious plan was to get lots of education at  
prestigious institutions, and then join some other prestigious  
institution and work one's way up the hierarchy. Your prestige was  
the prestige of the institution you belonged to. People did start  
their own businesses of course, but educated people rarely did,  
because in those days there was practically zero concept of starting  
what we now call a startup:   
a business that starts small and grows  
big. That was much harder to do in the mid 20th century. Starting  
one's own business meant starting a business that would start small  
and stay small. Which in those days of big companies often meant  
scurrying around trying to avoid being trampled by elephants. It  
was more prestigious to be one of the executive class riding the  
elephant.By the 1970s, no one stopped to wonder where the big prestigious  
companies had come from in the first place. It seemed like they'd  
always been there, like the chemical elements. And indeed, there  
was a double wall between ambitious kids in the 20th century and  
the origins of the big companies. Many of the big companies were  
roll-ups that didn't have clear founders. And when they did, the  
founders didn't seem like us. Nearly all of them had been uneducated,  
in the sense of not having been to college. They were what Shakespeare  
called rude mechanicals. College trained one to be a member of the  
professional classes. Its graduates didn't expect to do the sort  
of grubby menial work that Andrew Carnegie or Henry Ford started  
out doing.   
[15]And in the 20th century there were more and more college graduates.  
They increased from about 2% of the population in 1900 to about 25%  
in 2000. In the middle of the century our two big forces intersect,  
in the form of the GI Bill, which sent 2.2 million World War II  
veterans to college. Few thought of it in these terms, but the  
result of making college the canonical path for the ambitious was  
a world in which it was socially acceptable to work for Henry Ford,  
but not to be Henry Ford.  
[16]I remember this world well. I came of age just as it was starting  
to break up. In my childhood it was still dominant. Not quite so  
dominant as it had been. We could see from old TV shows and yearbooks  
and the way adults acted that people in the 1950s and 60s had been  
even more conformist than us. The mid-century model was already  
starting to get old. But that was not how we saw it at the time.  
We would at most have said that one could be a bit more daring in  
1975 than 1965. And indeed, things hadn't changed much yet.But change was coming soon. And when the Duplo economy started to  
disintegrate, it disintegrated in several different ways at once.  
Vertically integrated companies literally dis-integrated because  
it was more efficient to. Incumbents faced new competitors as (a)  
markets went global and (b) technical innovation started to trump  
economies of scale, turning size from an asset into a liability.  
Smaller companies were increasingly able to survive as formerly  
narrow channels to consumers broadened. Markets themselves started  
to change faster, as whole new categories of products appeared. And  
last but not least, the federal government, which had previously  
smiled upon J. P. Morgan's world as the natural state of things,  
began to realize it wasn't the last word after all.What J. P. Morgan was to the horizontal axis, Henry Ford was to the  
vertical. He wanted to do everything himself. The giant plant he  
built at River Rouge between 1917 and 1928 literally took in iron  
ore at one end and sent cars out the other. 100,000 people worked  
there. At the time it seemed the future. But that is not how car  
companies operate today. Now much of the design and manufacturing  
happens in a long supply chain, whose products the car companies  
ultimately assemble and sell. The reason car companies operate  
this way is that it works better. Each company in the supply chain  
focuses on what they know best. And they each have to do it well  
or they can be swapped out for another supplier.Why didn't Henry Ford realize that networks of cooperating companies  
work better than a single big company? One reason is that supplier  
networks take a while to evolve. In 1917, doing everything himself  
seemed to Ford the only way to get the scale he needed. And the  
second reason is that if you want to solve a problem using a network  
of cooperating companies, you have to be able to coordinate their  
efforts, and you can do that much better with computers. Computers  
reduce the transaction costs that Coase argued are the raison d'etre  
of corporations. That is a fundamental change.In the early 20th century, big companies were synonymous with  
efficiency. In the late 20th century they were synonymous with  
inefficiency. To some extent this was because the companies  
themselves had become sclerotic. But it was also because our  
standards were higher.It wasn't just within existing industries that change occurred.  
The industries themselves changed. It became possible to make lots  
of new things, and sometimes the existing companies weren't the  
ones who did it best.Microcomputers are a classic example. The market was pioneered by  
upstarts like Apple. When it got big enough, IBM decided it was  
worth paying attention to. At the time IBM completely dominated  
the computer industry. They assumed that all they had to do, now  
that this market was ripe, was to reach out and pick it. Most  
people at the time would have agreed with them. But what happened  
next illustrated how much more complicated the world had become.  
IBM did launch a microcomputer. Though quite successful, it did  
not crush Apple. But even more importantly, IBM itself ended up  
being supplanted by a supplier coming in from the side — from  
software, which didn't even seem to be the same business. IBM's  
big mistake was to accept a non-exclusive license for DOS. It must  
have seemed a safe move at the time. No other computer manufacturer  
had ever been able to outsell them. What difference did it make if  
other manufacturers could offer DOS too? The result of that  
miscalculation was an explosion of inexpensive PC clones. Microsoft  
now owned the PC standard, and the customer. And the microcomputer  
business ended up being Apple vs Microsoft.Basically, Apple bumped IBM and then Microsoft stole its wallet.  
That sort of thing did not happen to big companies in mid-century.  
But it was going to happen increasingly often in the future.Change happened mostly by itself in the computer business. In other  
industries, legal obstacles had to be removed first. Many of the  
mid-century oligopolies had been anointed by the federal government  
with policies (and in wartime, large orders) that kept out competitors.  
This didn't seem as dubious to government officials at the time as  
it sounds to us. They felt a two-party system ensured sufficient  
competition in politics. It ought to work for business too.Gradually the government realized that anti-competitive policies  
were doing more harm than good, and during the Carter administration  
it started to remove them. The word used for this process was  
misleadingly narrow: deregulation. What was really happening was  
de-oligopolization. It happened to one industry after another.  
Two of the most visible to consumers were air travel and long-distance  
phone service, which both became dramatically cheaper after  
deregulation.Deregulation also contributed to the wave of hostile takeovers in  
the 1980s. In the old days the only limit on the inefficiency of  
companies, short of actual bankruptcy, was the inefficiency of their  
competitors. Now companies had to face absolute rather than relative  
standards. Any public company that didn't generate sufficient  
returns on its assets risked having its management replaced with  
one that would. Often the new managers did this by breaking companies  
up into components that were more valuable separately.  
[17]Version 1 of the national economy consisted of a few big blocks  
whose relationships were negotiated in back rooms by a handful of  
executives, politicians, regulators, and labor leaders. Version 2  
was higher resolution: there were more companies, of more different  
sizes, making more different things, and their relationships changed  
faster. In this world there were still plenty of back room negotiations,  
but more was left to market forces. Which further accelerated the  
fragmentation.It's a little misleading to talk of versions when describing a  
gradual process, but not as misleading as it might seem. There was  
a lot of change in a few decades, and what we ended up with was  
qualitatively different. The companies in the S&P 500 in 1958 had  
been there an average of 61 years. By 2012 that number was 18 years.  
[18]The breakup of the Duplo economy happened simultaneously with the  
spread of computing power. To what extent were computers a precondition?  
It would take a book to answer that. Obviously the spread of computing  
power was a precondition for the rise of startups. I suspect it  
was for most of what happened in finance too. But was it a  
precondition for globalization or the LBO wave? I don't know, but  
I wouldn't discount the possibility. It may be that the refragmentation  
was driven by computers in the way the industrial revolution was  
driven by steam engines. Whether or not computers were a precondition,  
they have certainly accelerated it.The new fluidity of companies changed people's relationships with  
their employers. Why climb a corporate ladder that might be yanked  
out from under you? Ambitious people started to think of a career  
less as climbing a single ladder than as a series of jobs that might  
be at different companies. More movement (or even potential movement)  
between companies introduced more competition in salaries. Plus  
as companies became smaller it became easier to estimate how much  
an employee contributed to the company's revenue. Both changes  
drove salaries toward market price. And since people vary dramatically  
in productivity, paying market price meant salaries started to  
diverge.By no coincidence it was in the early 1980s that the term "yuppie"  
was coined. That word is not much used now, because the phenomenon  
it describes is so taken for granted, but at the time it was a label  
for something novel. Yuppies were young professionals who made lots  
of money. To someone in their twenties today, this wouldn't seem  
worth naming. Why wouldn't young professionals make lots of money?  
But until the 1980s, being underpaid early in your career was part  
of what it meant to be a professional. Young professionals were  
paying their dues, working their way up the ladder. The rewards  
would come later. What was novel about yuppies was that they wanted  
market price for the work they were doing now.The first yuppies did not work for startups. That was still in the  
future. Nor did they work for big companies. They were professionals  
working in fields like law, finance, and consulting. But their example   
rapidly inspired their peers. Once they saw that new BMW 325i, they   
wanted one too.Underpaying people at the beginning of their career only works if  
everyone does it. Once some employer breaks ranks, everyone else  
has to, or they can't get good people. And once started this process  
spreads through the whole economy, because at the beginnings of  
people's careers they can easily switch not merely employers but  
industries.But not all young professionals benefitted. You had to produce to  
get paid a lot. It was no coincidence that the first yuppies worked  
in fields where it was easy to measure that.More generally, an idea was returning whose name sounds old-fashioned  
precisely because it was so rare for so long: that you could make  
your fortune. As in the past there were multiple ways to do it.  
Some made their fortunes by creating wealth, and others by playing  
zero-sum games. But once it became possible to make one's fortune,  
the ambitious had to decide whether or not to. A physicist who  
chose physics over Wall Street in 1990 was making a sacrifice that  
a physicist in 1960 didn't have to think about.The idea even flowed back into big companies. CEOs of big companies  
make more now than they used to, and I think much of the reason is  
prestige. In 1960, corporate CEOs had immense prestige. They were  
the winners of the only economic game in town. But if they made as  
little now as they did then, in real dollar terms, they'd seem like  
small fry compared to professional athletes and whiz kids making  
millions from startups and hedge funds. They don't like that idea,  
so now they try to get as much as they can, which is more than they  
had been getting.   
[19]Meanwhile a similar fragmentation was happening at the other end  
of the economic scale. As big companies' oligopolies became less  
secure, they were less able to pass costs on to customers and thus  
less willing to overpay for labor. And as the Duplo world of a few  
big blocks fragmented into many companies of different sizes — some  
of them overseas — it became harder for unions to enforce their  
monopolies. As a result workers' wages also tended toward market  
price. Which (inevitably, if unions had been doing their job) tended  
to be lower. Perhaps dramatically so, if automation had decreased  
the need for some kind of work.And just as the mid-century model induced social as well as economic  
cohesion, its breakup brought social as well as economic fragmentation.  
People started to dress and act differently. Those who would later  
be called the "creative class" became more mobile. People who didn't  
care much for religion felt less pressure to go to church for  
appearances' sake, while those who liked it a lot opted for  
increasingly colorful forms. Some switched from meat loaf to tofu,  
and others to Hot Pockets. Some switched from driving Ford sedans  
to driving small imported cars, and others to driving SUVs. Kids  
who went to private schools or wished they did started to dress  
"preppy," and kids who wanted to seem rebellious made a conscious  
effort to look disreputable. In a hundred ways people spread apart.  
[20]Almost four decades later, fragmentation is still increasing. Has  
it been net good or bad? I don't know; the question may be  
unanswerable. Not entirely bad though. We take for granted the  
forms of fragmentation we like, and worry only about the ones we  
don't. But as someone who caught the tail end of mid-century  
conformism,   
I can tell you it was no utopia.  
[21]My goal here is not to say whether fragmentation has been good or  
bad, just to explain why it's happening. With the centripetal  
forces of total war and 20th century oligopoly mostly gone, what  
will happen next? And more specifically, is it possible to reverse  
some of the fragmentation we've seen?If it is, it will have to happen piecemeal. You can't reproduce  
mid-century cohesion the way it was originally produced. It would  
be insane to go to war just to induce more national unity. And  
once you understand the degree to which the economic history of the  
20th century was a low-res version 1, it's clear you can't reproduce  
that either.20th century cohesion was something that happened at least in a  
sense naturally. The war was due mostly to external forces, and  
the Duplo economy was an evolutionary phase. If you want cohesion  
now, you'd have to induce it deliberately. And it's not obvious  
how. I suspect the best we'll be able to do is address the symptoms  
of fragmentation. But that may be enough.The form of fragmentation people worry most about lately is economic inequality, and if you want to eliminate  
that you're up against a truly formidable headwind that has  
been in operation since the stone age. Technology.Technology is  
a lever. It magnifies work. And the lever not only grows increasingly  
long, but the rate at which it grows is itself increasing.Which in turn means the variation in the amount of wealth people  
can create has not only been increasing, but accelerating. The  
unusual conditions that prevailed in the mid 20th century masked  
this underlying trend. The ambitious had little choice but to join  
large organizations that made them march in step with lots of other  
people — literally in the case of the armed forces, figuratively  
in the case of big corporations. Even if the big corporations had  
wanted to pay people proportionate to their value, they couldn't  
have figured out how. But that constraint has gone now. Ever since  
it started to erode in the 1970s, we've seen the underlying forces  
at work again.  
[22]Not everyone who gets rich now does it by creating wealth, certainly.  
But a significant number do, and the Baumol Effect means all their  
peers get dragged along too.  
[23]  
And as long as it's possible to  
get rich by creating wealth, the default tendency will be for  
economic inequality to increase. Even if you eliminate all the  
other ways to get rich. You can mitigate this with subsidies at  
the bottom and taxes at the top, but unless taxes are high enough  
to discourage people from creating wealth, you're always going to  
be fighting a losing battle against increasing variation in  
productivity.  
[24]That form of fragmentation, like the others, is here to stay. Or  
rather, back to stay. Nothing is forever, but the tendency toward  
fragmentation should be more forever than most things, precisely  
because it's not due to any particular cause. It's simply a reversion  
to the mean. When Rockefeller said individualism was gone, he was  
right for a hundred years. It's back now, and that's likely to be  
true for longer.I worry that if we don't acknowledge this, we're headed for trouble.  
If we think 20th century cohesion disappeared because of few policy  
tweaks, we'll be deluded into thinking we can get it back (minus  
the bad parts, somehow) with a few countertweaks. And then we'll  
waste our time trying to eliminate fragmentation, when we'd be  
better off thinking about how to mitigate its consequences.  
Notes[1]  
Lester Thurow, writing in 1975, said the wage differentials  
prevailing at the end of World War II had become so embedded that  
they "were regarded as 'just' even after the egalitarian pressures  
of World War II had disappeared. Basically, the same differentials  
exist to this day, thirty years later." But Goldin and Margo think  
market forces in the postwar period also helped preserve the wartime  
compression of wages — specifically increased demand for unskilled  
workers, and oversupply of educated ones.(Oddly enough, the American custom of having employers pay for  
health insurance derives from efforts by businesses to circumvent  
NWLB wage controls in order to attract workers.)[2]  
As always, tax rates don't tell the whole story. There were  
lots of exemptions, especially for individuals. And in World War  
II the tax codes were so new that the government had little acquired  
immunity to tax avoidance. If the rich paid high taxes during the  
war it was more because they wanted to than because they had to.After the war, federal tax receipts as a percentage of GDP were  
about the same as they are now. In fact, for the entire period since  
the war, tax receipts have stayed close to 18% of GDP, despite  
dramatic changes in tax rates. The lowest point occurred when  
marginal income tax rates were highest: 14.1% in 1950. Looking at  
the data, it's hard to avoid the conclusion that tax rates have had  
little effect on what people actually paid.[3]  
Though in fact the decade preceding the war had been a time  
of unprecedented federal power, in response to the Depression.  
Which is not entirely a coincidence, because the Depression was one  
of the causes of the war. In many ways the New Deal was a sort of  
dress rehearsal for the measures the federal government took during  
wartime. The wartime versions were much more drastic and more  
pervasive though. As Anthony Badger wrote, "for many Americans the  
decisive change in their experiences came not with the New Deal but  
with World War II."[4]  
I don't know enough about the origins of the world wars to  
say, but it's not inconceivable they were connected to the rise of  
big corporations. If that were the case, 20th century cohesion would  
have a single cause.[5]  
More precisely, there was a bimodal economy consisting, in  
Galbraith's words, of "the world of the technically dynamic, massively  
capitalized and highly organized corporations on the one hand and  
the hundreds of thousands of small and traditional proprietors on  
the other." Money, prestige, and power were concentrated in the  
former, and there was near zero crossover.[6]  
I wonder how much of the decline in families eating together  
was due to the decline in families watching TV together afterward.[7]  
I know when this happened because it was the season Dallas  
premiered. Everyone else was talking about what was happening on  
Dallas, and I had no idea what they meant.[8]  
I didn't realize it till I started doing research for this  
essay, but the meretriciousness of the products I grew up with is  
a well-known byproduct of oligopoly. When companies can't compete  
on price, they compete on tailfins.[9]  
Monroeville Mall was at the time of its completion in 1969  
the largest in the country. In the late 1970s the movie Dawn of  
the Dead was shot there. Apparently the mall was not just the  
location of the movie, but its inspiration; the crowds of shoppers  
drifting through this huge mall reminded George Romero of zombies.  
My first job was scooping ice cream in the Baskin-Robbins.[10]  
Labor unions were exempted from antitrust laws by the Clayton  
Antitrust Act in 1914 on the grounds that a person's work is not  
"a commodity or article of commerce." I wonder if that means service  
companies are also exempt.[11]  
The relationships between unions and unionized companies can  
even be symbiotic, because unions will exert political pressure to  
protect their hosts. According to Michael Lind, when politicians  
tried to attack the A&P supermarket chain because it was putting  
local grocery stores out of business, "A&P successfully defended  
itself by allowing the unionization of its workforce in 1938, thereby  
gaining organized labor as a constituency." I've seen this phenomenon  
myself: hotel unions are responsible for more of the political  
pressure against Airbnb than hotel companies.[12]  
Galbraith was clearly puzzled that corporate executives would  
work so hard to make money for other people (the shareholders)  
instead of themselves. He devoted much of The New Industrial  
State to trying to figure this out.His theory was that professionalism had replaced money as a motive,  
and that modern corporate executives were, like (good) scientists,  
motivated less by financial rewards than by the desire to do good  
work and thereby earn the respect of their peers. There is something  
in this, though I think lack of movement between companies combined  
with self-interest explains much of observed behavior.[13]  
Galbraith (p. 94) says a 1952 study of the 800 highest paid  
executives at 300 big corporations found that three quarters of  
them had been with their company for more than 20 years.[14]  
It seems likely that in the first third of the 20th century  
executive salaries were low partly because companies then were more  
dependent on banks, who would have disapproved if executives got  
too much. This was certainly true in the beginning. The first big  
company CEOs were J. P. Morgan's hired hands.Companies didn't start to finance themselves with retained earnings  
till the 1920s. Till then they had to pay out their earnings in  
dividends, and so depended on banks for capital for expansion.  
Bankers continued to sit on corporate boards till the Glass-Steagall  
act in 1933.By mid-century big companies funded 3/4 of their growth from earnings.  
But the early years of bank dependence, reinforced by the financial  
controls of World War II, must have had a big effect on social  
conventions about executive salaries. So it may be that the lack  
of movement between companies was as much the effect of low salaries  
as the cause.Incidentally, the switch in the 1920s to financing growth with  
retained earnings was one cause of the 1929 crash. The banks now  
had to find someone else to lend to, so they made more margin loans.[15]  
Even now it's hard to get them to. One of the things I find  
hardest to get into the heads of would-be startup founders is how  
important it is to do certain kinds of menial work early in the  
life of a company. Doing things that don't  
scale is to how Henry Ford got started as a high-fiber diet is  
to the traditional peasant's diet: they had no choice but to do the  
right thing, while we have to make a conscious effort.[16]  
Founders weren't celebrated in the press when I was a kid.  
"Our founder" meant a photograph of a severe-looking man with a  
walrus mustache and a wing collar who had died decades ago. The  
thing to be when I was a kid was an executive. If you weren't  
around then it's hard to grasp the cachet that term had. The fancy  
version of everything was called the "executive" model.[17]  
The wave of hostile takeovers in the 1980s was enabled by a  
combination of circumstances: court decisions striking down state  
anti-takeover laws, starting with the Supreme Court's 1982 decision  
in Edgar v. MITE Corp.; the Reagan administration's comparatively  
sympathetic attitude toward takeovers; the Depository Institutions  
Act of 1982, which allowed banks and savings and loans to buy  
corporate bonds; a new SEC rule issued in 1982 (rule 415) that made  
it possible to bring corporate bonds to market faster; the creation  
of the junk bond business by Michael Milken; a vogue for conglomerates  
in the preceding period that caused many companies to be combined  
that never should have been; a decade of inflation that left many  
public companies trading below the value of their assets; and not  
least, the increasing complacency of managements.[18]  
Foster, Richard. "Creative Destruction Whips through Corporate  
America." Innosight, February 2012.[19]  
CEOs of big companies may be overpaid. I don't know enough  
about big companies to say. But it is certainly not impossible for  
a CEO to make 200x as much difference to a company's revenues as  
the average employee. Look at what Steve Jobs did for Apple when  
he came back as CEO. It would have been a good deal for the board  
to give him 95% of the company. Apple's market cap the day Steve  
came back in July 1997 was 1.73 billion. 5% of Apple now (January  
2016) would be worth about 30 billion. And it would not be if Steve  
hadn't come back; Apple probably wouldn't even exist anymore.Merely including Steve in the sample might be enough to answer the  
question of whether public company CEOs in the aggregate are overpaid.  
And that is not as facile a trick as it might seem, because the  
broader your holdings, the more the aggregate is what you care  
about.[20]  
The late 1960s were famous for social upheaval. But that was  
more rebellion (which can happen in any era if people are provoked  
sufficiently) than fragmentation. You're not seeing fragmentation  
unless you see people breaking off to both left and right.[21]  
Globally the trend has been in the other direction. While  
the US is becoming more fragmented, the world as a whole is becoming  
less fragmented, and mostly in good ways.[22]  
There were a handful of ways to make a fortune in the mid  
20th century. The main one was drilling for oil, which was open  
to newcomers because it was not something big companies could  
dominate through economies of scale. How did individuals accumulate  
large fortunes in an era of such high taxes? Giant tax loopholes  
defended by two of the most powerful men in Congress, Sam Rayburn  
and Lyndon Johnson.But becoming a Texas oilman was not in 1950 something one could  
aspire to the way starting a startup or going to work on Wall Street  
were in 2000, because (a) there was a strong local component and  
(b) success depended so much on luck.[23]  
The Baumol Effect induced by startups is very visible in  
Silicon Valley. Google will pay people millions of dollars a year  
to keep them from leaving to start or join startups.[24]  
I'm not claiming variation in productivity is the only cause  
of economic inequality in the US. But it's a significant cause, and  
it will become as big a cause as it needs to, in the sense that if  
you ban other ways to get rich, people who want to get rich will  
use this route instead.Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit, Patrick  
Collison, Ron Conway, Chris Dixon, Benedict Evans, Richard Florida,  
Ben Horowitz, Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris, Tim O'Reilly, Geoff  
Ralston, Max Roser, Alexia Tsotsis, and Qasar Younis for reading  
drafts of this. Max also told me about several valuable sources.BibliographyAllen, Frederick Lewis. The Big Change. Harper, 1952.Averitt, Robert. The Dual Economy. Norton, 1968.Badger, Anthony. The New Deal. Hill and Wang, 1989.Bainbridge, John. The Super-Americans. Doubleday, 1961.Beatty, Jack. Collossus. Broadway, 2001.Brinkley, Douglas. Wheels for the World. Viking, 2003.Brownleee, W. Elliot. Federal Taxation in America. Cambridge, 1996.Chandler, Alfred. The Visible Hand. Harvard, 1977.Chernow, Ron. The House of Morgan. Simon & Schuster, 1990.Chernow, Ron. Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller. Random House,  
1998.Galbraith, John. The New Industrial State. Houghton Mifflin, 1967.Goldin, Claudia and Robert A. Margo. "The Great Compression: The  
Wage Structure in the United States at Mid-Century." NBER Working  
Paper 3817, 1991.Gordon, John. An Empire of Wealth. HarperCollins, 2004.Klein, Maury. The Genesis of Industrial America, 1870-1920. Cambridge,  
2007.Lind, Michael. Land of Promise. HarperCollins, 2012.Mickelthwaite, John, and Adrian Wooldridge. The Company. Modern  
Library, 2003.Nasaw, David. Andrew Carnegie. Penguin, 2006.Sobel, Robert. The Age of Giant Corporations. Praeger, 1993.Thurow, Lester. Generating Inequality: Mechanisms of Distribution.  
Basic Books, 1975.Witte, John. The Politics and Development of the Federal Income  
Tax. Wisconsin, 1985.Related:Too Many Elite American Men Are Obsessed With Work and Wealth

# Jessica Livingston

November 2015A few months ago an article about Y Combinator said that early on  
it had been a "one-man show." It's sadly common to read that sort  
of thing. But the problem with that description is not just that  
it's unfair. It's also misleading. Much of what's most novel about  
YC is due to Jessica Livingston. If you don't understand her, you  
don't understand YC. So let me tell you a little about Jessica.YC had 4 founders. Jessica and I decided one night to start it,  
and the next day we recruited my friends Robert Morris and Trevor  
Blackwell. Jessica and I ran YC day to day, and Robert and Trevor  
read applications and did interviews with us.Jessica and I were already dating when we started YC. At first we  
tried to act "professional" about this, meaning we tried to conceal  
it. In retrospect that seems ridiculous, and we soon dropped the  
pretense. And the fact that Jessica and I were a couple is a big  
part of what made YC what it was. YC felt like a family. The  
founders early on were mostly young. We all had dinner together  
once a week, cooked for the first couple years by me. Our first  
building had been a private home. The overall atmosphere was  
shockingly different from a VC's office on Sand Hill Road, in a way  
that was entirely for the better. There was an authenticity that  
everyone who walked in could sense. And that didn't just mean that  
people trusted us. It was the perfect quality to instill in startups.  
Authenticity is one of the most important things YC looks for in  
founders, not just because fakers and opportunists are annoying,  
but because authenticity is one of the main things that separates  
the most successful startups from the rest.Early YC was a family, and Jessica was its mom. And the culture  
she defined was one of YC's most important innovations. Culture  
is important in any organization, but at YC culture wasn't just how  
we behaved when we built the product. At YC, the culture was the  
product.Jessica was also the mom in another sense: she had the last word.  
Everything we did as an organization went through her first — who  
to fund, what to say to the public, how to deal with other companies,  
who to hire, everything.Before we had kids, YC was more or less our life. There was no real  
distinction between working hours and not. We talked about YC all  
the time. And while there might be some businesses that it would  
be tedious to let infect your private life, we liked it. We'd started  
YC because it was something we were interested in. And some of the  
problems we were trying to solve were endlessly difficult. How do  
you recognize good founders? You could talk about that for years,  
and we did; we still do.I'm better at some things than Jessica, and she's better at some  
things than me. One of the things she's best at is judging people.  
She's one of those rare individuals with x-ray vision for character.  
She can see through any kind of faker almost immediately. Her  
nickname within YC was the Social Radar, and this special power of  
hers was critical in making YC what it is. The earlier you pick  
startups, the more you're picking the founders. Later stage investors  
get to try products and look at growth numbers. At the stage where  
YC invests, there is often neither a product nor any numbers.Others thought YC had some special insight about the future of  
technology. Mostly we had the same sort of insight Socrates claimed:  
we at least knew we knew nothing. What made YC successful was being  
able to pick good founders. We thought Airbnb was a bad idea. We  
funded it because we liked the founders.During interviews, Robert and Trevor and I would pepper the applicants  
with technical questions. Jessica would mostly watch. A lot of  
the applicants probably read her as some kind of secretary, especially  
early on, because she was the one who'd go out and get each new  
group and she didn't ask many questions. She was ok with that. It  
was easier for her to watch people if they didn't notice her. But  
after the interview, the three of us would turn to Jessica and ask  
"What does the Social Radar say?"  
[1]Having the Social Radar at interviews wasn't just how we picked  
founders who'd be successful. It was also how we picked founders  
who were good people. At first we did this because we couldn't  
help it. Imagine what it would feel like to have x-ray vision for  
character. Being around bad people would be intolerable. So we'd  
refuse to fund founders whose characters we had doubts about even  
if we thought they'd be successful.Though we initially did this out of self-indulgence, it turned out  
to be very valuable to YC. We didn't realize it in the beginning,  
but the people we were picking would become the YC alumni network.  
And once we picked them, unless they did something really egregious,  
they were going to be part of it for life. Some now think YC's  
alumni network is its most valuable feature. I personally think  
YC's advice is pretty good too, but the alumni network is certainly  
among the most valuable features. The level of trust and helpfulness  
is remarkable for a group of such size. And Jessica is the main  
reason why.(As we later learned, it probably cost us little to reject people  
whose characters we had doubts about, because how good founders are  
and how well they do are not orthogonal. If bad founders succeed  
at all, they tend to sell early. The most successful founders are  
almost all good.)If Jessica was so important to YC, why don't more people realize  
it? Partly because I'm a writer, and writers always get disproportionate  
attention. YC's brand was initially my brand, and our applicants  
were people who'd read my essays. But there is another reason:  
Jessica hates attention. Talking to reporters makes her nervous.  
The thought of giving a talk paralyzes her. She was even uncomfortable  
at our wedding, because the bride is always the center of attention.  
[2]It's not just because she's shy that she hates attention, but because  
it throws off the Social Radar. She can't be herself. You can't  
watch people when everyone is watching you.Another reason attention worries her is that she hates bragging.  
In anything she does that's publicly visible, her biggest fear  
(after the obvious fear that it will be bad) is that it will seem  
ostentatious. She says being too modest is a common problem for  
women. But in her case it goes beyond that. She has a horror of  
ostentation so visceral it's almost a phobia.She also hates fighting. She can't do it; she just shuts down. And  
unfortunately there is a good deal of fighting in being the public  
face of an organization.So although Jessica more than anyone made YC unique, the very  
qualities that enabled her to do it mean she tends to get written  
out of YC's history. Everyone buys this story that PG started YC  
and his wife just kind of helped. Even YC's haters buy it. A  
couple years ago when people were attacking us for not funding more  
female founders (than exist), they all treated YC as identical with  
PG. It would have spoiled the narrative to acknowledge Jessica's  
central role at YC.Jessica was boiling mad that people were accusing her company of  
sexism. I've never seen her angrier about anything. But she did  
not contradict them. Not publicly. In private there was a great  
deal of profanity. And she wrote three separate essays about the  
question of female founders. But she could never bring herself to  
publish any of them. She'd seen the level of vitriol in this debate,  
and she shrank from engaging.  
[3]It wasn't just because she disliked fighting. She's so sensitive  
to character that it repels her even to fight with dishonest people.  
The idea of mixing it up with linkbait journalists or Twitter trolls  
would seem to her not merely frightening, but disgusting.But Jessica knew her example as a successful female founder would  
encourage more women to start companies, so last year she did  
something YC had never done before and hired a PR firm to get her  
some interviews. At one of the first she did, the reporter brushed  
aside her insights about startups and turned it into a sensationalistic  
story about how some guy had tried to chat her up as she was waiting  
outside the bar where they had arranged to meet. Jessica was  
mortified, partly because the guy had done nothing wrong, but more  
because the story treated her as a victim significant only for being  
a woman, rather than one of the most knowledgeable investors in the  
Valley.After that she told the PR firm to stop.You're not going to be hearing in the press about what Jessica has  
achieved. So let me tell you what Jessica has achieved. Y Combinator  
is fundamentally a nexus of people, like a university. It doesn't  
make a product. What defines it is the people. Jessica more than  
anyone curated and nurtured that collection of people. In that  
sense she literally made YC.Jessica knows more about the qualities of startup founders than  
anyone else ever has. Her immense data set and x-ray vision are the  
perfect storm in that respect. The qualities of the founders are  
the best predictor of how a startup will do. And startups are in  
turn the most important source of growth in mature economies.The person who knows the most about the most important factor in  
the growth of mature economies — that is who Jessica Livingston is.  
Doesn't that sound like someone who should be better known?Notes[1]  
Harj Taggar reminded me that while Jessica didn't ask many  
questions, they tended to be important ones:"She was always good at sniffing out any red flags about the team  
or their determination and disarmingly asking the right question,  
which usually revealed more than the founders realized."[2]  
Or more precisely, while she likes getting attention in the  
sense of getting credit for what she has done, she doesn't like  
getting attention in the sense of being watched in real time.  
Unfortunately, not just for her but for a lot of people, how much  
you get of the former depends a lot on how much you get of the  
latter.Incidentally, if you saw Jessica at a public event, you would never  
guess she  
hates attention, because (a) she is very polite and (b) when she's  
nervous, she expresses it by smiling more.[3]  
The existence of people like Jessica is not just something  
the mainstream media needs to learn to acknowledge, but something  
feminists need to learn to acknowledge as well. There are successful  
women who don't like to fight. Which means if the public conversation  
about women consists of fighting, their voices will be silenced.There's a sort of Gresham's Law of conversations. If a conversation  
reaches a certain level of incivility, the more thoughtful people  
start to leave. No one understands female founders better than  
Jessica. But it's unlikely anyone will ever hear her speak candidly  
about the topic. She ventured a toe in that water a while ago, and  
the reaction was so violent that she decided "never again."  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Patrick Collison,   
Daniel Gackle, Carolynn  
Levy, Jon Levy, Kirsty Nathoo, Robert Morris, Geoff Ralston, and  
Harj Taggar for reading drafts of this. And yes, Jessica Livingston,  
who made me cut surprisingly little.

# A Way to Detect Bias

October 2015This will come as a surprise to a lot of people, but in some cases  
it's possible to detect bias in a selection process without knowing  
anything about the applicant pool. Which is exciting because among  
other things it means third parties can use this technique to detect  
bias whether those doing the selecting want them to or not.You can use this technique whenever (a) you have at least  
a random sample of the applicants that were selected, (b) their  
subsequent performance is measured, and (c) the groups of  
applicants you're comparing have roughly equal distribution of ability.How does it work? Think about what it means to be biased. What  
it means for a selection process to be biased against applicants  
of type x is that it's harder for them to make it through. Which  
means applicants of type x have to be better to get selected than  
applicants not of type x.  
[1]  
Which means applicants of type x  
who do make it through the selection process will outperform other  
successful applicants. And if the performance of all the successful  
applicants is measured, you'll know if they do.Of course, the test you use to measure performance must be a valid  
one. And in particular it must not be invalidated by the bias you're  
trying to measure.  
But there are some domains where performance can be measured, and  
in those detecting bias is straightforward. Want to know if the  
selection process was biased against some type of applicant? Check  
whether they outperform the others. This is not just a heuristic  
for detecting bias. It's what bias means.For example, many suspect that venture capital firms are biased  
against female founders. This would be easy to detect: among their  
portfolio companies, do startups with female founders outperform  
those without? A couple months ago, one VC firm (almost certainly  
unintentionally) published a study showing bias of this type. First  
Round Capital found that among its portfolio companies, startups  
with female founders outperformed  
those without by 63%.   
[2]The reason I began by saying that this technique would come as a  
surprise to many people is that we so rarely see analyses of this  
type. I'm sure it will come as a surprise to First Round that they  
performed one. I doubt anyone there realized that by limiting their  
sample to their own portfolio, they were producing a study not of  
startup trends but of their own biases when selecting companies.I predict we'll see this technique used more in the future. The  
information needed to conduct such studies is increasingly available.  
Data about who applies for things is usually closely guarded by the  
organizations selecting them, but nowadays data about who gets  
selected is often publicly available to anyone who takes the trouble  
to aggregate it.  
Notes[1]  
This technique wouldn't work if the selection process looked  
for different things from different types of applicants—for  
example, if an employer hired men based on their ability but women  
based on their appearance.[2]  
As Paul Buchheit points out, First Round excluded their most   
successful investment, Uber, from the study. And while it   
makes sense to exclude outliers from some types of studies,   
studies of returns from startup investing, which is all about   
hitting outliers, are not one of them.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Jessica Livingston, and Geoff Ralston for reading  
drafts of this.Arabic TranslationSwedish Translation

# Write Like You Talk

October 2015Here's a simple trick for getting more people to read what you  
write: write in spoken language.Something comes over most people when they start writing. They write  
in a different language than they'd use if they were talking to a  
friend. The sentence structure and even the words are different.  
No one uses "pen" as a verb in spoken English. You'd feel like an  
idiot using "pen" instead of "write" in a conversation with a friend.The last straw for me was a sentence I read a couple days ago:  
  
 The mercurial Spaniard himself declared: "After Altamira, all is  
 decadence."  
  
It's from Neil Oliver's A History of Ancient Britain. I feel bad  
making an example of this book, because it's no worse than lots of  
others. But just imagine calling Picasso "the mercurial Spaniard" when  
talking to a friend. Even one  
sentence of this would raise eyebrows in conversation. And yet  
people write whole books of it.Ok, so written and spoken language are different. Does that make  
written language worse?If you want people to read and understand what you write, yes.  
Written language is more complex, which makes it more work to read.  
It's also more formal and distant, which gives the reader's attention  
permission to drift. But perhaps worst of all, the complex sentences  
and fancy words give you, the writer, the false impression that  
you're saying more than you actually are.You don't need complex sentences to express complex ideas. When  
specialists in some abstruse topic talk to one another about ideas  
in their field, they don't use sentences any more complex than they  
do when talking about what to have for lunch. They use different  
words, certainly. But even those they use no more than necessary.  
And in my experience, the harder the subject, the more informally  
experts speak. Partly, I think, because they have less to prove,  
and partly because the harder the ideas you're talking about, the  
less you can afford to let language get in the way.Informal language is the athletic clothing of ideas.I'm not saying spoken language always works best. Poetry is as much  
music as text, so you can say things you wouldn't say in conversation.  
And there are a handful of writers who can get away with using fancy  
language in prose. And then of course there are cases where writers  
don't want to make it easy to understand what they're saying—in  
corporate announcements of bad news, for example, or at the more  
bogus end of the humanities. But for nearly everyone else, spoken  
language is better.It seems to be hard for most people to write in spoken language.  
So perhaps the best solution is to write your first draft the way  
you usually would, then afterward look at each sentence and ask "Is  
this the way I'd say this if I were talking to a friend?" If it  
isn't, imagine what you would say, and use that instead. After a  
while this filter will start to operate as you write. When you write  
something you wouldn't say, you'll hear the clank as it hits the  
page.Before I publish a new essay, I read it out loud and fix everything  
that doesn't sound like conversation. I even fix bits that are  
phonetically awkward; I don't know if that's necessary, but it  
doesn't cost much.This trick may not always be enough. I've seen writing so far  
removed from spoken language that it couldn't be fixed sentence by  
sentence. For cases like that there's a more drastic solution.  
After writing the first draft, try explaining to a friend what you  
just wrote. Then replace the draft with what you said to your friend.People often tell me how much my essays sound like me talking.  
The fact that this seems worthy of comment shows how rarely people  
manage to write in spoken language. Otherwise everyone's writing  
would sound like them talking.If you simply manage to write in spoken language, you'll be ahead  
of 95% of writers. And it's so easy to do: just don't let a sentence  
through unless it's the way you'd say it to a friend.Thanks to Patrick Collison and Jessica Livingston for reading drafts of this.Japanese TranslationArabic Translation

# Default Alive or Default Dead?

October 2015When I talk to a startup that's been operating for more than 8 or  
9 months, the first thing I want to know is almost always the same.  
Assuming their expenses remain constant and their revenue growth  
is what it has been over the last several months, do they make it to  
profitability on the money they have left? Or to put it more  
dramatically, by default do they live or die?The startling thing is how often the founders themselves don't know.  
Half the founders I talk to don't know whether they're default alive  
or default dead.If you're among that number, Trevor Blackwell has made a handy  
calculator you can use to find out.The reason I want to know first whether a startup is default alive  
or default dead is that the rest of the conversation depends on the  
answer. If the company is default alive, we can talk about ambitious  
new things they could do. If it's default dead, we probably need  
to talk about how to save it. We know the current trajectory ends  
badly. How can they get off that trajectory?Why do so few founders know whether they're default alive or default  
dead? Mainly, I think, because they're not used to asking that.  
It's not a question that makes sense to ask early on, any more than  
it makes sense to ask a 3 year old how he plans to support  
himself. But as the company grows older, the question switches from  
meaningless to critical. That kind of switch often takes people  
by surprise.I propose the following solution: instead of starting to ask too  
late whether you're default alive or default dead, start asking too  
early. It's hard to say precisely when the question switches  
polarity. But it's probably not that dangerous to start worrying  
too early that you're default dead, whereas it's very dangerous to  
start worrying too late.The reason is a phenomenon I wrote about earlier: the  
fatal pinch.  
The fatal pinch is default dead + slow growth + not enough  
time to fix it. And the way founders end up in it is by not realizing  
that's where they're headed.There is another reason founders don't ask themselves whether they're  
default alive or default dead: they assume it will be easy to raise  
more money. But that assumption is often false, and worse still, the  
more you depend on it, the falser it becomes.Maybe it will help to separate facts from hopes. Instead of thinking  
of the future with vague optimism, explicitly separate the components.  
Say "We're default dead, but we're counting on investors to save  
us." Maybe as you say that, it will set off the same alarms in your  
head that it does in mine. And if you set off the alarms sufficiently  
early, you may be able to avoid the fatal pinch.It would be safe to be default dead if you could count on investors  
saving you. As a rule their interest is a function of  
growth. If you have steep revenue growth, say over 5x a year, you  
can start to count on investors being interested even if you're not  
profitable.  
[1]  
But investors are so fickle that you can never  
do more than start to count on them. Sometimes something about your  
business will spook investors even if your growth is great. So no  
matter how good your growth is, you can never safely treat fundraising  
as more than a plan A. You should always have a plan B as well: you  
should know (as in write down) precisely what you'll need to do to  
survive if you can't raise more money, and precisely when you'll   
have to switch to plan B if plan A isn't working.In any case, growing fast versus operating cheaply is far from the  
sharp dichotomy many founders assume it to be. In practice there  
is surprisingly little connection between how much a startup spends  
and how fast it grows. When a startup grows fast, it's usually  
because the product hits a nerve, in the sense of hitting some big  
need straight on. When a startup spends a lot, it's usually because  
the product is expensive to develop or sell, or simply because  
they're wasteful.If you're paying attention, you'll be asking at this point not just  
how to avoid the fatal pinch, but how to avoid being default dead.  
That one is easy: don't hire too fast. Hiring too fast is by far  
the biggest killer of startups that raise money.  
[2]Founders tell themselves they need to hire in order to grow. But  
most err on the side of overestimating this need rather than  
underestimating it. Why? Partly because there's so much work to  
do. Naive founders think that if they can just hire enough  
people, it will all get done. Partly because successful startups have  
lots of employees, so it seems like that's what one does in order  
to be successful. In fact the large staffs of successful startups  
are probably more the effect of growth than the cause. And  
partly because when founders have slow growth they don't want to  
face what is usually the real reason: the product is not appealing  
enough.Plus founders who've just raised money are often encouraged to  
overhire by the VCs who funded them. Kill-or-cure strategies are  
optimal for VCs because they're protected by the portfolio effect.  
VCs want to blow you up, in one sense of the phrase or the other.  
But as a founder your incentives are different. You want above all  
to survive.  
[3]Here's a common way startups die. They make something moderately  
appealing and have decent initial growth. They raise their first  
round fairly easily, because the founders seem smart and the idea  
sounds plausible. But because the product is only moderately  
appealing, growth is ok but not great. The founders convince  
themselves that hiring a bunch of people is the way to boost growth.  
Their investors agree. But (because the product is only moderately  
appealing) the growth never comes. Now they're rapidly running out  
of runway. They hope further investment will save them. But because  
they have high expenses and slow growth, they're now unappealing  
to investors. They're unable to raise more, and the company dies.What the company should have done is address the fundamental problem:  
that the product is only moderately appealing. Hiring people is  
rarely the way to fix that. More often than not it makes it harder.  
At this early stage, the product needs to evolve more than to be  
"built out," and that's usually easier with fewer people.  
[4]Asking whether you're default alive or default dead may save you  
from this. Maybe the alarm bells it sets off will counteract the  
forces that push you to overhire. Instead you'll be compelled to  
seek growth in other ways. For example, by doing  
things that don't scale, or by redesigning the product in the  
way only founders can.  
And for many if not most startups, these paths to growth will be  
the ones that actually work.Airbnb waited 4 months after raising money at the end of Y Combinator  
before they hired their first employee. In the meantime the founders  
were terribly overworked. But they were overworked evolving Airbnb  
into the astonishingly successful organism it is now.Notes[1]  
Steep usage growth will also interest investors. Revenue  
will ultimately be a constant multiple of usage, so x% usage growth  
predicts x% revenue growth. But in practice investors discount  
merely predicted revenue, so if you're measuring usage you need a  
higher growth rate to impress investors.[2]  
Startups that don't raise money are saved from hiring too  
fast because they can't afford to. But that doesn't mean you should  
avoid raising money in order to avoid this problem, any more than  
that total abstinence is the only way to avoid becoming an alcoholic.[3]  
I would not be surprised if VCs' tendency to push founders  
to overhire is not even in their own interest. They don't know how  
many of the companies that get killed by overspending might have  
done well if they'd survived. My guess is a significant number.[4]  
After reading a draft, Sam Altman wrote:"I think you should make the hiring point more strongly. I think  
it's roughly correct to say that YC's most successful companies  
have never been the fastest to hire, and one of the marks of a great  
founder is being able to resist this urge."Paul Buchheit adds:"A related problem that I see a lot is premature scaling—founders  
take a small business that isn't really working (bad unit economics,  
typically) and then scale it up because they want impressive growth  
numbers. This is similar to over-hiring in that it makes the business  
much harder to fix once it's big, plus they are bleeding cash really  
fast."  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Joe Gebbia, Jessica Livingston,  
and Geoff Ralston for reading drafts of this.

# Why It's Safe for Founders to Be Nice

August 2015I recently got an email from a founder that helped me understand  
something important: why it's safe for startup founders to be nice  
people.I grew up with a cartoon idea of a very successful businessman (in  
the cartoon it was always a man): a rapacious, cigar-smoking,  
table-thumping guy in his fifties who wins by exercising power, and  
isn't too fussy about how. As I've written before, one of  
the things that has surprised me most about startups is   
how few of  
the most successful founders are like that. Maybe successful people  
in other industries are; I don't know; but not startup founders.  
[1]I knew this empirically, but I never saw the math of why till I got  
this founder's email. In it he said he worried that he was  
fundamentally soft-hearted and tended to give away too much for  
free. He thought perhaps he needed "a little dose of sociopath-ness."I told him not to worry about it, because so long as he built  
something good enough to spread by word of mouth, he'd have a  
superlinear growth curve. If he was bad at extracting money from  
people, at worst this curve would be some constant multiple less  
than 1 of what it might have been. But a constant multiple of any  
curve is exactly the same shape. The numbers on the Y axis are  
smaller, but the curve is just as steep, and when anything grows  
at the rate of a successful startup, the Y axis will take care of  
itself.Some examples will make this clear. Suppose your company is making  
$1000 a month now, and you've made something so great that it's  
growing at 5% a week. Two years from now, you'll be making about  
$160k a month.Now suppose you're so un-rapacious that you only extract half as  
much from your users as you could. That means two years later  
you'll be making $80k a month instead of $160k. How far behind are  
you? How long will it take to catch up with where you'd have been  
if you were extracting every penny? A mere 15 weeks. After two  
years, the un-rapacious founder is only 3.5 months behind the  
rapacious one.   
[2]If you're going to optimize a number, the one to choose is your  
growth rate. Suppose as before that you only extract half as much  
from users as you could, but that you're able to grow 6% a week  
instead of 5%. Now how are you doing compared to the rapacious  
founder after two years? You're already ahead—$214k a month  
versus $160k—and pulling away fast. In another year you'll be  
making $4.4 million a month to the rapacious founder's $2 million.Obviously one case where it would help to be rapacious is when  
growth depends on that. What makes startups different is that  
usually it doesn't. Startups usually win by making something so  
great that people recommend it to their friends. And being rapacious  
not only doesn't help you do that, but probably hurts.   
[3]The reason startup founders can safely be nice is that making great  
things is compounded, and rapacity isn't.So if you're a founder, here's a deal you can make with yourself  
that will both make you happy and make your company successful.  
Tell yourself you can be as nice as you want, so long as you work  
hard on your growth rate to compensate. Most successful startups  
make that tradeoff unconsciously. Maybe if you do it consciously  
you'll do it even better.Notes[1]  
Many think successful startup founders are driven by money.  
In fact the secret weapon of the most successful founders is that  
they aren't. If they were, they'd have taken one of the acquisition  
offers that every fast-growing startup gets on the way up. What  
drives the most successful founders is the same thing that drives  
most people who make things: the company is their project.[2]  
In fact since 2 ≈ 1.05 ^ 15, the un-rapacious founder is  
always 15 weeks behind the rapacious one.[3]  
The other reason it might help to be good at squeezing money  
out of customers is that startups usually lose money at first, and  
making more per customer makes it easier to get to profitability  
before your initial funding runs out. But while it is very common  
for startups to die  
from running through their initial funding and then being unable  
to raise more, the underlying cause is usually slow growth or  
excessive spending rather than insufficient effort to extract money  
from existing customers.Thanks to Sam Altman, Harj Taggar, Jessica Livingston, and  
Geoff Ralston for reading drafts of this, and to Randall Bennett  
for being such a nice guy.

# Change Your Name

August 2015If you have a US startup called X and you don't have x.com, you  
should probably change your name.The reason is not just that people can't find you. For companies  
with mobile apps, especially, having the right domain name is not  
as critical as it used to be for getting users. The problem with  
not having the .com of your name is that it signals weakness. Unless  
you're so big that your reputation precedes you, a marginal domain  
suggests you're a marginal company. Whereas  
(as Stripe shows)  
having x.com signals strength even if it has no relation to what you  
do.Even good founders can be in denial about this. Their denial derives  
from two very powerful forces: identity, and lack of imagination.X is what we are, founders think. There's no other name as good.  
Both of which are false.You can fix the first by stepping back from the problem. Imagine  
you'd called your company something else. If you had, surely you'd  
be just as attached to that name as you are to your current one.  
The idea of switching to your current name would seem repellent.  
[1]There's nothing intrinsically great about your current name. Nearly  
all your attachment to it comes from it being attached to you.  
[2]The way to neutralize the second source of denial, your inability  
to think of other potential names, is to acknowledge that you're  
bad at naming. Naming is a completely separate skill from those  
you need to be a good founder. You can be a great startup founder  
but hopeless at thinking of names for your company.Once you acknowledge that, you stop believing there is nothing else  
you could be called. There are lots of other potential names that  
are as good or better; you just can't think of them.How do you find them? One answer is the default way to solve  
problems you're bad at: find someone else who can think of names.  
But with company names there is another possible  
approach. It turns out almost any word or word pair that is not  
an obviously bad name is a sufficiently good one, and the number  
of such domains is so large that you can find plenty that are cheap  
or even untaken. So make a list and try to buy some. That's what  
Stripe   
did. (Their search also turned up parse.com, which their  
friends at Parse took.)The reason I know that naming companies is a distinct skill orthogonal  
to the others you need in a startup is that I happen to have it.  
Back when I was running YC and did more office hours with startups,  
I would often help them find new names. 80% of the time we could  
find at least one good name in a 20 minute office hour slot.Now when I do office hours I have to focus on more important  
questions, like what the company is doing. I tell them when they  
need to change their name. But I know the power of the forces that  
have them in their grip, so I know most won't listen.   
[3]There are of course examples of startups that have succeeded without  
having the .com of their name. There are startups that have succeeded despite any  
number of different mistakes. But this mistake is less excusable  
than most. It's something that can be fixed in a couple days if  
you have sufficient discipline to acknowledge the problem.100% of the top 20 YC companies by valuation have the .com of their  
name. 94% of the top 50 do. But only 66% of companies in the current  
batch have the .com of their name. Which suggests there are lessons  
ahead for most of the rest, one way or another.  
Notes[1]  
Incidentally, this thought experiment works for  
nationality and religion too.[2]  
The liking you have for a name that has become part of your  
identity manifests itself not directly, which would be easy to  
discount, but as a collection of specious beliefs about its intrinsic  
qualities. (This too is true of nationality and religion as well.)[3]  
Sometimes founders know it's a problem that they don't have  
the .com of their name, but delusion strikes a step later in the belief that they'll  
be able to buy it despite having no evidence it's for sale. Don't  
believe a domain is for sale unless the owner has already told you  
an asking price.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Jessica Livingston, and Geoff Ralston  
for reading drafts of this.

# What Microsoft Is this the Altair Basic of?

February 2015One of the most valuable exercises you can try if you want to  
understand startups is to look at the most successful companies and  
explain why they were not as lame as they seemed when they first  
launched. Because they practically all seemed lame at first. Not  
just small, lame. Not just the first step up a big mountain. More  
like the first step into a swamp.A Basic interpreter for the Altair? How could that ever grow into  
a giant company? People sleeping on airbeds in strangers' apartments?  
A web site for college students to stalk one another? A wimpy  
little single-board computer for hobbyists that used a TV as a  
monitor? A new search engine, when there were already about 10,  
and they were all trying to de-emphasize search? These ideas didn't  
just seem small. They seemed wrong. They were the kind of ideas  
you could not merely ignore, but ridicule.Often the founders themselves didn't know why their ideas were  
promising. They were attracted to these ideas by instinct, because  
they were living in the future and  
they sensed that something was missing. But they could not have  
put into words exactly how their ugly ducklings were going to grow  
into big, beautiful swans.Most people's first impulse when they hear about a lame-sounding  
new startup idea is to make fun of it. Even a lot of people who  
should know better.When I encounter a startup with a lame-sounding idea, I ask "What  
Microsoft is this the Altair Basic of?" Now it's a puzzle, and the  
burden is on me to solve it. Sometimes I can't think of an answer,  
especially when the idea is a made-up one. But it's remarkable how  
often there does turn out to be an answer. Often it's one the  
founders themselves hadn't seen yet.Intriguingly, there are sometimes multiple answers. I talked to a  
startup a few days ago that could grow into 3 distinct Microsofts.  
They'd probably vary in size by orders of magnitude. But you can  
never predict how big a Microsoft is going to be, so in cases like  
that I encourage founders to follow whichever path is most immediately  
exciting to them. Their instincts got them this far. Why stop now?

# The Ronco Principle

January 2015No one, VC or angel, has invested in more of the top startups than  
Ron Conway. He knows what happened in every deal in the Valley,  
half the time because he arranged it.And yet he's a super nice guy. In fact, nice is not the word.  
Ronco is good. I know of zero instances in which he has behaved  
badly. It's hard even to imagine.When I first came to Silicon Valley I thought "How lucky that someone  
so powerful is so benevolent." But gradually I realized it wasn't  
luck. It was by being benevolent that Ronco became so powerful.  
All the deals he gets to invest in come to him through referrals.  
Google did. Facebook did. Twitter was a referral from Evan Williams  
himself. And the reason so many people refer deals to him is that  
he's proven himself to be a good guy.Good does not mean being a pushover. I would not want to face an  
angry Ronco. But if Ron's angry at you, it's because you did  
something wrong. Ron is so old school he's Old Testament. He will  
smite you in his just wrath, but there's no malice in it.In almost every domain there are advantages to seeming good. It  
makes people trust you. But actually being good is an expensive  
way to seem good. To an amoral person it might seem to be overkill.In some fields it might be, but apparently not in the startup world.  
Though plenty of investors are jerks, there is a clear trend among  
them: the most successful investors are also the most upstanding.   
[1]It was not always this way. I would not feel confident saying that  
about investors twenty years ago.What changed? The startup world became more transparent and more  
unpredictable. Both make it harder to seem good without actually  
being good.It's obvious why transparency has that effect. When an investor  
maltreats a founder now, it gets out. Maybe not all the way to the  
press, but other founders hear about it, and that investor  
starts to lose deals.   
[2]The effect of unpredictability is more subtle. It increases the  
work of being inconsistent. If you're going to be two-faced, you  
have to know who you should be nice to and who you can get away  
with being nasty to. In the startup world, things change so rapidly  
that you can't tell. The random college kid you talk to today might  
in a couple years be the CEO of the hottest startup in the Valley.  
If you can't tell who to be nice to, you have to be nice to everyone.  
And probably the only people who can manage that are the people who  
are genuinely good.In a sufficiently connected and unpredictable world, you can't seem  
good without being good.As often happens, Ron discovered how to be the investor of the  
future by accident. He didn't foresee the future of startup  
investing, realize it would pay to be upstanding, and force himself  
to behave that way. It would feel unnatural to him to behave any  
other way. He was already   
living in the future.Fortunately that future is not limited to the startup world. The  
startup world is more transparent and unpredictable than most, but  
almost everywhere the trend is in that direction.Notes[1]  
I'm not saying that if you sort investors by benevolence  
you've also sorted them by returns, but rather that if you do a  
scatterplot with benevolence on the x axis and returns on the y,  
you'd see a clear upward trend.[2]  
Y Combinator in particular, because it aggregates data  
from so many startups, has a pretty comprehensive view of  
investor behavior.  
Thanks to Sam Altman and Jessica Livingston for reading drafts of  
this.Japanese Translation

# What Doesn't Seem Like Work?

January 2015My father is a mathematician. For most of my childhood he worked  
for Westinghouse, modelling nuclear reactors.He was one of those lucky people who know early on what they want to  
do. When you talk to him about his childhood, there's a clear  
watershed at about age 12, when he "got interested in maths."He  
grew up in the small Welsh seacoast town of Pwllheli. As we retraced  
his walk to school on Google Street View, he said that it had been  
nice growing up in the country."Didn't it get boring when you got to be about 15?" I asked."No," he said, "by then I was interested in maths."In another conversation he told me that what he really liked was  
solving problems. To me the exercises at the end of each chapter  
in a math textbook represent work, or at best a way to reinforce  
what you learned in that chapter. To him the problems were the  
reward. The text of each chapter was just some advice about solving  
them. He said that as soon as he got a new textbook he'd immediately  
work out all the problems — to the slight annoyance of his teacher,  
since the class was supposed to work through the book gradually.Few people know so early or so certainly what they want to work on.  
But talking to my father reminded me of a heuristic the rest of us  
can use. If something that seems like work to other people doesn't  
seem like work to you, that's something you're well suited for.  
For example, a lot of programmers I know, including me, actually  
like debugging. It's not something people tend to volunteer; one  
likes it the way one likes popping zits. But you may have to like  
debugging to like programming, considering the degree to which  
programming consists of it.The stranger your tastes seem to other people, the stronger evidence  
they probably are of what you should do. When I was in college I  
used to write papers for my friends. It was quite interesting to  
write a paper for a class I wasn't taking. Plus they were always  
so relieved.It seemed curious that the same task could be painful to one person  
and pleasant to another, but I didn't realize at the time what this  
imbalance implied, because I wasn't looking for it. I didn't realize  
how hard it can be to decide what you should work on, and that you  
sometimes have to figure it out from subtle clues, like a detective  
solving a case in a mystery novel. So I bet it would help a lot  
of people to ask themselves about this explicitly. What seems like  
work to other people that doesn't seem like work to you?  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston,  
Robert Morris, and my father for reading drafts of this.Robert Morris: All About ProgrammingFrench Translation

# Don't Talk to Corp Dev

January 2015Corporate Development, aka corp dev, is the group within companies  
that buys other companies. If you're talking to someone from corp  
dev, that's why, whether you realize it yet or not.It's usually a mistake to talk to corp dev unless (a) you want to  
sell your company right now and (b) you're sufficiently likely to  
get an offer at an acceptable price. In practice that means startups  
should only talk to corp dev when they're either doing really well  
or really badly. If you're doing really badly, meaning the company  
is about to die, you may as well talk to them, because you have  
nothing to lose. And if you're doing really well, you can safely  
talk to them, because you both know the price will have to be high,  
and if they show the slightest sign of wasting your time, you'll  
be confident enough to tell them to get lost.The danger is to companies in the middle. Particularly to young  
companies that are growing fast, but haven't been doing it for long  
enough to have grown big yet. It's usually a mistake for a promising  
company less than a year old even to talk to corp dev.But it's a mistake founders constantly make. When someone from  
corp dev wants to meet, the founders tell themselves they should  
at least find out what they want. Besides, they don't want to  
offend Big Company by refusing to meet.Well, I'll tell you what they want. They want to talk about buying  
you. That's what the title "corp dev" means. So before agreeing  
to meet with someone from corp dev, ask yourselves, "Do we want to  
sell the company right now?" And if the answer is no, tell them  
"Sorry, but we're focusing on growing the company." They won't be  
offended. And certainly the founders of Big Company won't be  
offended. If anything they'll think more highly of you. You'll  
remind them of themselves. They didn't sell either; that's why  
they're in a position now to buy other companies.  
[1]Most founders who get contacted by corp dev already know what it  
means. And yet even when they know what corp dev does and know  
they don't want to sell, they take the meeting. Why do they do it?  
The same mix of denial and wishful thinking that underlies most  
mistakes founders make. It's flattering to talk to someone who wants  
to buy you. And who knows, maybe their offer will be surprisingly  
high. You should at least see what it is, right?No. If they were going to send you an offer immediately by email,  
sure, you might as well open it. But that is not how conversations  
with corp dev work. If you get an offer at all, it will be at the  
end of a long and unbelievably distracting process. And if the  
offer is surprising, it will be surprisingly low.Distractions are the thing you can least afford in a startup. And  
conversations with corp dev are the worst sort of distraction,  
because as well as consuming your attention they undermine your  
morale. One of the tricks to surviving a grueling process is not  
to stop and think how tired you are. Instead you get into a sort  
of flow.   
[2]  
Imagine what it would do to you if at mile 20 of a  
marathon, someone ran up beside you and said "You must feel really  
tired. Would you like to stop and take a rest?" Conversations  
with corp dev are like that but worse, because the suggestion of  
stopping gets combined in your mind with the imaginary high price  
you think they'll offer.And then you're really in trouble. If they can, corp dev people  
like to turn the tables on you. They like to get you to the point  
where you're trying to convince them to buy instead of them trying  
to convince you to sell. And surprisingly often they succeed.This is a very slippery slope, greased with some of the most powerful  
forces that can work on founders' minds, and attended by an experienced  
professional whose full time job is to push you down it.Their tactics in pushing you down that slope are usually fairly  
brutal. Corp dev people's whole job is to buy companies, and they  
don't even get to choose which. The only way their performance is  
measured is by how cheaply they can buy you, and the more ambitious  
ones will stop at nothing to achieve that. For example, they'll  
almost always start with a lowball offer, just to see if you'll  
take it. Even if you don't, a low initial offer will demoralize you  
and make you easier to manipulate.And that is the most innocent of their tactics. Just wait till  
you've agreed on a price and think you have a done deal, and then  
they come back and say their boss has vetoed the deal and won't do  
it for more than half the agreed upon price. Happens all the time.  
If you think investors can behave badly, it's nothing compared to  
what corp dev people can do. Even corp dev people at companies  
that are otherwise benevolent.I remember once complaining to a  
friend at Google about some nasty trick their corp dev people had  
pulled on a YC startup."What happened to Don't be Evil?" I asked."I don't think corp dev got the memo," he replied.The tactics you encounter in M&A conversations can be like nothing  
you've experienced in the otherwise comparatively   
upstanding world  
of Silicon Valley. It's as if a chunk of genetic material from the  
old-fashioned robber baron business world got incorporated into the  
startup world.  
[3]The simplest way to protect yourself is to use the trick that John  
D. Rockefeller, whose grandfather was an alcoholic, used to protect  
himself from becoming one. He once told a Sunday school class  
  
 Boys, do you know why I never became a drunkard? Because I never  
 took the first drink.  
  
Do you want to sell your company right now? Not eventually, right  
now. If not, just don't take the first meeting. They won't be  
offended. And you in turn will be guaranteed to be spared one of  
the worst experiences that can happen to a startup.If you do want to sell, there's another set of   
techniques  
 for doing  
that. But the biggest mistake founders make in dealing with corp  
dev is not doing a bad job of talking to them when they're ready  
to, but talking to them before they are. So if you remember only  
the title of this essay, you already know most of what you need to  
know about M&A in the first year.Notes[1]  
I'm not saying you should never sell. I'm saying you should  
be clear in your own mind about whether you want to sell or not,  
and not be led by manipulation or wishful thinking into trying to  
sell earlier than you otherwise would have.[2]  
In a startup, as in most competitive sports, the task at hand  
almost does this for you; you're too busy to feel tired. But when  
you lose that protection, e.g. at the final whistle, the fatigue  
hits you like a wave. To talk to corp dev is to let yourself feel  
it mid-game.[3]  
To be fair, the apparent misdeeds of corp dev people are magnified  
by the fact that they function as the face of a large organization  
that often doesn't know its own mind. Acquirers can be surprisingly  
indecisive about acquisitions, and their flakiness is indistinguishable  
from dishonesty by the time it filters down to you.Thanks to Marc Andreessen, Jessica Livingston, Geoff  
Ralston, and Qasar Younis for reading drafts of this.

# Let the Other 95% of Great Programmers In

December 2014American technology companies want the government to make immigration  
easier because they say they can't find enough programmers in the  
US. Anti-immigration people say that instead of letting foreigners  
take these jobs, we should train more Americans to be programmers.  
Who's right?The technology companies are right. What the anti-immigration people  
don't understand is that there is a huge variation in ability between  
competent programmers and exceptional ones, and while you can train  
people to be competent, you can't train them to be exceptional.  
Exceptional programmers have an aptitude for and   
interest in  
programming that is not merely the product of training.  
[1]The US has less than 5% of the world's population. Which means if  
the qualities that make someone a great programmer are evenly  
distributed, 95% of great programmers are born outside the US.The anti-immigration people have to invent some explanation to  
account for all the effort technology companies have expended trying  
to make immigration easier. So they claim it's because they want  
to drive down salaries. But if you talk to startups, you find  
practically every one over a certain size has gone through legal  
contortions to get programmers into the US, where they then  
paid them the same as they'd have paid an American. Why would they  
go to extra trouble to get programmers for the same price? The  
only explanation is that they're telling the truth: there are just  
not enough great programmers to go around.  
[2]I asked the CEO of a startup with about 70 programmers how many  
more he'd hire if he could get all the great programmers he wanted.  
He said "We'd hire 30 tomorrow morning." And this is one of the  
hot startups that always win recruiting battles. It's the same all  
over Silicon Valley. Startups are that constrained for talent.It would be great if more Americans were trained as programmers,  
but no amount of training can flip a ratio as overwhelming as 95  
to 5. Especially since programmers are being trained in other  
countries too. Barring some cataclysm, it will always be true that  
most great programmers are born outside the US. It will always be  
true that most people who are great at anything are born outside  
the US.  
[3]Exceptional performance implies immigration. A country with only  
a few percent of the world's population will be exceptional in some  
field only if there are a lot of immigrants working in it.But this whole discussion has taken something for granted: that if  
we let more great programmers into the US, they'll want to come.  
That's true now, and we don't realize how lucky we are that it is.  
If we want to keep this option open, the best way to do it is to  
take advantage of it: the more of the world's great programmers are  
here, the more the rest will want to come here.And if we don't, the US could be seriously fucked. I realize that's  
strong language, but the people dithering about this don't seem to  
realize the power of the forces at work here. Technology gives the  
best programmers huge leverage. The world market in programmers  
seems to be becoming dramatically more liquid. And since good  
people like good colleagues, that means the best programmers could  
collect in just a few hubs. Maybe mostly in one hub.What if most of the great programmers collected in one hub, and it  
wasn't here? That scenario may seem unlikely now, but it won't be  
if things change as much in the next 50 years as they did in the  
last 50.We have the potential to ensure that the US remains a technology  
superpower just by letting in a few thousand great programmers a  
year. What a colossal mistake it would be to let that opportunity  
slip. It could easily be the defining mistake this generation of  
American politicians later become famous for. And unlike other  
potential mistakes on that scale, it costs nothing to fix.So please, get on with it.  
Notes[1]  
How much better is a great programmer than an ordinary one?  
So much better that you can't even measure the difference directly.  
A great programmer doesn't merely do the same work faster. A great  
programmer will invent things an ordinary programmer would never  
even think of. This doesn't mean a great programmer is infinitely  
more valuable, because any invention has a finite market value.  
But it's easy to imagine cases where a great programmer might invent  
things worth 100x or even 1000x an average programmer's salary.[2]  
There are a handful of consulting firms that rent out big  
pools of foreign programmers they bring in on H1-B visas. By all  
means crack down on these. It should be easy to write legislation  
that distinguishes them, because they are so different from technology  
companies. But it is dishonest of the anti-immigration people to  
claim that companies like Google and Facebook are driven by the  
same motives. An influx of inexpensive but mediocre programmers  
is the last thing they'd want; it would destroy them.[3]  
Though this essay talks about programmers, the group of people  
we need to import is broader, ranging from designers to programmers  
to electrical engineers. The best one could do as a general term  
might be "digital talent." It seemed better to make the argument a  
little too narrow than to confuse everyone with a neologism.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, John Collison, Patrick Collison, Jessica  
Livingston, Geoff Ralston, Fred Wilson, and Qasar Younis for reading  
drafts of this.Spanish Translation

# How to Be an Expert in a Changing World

December 2014If the world were static, we could have monotonically increasing  
confidence in our beliefs. The more (and more varied) experience  
a belief survived, the less likely it would be false. Most people  
implicitly believe something like this about their opinions. And  
they're justified in doing so with opinions about things that don't  
change much, like human nature. But you can't trust your opinions  
in the same way about things that change, which could include  
practically everything else.When experts are wrong, it's often because they're experts on an  
earlier version of the world.Is it possible to avoid that? Can you protect yourself against  
obsolete beliefs? To some extent, yes. I spent almost a decade  
investing in early stage startups, and curiously enough protecting  
yourself against obsolete beliefs is exactly what you have to do  
to succeed as a startup investor. Most really good startup ideas  
look like bad ideas at first, and many of those look bad specifically  
because some change in the world just switched them from bad to  
good. I spent a lot of time learning to recognize such ideas, and  
the techniques I used may be applicable to ideas in general.The first step is to have an explicit belief in change. People who  
fall victim to a monotonically increasing confidence in their  
opinions are implicitly concluding the world is static. If you  
consciously remind yourself it isn't, you start to look for change.Where should one look for it? Beyond the moderately useful  
generalization that human nature doesn't change much, the unfortunate  
fact is that change is hard to predict. This is largely a tautology  
but worth remembering all the same: change that matters usually  
comes from an unforeseen quarter.So I don't even try to predict it. When I get asked in interviews  
to predict the future, I always have to struggle to come up with  
something plausible-sounding on the fly, like a student who hasn't  
prepared for an exam.  
[1]  
But it's not out of laziness that I haven't  
prepared. It seems to me that beliefs about the future are so  
rarely correct that they usually aren't worth the extra rigidity  
they impose, and that the best strategy is simply to be aggressively  
open-minded. Instead of trying to point yourself in the right  
direction, admit you have no idea what the right direction is, and  
try instead to be super sensitive to the winds of change.It's ok to have working hypotheses, even though they may constrain  
you a bit, because they also motivate you. It's exciting to chase  
things and exciting to try to guess answers. But you have to be  
disciplined about not letting your hypotheses harden into anything  
more.  
[2]I believe this passive m.o. works not just for evaluating new ideas  
but also for having them. The way to come up with new ideas is not  
to try explicitly to, but to try to solve problems and simply not  
discount weird hunches you have in the process.The winds of change originate in the unconscious minds of domain  
experts. If you're sufficiently expert in a field, any weird idea  
or apparently irrelevant question that occurs to you is ipso facto  
worth exploring.   
[3]  
 Within Y Combinator, when an idea is described  
as crazy, it's a compliment—in fact, on average probably a  
higher compliment than when an idea is described as good.Startup investors have extraordinary incentives for correcting  
obsolete beliefs. If they can realize before other investors that  
some apparently unpromising startup isn't, they can make a huge  
amount of money. But the incentives are more than just financial.  
Investors' opinions are explicitly tested: startups come to them  
and they have to say yes or no, and then, fairly quickly, they learn  
whether they guessed right. The investors who say no to a Google  
(and there were several) will remember it for the rest of their  
lives.Anyone who must in some sense bet on ideas rather than merely  
commenting on them has similar incentives. Which means anyone who  
wants such incentives can have them, by turning their comments into  
bets: if you write about a topic in some fairly durable and public  
form, you'll find you worry much more about getting things right  
than most people would in a casual conversation.  
[4]Another trick I've found to protect myself against obsolete beliefs  
is to focus initially on people rather than ideas. Though the nature  
of future discoveries is hard to predict, I've found I can predict  
quite well what sort of people will make them. Good new ideas come  
from earnest, energetic, independent-minded people.Betting on people over ideas saved me countless times as an investor.  
We thought Airbnb was a bad idea, for example. But we could tell  
the founders were earnest, energetic, and independent-minded.  
(Indeed, almost pathologically so.) So we suspended disbelief and  
funded them.This too seems a technique that should be generally applicable.  
Surround yourself with the sort of people new ideas come from. If  
you want to notice quickly when your beliefs become obsolete, you  
can't do better than to be friends with the people whose discoveries  
will make them so.It's hard enough already not to become the prisoner of your own  
expertise, but it will only get harder, because change is accelerating.  
That's not a recent trend; change has been accelerating since the  
paleolithic era. Ideas beget ideas. I don't expect that to change.  
But I could be wrong.  
Notes[1]  
My usual trick is to talk about aspects of the present that  
most people haven't noticed yet.[2]  
Especially if they become well enough known that people start  
to identify them with you. You have to be extra skeptical about  
things you want to believe, and once a hypothesis starts to be  
identified with you, it will almost certainly start to be in that  
category.[3]  
In practice "sufficiently expert" doesn't require one to be  
recognized as an expert—which is a trailing indicator in any  
case. In many fields a year of focused work plus caring a lot would  
be enough.[4]  
Though they are public and persist indefinitely, comments on  
e.g. forums and places like Twitter seem empirically to work like  
casual conversation. The threshold may be whether what you write  
has a title.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Patrick Collison, and Robert Morris  
for reading drafts of this.Spanish TranslationArabic Translation

# How You Know

December 2014I've read Villehardouin's chronicle of the Fourth Crusade at least  
two times, maybe three. And yet if I had to write down everything  
I remember from it, I doubt it would amount to much more than a  
page. Multiply this times several hundred, and I get an uneasy  
feeling when I look at my bookshelves. What use is it to read all  
these books if I remember so little from them?A few months ago, as I was reading Constance Reid's excellent  
biography of Hilbert, I figured out if not the answer to this  
question, at least something that made me feel better about it.  
She writes:  
  
 Hilbert had no patience with mathematical lectures which filled  
 the students with facts but did not teach them how to frame a  
 problem and solve it. He often used to tell them that "a perfect  
 formulation of a problem is already half its solution."  
  
That has always seemed to me an important point, and I was even  
more convinced of it after hearing it confirmed by Hilbert.But how had I come to believe in this idea in the first place? A  
combination of my own experience and other things I'd read. None  
of which I could at that moment remember! And eventually I'd forget  
that Hilbert had confirmed it too. But my increased belief in the  
importance of this idea would remain something I'd learned from  
this book, even after I'd forgotten I'd learned it.Reading and experience train your model of the world. And even if  
you forget the experience or what you read, its effect on your model  
of the world persists. Your mind is like a compiled program you've  
lost the source of. It works, but you don't know why.The place to look for what I learned from Villehardouin's chronicle  
is not what I remember from it, but my mental models of the crusades,  
Venice, medieval culture, siege warfare, and so on. Which doesn't  
mean I couldn't have read more attentively, but at least the harvest  
of reading is not so miserably small as it might seem.This is one of those things that seem obvious in retrospect. But  
it was a surprise to me and presumably would be to anyone else who  
felt uneasy about (apparently) forgetting so much they'd read.Realizing it does more than make you feel a little better about  
forgetting, though. There are specific implications.For example, reading and experience are usually "compiled" at the  
time they happen, using the state of your brain at that time. The  
same book would get compiled differently at different points in  
your life. Which means it is very much worth reading important  
books multiple times. I always used to feel some misgivings about  
rereading books. I unconsciously lumped reading together with work  
like carpentry, where having to do something again is a sign you  
did it wrong the first time. Whereas now the phrase "already read"  
seems almost ill-formed.Intriguingly, this implication isn't limited to books. Technology  
will increasingly make it possible to relive our experiences. When  
people do that today it's usually to enjoy them again (e.g. when  
looking at pictures of a trip) or to find the origin of some bug in  
their compiled code (e.g. when Stephen Fry succeeded in remembering  
the childhood trauma that prevented him from singing). But as  
technologies for recording and playing back your life improve, it  
may become common for people to relive experiences without any goal  
in mind, simply to learn from them again as one might when rereading  
a book.Eventually we may be able not just to play back experiences but  
also to index and even edit them. So although not knowing how you  
know things may seem part of being human, it may not be.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Jessica Livingston, and Robert Morris for reading   
drafts of this.Japanese Translation

# The Fatal Pinch

December 2014Many startups go through a point a few months before they die where  
although they have a significant amount of money in the bank, they're  
also losing a lot each month, and revenue growth is either nonexistent  
or mediocre. The company has, say, 6 months of runway. Or to put  
it more brutally, 6 months before they're out of business. They  
expect to avoid that by raising more from investors.  
[1]That last sentence is the fatal one.There may be nothing founders are so prone to delude themselves  
about as how interested investors will be in giving them additional  
funding. It's hard to convince investors the first time too, but  
founders expect that. What bites them the second time is a confluence  
of three forces:  
  
 The company is spending more now than it did the first time  
 it raised money. Investors have much higher standards for companies that have  
 already raised money. The company is now starting to read as a failure. The first  
 time it raised money, it was neither a success nor a failure; it  
 was too early to ask. Now it's possible to ask that question, and  
 the default answer is failure, because at this point that is the  
 default outcome.  
  
I'm going to call the situation I described in the first paragraph "the fatal pinch." I try to resist  
coining phrases, but making up a name for this situation may snap  
founders into realizing when they're in it.One of the things that makes the fatal pinch so dangerous is  
that it's self-reinforcing. Founders overestimate their chances  
of raising more money, and so are slack about reaching  
profitability, which further decreases their chances of raising  
money.Now that you know about the fatal pinch, how do you avoid it? Y Combinator tells  
founders who raise money to act as if it's the last they'll ever  
get. Because the self-reinforcing nature of this situation works  
the other way too: the less you need further investment, the easier  
it is to get.What do you do if you're already in the fatal pinch? The  
first step is to re-evaluate the probability of raising more money.  
I will now, by an amazing feat of clairvoyance, do this for you:  
the probability is zero.   
[2]Three options remain: you can shut down the company, you can increase  
how much you make, and you can decrease how much you spend.You should shut down the company if you're certain it will  
fail no matter what you do. Then at least you can give back the  
money you have left, and save yourself however many months you would  
have spent riding it down.Companies rarely have to fail though. What I'm really doing  
here is giving you the option of admitting you've already given up.If you don't want to shut down the company, that leaves increasing  
revenues and decreasing expenses. In most startups, expenses =  
people, and decreasing expenses = firing people.  
[3]  
Deciding to  
fire people is usually hard, but there's one case in which it  
shouldn't be: when there are people you already know you should  
fire but you're in denial about it. If so, now's the time.If that makes you profitable, or will enable you to make it to  
profitability on the money you have left, you've avoided the immediate  
danger.Otherwise you have three options: you either have to fire good  
people, get some or all of the employees to take less salary for a  
while, or increase revenues.Getting people to take less salary is a weak solution that will  
only work when the problem isn't too bad. If your current trajectory  
won't quite get you to profitability but you can get over the threshold  
by cutting salaries a little,  
you might be able to make the case to everyone for doing it.  
Otherwise you're probably just postponing the problem, and that  
will be obvious to the people whose salaries you're proposing to  
cut.  
[4]Which leaves two options, firing good people and making more money.  
While trying to balance them, keep in mind the eventual goal: to be  
a successful product company in the sense of having a single thing  
lots of people use.You should lean more toward firing people if the source of your  
trouble is overhiring. If you went out and hired 15 people before  
you even knew what you were building, you've created a broken  
company. You need to figure out what you're building, and it will  
probably be easier to do that with a handful of people than 15.  
Plus those 15 people might not even be the ones you need for whatever  
you end up building. So the solution may be to shrink and then  
figure out what direction to grow in. After all, you're not doing  
those 15 people any favors if you fly the company into ground with  
them aboard. They'll all lose their jobs eventually, along with  
all the time they expended on this doomed company.Whereas if you only have a handful of people, it may be better to  
focus on trying to make more money. It may seem facile to suggest  
a startup make more money, as if that could be done for the asking.  
Usually a startup is already trying as hard as it can to sell  
whatever it sells. What I'm suggesting here is not so much to try  
harder to make money but to try to make money in a different way.  
For example, if you have only one person selling while the rest are  
writing code, consider having everyone work on selling. What good  
will more code do you when you're out of business?   
If you have to write code to close a certain deal, go ahead;  
that follows from everyone working on selling. But only work on  
whatever will get you the most revenue the soonest.Another way to make money differently is to sell different things,  
and in particular to do more consultingish work. I say consultingish  
because there is a long slippery slope from making products to pure  
consulting, and you don't have to go far down it before you start  
to offer something really attractive to customers. Although your  
product may not be very appealing yet, if you're a startup your  
programmers will often be way better than the ones your customers  
have. Or you may have expertise in some new field they  
don't understand. So if you change your sales conversations  
just a little from "do you want to buy our product?" to "what do  
you need that you'd pay a lot for?" you may find it's suddenly a  
lot easier to extract money from customers.Be ruthlessly mercenary when you start doing this, though. You're  
trying to save your company from death here, so make customers pay  
a lot, quickly. And to the extent you can, try to avoid the  
worst pitfalls of consulting. The ideal thing might be if you built  
a precisely defined derivative version of your product for the  
customer, and it was otherwise a straight product sale. You keep  
the IP and no billing by the hour.In the best case, this consultingish work may not be just something  
you do to survive, but may turn out to be the thing-that-doesn't-scale that defines your  
company. Don't expect it to be, but as you dive into individual  
users' needs, keep your eyes open for narrow openings that have  
wide vistas beyond.There is usually so much demand for custom work that unless you're  
really incompetent there has to be some point down the slope of  
consulting at which you can survive. But I didn't use the term  
slippery slope by accident; customers' insatiable demand for custom  
work will always be pushing you toward the bottom. So while you'll  
probably survive, the problem now becomes to survive with the least  
damage and distraction.The good news is, plenty of successful startups have passed through  
near-death experiences and gone on to flourish. You just have to  
realize in time that you're near death. And if you're in the fatal pinch,  
you are.  
Notes[1]  
There are a handful of companies that can't reasonably expect  
to make money for the first year or two, because what they're  
building takes so long. For these companies substitute "progress"  
for "revenue growth." You're not one of these companies unless  
your initial investors agreed in advance that you were. And frankly  
even these companies wish they weren't, because the illiquidity of  
"progress" puts them at the mercy of investors.[2]  
There's a variant of the fatal pinch where your existing  
investors help you along by promising to invest more. Or rather,  
where you read them as promising to invest more, while they think  
they're just mentioning the possibility. The way to solve this  
problem, if you have 8 months of runway or less, is to try to get  
the money right now. Then you'll either get the money, in which  
case (immediate) problem solved, or at least prevent your investors  
from helping you to remain in denial about your fundraising prospects.[3]  
Obviously, if you have significant expenses other than salaries  
that you can eliminate, do it now.[4]  
Unless of course the source of the problem is that you're paying  
yourselves high salaries. If by cutting the founders' salaries to  
the minimum you need, you can make it to profitability, you should.  
But it's a bad sign if you needed to read this to realize that.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Jessica Livingston, and  
Geoff Ralston for reading drafts of this.Arabic Translation

# Mean People Fail

November 2014It struck me recently how few of the most successful people I know  
are mean. There are exceptions, but remarkably few.Meanness isn't rare. In fact, one of the things the internet has  
shown us is how mean people can be. A few decades ago, only famous  
people and professional writers got to publish their opinions. Now  
everyone can, and we can all see the long tail of  
meanness that had previously been hidden.And yet while there are clearly a lot of mean people out there,  
there are next to none among the most successful people I know.  
What's going on here? Are meanness and success inversely correlated?Part of what's going on, of course, is selection bias. I only know  
people who work in certain fields: startup founders, programmers,  
professors. I'm willing to believe that successful people in other  
fields are mean. Maybe successful hedge fund managers are mean; I  
don't know enough to say. It seems quite likely that most successful  
drug lords are mean. But there are at least big chunks of the world  
that mean people don't rule, and that territory seems to be growing.My wife and Y Combinator cofounder Jessica is one of those rare  
people who have x-ray vision for character. Being married to her  
is like standing next to an airport baggage scanner. She came to  
the startup world from investment banking, and she has always been  
struck both by how consistently successful startup founders turn  
out to be good people, and how consistently bad people fail as  
startup founders.Why? I think there are several reasons. One is that being mean  
makes you stupid. That's why I hate fights. You never do your best  
work in a fight, because fights are not sufficiently general.  
Winning is always a function of the situation and the people involved.  
You don't win fights by thinking of big ideas but by thinking of  
tricks that work in one particular case. And yet fighting is just  
as much work as thinking about real problems. Which is particularly  
painful to someone who cares how their brain is used: your brain  
goes fast but you get nowhere, like a car spinning its wheels.Startups don't win by attacking. They win by transcending. There  
are exceptions of course, but usually the way to win is to race  
ahead, not to stop and fight.Another reason mean founders lose is that they can't get the best  
people to work for them. They can hire people who will put up with  
them because they need a job. But the best people have other options.  
A mean person can't convince the best people to work for him unless  
he is super convincing. And while having the best people helps any  
organization, it's critical for startups.There is also a complementary force at work: if you want to build  
great things, it helps to be driven by a spirit of benevolence. The startup founders who end up  
richest are not the ones driven by money. The ones driven by money  
take the big acquisition offer that nearly every successful startup  
gets en route.  
[1]  
The ones who keep going are driven by something  
else. They may not say so explicitly, but they're usually trying  
to improve the world. Which means people with a desire to improve  
the world have a natural advantage.  
[2]The exciting thing is that startups are not just one random type  
of work in which meanness and success are inversely correlated.  
This kind of work is the future.For most of history success meant control of scarce resources. One  
got that by fighting, whether literally in the case of pastoral  
nomads driving hunter-gatherers into marginal lands, or metaphorically  
in the case of Gilded Age financiers contending with one another  
to assemble railroad monopolies. For most of history, success meant  
success at zero-sum games. And in most of them meanness was not a  
handicap but probably an advantage.That is changing. Increasingly the games that matter are not zero-sum.  
Increasingly you win not by fighting to get control of a scarce  
resource, but by having new ideas and building new things.  
[3]There have long been games where you won by having new ideas. In  
the third century BC, Archimedes won by doing that. At least until  
an invading Roman army killed him. Which illustrates why  
this change is happening: for new ideas to matter, you need a certain  
degree of civil order. And not just not being at war. You also  
need to prevent the sort of economic violence that nineteenth century  
magnates practiced against one another and communist countries  
practiced against their citizens. People need to feel that what  
they create can't be stolen.  
[4]That has always been the case for thinkers, which is why this trend  
began with them. When you think of successful people from history  
who weren't ruthless, you get mathematicians and writers and artists.  
The exciting thing is that their m.o. seems to be spreading. The  
games played by intellectuals are leaking into the real world, and  
this is reversing the historical polarity of the relationship between  
meanness and success.So I'm really glad I stopped to think about this. Jessica and I  
have always worked hard to teach our kids not to be mean. We  
tolerate noise and mess and junk food, but not meanness. And now  
I have both an additional reason to crack down on it, and an  
additional argument to use when I do: that being mean makes you  
fail.  
Notes[1]  
I'm not saying all founders who take big acquisition offers  
are driven only by money, but rather that those who don't aren't.  
Plus one can have benevolent motives for being driven by money — for   
example, to take care of one's family, or to be free to work  
on projects that improve the world.[2]  
It's unlikely that every successful startup improves the  
world. But their founders, like parents, truly believe they do.  
Successful founders are in love with their companies. And while  
this sort of love is as blind as the love people have for one  
another, it is genuine.[3]  
Peter   
Thiel would point out that successful founders still  
get rich from controlling monopolies, just monopolies they create  
rather than ones they capture. And while this is largely true, it  
means a big change in the sort of person who wins.[4]  
To be fair, the Romans didn't mean to kill Archimedes. The  
Roman commander specifically ordered that he be spared. But he got  
killed in the chaos anyway.In sufficiently disordered times, even thinking requires  
control of scarce resources, because living at all is a scarce  
resource.Thanks to Sam Altman, Ron Conway, Daniel Gackle, Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris,  
Geoff Ralston, and Fred Wilson for reading drafts of this.Portuguese TranslationJapanese TranslationArabic Translation

# Before the Startup

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2014(This essay is derived from a guest lecture in Sam Altman's startup class at  
Stanford. It's intended for college students, but much of it is  
applicable to potential founders at other ages.)One of the advantages of having kids is that when you have to give  
advice, you can ask yourself "what would I tell my own kids?" My  
kids are little, but I can imagine what I'd tell them about startups  
if they were in college, and that's what I'm going to tell you.Startups are very counterintuitive. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's  
just because knowledge about them hasn't permeated our culture yet.  
But whatever the reason, starting a startup is a task where you  
can't always trust your instincts.It's like skiing in that way. When you first try skiing and you  
want to slow down, your instinct is to lean back. But if you lean  
back on skis you fly down the hill out of control. So part of  
learning to ski is learning to suppress that impulse. Eventually  
you get new habits, but at first it takes a conscious effort. At  
first there's a list of things you're trying to remember as you  
start down the hill.Startups are as unnatural as skiing, so there's a similar list for  
startups. Here I'm going to give you the first part of it — the things  
to remember if you want to prepare yourself to start a startup.  
CounterintuitiveThe first item on it is the fact I already mentioned: that startups  
are so weird that if you trust your instincts, you'll make a lot  
of mistakes. If you know nothing more than this, you may at least  
pause before making them.When I was running Y Combinator I used to joke that our function  
was to tell founders things they would ignore. It's really true.  
Batch after batch, the YC partners warn founders about mistakes  
they're about to make, and the founders ignore them, and then come  
back a year later and say "I wish we'd listened."Why do the founders ignore the partners' advice? Well, that's the  
thing about counterintuitive ideas: they contradict your intuitions.  
They seem wrong. So of course your first impulse is to disregard  
them. And in fact my joking description is not merely the curse  
of Y Combinator but part of its raison d'etre. If founders' instincts  
already gave them the right answers, they wouldn't need us. You  
only need other people to give you advice that surprises you. That's  
why there are a lot of ski instructors and not many running  
instructors.  
[1]You can, however, trust your instincts about people. And in fact  
one of the most common mistakes young founders make is not to  
do that enough. They get involved with people who seem impressive,  
but about whom they feel some misgivings personally. Later when  
things blow up they say "I knew there was something off about him,  
but I ignored it because he seemed so impressive."If you're thinking about getting involved with someone — as a  
cofounder, an employee, an investor, or an acquirer — and you  
have misgivings about them, trust your gut. If someone seems  
slippery, or bogus, or a jerk, don't ignore it.This is one case where it pays to be self-indulgent. Work with  
people you genuinely like, and you've known long enough to be sure.  
ExpertiseThe second counterintuitive point is that it's not that important  
to know a lot about startups. The way to succeed in a startup is  
not to be an expert on startups, but to be an expert on your users  
and the problem you're solving for them.  
Mark Zuckerberg didn't succeed because he was an expert on startups.  
He succeeded despite being a complete noob at startups, because he  
understood his users really well.If you don't know anything about, say, how to raise an angel round,  
don't feel bad on that account. That sort of thing you can learn  
when you need to, and forget after you've done it.In fact, I worry it's not merely unnecessary to learn in great  
detail about the mechanics of startups, but possibly somewhat  
dangerous. If I met an undergrad who knew all about convertible  
notes and employee agreements and (God forbid) class FF stock, I  
wouldn't think "here is someone who is way ahead of their peers."  
It would set off alarms. Because another of the characteristic  
mistakes of young founders is to go through the motions of starting  
a startup. They make up some plausible-sounding idea, raise money  
at a good valuation, rent a cool office, hire a bunch of people.  
From the outside that seems like what startups do. But the next  
step after rent a cool office and hire a bunch of people is: gradually  
realize how completely fucked they are, because while imitating all  
the outward forms of a startup they have neglected the one thing  
that's actually essential: making something people want.  
GameWe saw this happen so often that we made up a name for it: playing  
house. Eventually I realized why it was happening. The reason  
young founders go through the motions of starting a startup is  
because that's what they've been trained to do for their whole lives  
up to that point. Think about what you have to do to get into  
college, for example. Extracurricular activities, check. Even in  
college classes most of the work is as artificial as running laps.I'm not attacking the educational system for being this way. There  
will always be a certain amount of fakeness in the work you do when  
you're being taught something, and if you measure their performance  
it's inevitable that people will exploit the difference to the point  
where much of what you're measuring is artifacts of the fakeness.I confess I did it myself in college. I found that in a lot of  
classes there might only be 20 or 30 ideas that were the right shape  
to make good exam questions. The way I studied for exams in these  
classes was not (except incidentally) to master the material taught  
in the class, but to make a list of potential exam questions and  
work out the answers in advance. When I walked into the final, the  
main thing I'd be feeling was curiosity about which of my questions  
would turn up on the exam. It was like a game.It's not surprising that after being trained for their whole lives  
to play such games, young founders' first impulse on starting a  
startup is to try to figure out the tricks for winning at this new  
game. Since fundraising appears to be the measure of success for  
startups (another classic noob mistake), they always want to know what the  
tricks are for convincing investors. We tell them the best way to  
convince investors is to make a startup  
that's actually doing well, meaning growing fast, and then simply  
tell investors so. Then they want to know what the tricks are for  
growing fast. And we have to tell them the best way to do that is  
simply to make something people want.So many of the conversations YC partners have with young founders  
begin with the founder asking "How do we..." and the partner replying  
"Just..."Why do the founders always make things so complicated? The reason,  
I realized, is that they're looking for the trick.So this is the third counterintuitive thing to remember about  
startups: starting a startup is where gaming the system stops  
working. Gaming the system may continue to work if you go to work  
for a big company. Depending on how broken the company is, you can  
succeed by sucking up to the right people, giving the impression  
of productivity, and so on.   
[2]  
But that doesn't work with startups.  
There is no boss to trick, only users, and all users care about is  
whether your product does what they want. Startups are as impersonal  
as physics. You have to make something people want, and you prosper  
only to the extent you do.The dangerous thing is, faking does work to some degree on investors.  
If you're super good at sounding like you know what you're talking  
about, you can fool investors for at least one and perhaps even two  
rounds of funding. But it's not in your interest to. The company  
is ultimately doomed. All you're doing is wasting your own time  
riding it down.So stop looking for the trick. There are tricks in startups, as  
there are in any domain, but they are an order of magnitude less  
important than solving the real problem. A founder who knows nothing  
about fundraising but has made something users love will have an  
easier time raising money than one who knows every trick in the  
book but has a flat usage graph. And more importantly, the founder  
who has made something users love is the one who will go on to  
succeed after raising the money.Though in a sense it's bad news in that you're deprived of one of  
your most powerful weapons, I think it's exciting that gaming the  
system stops working when you start a startup. It's exciting that  
there even exist parts of the world where you win by doing good  
work. Imagine how depressing the world would be if it were all  
like school and big companies, where you either have to spend a lot  
of time on bullshit things or lose to people who do.  
[3]  
I would  
have been delighted if I'd realized in college that there were parts  
of the real world where gaming the system mattered less than others,  
and a few where it hardly mattered at all. But there are, and this  
variation is one of the most important things to consider when  
you're thinking about your future. How do you win in each type of  
work, and what would you like to win by doing?  
[4]  
All-ConsumingThat brings us to our fourth counterintuitive point: startups are  
all-consuming. If you start a startup, it will take over your life  
to a degree you cannot imagine. And if your startup succeeds, it  
will take over your life for a long time: for several years at the  
very least, maybe for a decade, maybe for the rest of your working  
life. So there is a real opportunity cost here.Larry Page may seem to have an enviable life, but there are aspects  
of it that are unenviable. Basically at 25 he started running as  
fast as he could and it must seem to him that he hasn't stopped to  
catch his breath since. Every day new shit happens in the Google  
empire that only the CEO can deal with, and he, as CEO, has to deal  
with it. If he goes on vacation for even a week, a whole week's  
backlog of shit accumulates. And he has to bear this uncomplainingly,  
partly because as the company's daddy he can never show fear or  
weakness, and partly because billionaires get less than zero sympathy  
if they talk about having difficult lives. Which has the strange  
side effect that the difficulty of being a successful startup founder  
is concealed from almost everyone except those who've done it.Y Combinator has now funded several companies that can be called  
big successes, and in every single case the founders say the same  
thing. It never gets any easier. The nature of the problems change.  
You're worrying about construction delays at your London office  
instead of the broken air conditioner in your studio apartment.  
But the total volume of worry never decreases; if anything it  
increases.Starting a successful startup is similar to having kids in that  
it's like a button you push that changes your life irrevocably.  
And while it's truly wonderful having kids, there are a lot of  
things that are easier to do before you have them than after. Many  
of which will make you a better parent when you do have kids. And  
since you can delay pushing the button for a while, most people in  
rich countries do.Yet when it comes to startups, a lot of people seem to think they're  
supposed to start them while they're still in college. Are you  
crazy? And what are the universities thinking? They go out of  
their way to ensure their students are well supplied with contraceptives,  
and yet they're setting up entrepreneurship programs and startup  
incubators left and right.To be fair, the universities have their hand forced here. A lot  
of incoming students are interested in startups. Universities are,  
at least de facto, expected to prepare them for their careers. So  
students who want to start startups hope universities can teach  
them about startups. And whether universities can do this or not,  
there's some pressure to claim they can, lest they lose applicants  
to other universities that do.Can universities teach students about startups? Yes and no. They  
can teach students about startups, but as I explained before, this  
is not what you need to know. What you need to learn about are the  
needs of your own users, and you can't do that until you actually  
start the company.  
[5]  
So starting a startup is intrinsically  
something you can only really learn by doing it. And it's impossible  
to do that in college, for the reason I just explained: startups  
take over your life. You can't start a startup for real as a  
student, because if you start a startup for real you're not a student  
anymore. You may be nominally a student for a bit, but you won't even  
be that for long.  
[6]Given this dichotomy, which of the two paths should you take? Be  
a real student and not start a startup, or start a real startup and  
not be a student? I can answer that one for you. Do not start a  
startup in college. How to start a startup is just a subset of a  
bigger problem you're trying to solve: how to have a good life.  
And though starting a startup can be part of a good life for a lot  
of ambitious people, age 20 is not the optimal time to do it.  
Starting a startup is like a brutally fast depth-first search. Most  
people should still be searching breadth-first at 20.You can do things in your early 20s that you can't do as well before  
or after, like plunge deeply into projects on a whim and travel  
super cheaply with no sense of a deadline. For unambitious people,  
this sort of thing is the dreaded "failure to launch," but for the  
ambitious ones it can be an incomparably valuable sort of exploration.  
If you start a startup at 20 and you're sufficiently successful,  
you'll never get to do it.  
[7]Mark Zuckerberg will never get to bum around a foreign country. He  
can do other things most people can't, like charter jets to fly him  
to foreign countries. But success has taken a lot of the serendipity  
out of his life. Facebook is running him as much as he's running  
Facebook. And while it can be very cool to be in the grip of a  
project you consider your life's work, there are advantages to  
serendipity too, especially early in life. Among other things it  
gives you more options to choose your life's work from.There's not even a tradeoff here. You're not sacrificing anything  
if you forgo starting a startup at 20, because you're more likely  
to succeed if you wait. In the unlikely case that you're 20 and  
one of your side projects takes off like Facebook did, you'll face  
a choice of running with it or not, and it may be reasonable to run  
with it. But the usual way startups take off is for the founders  
to make them take off, and it's gratuitously  
stupid to do that at 20.  
TryShould you do it at any age? I realize I've made startups sound  
pretty hard. If I haven't, let me try again: starting a startup  
is really hard. What if it's too hard? How can you tell if you're  
up to this challenge?The answer is the fifth counterintuitive point: you can't tell. Your  
life so far may have given you some idea what your prospects might  
be if you tried to become a mathematician, or a professional football  
player. But unless you've had a very strange life you haven't done  
much that was like being a startup founder.  
Starting a startup will change you a lot. So what you're trying  
to estimate is not just what you are, but what you could grow into,  
and who can do that?For the past 9 years it was my job to predict whether people would  
have what it took to start successful startups. It was easy to  
tell how smart they were, and most people reading this will be over  
that threshold. The hard part was predicting how tough and ambitious they would become. There  
may be no one who has more experience at trying to predict that,  
so I can tell you how much an expert can know about it, and the  
answer is: not much. I learned to keep a completely open mind about  
which of the startups in each batch would turn out to be the stars.The founders sometimes think they know. Some arrive feeling sure  
they will ace Y Combinator just as they've aced every one of the (few,  
artificial, easy) tests they've faced in life so far. Others arrive  
wondering how they got in, and hoping YC doesn't discover whatever  
mistake caused it to accept them. But there is little correlation  
between founders' initial attitudes and how well their companies  
do.I've read that the same is true in the military — that the  
swaggering recruits are no more likely to turn out to be really  
tough than the quiet ones. And probably for the same reason: that  
the tests involved are so different from the ones in their previous  
lives.If you're absolutely terrified of starting a startup, you probably  
shouldn't do it. But if you're merely unsure whether you're up to  
it, the only way to find out is to try. Just not now.  
IdeasSo if you want to start a startup one day, what should you do in  
college? There are only two things you need initially: an idea and  
cofounders. And the m.o. for getting both is the same. Which leads  
to our sixth and last counterintuitive point: that the way to get  
startup ideas is not to try to think of startup ideas.I've written a whole essay on this,  
so I won't repeat it all here. But the short version is that if  
you make a conscious effort to think of startup ideas, the ideas  
you come up with will not merely be bad, but bad and plausible-sounding,  
meaning you'll waste a lot of time on them before realizing they're  
bad.The way to come up with good startup ideas is to take a step back.  
Instead of making a conscious effort to think of startup ideas,  
turn your mind into the type that startup ideas form in without any  
conscious effort. In fact, so unconsciously that you don't even  
realize at first that they're startup ideas.This is not only possible, it's how Apple, Yahoo, Google, and  
Facebook all got started. None of these companies were even meant  
to be companies at first. They were all just side projects. The  
best startups almost have to start as side projects, because great  
ideas tend to be such outliers that your conscious mind would reject  
them as ideas for companies.Ok, so how do you turn your mind into the type that startup ideas  
form in unconsciously? (1) Learn a lot about things that matter,  
then (2) work on problems that interest you (3) with people you  
like and respect. The third part, incidentally, is how you get  
cofounders at the same time as the idea.The first time I wrote that paragraph, instead of "learn a lot about  
things that matter," I wrote "become good at some technology." But  
that prescription, though sufficient, is too narrow. What was  
special about Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia was not that they were  
experts in technology. They were good at design, and perhaps even  
more importantly, they were good at organizing groups and making  
projects happen. So you don't have to work on technology per se,  
so long as you work on problems demanding enough to stretch you.What kind of problems are those? That is very hard to answer in  
the general case. History is full of examples of young people who  
were working on important problems that no  
one else at the time thought were important, and in particular  
that their parents didn't think were important. On the other hand,  
history is even fuller of examples of parents who thought their  
kids were wasting their time and who were right. So how do you  
know when you're working on real stuff?  
[8]I know how I know. Real problems are interesting, and I am  
self-indulgent in the sense that I always want to work on interesting  
things, even if no one else cares about them (in fact, especially  
if no one else cares about them), and find it very hard to make  
myself work on boring things, even if they're supposed to be  
important.My life is full of case after case where I worked on something just  
because it seemed interesting, and it turned out later to be useful  
in some worldly way. Y  
Combinator itself was something I only did because it seemed  
interesting. So I seem to have some sort of internal compass that  
helps me out. But I don't know what other people have in their  
heads. Maybe if I think more about this I can come up with heuristics  
for recognizing genuinely interesting problems, but for the moment  
the best I can offer is the hopelessly question-begging advice that  
if you have a taste for genuinely interesting problems, indulging  
it energetically is the best way to prepare yourself for a startup.  
And indeed, probably also the best way to live.  
[9]But although I can't explain in the general case what counts as an  
interesting problem, I can tell you about a large subset of them.  
If you think of technology as something that's spreading like a  
sort of fractal stain, every moving point on the edge represents  
an interesting problem. So one guaranteed way to turn your mind  
into the type that has good startup ideas is to get yourself to the  
leading edge of some technology — to cause yourself, as Paul  
Buchheit put it, to "live in the future." When you reach that point,  
ideas that will seem to other people uncannily prescient will seem  
obvious to you. You may not realize they're startup ideas, but  
you'll know they're something that ought to exist.For example, back at Harvard in the mid 90s a fellow grad student  
of my friends Robert and Trevor wrote his own voice over IP software.  
He didn't mean it to be a startup, and he never tried to turn it  
into one. He just wanted to talk to his girlfriend in Taiwan without  
paying for long distance calls, and since he was an expert on  
networks it seemed obvious to him that the way to do it was turn  
the sound into packets and ship it over the Internet. He never did  
any more with his software than talk to his girlfriend, but this  
is exactly the way the best startups get started.So strangely enough the optimal thing to do in college if you want  
to be a successful startup founder is not some sort of new, vocational  
version of college focused on "entrepreneurship." It's the classic  
version of college as education for its own sake. If you want to  
start a startup after college, what you should do in college is  
learn powerful things. And if you have genuine intellectual  
curiosity, that's what you'll naturally tend to do if you just  
follow your own inclinations.  
[10]The component of entrepreneurship that really matters is domain  
expertise. The way to become Larry Page was to become an expert  
on search. And the way to become an expert on search was to be  
driven by genuine curiosity, not some ulterior motive.At its best, starting a startup is merely an ulterior motive for  
curiosity. And you'll do it best if you introduce the ulterior  
motive toward the end of the process.So here is the ultimate advice for young would-be startup founders,  
boiled down to two words: just learn.  
Notes[1]  
Some founders listen more than others, and this tends to be a  
predictor of success. One of the things I  
remember about the Airbnbs during YC is how intently they listened.[2]  
In fact, this is one of the reasons startups are possible. If  
big companies weren't plagued by internal inefficiencies, they'd  
be proportionately more effective, leaving less room for startups.[3]  
In a startup you have to spend a lot of time on schleps, but this sort of work is merely  
unglamorous, not bogus.[4]  
What should you do if your true calling is gaming the system?  
Management consulting.[5]  
The company may not be incorporated, but if you start to get  
significant numbers of users, you've started it, whether you realize  
it yet or not.[6]  
It shouldn't be that surprising that colleges can't teach  
students how to be good startup founders, because they can't teach  
them how to be good employees either.The way universities "teach" students how to be employees is to  
hand off the task to companies via internship programs. But you  
couldn't do the equivalent thing for startups, because by definition  
if the students did well they would never come back.[7]  
Charles Darwin was 22 when he received an invitation to travel  
aboard the HMS Beagle as a naturalist. It was only because he was  
otherwise unoccupied, to a degree that alarmed his family, that he  
could accept it. And yet if he hadn't we probably would not know  
his name.[8]  
Parents can sometimes be especially conservative in this  
department. There are some whose definition of important problems  
includes only those on the critical path to med school.[9]  
I did manage to think of a heuristic for detecting whether you  
have a taste for interesting ideas: whether you find known boring  
ideas intolerable. Could you endure studying literary theory, or  
working in middle management at a large company?[10]  
In fact, if your goal is to start a startup, you can stick  
even more closely to the ideal of a liberal education than past  
generations have. Back when students focused mainly on getting a  
job after college, they thought at least a little about how the  
courses they took might look to an employer. And perhaps even  
worse, they might shy away from taking a difficult class lest they  
get a low grade, which would harm their all-important GPA. Good  
news: users don't care what your GPA  
was. And I've never heard of investors caring either. Y Combinator  
certainly never asks what classes you took in college or what grades  
you got in them.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, John Collison, Patrick  
Collison, Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris, Geoff Ralston, and  
Fred Wilson for reading drafts of this.Arabic Translation

# How to Raise Money

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
September 2013Most startups that raise money do it more than once. A typical  
trajectory might be (1) to get started with a few tens of thousands  
from something like Y Combinator or individual angels, then   
(2) raise a few hundred thousand to a few million to build the company,  
and then (3) once the company is clearly succeeding, raise one or  
more later rounds to accelerate growth.Reality can be messier. Some companies raise money twice in phase  
2. Others skip phase 1 and go straight to phase 2. And at Y Combinator   
we get an increasing number of companies that have already  
raised amounts in the hundreds of thousands. But the three phase  
path is at least the one about which individual startups' paths  
oscillate.This essay focuses on phase 2 fundraising. That's the type the  
startups we fund are doing on Demo Day, and this essay is the advice  
we give them.  
ForcesFundraising is hard in both senses: hard like lifting a heavy weight,  
and hard like solving a puzzle. It's hard like lifting a weight  
because it's intrinsically hard to convince people to part with  
large sums of money. That problem is irreducible; it should be  
hard. But much of the other kind of difficulty can be eliminated.  
Fundraising only seems a puzzle because it's an alien world to most  
founders, and I hope to fix that by supplying a map through it.To founders, the behavior of investors is often opaque — partly  
because their motivations are obscure, but partly because they  
deliberately mislead you. And the misleading ways of investors  
combine horribly with the wishful thinking of inexperienced founders.  
At YC we're always warning founders about this danger, and investors  
are probably more circumspect with YC startups than with other  
companies they talk to, and even so we witness a constant series  
of explosions as these two volatile components combine.  
[1]If you're an inexperienced founder, the only way to survive is by  
imposing external constraints on yourself. You can't trust your  
intuitions. I'm going to give you a set of rules here that will  
get you through this process if anything will. At certain moments  
you'll be tempted to ignore them. So rule number zero is: these  
rules exist for a reason. You wouldn't need a rule to keep you  
going in one direction if there weren't powerful forces pushing you  
in another.The ultimate source of the forces acting on you are the forces  
acting on investors. Investors are pinched between two kinds of  
fear: fear of investing in startups that fizzle, and fear of missing  
out on startups that take off. The cause of all this fear is the  
very thing that makes startups such attractive investments: the  
successful ones grow very fast. But that fast growth means investors  
can't wait around. If you wait till a startup is obviously a  
success, it's too late. To get the really high returns, you have  
to invest in startups when it's still unclear how they'll do. But  
that in turn makes investors nervous they're about to invest in a  
flop. As indeed they often are.What investors would like to do, if they could, is wait. When a  
startup is only a few months old, every week that passes gives you  
significantly more information about them. But if you wait too  
long, other investors might take the deal away from you. And of  
course the other investors are all subject to the same forces. So  
what tends to happen is that they all wait as long as they can,  
then when some act the rest have to.  
Don't raise money unless you want it and it wants you.Such a high proportion of successful startups raise money that it  
might seem fundraising is one of the defining qualities of a startup.  
Actually it isn't. Rapid growth is what  
makes a company a startup. Most companies in a position to grow  
rapidly find that (a) taking outside money helps them grow faster,  
and (b) their growth potential makes it easy to attract such money.  
It's so common for both (a) and (b) to be true of a successful  
startup that practically all do raise outside money. But there may  
be cases where a startup either wouldn't want to grow faster, or  
outside money wouldn't help them to, and if you're one of them,  
don't raise money.The other time not to raise money is when you won't be able to. If  
you try to raise money before you can convince  
investors, you'll not only waste your time, but also burn your  
reputation with those investors.  
Be in fundraising mode or not.One of the things that surprises founders most about fundraising  
is how distracting it is. When you start fundraising, everything  
else grinds to a halt. The problem is not the time fundraising  
consumes but that it becomes the top idea in  
your mind. A startup can't endure that level of distraction  
for long. An early stage startup grows mostly because the founders  
make it grow, and if the founders look away,  
growth usually drops sharply.Because fundraising is so distracting, a startup should either be  
in fundraising mode or not. And when you do decide to raise money,  
you should focus your whole attention on it so you can get it done  
quickly and get back to work.  
[2]You can take money from investors when you're not in fundraising  
mode. You just can't expend any attention on it. There are two  
things that take attention: convincing investors, and negotiating  
with them. So when you're not in fundraising mode, you should take  
money from investors only if they require no convincing, and are  
willing to invest on terms you'll take without negotiation. For  
example, if a reputable investor is willing to invest on a convertible  
note, using standard paperwork, that is either uncapped or capped  
at a good valuation, you can take that without having to think.  
[3]  
The terms will be whatever they turn out to be in your next  
equity round. And "no convincing" means just that: zero time spent  
meeting with investors or preparing materials for them. If an  
investor says they're ready to invest, but they need you to come  
in for one meeting to meet some of the partners, tell them no, if  
you're not in fundraising mode, because that's fundraising.   
[4]  
Tell them politely; tell them you're focusing on the company right  
now, and that you'll get back to them when you're fundraising; but  
do not get sucked down the slippery slope.Investors will try to lure you into fundraising when you're not.  
It's great for them if they can, because they can thereby get a  
shot at you before everyone else. They'll send you emails saying  
they want to meet to learn more about you. If you get cold-emailed  
by an associate at a VC firm, you shouldn't meet even if you are  
in fundraising mode. Deals don't happen that way.  
[5]  
But even  
if you get an email from a partner you should try to delay meeting  
till you're in fundraising mode. They may say they just want to  
meet and chat, but investors never just want to meet and chat. What  
if they like you? What if they start to talk about giving you  
money? Will you be able to resist having that conversation? Unless  
you're experienced enough at fundraising to have a casual conversation  
with investors that stays casual, it's safer to tell them that you'd  
be happy to later, when you're fundraising, but that right now you  
need to focus on the company.  
[6]Companies that are successful at raising money in phase 2 sometimes  
tack on a few investors after leaving fundraising mode. This is  
fine; if fundraising went well, you'll be able to do it without  
spending time convincing them or negotiating about terms.  
Get introductions to investors.Before you can talk to investors, you have to be introduced to them.  
If you're presenting at a Demo Day, you'll be introduced to a whole  
bunch simultaneously. But even if you are, you should supplement  
these with intros you collect yourself.Do you have to be introduced? In phase 2, yes. Some investors  
will let you email them a business plan, but you can tell from the  
way their sites are organized that they don't really want startups  
to approach them directly.Intros vary greatly in effectiveness. The best type of intro is  
from a well-known investor who has just invested in you. So when  
you get an investor to commit, ask them to introduce you to other  
investors they respect.  
[7]  
The next best type of intro is from a  
founder of a company they've funded. You can also get intros from  
other people in the startup community, like lawyers and reporters.There are now sites like AngelList, FundersClub, and WeFunder that  
can introduce you to investors. We recommend startups treat them  
as auxiliary sources of money. Raise money first from leads you  
get yourself. Those will on average be better investors. Plus  
you'll have an easier time raising money on these sites once you  
can say you've already raised some from well-known investors.  
Hear no till you hear yes.Treat investors as saying no till they unequivocally say yes, in  
the form of a definite offer with no contingencies.I mentioned earlier that investors prefer to wait if they can.  
What's particularly dangerous for founders is the way they wait.  
Essentially, they lead you on. They seem like they're about to  
invest right up till the moment they say no. If they even say no.  
Some of the worse ones never actually do say no; they just stop  
replying to your emails. They hope that way to get a free option  
on investing. If they decide later that they want to invest — usually  
because they've heard you're a hot deal — they can pretend they  
just got distracted and then restart the conversation as if they'd  
been about to.  
[8]That's not the worst thing investors will do. Some will use language  
that makes it sound as if they're committing, but which doesn't  
actually commit them. And wishful thinking founders are happy to  
meet them half way.  
[9]Fortunately, the next rule is a tactic for neutralizing this behavior.  
But to work it depends on you not being tricked by the no that  
sounds like yes. It's so common for founders to be misled/mistaken  
about this that we designed a protocol to fix the  
problem. If you believe an investor has committed, get them to  
confirm it. If you and they have different views of reality, whether  
the source of the discrepancy is their sketchiness or your wishful  
thinking, the prospect of confirming a commitment in writing will  
flush it out. And till they confirm, regard them as saying no.  
Do breadth-first search weighted by expected value.When you talk to investors your m.o. should be breadth-first search,  
weighted by expected value. You should always talk to investors  
in parallel rather than serially. You can't afford the time it  
takes to talk to investors serially, plus if you only talk to one  
investor at a time, they don't have the pressure of other investors  
to make them act. But you shouldn't pay the same attention to every  
investor, because some are more promising prospects than others.  
The optimal solution is to talk to all potential investors in  
parallel, but give higher priority to the more promising ones.   
[10]Expected value = how likely an investor is to say yes, multiplied  
by how good it would be if they did. So for example, an eminent  
investor who would invest a lot, but will be hard to convince, might  
have the same expected value as an obscure angel who won't invest  
much, but will be easy to convince. Whereas an obscure angel who  
will only invest a small amount, and yet needs to meet multiple  
times before making up his mind, has very low expected value. Meet  
such investors last, if at all.   
[11]Doing breadth-first search weighted by expected value will save you  
from investors who never explicitly say no but merely drift away,  
because you'll drift away from them at the same rate. It protects  
you from investors who flake in much the same way that a distributed  
algorithm protects you from processors that fail. If some investor  
isn't returning your emails, or wants to have lots of meetings but  
isn't progressing toward making you an offer, you automatically  
focus less on them. But you have to be disciplined about assigning  
probabilities. You can't let how much you want an investor influence  
your estimate of how much they want you.  
Know where you stand.How do you judge how well you're doing with an investor, when  
investors habitually seem more positive than they are? By looking  
at their actions rather than their words. Every investor has some  
track they need to move along from the first conversation to wiring  
the money, and you should always know what that track consists of,  
where you are on it, and how fast you're moving forward.Never leave a meeting with an investor without asking what happens  
next. What more do they need in order to decide? Do they need  
another meeting with you? To talk about what? And how soon? Do  
they need to do something internally, like talk to their partners,  
or investigate some issue? How long do they expect it to take?  
Don't be too pushy, but know where you stand. If investors are  
vague or resist answering such questions, assume the worst; investors  
who are seriously interested in you will usually be happy to talk  
about what has to happen between now and wiring the money, because  
they're already running through that in their heads.   
[12]If you're experienced at negotiations, you already know how to ask  
such questions.  
[13]  
If you're not, there's a trick you can use  
in this situation. Investors know you're inexperienced at raising  
money. Inexperience there doesn't make you unattractive. Being a  
noob at technology would, if you're starting a technology startup,  
but not being a noob at fundraising. Larry and Sergey were noobs  
at fundraising. So you can just confess that you're inexperienced  
at this and ask how their process works and where you are in it.  
[14]  
Get the first commitment.The biggest factor in most investors' opinions of you is the opinion  
of other investors. Once you start getting  
investors to commit, it becomes increasingly easy to get more to.  
But the other side of this coin is that it's often hard to get the  
first commitment.Getting the first substantial offer can be half the total difficulty  
of fundraising. What counts as a substantial offer depends on who  
it's from and how much it is. Money from friends and family doesn't  
usually count, no matter how much. But if you get $50k from a well  
known VC firm or angel investor, that will usually be enough to set  
things rolling.  
[15]  
Close committed money.It's not a deal till the money's in the bank. I often hear  
inexperienced founders say things like "We've raised $800,000,"  
only to discover that zero of it is in the bank so far. Remember  
the twin fears that torment investors? The fear of missing out  
that makes them jump early, and the fear of jumping onto a turd  
that results? This is a market where people are exceptionally prone  
to buyer's remorse. And it's also one that furnishes them plenty  
of excuses to gratify it. The public markets snap startup investing  
around like a whip. If the Chinese economy blows up tomorrow, all  
bets are off. But there are lots of surprises for individual  
startups too, and they tend to be concentrated around fundraising.  
Tomorrow a big competitor could appear, or you could get C&Ded, or  
your cofounder could quit.  
[16]Even a day's delay can bring news that causes an investor to change  
their mind. So when someone commits, get the money. Knowing where  
you stand doesn't end when they say they'll invest. After they say  
yes, know what the timetable is for getting the money, and then  
babysit that process till it happens. Institutional investors have  
people in charge of wiring money, but you may have to hunt angels  
down in person to collect a check.Inexperienced investors are the ones most likely to get buyer's  
remorse. Established ones have learned to treat saying yes as like  
diving off a diving board, and they also have more brand to preserve.  
But I've heard of cases of even top-tier VC firms welching on deals.  
Avoid investors who don't "lead."Since getting the first offer is most of the difficulty of fundraising,  
that should be part of your calculation of expected value when you  
start. You have to estimate not just the probability that an  
investor will say yes, but the probability that they'd be the first  
to say yes, and the latter is not simply a constant fraction of the  
former. Some investors are known for deciding quickly, and those  
are extra valuable early on.Conversely, an investor who will only invest once other investors  
have is worthless initially. And while most investors are influenced  
by how interested other investors are in you, there are some who  
have an explicit policy of only investing after other investors  
have. You can recognize this contemptible subspecies of investor  
because they often talk about "leads." They say that they don't  
lead, or that they'll invest once you have a lead. Sometimes they  
even claim to be willing to lead themselves, by which they mean  
they won't invest till you get $x from other investors. (It's great  
if by "lead" they mean they'll invest unilaterally, and in addition  
will help you raise more. What's lame is when they use the term  
to mean they won't invest unless you can raise more elsewhere.)  
[17]Where does this term "lead" come from? Up till a few years ago,  
startups raising money in phase 2 would usually raise equity rounds  
in which several investors invested at the same time using the same  
paperwork. You'd negotiate the terms with one "lead" investor, and  
then all the others would sign the same documents and all the money  
change hands at the closing.Series A rounds still work that way, but things now work differently  
for most fundraising prior to the series A. Now there are rarely  
actual rounds before the A round, or leads for them. Now startups  
simply raise money from investors one at a time till they feel they  
have enough.Since there are no longer leads, why do investors use that term?  
Because it's a more legitimate-sounding way of saying what they  
really mean. All they really mean is that their interest in you  
is a function of other investors' interest in you. I.e. the spectral  
signature of all mediocre investors. But when phrased in terms of  
leads, it sounds like there is something structural and therefore  
legitimate about their behavior.When an investor tells you "I want to invest in you, but I don't  
lead," translate that in your mind to "No, except yes if you turn  
out to be a hot deal." And since that's the default opinion of any  
investor about any startup, they've essentially just told you  
nothing.When you first start fundraising, the expected value of an investor  
who won't "lead" is zero, so talk to such investors last if at all.  
Have multiple plans.Many investors will ask how much you're planning to raise. This  
question makes founders feel they should be planning to raise a  
specific amount. But in fact you shouldn't. It's a mistake to  
have fixed plans in an undertaking as unpredictable as fundraising.So why do investors ask how much you plan to raise? For much the  
same reasons a salesperson in a store will ask "How much were you  
planning to spend?" if you walk in looking for a gift for a friend.  
You probably didn't have a precise amount in mind; you just want  
to find something good, and if it's inexpensive, so much the better.  
The salesperson asks you this not because you're supposed to have  
a plan to spend a specific amount, but so they can show you only  
things that cost the most you'll pay.Similarly, when investors ask how much you plan to raise, it's not  
because you're supposed to have a plan. It's to see whether you'd  
be a suitable recipient for the size of investment they like to  
make, and also to judge your ambition, reasonableness, and how far  
you are along with fundraising.If you're a wizard at fundraising, you can say "We plan to raise  
a $7 million series A round, and we'll be accepting termsheets next  
tuesday." I've known a handful of founders who could pull that off  
without having VCs laugh in their faces. But if you're in the  
inexperienced but earnest majority, the solution is analogous to  
the solution I recommend for pitching  
your startup: do the right thing and then just tell investors what  
you're doing.And the right strategy, in fundraising, is to have multiple plans  
depending on how much you can raise. Ideally you should be able  
to tell investors something like: we can make it to profitability  
without raising any more money, but if we raise a few hundred  
thousand we can hire one or two smart friends, and if we raise a  
couple million, we can hire a whole engineering team, etc.Different plans match different investors. If you're talking to a  
VC firm that only does series A rounds (though there are few of  
those left), it would be a waste of time talking about any but your  
most expensive plan. Whereas if you're talking to an angel who  
invests $20k at a time and you haven't raised any money yet, you  
probably want to focus on your least expensive plan.If you're so fortunate as to have to think about the upper limit  
on what you should raise, a good rule of thumb is to multiply the  
number of people you want to hire times $15k times 18 months. In  
most startups, nearly all the costs are a function of the number  
of people, and $15k per month is the conventional total cost  
(including benefits and even office space) per person. $15k per  
month is high, so don't actually spend that much. But it's ok to  
use a high estimate when fundraising to add a margin for error. If  
you have additional expenses, like manufacturing, add in those at  
the end. Assuming you have none and you think you might hire 20  
people, the most you'd want to raise is 20 x $15k x 18 = $5.4  
million.  
[18]  
Underestimate how much you want.Though you can focus on different plans when talking to different  
types of investors, you should on the whole err on the side of  
underestimating the amount you hope to raise.For example, if you'd like to raise $500k, it's better to say  
initially that you're trying to raise $250k. Then when you reach  
$150k you're more than half done. That sends two useful signals  
to investors: that you're doing well, and that they have to decide  
quickly because you're running out of room. Whereas if you'd said  
you were raising $500k, you'd be less than a third done at $150k.  
If fundraising stalled there for an appreciable time, you'd start  
to read as a failure.Saying initially that you're raising $250k doesn't limit you to  
raising that much. When you reach your initial target and you still  
have investor interest, you can just decide to raise more. Startups  
do that all the time. In fact, most startups that are very successful  
at fundraising end up raising more than they originally intended.I'm not saying you should lie, but that you should lower your  
expectations initially. There is almost no downside in starting  
with a low number. It not only won't cap the amount you raise, but  
will on the whole tend to increase it.A good metaphor here is angle of attack. If you try to fly at too  
steep an angle of attack, you just stall. If you say right out of  
the gate that you want to raise a $5 million series A round, unless  
you're in a very strong position, you not only won't get that but  
won't get anything. Better to start at a low angle of attack, build  
up speed, and then gradually increase the angle if you want.  
Be profitable if you can.You will be in a much stronger position if your collection of plans  
includes one for raising zero dollars — i.e. if you can make  
it to profitability without raising any additional money. Ideally  
you want to be able to say to investors "We'll succeed no matter  
what, but raising money will help us do it faster."There are many analogies between fundraising and dating, and this  
is one of the strongest. No one wants you if you seem desperate.  
And the best way not to seem desperate is not to be desperate.  
That's one reason we urge startups during YC to keep expenses low  
and to try to make it to ramen  
profitability before Demo Day. Though it sounds slightly  
paradoxical, if you want to raise money, the best thing you can do  
is get yourself to the point where you don't need to.There are almost two distinct modes of fundraising: one in which  
founders who need money knock on doors seeking it, knowing that  
otherwise the company will die or at the very least people will  
have to be fired, and one in which founders who don't need money  
take some to grow faster than they could merely on their own revenues.  
To emphasize the distinction I'm going to name them: type A fundraising  
is when you don't need money, and type B fundraising is when you  
do.Inexperienced founders read about famous startups doing what was  
type A fundraising, and decide they should raise money too, since  
that seems to be how startups work. Except when they raise money  
they don't have a clear path to profitability and are thus doing  
type B fundraising. And they are then surprised how difficult and  
unpleasant it is.Of course not all startups can make it to ramen profitability in a  
few months. And some that don't still manage to have the upper  
hand over investors, if they have some other advantage like  
extraordinary growth numbers or exceptionally formidable founders.  
But as time passes it gets increasingly difficult to fundraise from  
a position of strength without being profitable.  
[19]  
Don't optimize for valuation.When you raise money, what should your valuation be? The most  
important thing to understand about valuation is that it's not that  
important.Founders who raise money at high valuations tend to be unduly proud  
of it. Founders are often competitive people, and since valuation  
is usually the only visible number attached to a startup, they end  
up competing to raise money at the highest valuation. This is  
stupid, because fundraising is not the test that matters. The real  
test is revenue. Fundraising is just a means to that end. Being  
proud of how well you did at fundraising is like being proud of  
your college grades.Not only is fundraising not the test that matters, valuation is not  
even the thing to optimize about fundraising. The number one thing  
you want from phase 2 fundraising is to get the money you need, so  
you can get back to focusing on the real test, the success of your  
company. Number two is good investors. Valuation is at best third.The empirical evidence shows just how unimportant it is. Dropbox  
and Airbnb are the most successful companies we've funded so far,  
and they raised money after Y Combinator at premoney valuations of  
$4 million and $2.6 million respectively. Prices are so much higher  
now that if you can raise money at all you'll probably raise it at  
higher valuations than Dropbox and Airbnb. So let that satisfy  
your competitiveness. You're doing better than Dropbox and Airbnb!  
At a test that doesn't matter.When you start fundraising, your initial valuation (or valuation  
cap) will be set by the deal you make with the first investor who  
commits. You can increase the price for later investors, if you  
get a lot of interest, but by default the valuation you got from  
the first investor becomes your asking price.So if you're raising money from multiple investors, as most companies  
do in phase 2, you have to be careful to avoid raising the first  
from an over-eager investor at a price you won't be able to  
sustain. You can of course lower your price if you need to (in  
which case you should give the same terms to investors who invested  
earlier at a higher price), but you may lose a bunch of leads in  
the process of realizing you need to do this.What you can do if you have eager first investors is raise money  
from them on an uncapped convertible note with an MFN clause. This  
is essentially a way of saying that the valuation cap of the note  
will be determined by the next investors you raise money from.It will be easier to raise money at a lower valuation. It shouldn't  
be, but it is. Since phase 2 prices vary at most 10x and the big  
successes generate returns of at least 100x, investors should pick  
startups entirely based on their estimate of the probability that  
the company will be a big success and hardly at all on price. But  
although it's a mistake for investors to care about price, a  
significant number do. A startup that investors seem to like but  
won't invest in at a cap of $x will have an easier time at $x/2.  
[20]  
Yes/no before valuation.Some investors want to know what your valuation is before they even  
talk to you about investing. If your valuation has already been  
set by a prior investment at a specific valuation or cap, you can  
tell them that number. But if it isn't set because you haven't  
closed anyone yet, and they try to push you to name a price, resist  
doing so. If this would be the first investor you've closed, then  
this could be the tipping point of fundraising. That means closing  
this investor is the first priority, and you need to get the  
conversation onto that instead of being dragged sideways into a  
discussion of price.Fortunately there is a way to avoid naming a price in this situation.  
And it is not just a negotiating trick; it's how you (both) should  
be operating. Tell them that valuation is not the most important  
thing to you and that you haven't thought much about it, that you  
are looking for investors you want to partner with and who want to  
partner with you, and that you should talk first about whether they  
want to invest at all. Then if they decide they do want to invest,  
you can figure out a price. But first things first.Since valuation isn't that important and getting fundraising rolling  
is, we usually tell founders to give the first investor who commits  
as low a price as they need to. This is a safe technique so long  
as you combine it with the next one.   
[21]  
Beware "valuation sensitive" investors.Occasionally you'll encounter investors who describe themselves as  
"valuation sensitive." What this means in practice is that they  
are compulsive negotiators who will suck up a lot of your time  
trying to push your price down. You should therefore never approach  
such investors first. While you shouldn't chase high valuations,  
you also don't want your valuation to be set artificially low because  
the first investor who committed happened to be a compulsive  
negotiator. Some such investors have value, but the time to approach  
them is near the end of fundraising, when you're in a position to  
say "this is the price everyone else has paid; take it or leave it"  
and not mind if they leave it. This way, you'll not only get market  
price, but it will also take less time.Ideally you know which investors have a reputation for being  
"valuation sensitive" and can postpone dealing with them till last,  
but occasionally one you didn't know about will pop up early on.  
The rule of doing breadth first search weighted by expected value  
already tells you what to do in this case: slow down your interactions  
with them.There are a handful of investors who will try to invest at a lower  
valuation even when your price has already been set. Lowering your  
price is a backup plan you resort to when you discover you've let  
the price get set too high to close all the money you need. So  
you'd only want to talk to this sort of investor if you were about  
to do that anyway. But since investor meetings have to be arranged  
at least a few days in advance and you can't predict when you'll  
need to resort to lowering your price, this means in practice that  
you should approach this type of investor last if at all.If you're surprised by a lowball offer, treat it as a backup offer  
and delay responding to it. When someone makes an offer in good  
faith, you have a moral obligation to respond in a reasonable time.  
But lowballing you is a dick move that should be met with the  
corresponding countermove.  
Accept offers greedily.I'm a little leery of using the term "greedily" when writing about  
fundraising lest non-programmers misunderstand me, but a greedy  
algorithm is simply one that doesn't try to look into the future.  
A greedy algorithm takes the best of the options in front of it  
right now. And that is how startups should approach fundraising  
in phases 2 and later. Don't try to look into the future because  
(a) the future is unpredictable, and indeed in this business you're  
often being deliberately misled about it and (b) your first priority  
in fundraising should be to get it finished and get back to work  
anyway.If someone makes you an acceptable offer, take it. If you have  
multiple incompatible offers, take the best. Don't reject an  
acceptable offer in the hope of getting a better one in the future.These simple rules cover a wide variety of cases. If you're raising  
money from many investors, roll them up as they say yes. As you  
start to feel you've raised enough, the threshold for acceptable  
will start to get higher.In practice offers exist for stretches of time, not points. So  
when you get an acceptable offer that would be incompatible with  
others (e.g. an offer to invest most of the money you need), you  
can tell the other investors you're talking to that you have an  
offer good enough to accept, and give them a few days to make their  
own. This could lose you some that might have made an offer if  
they had more time. But by definition you don't care; the initial  
offer was acceptable.Some investors will try to prevent others from having time to decide  
by giving you an "exploding" offer, meaning one that's only valid  
for a few days. Offers from the very best investors explode less  
frequently and less rapidly — Fred Wilson never gives exploding  
offers, for example — because they're confident you'll pick  
them. But lower-tier investors sometimes give offers with very  
short fuses, because they believe no one who had other options would  
choose them. A deadline of three working days is acceptable. You  
shouldn't need more than that if you've been talking to investors  
in parallel. But a deadline any shorter is a sign you're dealing  
with a sketchy investor. You can usually call their bluff, and you  
may need to.  
[22]It might seem that instead of accepting offers greedily, your goal  
should be to get the best investors as partners. That is certainly  
a good goal, but in phase 2 "get the best investors" only rarely  
conflicts with "accept offers greedily," because the best investors  
don't usually take any longer to decide than the others. The only  
case where the two strategies give conflicting advice is when you  
have to forgo an offer from an acceptable investor to see if you'll  
get an offer from a better one. If you talk to investors in parallel  
and push back on exploding offers with excessively short deadlines,  
that will almost never happen. But if it does, "get the best  
investors" is in the average case bad advice. The best investors  
are also the most selective, because they get their pick of all the  
startups. They reject nearly everyone they talk to, which means  
in the average case it's a bad trade to exchange a definite offer  
from an acceptable investor for a potential offer from a better  
one.(The situation is different in phase 1. You can't apply to all the  
incubators in parallel, because some offset their schedules to  
prevent this. In phase 1, "accept offers greedily" and "get the  
best investors" do conflict, so if you want to apply to multiple  
incubators, you should do it in such a way that the ones you want  
most decide first.)Sometimes when you're raising money from multiple investors, a  
series A will emerge out of those conversations, and these rules  
even cover what to do in that case. When an investor starts to  
talk to you about a series A, keep taking smaller investments till  
they actually give you a termsheet. There's no practical difficulty.  
If the smaller investments are on convertible notes, they'll just  
convert into the series A round. The series A investor won't like  
having all these other random investors as bedfellows, but if it  
bothers them so much they should get on with giving you a termsheet.  
Till they do, you don't know for sure they will, and the greedy  
algorithm tells you what to do.  
[23]  
Don't sell more than 25% in phase 2.If you do well, you will probably raise a series A round eventually.  
I say probably because things are changing with series A rounds.  
Startups may start to skip them. But only one company we've funded  
has so far, so tentatively assume the path to huge passes through  
an A round.  
[24]Which means you should avoid doing things in earlier rounds that  
will mess up raising an A round. For example, if you've sold more  
than about 40% of your company total, it starts to get harder to  
raise an A round, because VCs worry there will not be enough stock  
left to keep the founders motivated.Our rule of thumb is not to sell more than 25% in phase 2, on top  
of whatever you sold in phase 1, which should be less than 15%. If  
you're raising money on uncapped notes, you'll have to guess what  
the eventual equity round valuation might be. Guess conservatively.(Since the goal of this rule is to avoid messing up the series A,  
there's obviously an exception if you end up raising a series A in  
phase 2, as a handful of startups do.)  
Have one person handle fundraising.If you have multiple founders, pick one to handle fundraising so  
the other(s) can keep working on the company. And since the danger  
of fundraising is not the time taken up by the actual meetings but  
that it becomes the top idea in your mind, the founder who handles  
fundraising should make a conscious effort to insulate the other  
founder(s) from the details of the process.  
[25](If the founders mistrust one another, this could cause some friction.  
But if the founders mistrust one another, you have worse problems  
to worry about than how to organize fundraising.)The founder who handles fundraising should be the CEO, who should  
in turn be the most formidable of the founders. Even if the CEO  
is a programmer and another founder is a salesperson? Yes. If you  
happen to be that type of founding team, you're effectively a single  
founder when it comes to fundraising.It's ok to bring all the founders to meet an investor who will  
invest a lot, and who needs this meeting as the final step before  
deciding. But wait till that point. Introducing an investor to  
your cofounder(s) should be like introducing a girl/boyfriend to  
your parents — something you do only when things reach a certain  
stage of seriousness.Even if there are still one or more founders focusing on the company  
during fundraising, growth will slow. But try to get as much growth  
as you can, because fundraising is a segment of time, not a point,  
and what happens to the company during that time affects the outcome.  
If your numbers grow significantly between two investor meetings,  
investors will be hot to close, and if your numbers are flat or  
down they'll start to get cold feet.  
You'll need an executive summary and (maybe) a deck.Traditionally phase 2 fundraising consists of presenting a slide  
deck in person to investors. Sequoia describes what such a deck  
should contain, and  
since they're the customer you can take their word for it.I say "traditionally" because I'm ambivalent about decks, and (though  
perhaps this is wishful thinking) they seem to be on the way out.  
A lot of the most successful startups we fund never make decks in  
phase 2. They just talk to investors and explain what they plan  
to do. Fundraising usually takes off fast for the startups that  
are most successful at it, and they're thus able to excuse themselves  
by saying that they haven't had time to make a deck.You'll also want an executive summary, which should be no more than  
a page long and describe in the most matter of fact language what  
you plan to do, why it's a good idea, and what progress you've made  
so far. The point of the summary is to remind the investor (who  
may have met many startups that day) what you talked about.Assume that if you give someone a copy of your deck or executive  
summary, it will be passed on to whoever you'd least like to have  
it. But don't refuse on that account to give copies to investors  
you meet. You just have to treat such leaks as a cost of doing  
business. In practice it's not that high a cost. Though founders  
are rightly indignant when their plans get leaked to competitors,  
I can't think of a startup whose outcome has been affected by it.Sometimes an investor will ask you to send them your deck and/or  
executive summary before they decide whether to meet with you. I  
wouldn't do that. It's a sign they're not really interested.  
Stop fundraising when it stops working.When do you stop fundraising? Ideally when you've raised enough.  
But what if you haven't raised as much as you'd like? When do you  
give up?It's hard to give general advice about this, because there have  
been cases of startups that kept trying to raise money even when  
it seemed hopeless, and miraculously succeeded. But what I usually  
tell founders is to stop fundraising when you start to get a lot  
of air in the straw. When you're drinking through a straw, you can  
tell when you get to the end of the liquid because you start to get  
a lot of air in the straw. When your fundraising options run out,  
they usually run out in the same way. Don't keep sucking on the  
straw if you're just getting air. It's not going to get better.  
Don't get addicted to fundraising.Fundraising is a chore for most founders, but some find it more  
interesting than working on their startup. The work at an early  
stage startup often consists of unglamorous schleps. Whereas fundraising, when it's  
going well, can be quite the opposite. Instead of sitting in your  
grubby apartment listening to users complain about bugs in your  
software, you're being offered millions of dollars by famous investors  
over lunch at a nice restaurant.  
[26]The danger of fundraising is particularly acute for people who are  
good at it. It's always fun to work on something you're good at.  
If you're one of these people, beware. Fundraising is not what  
will make your company successful. Listening to users complain  
about bugs in your software is what will make you successful. And  
the big danger of getting addicted to fundraising is not merely  
that you'll spend too long on it or raise too much money. It's  
that you'll start to think of yourself as being already successful,  
and lose your taste for the schleps you need to undertake to actually  
be successful. Startups can be destroyed by this.When I see a startup with young founders that is fabulously successful  
at fundraising, I mentally decrease my estimate of the probability  
that they'll succeed. The press may be writing about them as if  
they'd been anointed as the next Google, but I'm thinking "this is  
going to end badly."  
Don't raise too much.Though only a handful of startups have to worry about this, it is  
possible to raise too much. The dangers of raising too much are  
subtle but insidious. One is that it will set impossibly high  
expectations. If you raise an excessive amount of money, it will  
be at a high valuation, and the danger of raising money at too high  
a valuation is that you won't be able to increase it sufficiently  
the next time you raise money.A company's valuation is expected to rise each time it raises money.  
If not it's a sign of a company in trouble, which makes you  
unattractive to investors. So if you raise money in phase 2 at a  
post-money valuation of $30 million, the pre-money valuation of  
your next round, if you want to raise one, is going to have to be  
at least $50 million. And you have to be doing really, really well  
to raise money at $50 million.It's very dangerous to let the competitiveness of your current round  
set the performance threshold you have to meet to raise your next  
one, because the two are only loosely coupled.But the money itself may be more dangerous than the valuation. The  
more you raise, the more you spend, and spending a lot of money can  
be disastrous for an early stage startup. Spending a lot makes it  
harder to become profitable, and perhaps even worse, it makes you  
more rigid, because the main way to spend money is people, and the  
more people you have, the harder it is to change directions. So  
if you do raise a huge amount of money, don't spend it. (You will  
find that advice almost impossible to follow, so hot will be the  
money burning a hole in your pocket, but I feel obliged at least  
to try.)  
Be nice.Startups raising money occasionally alienate investors by seeming  
arrogant. Sometimes because they are arrogant, and sometimes because  
they're noobs clumsily attempting to mimic the toughness they've  
observed in experienced founders.It's a mistake to behave arrogantly to investors. While there are  
certain situations in which certain investors like certain kinds  
of arrogance, investors vary greatly in this respect, and a flick  
of the whip that will bring one to heel will make another roar with  
indignation. The only safe strategy is never to seem arrogant at  
all.That will require some diplomacy if you follow the advice I've given  
here, because the advice I've given is essentially how to play  
hardball back. When you refuse to meet an investor because you're  
not in fundraising mode, or slow down your interactions with an  
investor who moves too slow, or treat a contingent offer as the no  
it actually is and then, by accepting offers greedily, end up leaving  
that investor out, you're going to be doing things investors don't  
like. So you must cushion the blow with soft words. At YC we tell  
startups they can blame us. And now that I've written this, everyone  
else can blame me if they want. That plus the inexperience card  
should work in most situations: sorry, we think you're great, but  
PG said startups shouldn't \_\_\_, and since we're new to fundraising,  
we feel like we have to play it safe.The danger of behaving arrogantly is greatest when you're doing  
well. When everyone wants you, it's hard not to let it go to your  
head. Especially if till recently no one wanted you. But restrain  
yourself. The startup world is a small place, and startups have  
lots of ups and downs. This is a domain where it's more true than  
usual that pride goeth before a fall.  
[27]Be nice when investors reject you as well. The best investors are  
not wedded to their initial opinion of you. If they reject you in  
phase 2 and you end up doing well, they'll often invest in phase  
3. In fact investors who reject you are some of your warmest leads  
for future fundraising. Any investor who spent significant time  
deciding probably came close to saying yes. Often you have some  
internal champion who only needs a little more evidence to convince  
the skeptics. So it's wise not merely to be nice to investors who  
reject you, but (unless they behaved badly) to treat it as the  
beginning of a relationship.  
The bar will be higher next time.Assume the money you raise in phase 2 will be the last you ever  
raise. You must make it to profitability on this money if you can.Over the past several years, the investment community has evolved  
from a strategy of anointing a small number of winners early and  
then supporting them for years to a strategy of spraying money at  
early stage startups and then ruthlessly culling them at the next  
stage. This is probably the optimal strategy for investors. It's  
too hard to pick winners early on. Better to let the market do it  
for you. But it often comes as a surprise to startups how much  
harder it is to raise money in phase 3.When your company is only a couple months old, all it has to be is  
a promising experiment that's worth funding to see how it turns  
out. The next time you raise money, the experiment has to have  
worked. You have to be on a trajectory that leads to going public.  
And while there are some ideas where the proof that the experiment  
worked might consist of e.g. query response times, usually the proof  
is profitability. Usually phase 3 fundraising has to be type A  
fundraising.In practice there are two ways startups hose themselves between  
phases 2 and 3. Some are just too slow to become profitable. They  
raise enough money to last for two years. There doesn't seem any  
particular urgency to be profitable. So they don't make any effort  
to make money for a year. But by that time, not making money has  
become habitual. When they finally decide to try, they find they  
can't.The other way companies hose themselves is by letting their expenses  
grow too fast. Which almost always means hiring too many people.  
You usually shouldn't go out and hire 8 people as soon as you raise  
money at phase 2. Usually you want to wait till you have growth  
(and thus usually revenues) to justify them. A lot of VCs will  
encourage you to hire aggressively. VCs generally tell you to spend  
too much, partly because as money people they err on the side of  
solving problems by spending money, and partly because they want  
you to sell them more of your company in subsequent rounds. Don't  
listen to them.  
Don't make things complicated.I realize it may seem odd to sum up this huge treatise by saying  
that my overall advice is not to make fundraising too complicated,  
but if you go back and look at this list you'll see it's basically  
a simple recipe with a lot of implications and edge cases. Avoid  
investors till you decide to raise money, and then when you do,  
talk to them all in parallel, prioritized by expected value, and  
accept offers greedily. That's fundraising in one sentence. Don't  
introduce complicated optimizations, and don't let investors introduce  
complications either.Fundraising is not what will make you successful. It's just a means  
to an end. Your primary goal should be to get it over with and get  
back to what will make you successful — making things and talking  
to users — and the path I've described will for most startups  
be the surest way to that destination.Be good, take care of yourselves, and don't leave the path.  
Notes[1]  
The worst explosions happen when unpromising-seeming startups  
encounter mediocre investors. Good investors don't lead startups  
on; their reputations are too valuable. And startups that seem  
promising can usually get enough money from good investors that  
they don't have to talk to mediocre ones. It is the unpromising-seeming  
startups that have to resort to raising money from mediocre investors.  
And it's particularly damaging when these investors flake, because  
unpromising-seeming startups are usually more desperate for money.(Not all unpromising-seeming startups do badly. Some are merely  
ugly ducklings in the sense that they violate current startup  
fashions.)[2]  
One YC founder told me:  
  
 I think in general we've done ok at fundraising, but I managed  
 to screw up twice at the exact same thing — trying to focus  
 on building the company and fundraising at the same time.  
  
[3]  
There is one subtle danger you have to watch out for here, which  
I warn about later: beware of getting too high a valuation from an  
eager investor, lest that set an impossibly high target when raising  
additional money.[4]  
If they really need a meeting, then they're not ready to invest,  
regardless of what they say. They're still deciding, which means  
you're being asked to come in and convince them. Which is fundraising.[5]  
Associates at VC firms regularly cold email startups. Naive  
founders think "Wow, a VC is interested in us!" But an associate  
is not a VC. They have no decision-making power. And while they  
may introduce startups they like to partners at their firm, the  
partners discriminate against deals that come to them this way. I  
don't know of a single VC investment that began with an associate  
cold-emailing a startup. If you want to approach a specific firm,  
get an intro to a partner from someone they respect.It's ok to talk to an associate if you get an intro to a VC firm  
or they see you at a Demo Day and they begin by having an associate  
vet you. That's not a promising lead and should therefore get low  
priority, but it's not as completely worthless as a cold email.Because the title "associate" has gotten a bad reputation, a few  
VC firms have started to give their associates the title "partner,"  
which can make things very confusing. If you're a YC startup you  
can ask us who's who; otherwise you may have to do some research  
online. There may be a special title for actual partners. If  
someone speaks for the firm in the press or a blog on the firm's  
site, they're probably a real partner. If they're on boards of  
directors they're probably a real partner.There are titles between "associate" and "partner," including  
"principal" and "venture partner." The meanings of these titles  
vary too much to generalize.[6]  
For similar reasons, avoid casual conversations with potential  
acquirers. They can lead to distractions even more dangerous than  
fundraising. Don't even take a meeting with a potential acquirer  
unless you want to sell your company right now.[7]  
Joshua Reeves specifically suggests asking each investor to  
intro you to two more investors.Don't ask investors who say no for introductions to other investors.  
That will in many cases be an anti-recommendation.[8]  
This is not always as deliberate as its sounds. A lot of the  
delays and disconnects between founders and investors are induced  
by the customs of the venture business, which have evolved the way  
they have because they suit investors' interests.[9]  
One YC founder who read a draft of this essay wrote:  
  
 This is the most important section. I think it might bear stating  
 even more clearly. "Investors will deliberately affect more  
 interest than they have to preserve optionality. If an investor  
 seems very interested in you, they still probably won't invest.  
 The solution for this is to assume the worst — that an investor  
 is just feigning interest — until you get a definite commitment."  
  
[10]  
Though you should probably pack investor meetings as closely  
as you can, Jeff Byun mentions one reason not to: if you pack  
investor meetings too closely, you'll have less time for your pitch  
to evolve.Some founders deliberately schedule a handful of lame investors  
first, to get the bugs out of their pitch.[11]  
There is not an efficient market in this respect. Some of the  
most useless investors are also the highest maintenance.[12]  
Incidentally, this paragraph is sales 101. If you want to see  
it in action, go talk to a car dealer.[13]  
I know one very smooth founder who used to end investor meetings  
with "So, can I count you in?" delivered as if it were "Can you  
pass the salt?" Unless you're very smooth (if you're not sure...),  
do not do this yourself. There is nothing more unconvincing, for  
an investor, than a nerdy founder trying to deliver the lines meant  
for a smooth one.Investors are fine with funding nerds. So if you're a nerd, just  
try to be a good nerd, rather than doing a bad imitation of a smooth  
salesman.[14]  
Ian Hogarth suggests a good way to tell how serious potential  
investors are: the resources they expend on you after the first  
meeting. An investor who's seriously interested will already be  
working to help you even before they've committed.[15]  
In principle you might have to think about so-called "signalling  
risk." If a prestigious VC makes a small seed investment in you,  
what if they don't want to invest the next time you raise money?  
Other investors might assume that the VC knows you well, since  
they're an existing investor, and if they don't want to invest in  
your next round, that must mean you suck. The reason I say "in  
principle" is that in practice signalling hasn't been much of a  
problem so far. It rarely arises, and in the few cases where it  
does, the startup in question usually is doing badly and is doomed  
anyway.If you have the luxury of choosing among seed investors, you can  
play it safe by excluding VC firms. But it isn't critical to.[16]  
Sometimes a competitor will deliberately threaten you with a  
lawsuit just as you start fundraising, because they know you'll  
have to disclose the threat to potential investors and they hope  
this will make it harder for you to raise money. If this happens  
it will probably frighten you more than investors. Experienced  
investors know about this trick, and know the actual lawsuits rarely  
happen. So if you're attacked in this way, be forthright with  
investors. They'll be more alarmed if you seem evasive than if you  
tell them everything.[17]  
A related trick is to claim that they'll only invest contingently  
on other investors doing so because otherwise you'd be "undercapitalized."  
This is almost always bullshit. They can't estimate your minimum  
capital needs that precisely.[18]  
You won't hire all those 20 people at once, and you'll probably  
have some revenues before 18 months are out. But those too are  
acceptable or at least accepted additions to the margin for error.[19]  
Type A fundraising is so much better that it might even be  
worth doing something different if it gets you there sooner. One  
YC founder told me that if he were a first-time founder again he'd  
"leave ideas that are up-front capital intensive to founders with  
established reputations."[20]  
I don't know whether this happens because they're innumerate,  
or because they believe they have zero ability to predict startup  
outcomes (in which case this behavior at least wouldn't be irrational).  
In either case the implications are similar.[21]  
If you're a YC startup and you have an investor who for some  
reason insists that you decide the price, any YC partner can estimate  
a market price for you.[22]  
You should respond in kind when investors behave upstandingly  
too. When an investor makes you a clean offer with no deadline,  
you have a moral obligation to respond promptly.[23]  
Tell the investors talking to you about an A round about the  
smaller investments you raise as you raise them. You owe them such  
updates on your cap table, and this is also a good way to pressure  
them to act. They won't like you raising other money and may  
pressure you to stop, but they can't legitimately ask you to commit  
to them till they also commit to you. If they want you to stop  
raising money, the way to do it is to give you a series A termsheet  
with a no-shop clause.You can relent a little if the potential series A investor has a  
great reputation and they're clearly working fast to get you a  
termsheet, particularly if a third party like YC is involved to  
ensure there are no misunderstandings. But be careful.[24]  
The company is Weebly, which made it to profitability on a  
seed investment of $650k. They did try to raise a series A in the  
fall of 2008 but (no doubt partly because it was the fall of 2008)  
the terms they were offered were so bad that they decided to skip  
raising an A round.[25]  
Another advantage of having one founder take fundraising  
meetings is that you never have to negotiate in real time, which  
is something inexperienced founders should avoid. One YC founder  
told me:  
  
 Investors are professional negotiators and can negotiate on the  
 spot very easily. If only one founder is in the room, you can  
 say "I need to circle back with my co-founder" before making any  
 commitments. I used to do this all the time.  
  
[26]  
You'll be lucky if fundraising feels pleasant enough to become  
addictive. More often you have to worry about the other  
extreme — becoming demoralized when investors reject you. As  
one (very successful) YC founder wrote after reading a draft of  
this:  
  
 It's hard to mentally deal with the sheer scale of rejection in  
 fundraising and if you are not in the right mindset you will fail.  
 Users may love you but these supposedly smart investors may not  
 understand you at all. At this point for me, rejection still  
 rankles but I've come to accept that investors are just not super  
 thoughtful for the most part and you need to play the game according  
 to certain somewhat depressing rules (many of which you are  
 listing) in order to win.  
  
[27]  
The actual sentence in the King James Bible is "Pride goeth  
before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall."Thanks to Slava Akhmechet, Sam Altman, Nate Blecharczyk,  
Adora Cheung, Bill Clerico, John Collison, Patrick Collison, Parker  
Conrad, Ron Conway, Travis Deyle, Jason Freedman, Joe Gebbia, Mattan  
Griffel, Kevin Hale, Jacob Heller, Ian Hogarth, Justin Kan, Professor  
Moriarty, Nikhil Nirmel, David Petersen, Geoff Ralston, Joshua  
Reeves, Yuri Sagalov, Emmett Shear, Rajat Suri, Garry Tan, and Nick  
Tomarello for reading drafts of this.Russian Translation

# Investor Herd Dynamics

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
August 2013The biggest component in most investors' opinion of you is the  
opinion of other investors. Which is of course a recipe for  
exponential growth. When one investor wants to invest in you, that  
makes other investors want to, which makes others want to, and so  
on.Sometimes inexperienced founders mistakenly conclude that manipulating  
these forces is the essence of fundraising. They hear stories about  
stampedes to invest in successful startups, and think it's therefore  
the mark of a successful startup to have this happen. But actually  
the two are not that highly correlated. Lots of startups that cause  
stampedes end up flaming out (in extreme cases, partly as a result  
of the stampede), and lots of very successful startups were only  
moderately popular with investors the first time they raised money.So the point of this essay is not to explain how to create a stampede,  
but merely to explain the forces that generate them. These forces  
are always at work to some degree in fundraising, and they can cause  
surprising situations. If you understand them, you can at least  
avoid being surprised.One reason investors like you more when other investors like you  
is that you actually become a better investment. Raising money  
decreases the risk of failure. Indeed, although investors hate it,  
you are for this reason justified in raising your valuation for  
later investors. The investors who invested when you had no money  
were taking more risk, and are entitled to higher returns. Plus a  
company that has raised money is literally more valuable. After  
you raise the first million dollars, the company is at least a  
million dollars more valuable, because it's the same company as  
before, plus it has a million dollars in the bank.  
[1]Beware, though, because later investors so hate to have the price  
raised on them that they resist even this self-evident reasoning.  
Only raise the price on an investor you're comfortable with losing,  
because some will angrily refuse.  
[2]The second reason investors like you more when you've had some  
success at fundraising is that it makes you more confident, and an  
investors' opinion of you is the foundation  
of their opinion of your company. Founders are often surprised how  
quickly investors seem to know when they start to succeed at raising  
money. And while there are in fact lots of ways for such information  
to spread among investors, the main vector is probably the founders  
themselves. Though they're often clueless about technology, most  
investors are pretty good at reading people. When fundraising is  
going well, investors are quick to sense it in your increased  
confidence. (This is one case where the average founder's inability  
to remain poker-faced works to your advantage.)But frankly the most important reason investors like you more when  
you've started to raise money is that they're bad at judging startups.  
Judging startups is hard even for the best investors. The mediocre  
ones might as well be flipping coins. So when mediocre investors  
see that lots of other people want to invest in you, they assume  
there must be a reason. This leads to the phenomenon known in the  
Valley as the "hot deal," where you have more interest from investors  
than you can handle.The best investors aren't influenced much by the opinion of other  
investors. It would only dilute their own judgment to average it  
together with other people's. But they are indirectly influenced  
in the practical sense that interest from other investors imposes  
a deadline. This is the fourth way in which offers beget offers.  
If you start to get far along the track toward an offer with one  
firm, it will sometimes provoke other firms, even good ones, to  
make up their minds, lest they lose the deal.Unless you're a wizard at negotiation (and if you're not sure,  
you're not) be very careful about exaggerating this to push a good  
investor to decide. Founders try this sort of thing all the time,  
and investors are very sensitive to it. If anything oversensitive.  
But you're safe so long as you're telling the truth. If you're  
getting far along with investor B, but you'd rather raise money  
from investor A, you can tell investor A that this is happening.  
There's no manipulation in that. You're genuinely in a bind, because  
you really would rather raise money from A, but you can't safely  
reject an offer from B when it's still uncertain what A will decide.Do not, however, tell A who B is. VCs will sometimes ask which  
other VCs you're talking to, but you should never tell them. Angels  
you can sometimes tell about other angels, because angels cooperate  
more with one another. But if VCs ask, just point out that they  
wouldn't want you telling other firms about your conversations, and  
you feel obliged to do the same for any firm you talk to. If they  
push you, point out that you're inexperienced at fundraising — which  
is always a safe card to play — and you feel you have to be  
extra cautious.   
[3]While few startups will experience a stampede of interest, almost  
all will at least initially experience the other side of this  
phenomenon, where the herd remains clumped together at a distance.  
The fact that investors are so much influenced by other investors'  
opinions means you always start out in something of a hole. So  
don't be demoralized by how hard it is to get the first commitment,  
because much of the difficulty comes from this external force. The  
second will be easier.Notes[1]  
An accountant might say that a company that has raised a million  
dollars is no richer if it's convertible debt, but in practice money  
raised as convertible debt is little different from money raised  
in an equity round.[2]  
Founders are often surprised by this, but investors can get  
very emotional. Or rather indignant; that's the main emotion I've  
observed; but it is very common, to the point where it sometimes  
causes investors to act against their own interests. I know of one  
investor who invested in a startup at a $15 million valuation cap.  
Earlier he'd had an opportunity to invest at a $5 million cap, but  
he refused because a friend who invested earlier had been able to  
invest at a $3 million cap.[3]  
If an investor pushes you hard to tell them about your conversations  
with other investors, is this someone you want as an investor?  
Thanks to Paul Buchheit, Jessica Livingston, Geoff Ralston, and Garry Tan  
for reading drafts of this.Russian Translation

# How to Convince Investors

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
August 2013When people hurt themselves lifting heavy things, it's usually  
because they try to lift with their back. The right way to lift  
heavy things is to let your legs do the work. Inexperienced founders  
make the same mistake when trying to convince investors. They try  
to convince with their pitch. Most would be better off if they let  
their startup do the work — if they started by understanding why  
their startup is worth investing in, then simply explained this  
well to investors.Investors are looking for startups that will be very successful.  
But that test is not as simple as it sounds. In startups, as in a  
lot of other domains, the distribution of outcomes follows a power  
law, but in startups the curve is startlingly steep. The big  
successes are so big they   
dwarf the rest. And since there are only  
a handful each year (the conventional wisdom is 15), investors treat  
"big success" as if it were binary. Most are interested in you if  
you seem like you have a chance, however small, of being one of the  
15 big successes, and otherwise not.  
[1](There are a handful of angels who'd be interested in a company  
with a high probability of being moderately successful. But angel  
investors like big successes too.)How do you seem like you'll be one of the big successes? You need  
three things: formidable founders, a promising market, and (usually)  
some evidence of success so far.FormidableThe most important ingredient is formidable founders. Most investors  
decide in the first few minutes whether you seem like a winner or  
a loser, and once their opinion is set it's hard to change. [2]  
Every startup has reasons both to invest and not to invest. If  
investors think you're a winner they focus on the former, and if  
not they focus on the latter. For example, it might be a rich  
market, but with a slow sales cycle. If investors are impressed  
with you as founders, they say they want to invest because it's a  
rich market, and if not, they say they can't invest because of the  
slow sales cycle.They're not necessarily trying to mislead you. Most investors are  
genuinely unclear in their own minds why they like or dislike  
startups. If you seem like a winner, they'll like your idea more.  
But don't be too smug about this weakness of theirs, because you  
have it too; almost everyone does.There is a role for ideas of course. They're fuel for the fire  
that starts with liking the founders. Once investors like you,  
you'll see them reaching for ideas: they'll be saying "yes, and you  
could also do x." (Whereas when they don't like you, they'll be  
saying "but what about y?")But the foundation of convincing investors is to seem formidable,  
and since this isn't a word most people use in conversation much,  
I should explain what it means. A formidable person is one who  
seems like they'll get what they want, regardless of whatever  
obstacles are in the way. Formidable is close to confident, except  
that someone could be confident and mistaken. Formidable is roughly  
justifiably confident.There are a handful of people who are really good at seeming  
formidable — some because they actually are very formidable and  
just let it show, and others because they are more or less con  
artists.  
[3]  
But most founders, including many who will go on  
to start very successful companies, are not that good at seeming  
formidable the first time they try fundraising. What should they  
do?  
[4]What they should not do is try to imitate the swagger of more  
experienced founders. Investors are not always that good at judging  
technology, but they're good at judging confidence. If you try to  
act like something you're not, you'll just end up in an uncanny  
valley. You'll depart from sincere, but never arrive at convincing.TruthThe way to seem most formidable as an inexperienced founder is to  
stick to the truth. How formidable you seem isn't a constant. It  
varies depending on what you're saying. Most people can seem  
confident when they're saying "one plus one is two," because they  
know it's true. The most diffident person would be puzzled and  
even slightly contemptuous if they told a VC "one plus one is two"  
and the VC reacted with skepticism. The magic ability of people  
who are good at seeming formidable is that they can do this with  
the sentence "we're going to make a billion dollars a year." But  
you can do the same, if not with that sentence with some fairly  
impressive ones, so long as you convince yourself first.That's the secret. Convince yourself that your startup is worth  
investing in, and then when you explain this to investors they'll  
believe you. And by convince yourself, I don't mean play mind games  
with yourself to boost your confidence. I mean truly evaluate  
whether your startup is worth investing in. If it isn't, don't try  
to raise money.  
[5]  
But if it is, you'll be telling the truth  
when you tell investors it's worth investing in, and they'll sense  
that. You don't have to be a smooth presenter if you understand  
something well and tell the truth about it.To evaluate whether your startup is worth investing in, you have  
to be a domain expert. If you're not a domain expert, you can be  
as convinced as you like about your idea, and it will seem to  
investors no more than an instance of the Dunning-Kruger effect.  
Which in fact it will usually be. And investors can tell fairly  
quickly whether you're a domain expert by how well you answer their  
questions. Know everything about your market.  
[6]Why do founders persist in trying to convince investors of things  
they're not convinced of themselves? Partly because we've all been  
trained to.When my friends Robert Morris and Trevor Blackwell were in grad  
school, one of their fellow students was on the receiving end of a  
question from their faculty advisor that we still quote today. When  
the unfortunate fellow got to his last slide, the professor burst  
out:  
  
 Which one of these conclusions do you actually believe?  
  
One of the artifacts of the way schools are organized is that we  
all get trained to talk even when we have nothing to say. If you  
have a ten page paper due, then ten pages you must write, even if  
you only have one page of ideas. Even if you have no ideas. You  
have to produce something. And all too many startups go into  
fundraising in the same spirit. When they think it's time to raise  
money, they try gamely to make the best case they can for their  
startup. Most never think of pausing beforehand to ask whether  
what they're saying is actually convincing, because they've all  
been trained to treat the need to present as a given — as an area  
of fixed size, over which however much truth they have must needs  
be spread, however thinly.The time to raise money is not when you need it, or when you reach  
some artificial deadline like a Demo Day. It's when you can convince  
investors, and not before.   
[7]And unless you're a good con artist, you'll never convince investors  
if you're not convinced yourself. They're far better at detecting  
bullshit than you are at producing it, even if you're producing it  
unknowingly. If you try to convince investors before you've convinced  
yourself, you'll be wasting both your time.But pausing first to convince yourself will do more than save you  
from wasting your time. It will force you to organize your thoughts.  
To convince yourself that your startup is worth investing in, you'll  
have to figure out why it's worth investing in. And if you can  
do that you'll end up with more than added confidence. You'll also  
have a provisional roadmap of how to succeed.MarketNotice I've been careful to talk about whether a startup is worth  
investing in, rather than whether it's going to succeed. No one  
knows whether a startup is going to succeed. And it's a good thing  
for investors that this is so, because if you could know in advance  
whether a startup would succeed, the stock price would already be  
the future price, and there would be no room for investors to make  
money. Startup investors know that every investment is a bet, and  
against pretty long odds.So to prove you're worth investing in, you don't have to prove  
you're going to succeed, just that you're a sufficiently good bet.  
What makes a startup a sufficiently good bet? In addition to  
formidable founders, you need a plausible path to owning a big piece  
of a big market. Founders think of startups as ideas, but investors  
think of them as markets. If there are x number of customers who'd  
pay an average of $y per year for what you're making, then the total  
addressable market, or TAM, of your company is $xy. Investors don't  
expect you to collect all that money, but it's an upper bound on  
how big you can get.Your target market has to be big, and it also has to be capturable  
by you. But the market doesn't have to be big yet, nor do you  
necessarily have to be in it yet. Indeed, it's often better to  
start in a small market that will either turn into a big one or  
from which you can move into a big one. There just has to be some  
plausible sequence of hops that leads to dominating a big market a  
few years down the line.The standard of plausibility varies dramatically depending on the  
age of the startup. A three month old company at Demo Day only  
needs to be a promising experiment that's worth funding to see how  
it turns out. Whereas a two year old company raising a series A  
round needs to be able to show the experiment worked.   
[8]But every company that gets really big is "lucky" in the sense that  
their growth is due mostly to some external wave they're riding,  
so to make a convincing case for becoming huge, you have to identify  
some specific trend you'll benefit from. Usually you can find this  
by asking "why now?" If this is such a great idea, why hasn't  
someone else already done it? Ideally the answer is that it only  
recently became a good idea, because something changed, and no one  
else has noticed yet.Microsoft for example was not going to grow huge selling Basic  
interpreters. But by starting there they were perfectly poised to  
expand up the stack of microcomputer software as microcomputers  
grew powerful enough to support one. And microcomputers turned out  
to be a really huge wave, bigger than even the most optimistic  
observers would have predicted in 1975.But while Microsoft did really well and there is thus a temptation  
to think they would have seemed a great bet a few months in, they  
probably didn't. Good, but not great. No company, however successful,  
ever looks more than a pretty good bet a few months in. Microcomputers  
turned out to be a big deal, and Microsoft both executed well and  
got lucky. But it was by no means obvious that this was how things  
would play out. Plenty of companies seem as good a bet a few months  
in. I don't know about startups in general, but at least half the  
startups we fund could make as good a case as Microsoft could have  
for being on a path to dominating a large market. And who can  
reasonably expect more of a startup than that?RejectionIf you can make as good a case as Microsoft could have, will you  
convince investors? Not always. A lot of VCs would have rejected  
Microsoft.  
[9]  
Certainly some rejected Google. And getting  
rejected will put you in a slightly awkward position, because as  
you'll see when you start fundraising, the most common question  
you'll get from investors will be "who else is investing?" What do  
you say if you've been fundraising for a while and no one has  
committed yet?   
[10]The people who are really good at acting formidable often solve  
this problem by giving investors the impression that while no  
investors have committed yet, several are about to. This is arguably  
a permissible tactic. It's slightly dickish of investors to care  
more about who else is investing than any other aspect of your  
startup, and misleading them about how far along you are with other  
investors seems the complementary countermove. It's arguably an  
instance of scamming a scammer. But I don't recommend this approach  
to most founders, because most founders wouldn't be able to carry  
it off. This is the single most common lie told to investors, and  
you have to be really good at lying to tell members of some profession  
the most common lie they're told.If you're not a master of negotiation (and perhaps even if you are)  
the best solution is to tackle the problem head-on, and to explain  
why investors have turned you down and why they're mistaken. If  
you know you're on the right track, then you also know why investors  
were wrong to reject you. Experienced investors are well aware that  
the best ideas are also the scariest. They all know about the VCs  
who rejected Google. If instead of seeming evasive and ashamed  
about having been turned down (and thereby implicitly agreeing with  
the verdict) you talk candidly about what scared investors about  
you, you'll seem more confident, which they like, and you'll probably  
also do a better job of presenting that aspect of your startup. At  
the very least, that worry will now be out in the open instead of  
being a gotcha left to be discovered by the investors you're currently  
talking to, who will be proud of and thus attached to their discovery.  
[11]This strategy will work best with the best investors, who are both  
hard to bluff and who already believe most other investors are  
conventional-minded drones doomed always to miss the big outliers.  
Raising money is not like applying to college, where you can assume  
that if you can get into MIT, you can also get into Foobar State.  
Because the best investors are much smarter than the rest, and the  
best startup ideas look initially like   
bad ideas, it's not uncommon  
for a startup to be rejected by all the VCs except the best ones.  
That's what happened to Dropbox. Y Combinator started in Boston,  
and for the first 3 years we ran alternating batches in Boston and  
Silicon Valley. Because Boston investors were so few and so timid,  
we used to ship Boston batches out for a second Demo Day in Silicon  
Valley. Dropbox was part of a Boston batch, which means all those  
Boston investors got the first look at Dropbox, and none of them  
closed the deal. Yet another backup and syncing thing, they all  
thought. A couple weeks later, Dropbox raised a series A round  
from Sequoia.  
[12]DifferentNot understanding that investors view investments as bets combines  
with the ten page paper mentality to prevent founders from even  
considering the possibility of being certain of what they're saying.  
They think they're trying to convince investors of something very  
uncertain — that their startup will be huge — and convincing anyone  
of something like that must obviously entail some wild feat of  
salesmanship. But in fact when you raise money you're trying to  
convince investors of something so much less speculative — whether  
the company has all the elements of a good bet — that you can  
approach the problem in a qualitatively different way. You can  
convince yourself, then convince them.And when you convince them, use the same matter-of-fact language  
you used to convince yourself. You wouldn't use vague, grandiose  
marketing-speak among yourselves. Don't use it with investors  
either. It not only doesn't work on them, but seems a mark of  
incompetence. Just be concise. Many investors explicitly use that  
as a test, reasoning (correctly) that if you can't explain your  
plans concisely, you don't really understand them. But even investors  
who don't have a rule about this will be bored and frustrated by  
unclear explanations.  
[13]So here's the recipe for impressing investors when you're not already  
good at seeming formidable:  
  
 Make something worth investing in. Understand why it's worth investing in. Explain that clearly to investors.  
  
If you're saying something you know is true, you'll seem confident  
when you're saying it. Conversely, never let pitching draw you  
into bullshitting. As long as you stay on the territory of truth,  
you're strong. Make the truth good, then just tell it.Notes[1]  
There's no reason to believe this number is a constant. In  
fact it's our explicit goal at Y Combinator to increase it, by  
encouraging people to start startups who otherwise wouldn't have.[2]  
Or more precisely, investors decide whether you're a loser  
or possibly a winner. If you seem like a winner, they may then,  
depending on how much you're raising, have several more meetings  
with you to test whether that initial impression holds up.But if you seem like a loser they're done, at least for the next  
year or so. And when they decide you're a loser they usually decide  
in way less than the 50 minutes they may have allotted for the first  
meeting. Which explains the astonished stories one always hears  
about VC inattentiveness. How could these people make investment  
decisions well when they're checking their messages during startups'  
presentations? The solution to that mystery is that they've already  
made the decision.[3]  
The two are not mutually exclusive. There are people who are  
both genuinely formidable, and also really good at acting that way.[4]  
How can people who will go on to create giant companies not  
seem formidable early on? I think the main reason is that their  
experience so far has trained them to keep their wings folded, as  
it were. Family, school, and jobs encourage cooperation, not  
conquest. And it's just as well they do, because even being Genghis  
Khan is probably 99% cooperation. But the result is that most  
people emerge from the tube of their upbringing in their early  
twenties compressed into the shape of the tube. Some find they  
have wings and start to spread them. But this takes a few years.  
In the beginning even they don't know yet what they're capable of.[5]  
In fact, change what you're doing. You're investing your own  
time in your startup. If you're not convinced that what you're  
working on is a sufficiently good bet, why are you even working on  
that?[6]  
When investors ask you a question you don't know the answer  
to, the best response is neither to bluff nor give up, but instead  
to explain how you'd figure out the answer. If you can work out a  
preliminary answer on the spot, so much the better, but explain  
that's what you're doing.[7]  
At YC we try to ensure startups are ready to raise money on  
Demo Day by encouraging them to ignore investors and instead focus  
on their companies till about a week before. That way most reach  
the stage where they're sufficiently convincing well before Demo  
Day. But not all do, so we also give any startup that wants to the  
option of deferring to a later Demo Day.[8]  
Founders are often surprised by how much harder it is to raise  
the next round. There is a qualitative difference in investors'  
attitudes. It's like the difference between being judged as a kid  
and as an adult. The next time you raise money, it's not enough  
to be promising. You have to be delivering results.So although it works well to show growth graphs at either stage,  
investors treat them differently. At three months, a growth graph  
is mostly evidence that the founders are effective. At two years,  
it has to be evidence of a promising market and a company tuned to  
exploit it.[9]  
By this I mean that if the present day equivalent of the 3  
month old Microsoft presented at a Demo Day, there would be investors  
who turned them down. Microsoft itself didn't raise outside money,  
and indeed the venture business barely existed when they got started  
in 1975.[10]  
The best investors rarely care who else is investing, but  
mediocre investors almost all do. So you can use this question as  
a test of investor quality.[11]  
To use this technique, you'll have to find out why investors  
who rejected you did so, or at least what they claim was the reason.  
That may require asking, because investors don't always volunteer  
a lot of detail. Make it clear when you ask that you're not trying  
to dispute their decision — just that if there is some weakness in  
your plans, you need to know about it. You won't always get a real  
reason out of them, but you should at least try.[12]  
Dropbox wasn't rejected by all the East Coast VCs. There was  
one firm that wanted to invest but tried to lowball them.[13]  
Alfred Lin points out that it's doubly important for the  
explanation of a startup to be clear and concise, because it has  
to convince at one remove: it has to work not just on the partner  
you talk to, but when that partner re-tells it to colleagues.We consciously optimize for this at YC. When we work with founders  
create a Demo Day pitch, the last step is to imagine how an investor  
would sell it to colleagues.  
Thanks to Marc Andreessen, Sam Altman, Patrick Collison, Ron Conway,  
Chris Dixon, Alfred Lin, Ben Horowitz, Steve Huffman, Jessica  
Livingston, Greg Mcadoo, Andrew Mason, Geoff Ralston, Yuri Sagalov,  
Emmett Shear, Rajat Suri, Garry Tan, Albert Wenger, Fred Wilson,  
and Qasar Younis for reading drafts of this.

# Do Things that Don't Scale

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
July 2013One of the most common types of advice we give at Y Combinator is  
to do things that don't scale. A lot of would-be founders believe  
that startups either take off or don't. You build something, make  
it available, and if you've made a better mousetrap, people beat a  
path to your door as promised. Or they don't, in which case the  
market must not exist.  
[1]Actually startups take off because the founders make them take off.  
There may be a handful that just grew by themselves, but usually  
it takes some sort of push to get them going. A good metaphor would  
be the cranks that car engines had before they got electric starters.  
Once the engine was going, it would keep going, but there was a  
separate and laborious process to get it going.RecruitThe most common unscalable thing founders have to do at the start  
is to recruit users manually. Nearly all startups have to. You  
can't wait for users to come to you. You have to go out and get  
them.Stripe is one of the most successful startups we've funded, and the  
problem they solved was an urgent one. If anyone could have sat  
back and waited for users, it was Stripe. But in fact they're  
famous within YC for aggressive early user acquisition.Startups building things for other startups have a big pool of  
potential users in the other companies we've funded, and none took  
better advantage of it than Stripe. At YC we use the term "Collison  
installation" for the technique they invented. More diffident  
founders ask "Will you try our beta?" and if the answer is yes,  
they say "Great, we'll send you a link." But the Collison brothers  
weren't going to wait. When anyone agreed to try Stripe they'd say  
"Right then, give me your laptop" and set them up on the spot.There are two reasons founders resist going out and recruiting users  
individually. One is a combination of shyness and laziness. They'd  
rather sit at home writing code than go out and talk to a bunch of  
strangers and probably be rejected by most of them. But for a  
startup to succeed, at least one founder (usually the CEO) will  
have to spend a lot of time on sales and marketing.  
[2]The other reason founders ignore this path is that the absolute  
numbers seem so small at first. This can't be how the big, famous  
startups got started, they think. The mistake they make is to  
underestimate the power of compound growth. We encourage every  
startup to measure their progress by weekly growth  
rate. If you have 100 users, you need to get 10 more next week  
to grow 10% a week. And while 110 may not seem much better than  
100, if you keep growing at 10% a week you'll be surprised how big  
the numbers get. After a year you'll have 14,000 users, and after  
2 years you'll have 2 million.You'll be doing different things when you're acquiring users a  
thousand at a time, and growth has to slow down eventually. But  
if the market exists you can usually start by recruiting users  
manually and then gradually switch to less manual methods.   
[3]Airbnb is a classic example of this technique. Marketplaces are  
so hard to get rolling that you should expect to take heroic measures  
at first. In Airbnb's case, these consisted of going door to door  
in New York, recruiting new users and helping existing ones improve  
their listings. When I remember the Airbnbs during YC, I picture  
them with rolly bags, because when they showed up for tuesday dinners  
they'd always just flown back from somewhere.FragileAirbnb now seems like an unstoppable juggernaut, but early on it  
was so fragile that about 30 days of going out and engaging in  
person with users made the difference between success and failure.That initial fragility was not a unique feature of Airbnb. Almost  
all startups are fragile initially. And that's one of the biggest  
things inexperienced founders and investors (and reporters and  
know-it-alls on forums) get wrong about them. They unconsciously  
judge larval startups by the standards of established ones. They're  
like someone looking at a newborn baby and concluding "there's no  
way this tiny creature could ever accomplish anything."It's harmless if reporters and know-it-alls dismiss your startup.  
They always get things wrong. It's even ok if investors dismiss  
your startup; they'll change their minds when they see growth. The  
big danger is that you'll dismiss your startup yourself. I've seen  
it happen. I often have to encourage founders who don't see the  
full potential of what they're building. Even Bill Gates made that  
mistake. He returned to Harvard for the fall semester after starting  
Microsoft. He didn't stay long, but he wouldn't have returned at  
all if he'd realized Microsoft was going to be even a fraction of  
the size it turned out to be.   
[4]The question to ask about an early stage startup is not "is this  
company taking over the world?" but "how big could this company  
get if the founders did the right things?" And the right things  
often seem both laborious and inconsequential at the time. Microsoft  
can't have seemed very impressive when it was just a couple guys  
in Albuquerque writing Basic interpreters for a market of a few  
thousand hobbyists (as they were then called), but in retrospect  
that was the optimal path to dominating microcomputer software.  
And I know Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia didn't feel like they were  
en route to the big time as they were taking "professional" photos  
of their first hosts' apartments. They were just trying to survive.  
But in retrospect that too was the optimal path to dominating a big  
market.How do you find users to recruit manually? If you build something  
to solve your own problems, then  
you only have to find your peers, which is usually straightforward.  
Otherwise you'll have to make a more deliberate effort to locate  
the most promising vein of users. The usual way to do that is to  
get some initial set of users by doing a comparatively untargeted  
launch, and then to observe which kind seem most enthusiastic, and  
seek out more like them. For example, Ben Silbermann noticed that  
a lot of the earliest Pinterest users were interested in design,  
so he went to a conference of design bloggers to recruit users, and  
that worked well.   
[5]DelightYou should take extraordinary measures not just to acquire users,  
but also to make them happy. For as long as they could (which  
turned out to be surprisingly long), Wufoo sent each new user a  
hand-written thank you note. Your first users should feel that  
signing up with you was one of the best choices they ever made.  
And you in turn should be racking your brains to think of new ways  
to delight them.Why do we have to teach startups this? Why is it counterintuitive  
for founders? Three reasons, I think.One is that a lot of startup founders are trained as engineers,  
and customer service is not part of the training of engineers.  
You're supposed to build things that are robust and elegant, not  
be slavishly attentive to individual users like some kind of  
salesperson. Ironically, part of the reason engineering is  
traditionally averse to handholding is that its traditions date  
from a time when engineers were less powerful — when they were  
only in charge of their narrow domain of building things, rather  
than running the whole show. You can be ornery when you're Scotty,  
but not when you're Kirk.Another reason founders don't focus enough on individual customers  
is that they worry it won't scale. But when founders of larval  
startups worry about this, I point out that in their current state  
they have nothing to lose. Maybe if they go out of their way to  
make existing users super happy, they'll one day have too many to  
do so much for. That would be a great problem to have. See if you  
can make it happen. And incidentally, when it does, you'll find  
that delighting customers scales better than you expected. Partly  
because you can usually find ways to make anything scale more than  
you would have predicted, and partly because delighting customers  
will by then have permeated your culture.I have never once seen a startup lured down a blind alley by trying  
too hard to make their initial users happy.But perhaps the biggest thing preventing founders from realizing  
how attentive they could be to their users is that they've never  
experienced such attention themselves. Their standards for customer  
service have been set by the companies they've been customers of,  
which are mostly big ones. Tim Cook doesn't send you a hand-written  
note after you buy a laptop. He can't. But you can. That's one  
advantage of being small: you can provide a level of service no big  
company can.   
[6]Once you realize that existing conventions are not the upper bound  
on user experience, it's interesting in a very pleasant way to think  
about how far you could go to delight your users.ExperienceI was trying to think of a phrase to convey how extreme your attention  
to users should be, and I realized Steve Jobs had already done it:  
insanely great. Steve wasn't just using "insanely" as a synonym  
for "very." He meant it more literally — that one should focus  
on quality of execution to a degree that in everyday life would be  
considered pathological.All the most successful startups we've funded have, and that probably  
doesn't surprise would-be founders. What novice founders don't get  
is what insanely great translates to in a larval startup. When  
Steve Jobs started using that phrase, Apple was already an established  
company. He meant the Mac (and its documentation and even  
packaging — such is the nature of obsession) should be insanely  
well designed and manufactured. That's not hard for engineers to  
grasp. It's just a more extreme version of designing a robust and  
elegant product.What founders have a hard time grasping (and Steve himself might  
have had a hard time grasping) is what insanely great morphs into  
as you roll the time slider back to the first couple months of a  
startup's life. It's not the product that should be insanely great,  
but the experience of being your user. The product is just one  
component of that. For a big company it's necessarily the dominant  
one. But you can and should give users an insanely great experience  
with an early, incomplete, buggy product, if you make up the  
difference with attentiveness.Can, perhaps, but should? Yes. Over-engaging with early users is  
not just a permissible technique for getting growth rolling. For  
most successful startups it's a necessary part of the feedback loop  
that makes the product good. Making a better mousetrap is not an  
atomic operation. Even if you start the way most successful startups  
have, by building something you yourself need, the first thing you  
build is never quite right. And except in domains with big penalties  
for making mistakes, it's often better not to aim for perfection  
initially. In software, especially, it usually works best to get  
something in front of users as soon as it has a quantum of utility,  
and then see what they do with it. Perfectionism is often an excuse  
for procrastination, and in any case your initial model of users  
is always inaccurate, even if you're one of them.   
[7]The feedback you get from engaging directly with your earliest users  
will be the best you ever get. When you're so big you have to  
resort to focus groups, you'll wish you could go over to your users'  
homes and offices and watch them use your stuff like you did when  
there were only a handful of them.FireSometimes the right unscalable trick is to focus on a deliberately  
narrow market. It's like keeping a fire contained at first to get  
it really hot before adding more logs.That's what Facebook did. At first it was just for Harvard students.  
In that form it only had a potential market of a few thousand people,  
but because they felt it was really for them, a critical mass of  
them signed up. After Facebook stopped being for Harvard students,  
it remained for students at specific colleges for quite a while.  
When I interviewed Mark Zuckerberg at Startup School, he said that  
while it was a lot of work creating course lists for each school,  
doing that made students feel the site was their natural home.Any startup that could be described as a marketplace usually has  
to start in a subset of the market, but this can work for other  
startups as well. It's always worth asking if there's a subset of  
the market in which you can get a critical mass of users quickly.  
[8]Most startups that use the contained fire strategy do it unconsciously.  
They build something for themselves and their friends, who happen  
to be the early adopters, and only realize later that they could  
offer it to a broader market. The strategy works just as well if  
you do it unconsciously. The biggest danger of not being consciously  
aware of this pattern is for those who naively discard part of it.  
E.g. if you don't build something for yourself and your friends,  
or even if you do, but you come from the corporate world and your  
friends are not early adopters, you'll no longer have a perfect  
initial market handed to you on a platter.Among companies, the best early adopters are usually other startups.  
They're more open to new things both by nature and because, having  
just been started, they haven't made all their choices yet. Plus  
when they succeed they grow fast, and you with them. It was one  
of many unforeseen advantages of the YC model (and specifically of  
making YC big) that B2B startups now have an instant market of  
hundreds of other startups ready at hand.MerakiFor hardware startups there's a variant of  
doing things that don't scale that we call "pulling a Meraki."  
Although we didn't fund Meraki, the founders were Robert Morris's  
grad students, so we know their history. They got started by doing  
something that really doesn't scale: assembling their routers  
themselves.Hardware startups face an obstacle that software startups don't.  
The minimum order for a factory production run is usually several  
hundred thousand dollars. Which can put you in a catch-22: without  
a product you can't generate the growth you need to raise the money  
to manufacture your product. Back when hardware startups had to  
rely on investors for money, you had to be pretty convincing to  
overcome this. The arrival of crowdfunding (or more precisely,  
preorders) has helped a lot. But even so I'd advise startups to  
pull a Meraki initially if they can. That's what Pebble did. The  
Pebbles   
assembled  
 the first several hundred watches themselves. If  
they hadn't gone through that phase, they probably wouldn't have  
sold $10 million worth of watches when they did go on Kickstarter.Like paying excessive attention to early customers, fabricating  
things yourself turns out to be valuable for hardware startups.  
You can tweak the design faster when you're the factory, and you  
learn things you'd never have known otherwise. Eric Migicovsky of  
Pebble said one of the things he learned was "how valuable it was to  
source good screws." Who knew?ConsultSometimes we advise founders of B2B startups to take over-engagement  
to an extreme, and to pick a single user and act as if they were  
consultants building something just for that one user. The initial  
user serves as the form for your mold; keep tweaking till you fit  
their needs perfectly, and you'll usually find you've made something  
other users want too. Even if there aren't many of them, there are  
probably adjacent territories that have more. As long as you can  
find just one user who really needs something and can act on that  
need, you've got a toehold in making something people want, and  
that's as much as any startup needs initially.   
[9]Consulting is the canonical example of work that doesn't scale.  
But (like other ways of bestowing one's favors liberally) it's safe  
to do it so long as you're not being paid to. That's where companies  
cross the line. So long as you're a product company that's merely  
being extra attentive to a customer, they're very grateful even if  
you don't solve all their problems. But when they start paying you  
specifically for that attentiveness — when they start paying  
you by the hour — they expect you to do everything.Another consulting-like technique for recruiting initially lukewarm  
users is to use your software yourselves on their behalf. We  
did that at Viaweb. When we approached merchants asking if they  
wanted to use our software to make online stores, some said no, but  
they'd let us make one for them. Since we would do anything to get  
users, we did. We felt pretty lame at the time. Instead of  
organizing big strategic e-commerce partnerships, we were trying  
to sell luggage and pens and men's shirts. But in retrospect it  
was exactly the right thing to do, because it taught us how it would  
feel to merchants to use our software. Sometimes the feedback loop  
was near instantaneous: in the middle of building some merchant's  
site I'd find I needed a feature we didn't have, so I'd spend a  
couple hours implementing it and then resume building the site.ManualThere's a more extreme variant where you don't just use your software,  
but are your software. When you only have a small number of users,  
you can sometimes get away with doing by hand things that you plan  
to automate later. This lets you launch faster, and when you do  
finally automate yourself out of the loop, you'll know exactly what  
to build because you'll have muscle memory from doing it yourself.When manual components look to the user like software, this technique  
starts to have aspects of a practical joke. For example, the way  
Stripe delivered "instant" merchant accounts to its first users was  
that the founders manually signed them up for traditional merchant  
accounts behind the scenes.Some startups could be entirely manual at first. If you can find  
someone with a problem that needs solving and you can solve it  
manually, go ahead and do that for as long as you can, and then  
gradually automate the bottlenecks. It would be a little frightening  
to be solving users' problems in a way that wasn't yet automatic,  
but less frightening than the far more common case of having something  
automatic that doesn't yet solve anyone's problems.BigI should mention one sort of initial tactic that usually doesn't  
work: the Big Launch. I occasionally meet founders who seem to  
believe startups are projectiles rather than powered aircraft, and  
that they'll make it big if and only if they're launched with  
sufficient initial velocity. They want to launch simultaneously  
in 8 different publications, with embargoes. And on a tuesday, of  
course, since they read somewhere that's the optimum day to launch  
something.It's easy to see how little launches matter. Think of some successful  
startups. How many of their launches do you remember?  
All you need from a launch is some initial core of users. How well  
you're doing a few months later will depend more on how happy you  
made those users than how many there were of them.  
[10]So why do founders think launches matter? A combination of solipsism  
and laziness. They think what they're building is so great that  
everyone who hears about it will immediately sign up. Plus it would  
be so much less work if you could get users merely by broadcasting  
your existence, rather than recruiting them one at a time. But  
even if what you're building really is great, getting users will  
always be a gradual process — partly because great things  
are usually also novel, but mainly because users have other things  
to think about.Partnerships too usually don't work. They don't work for startups  
in general, but they especially don't work as a way to get growth  
started. It's a common mistake among inexperienced founders to  
believe that a partnership with a big company will be their big  
break. Six months later they're all saying the same thing: that  
was way more work than we expected, and we ended up getting practically  
nothing out of it.   
[11]It's not enough just to do something extraordinary initially. You  
have to make an extraordinary effort initially. Any strategy  
that omits the effort — whether it's expecting a big launch to  
get you users, or a big partner — is ipso facto suspect.VectorThe need to do something unscalably laborious to get started is so  
nearly universal that it might be a good idea to stop thinking of  
startup ideas as scalars. Instead we should try thinking of them  
as pairs of what you're going to build, plus the unscalable thing(s)  
you're going to do initially to get the company going.It could be interesting to start viewing startup ideas this way,  
because now that there are two components you can try to be imaginative  
about the second as well as the first. But in most cases the second  
component will be what it usually is — recruit users manually  
and give them an overwhelmingly good experience — and the main  
benefit of treating startups as vectors will be to remind founders  
they need to work hard in two dimensions.  
[12]In the best case, both components of the vector contribute to your  
company's DNA: the unscalable things you have to do to get started  
are not merely a necessary evil, but change the company permanently  
for the better. If you have to be aggressive about user acquisition  
when you're small, you'll probably still be aggressive when you're  
big. If you have to manufacture your own hardware, or use your  
software on users's behalf, you'll learn things you couldn't have  
learned otherwise. And most importantly, if you have to work hard  
to delight users when you only have a handful of them, you'll keep  
doing it when you have a lot.Notes[1]  
Actually Emerson never mentioned mousetraps specifically. He  
wrote "If a man has good corn or wood, or boards, or pigs, to sell,  
or can make better chairs or knives, crucibles or church organs,  
than anybody else, you will find a broad hard-beaten road to his  
house, though it be in the woods."[2]  
Thanks to Sam Altman for suggesting I make this explicit.  
And no, you can't avoid doing sales by hiring someone to do it for  
you. You have to do sales yourself initially. Later you can hire  
a real salesperson to replace you.[3]  
The reason this works is that as you get bigger, your size  
helps you grow. Patrick Collison wrote "At some point, there was  
a very noticeable change in how Stripe felt. It tipped from being  
this boulder we had to push to being a train car that in fact had  
its own momentum."[4]  
One of the more subtle ways in which YC can help founders  
is by calibrating their ambitions, because we know exactly how a  
lot of successful startups looked when they were just getting  
started.[5]  
If you're building something for which you can't easily get  
a small set of users to observe — e.g. enterprise software — and  
in a domain where you have no connections, you'll have to rely on  
cold calls and introductions. But should you even be working on  
such an idea?[6]  
Garry Tan pointed out an interesting trap founders fall into  
in the beginning. They want so much to seem big that they imitate  
even the flaws of big companies, like indifference to individual  
users. This seems to them more "professional." Actually it's  
better to embrace the fact that you're small and use whatever  
advantages that brings.[7]  
Your user model almost couldn't be perfectly accurate, because  
users' needs often change in response to what you build for them.  
Build them a microcomputer, and suddenly they need to run spreadsheets  
on it, because the arrival of your new microcomputer causes someone  
to invent the spreadsheet.[8]  
If you have to choose between the subset that will sign up  
quickest and those that will pay the most, it's usually best to  
pick the former, because those are probably the early adopters.  
They'll have a better influence on your product, and they won't  
make you expend as much effort on sales. And though they have less  
money, you don't need that much to maintain your target growth rate  
early on.[9]  
Yes, I can imagine cases where you could end up making  
something that was really only useful for one user. But those are  
usually obvious, even to inexperienced founders. So if it's not  
obvious you'd be making something for a market of one, don't worry  
about that danger.[10]  
There may even be an inverse correlation between launch  
magnitude and success. The only launches I remember are famous  
flops like the Segway and Google Wave. Wave is a particularly  
alarming example, because I think it was actually a great idea that  
was killed partly by its overdone launch.[11]  
Google grew big on the back of Yahoo, but that wasn't a  
partnership. Yahoo was their customer.[12]  
It will also remind founders that an idea where the second  
component is empty — an idea where there is nothing you can do  
to get going, e.g. because you have no way to find users to recruit  
manually — is probably a bad idea, at least for those founders.Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Patrick Collison, Kevin  
Hale, Steven Levy, Jessica Livingston, Geoff Ralston, and Garry Tan for reading  
drafts of this.Japanese TranslationRussian TranslationFrench TranslationArabic TranslationItalian TranslationKorean Translation

# Startup Investing Trends

June 2013(This talk was written for an audience of investors.)Y Combinator has now funded 564 startups including the current  
batch, which has 53. The total valuation of the 287 that have  
valuations (either by raising an equity round, getting acquired,  
or dying) is about $11.7 billion, and the 511 prior to the current  
batch have collectively raised about $1.7 billion.  
[1]As usual those numbers are dominated by a few big winners. The top  
10 startups account for 8.6 of that 11.7 billion. But there is a  
peloton of younger startups behind them. There are about 40 more  
that have a shot at being really big.Things got a little out of hand last summer when we had 84 companies  
in the batch, so we tightened up our filter to decrease the batch  
size.   
[2]  
Several journalists have tried to interpret that as  
evidence for some macro story they were telling, but the reason had  
nothing to do with any external trend. The reason was that we  
discovered we were using an n² algorithm, and we needed to buy  
time to fix it. Fortunately we've come up with several techniques  
for sharding YC, and the problem now seems to be fixed. With a new  
more scaleable model and only 53 companies, the current batch feels  
like a walk in the park. I'd guess we can grow another 2 or 3x  
before hitting the next bottleneck.   
[3]One consequence of funding such a large number of startups is that  
we see trends early. And since fundraising is one of the main  
things we help startups with, we're in a good position to notice  
trends in investing.I'm going to take a shot at describing where these trends are  
leading. Let's start with the most basic question: will the future  
be better or worse than the past? Will investors, in the aggregate,  
make more money or less?I think more. There are multiple forces at work, some of which  
will decrease returns, and some of which will increase them. I  
can't predict for sure which forces will prevail, but I'll describe  
them and you can decide for yourself.There are two big forces driving change in startup funding: it's  
becoming cheaper to start a startup, and startups are becoming a  
more normal thing to do.When I graduated from college in 1986, there were essentially two  
options: get a job or go to grad school. Now there's a third: start  
your own company.  
That's a big change. In principle it was possible to start your  
own company in 1986 too, but it didn't seem like a real possibility.  
It seemed possible to start a consulting company, or a niche product  
company, but it didn't seem possible to start a company that would  
become big.  
[4]That kind of change, from 2 paths to 3, is the sort of big social  
shift that only happens once every few generations. I think we're  
still at the beginning of this one. It's hard to predict how big  
a deal it will be. As big a deal as the Industrial Revolution?  
Maybe. Probably not. But it will be a big enough deal that it  
takes almost everyone by surprise, because those big social shifts  
always do.One thing we can say for sure is that there will be a lot more  
startups. The monolithic, hierarchical companies of the mid 20th  
century are being replaced by networks  
of smaller companies. This process is not just something happening  
now in Silicon Valley. It started decades ago, and it's happening  
as far afield as the car industry. It has a long way to run.   
[5]  
The other big driver of change is that startups are becoming cheaper  
to start. And in fact the two forces are related: the decreasing  
cost of starting a startup is one of the reasons startups are  
becoming a more normal thing to do.The fact that startups need less money means founders will increasingly  
have the upper hand over investors. You still need just as much  
of their energy and imagination, but they don't need as much of  
your money. Because founders have the upper hand, they'll retain  
an increasingly large share of the stock in, and control of, their  
companies. Which means investors will get less stock and less  
control.Does that mean investors will make less money? Not necessarily,  
because there will be more good startups. The total amount of  
desirable startup stock available to investors will probably increase,  
because the number of desirable startups will probably grow faster  
than the percentage they sell to investors shrinks.There's a rule of thumb in the VC business that there are about 15  
companies a year that will be really successful. Although a lot  
of investors unconsciously treat this number as if it were some  
sort of cosmological constant, I'm certain it isn't. There are  
probably limits on the rate at which technology can develop, but  
that's not the limiting factor now. If it were, each successful  
startup would be founded the month it became possible, and that is  
not the case. Right now the limiting factor on the number of big  
hits is the number of sufficiently good founders starting companies,  
and that number can and will increase. There are still a lot of  
people who'd make great founders who never end up starting a company.  
You can see that from how randomly some of the most successful  
startups got started. So many of the biggest startups almost didn't  
happen that there must be a lot of equally good startups that  
actually didn't happen.There might be 10x or even 50x more good founders out there. As  
more of them go ahead and start startups, those 15 big hits a year  
could easily become 50 or even 100.  
[6]What about returns, though? Are we heading for a world in which  
returns will be pinched by increasingly high valuations? I think  
the top firms will actually make more money than they have in the  
past. High returns don't come from investing at low valuations.  
They come from investing in the companies that do really well. So  
if there are more of those to be had each year, the best pickers  
should have more hits.This means there should be more variability in the VC business.  
The firms that can recognize and attract the best startups will do  
even better, because there will be more of them to recognize and  
attract. Whereas the bad firms will get the leftovers, as they do  
now, and yet pay a higher price for them.Nor do I think it will be a problem that founders keep control of  
their companies for longer. The empirical evidence on that is  
already clear: investors make more money as founders' bitches than  
their bosses. Though somewhat humiliating, this is actually good  
news for investors, because it takes less time to serve founders  
than to micromanage them.What about angels? I think there is a lot of opportunity there.  
It used to suck to be an angel investor. You couldn't get access  
to the best deals, unless you got lucky like Andy Bechtolsheim, and  
when you did invest in a startup, VCs might try to strip you of  
your stock when they arrived later. Now an angel can go to something  
like Demo Day or AngelList and have access to the same deals VCs  
do. And the days when VCs could wash angels out of the cap table  
are long gone.I think one of the biggest unexploited opportunities in startup  
investing right now is angel-sized investments made quickly. Few  
investors understand the cost that raising money from them imposes  
on startups. When the company consists only of the founders,  
everything grinds to a halt during fundraising, which can easily  
take 6 weeks. The current high cost of fundraising means there is  
room for low-cost investors to undercut the rest. And in this  
context, low-cost means deciding quickly. If there were a reputable  
investor who invested $100k on good terms and promised to decide  
yes or no within 24 hours, they'd get access to almost all the best  
deals, because every good startup would approach them first. It  
would be up to them to pick, because every bad startup would approach  
them first too, but at least they'd see everything. Whereas if an  
investor is notorious for taking a long time to make up their mind  
or negotiating a lot about valuation, founders will save them for  
last. And in the case of the most promising startups, which tend  
to have an easy time raising money, last can easily become never.Will the number of big hits grow linearly with the total number of  
new startups? Probably not, for two reasons. One is that the  
scariness of starting a startup in the old days was a pretty effective  
filter. Now that the cost of failing is becoming lower, we should  
expect founders to do it more. That's not a bad thing. It's common  
in technology for an innovation that decreases the cost of failure  
to increase the number of failures and yet leave you net ahead.The other reason the number of big hits won't grow proportionately  
to the number of startups is that there will start to be an increasing  
number of idea clashes. Although the finiteness of the number of  
good ideas is not the reason there are only 15 big hits a year, the  
number has to be finite, and the more startups there are, the more  
we'll see multiple companies doing the same thing at the same time.  
It will be interesting, in a bad way, if idea clashes become a lot  
more common.   
[7]Mostly because of the increasing number of early failures, the startup  
business of the future won't simply be the same shape, scaled up.  
What used to be an obelisk will become a pyramid. It will be a  
little wider at the top, but a lot wider at the bottom.What does that mean for investors? One thing it means is that there  
will be more opportunities for investors at the earliest stage,  
because that's where the volume of our imaginary solid is growing  
fastest. Imagine the obelisk of investors that corresponds to  
the obelisk of startups. As it widens out into a pyramid to match  
the startup pyramid, all the contents are adhering to the top,  
leaving a vacuum at the bottom.That opportunity for investors mostly means an opportunity for new  
investors, because the degree of risk an existing investor or firm  
is comfortable taking is one of the hardest things for them to  
change. Different types of investors are adapted to different  
degrees of risk, but each has its specific degree of risk deeply  
imprinted on it, not just in the procedures they follow but in the  
personalities of the people who work there.I think the biggest danger for VCs, and also the biggest opportunity,  
is at the series A stage. Or rather, what used to be the series A  
stage before series As turned into de facto series B rounds.Right now, VCs often knowingly invest too much money at the series  
A stage. They do it because they feel they need to get a big chunk  
of each series A company to compensate for the opportunity cost of  
the board seat it consumes. Which means when there is a lot of  
competition for a deal, the number that moves is the valuation (and  
thus amount invested) rather than the percentage of the company  
being sold. Which means, especially in the case of more promising  
startups, that series A investors often make companies take more  
money than they want.Some VCs lie and claim the company really needs that much. Others  
are more candid, and admit their financial models require them to  
own a certain percentage of each company. But we all know the  
amounts being raised in series A rounds are not determined by asking  
what would be best for the companies. They're determined by VCs  
starting from the amount of the company they want to own, and the  
market setting the valuation and thus the amount invested.Like a lot of bad things, this didn't happen intentionally. The  
VC business backed into it as their initial assumptions gradually  
became obsolete. The traditions and financial models of the VC  
business were established when founders needed investors more. In  
those days it was natural for founders to sell VCs a big chunk of  
their company in the series A round. Now founders would prefer to  
sell less, and VCs are digging in their heels because they're not  
sure if they can make money buying less than 20% of each series A  
company.The reason I describe this as a danger is that series A investors  
are increasingly at odds with the startups they supposedly serve,  
and that tends to come back to bite you eventually. The reason I  
describe it as an opportunity is that there is now a lot of potential  
energy built up, as the market has moved away from VCs' traditional  
business model. Which means the first VC to break ranks and start  
to do series A rounds for as much equity as founders want to sell  
(and with no "option pool" that comes only from the founders' shares)  
stands to reap huge benefits.What will happen to the VC business when that happens? Hell if I  
know. But I bet that particular firm will end up ahead. If one  
top-tier VC firm started to do series A rounds that started from  
the amount the company needed to raise and let the percentage  
acquired vary with the market, instead of the other way around,  
they'd instantly get almost all the best startups. And that's where  
the money is.You can't fight market forces forever. Over the last decade we've  
seen the percentage of the company sold in series A rounds creep  
inexorably downward. 40% used to be common. Now VCs are fighting  
to hold the line at 20%. But I am daily waiting for the line to  
collapse. It's going to happen. You may as well anticipate it,  
and look bold.Who knows, maybe VCs will make more money by doing the right thing.  
It wouldn't be the first time that happened. Venture capital is a  
business where occasional big successes generate hundredfold returns.  
How much confidence can you really have in financial models for  
something like that anyway? The  
big successes only have to get a tiny bit less occasional to  
compensate for a 2x decrease in the stock sold in series A rounds.If you want to find new opportunities for investing, look for things  
founders complain about. Founders are your customers, and the  
things they complain about are unsatisfied demand. I've given two  
examples of things founders complain about most—investors who  
take too long to make up their minds, and excessive dilution in  
series A rounds—so those are good places to look now. But  
the more general recipe is: do something founders want.  
Notes[1]  
I realize revenue and not fundraising is the proper test of  
success for a startup. The reason we quote statistics about  
fundraising is because those are the numbers we have. We couldn't  
talk meaningfully about revenues without including the numbers from  
the most successful startups, and we don't have those. We often  
discuss revenue growth with the earlier stage startups, because  
that's how we gauge their progress, but when companies reach a  
certain size it gets presumptuous for a seed investor to do that.In any case, companies' market caps do eventually become a function  
of revenues, and post-money valuations of funding rounds are at  
least guesses by pros about where those market caps will end up.The reason only 287 have valuations is that the rest have mostly  
raised money on convertible notes, and although convertible notes  
often have valuation caps, a valuation cap is merely an upper bound  
on a valuation.[2]  
We didn't try to accept a particular number. We have no way  
of doing that even if we wanted to. We just tried to be significantly  
pickier.[3]  
Though you never know with bottlenecks, I'm guessing the next  
one will be coordinating efforts among partners.[4]  
I realize starting a company doesn't have to mean starting a  
startup. There will be lots of people starting normal companies  
too. But that's not relevant to an audience of investors.Geoff Ralston reports that in Silicon Valley it seemed thinkable  
to start a startup in the mid 1980s. It would have started there.  
But I know it didn't to undergraduates on the East Coast.[5]  
This trend is one of the main causes of the increase in  
economic inequality in the US since the mid twentieth century. The  
person who would in 1950 have been the general manager of the x  
division of Megacorp is now the founder of the x company, and owns  
significant equity in it.[6]  
If Congress passes the founder  
visa in a non-broken form, that alone could in principle get  
us up to 20x, since 95% of the world's population lives outside the  
US.[7]  
If idea clashes got bad enough, it could change what it means  
to be a startup. We currently advise startups mostly to ignore  
competitors. We tell them startups are competitive like running,  
not like soccer; you don't have to go and steal the ball away from  
the other team. But if idea clashes became common enough, maybe  
you'd start to have to. That would be unfortunate.Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Dalton Caldwell,  
Patrick Collison, Jessica  
Livingston, Andrew Mason, Geoff Ralston, and Garry Tan for reading  
drafts of this.

# How to Get Startup Ideas

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
November 2012The way to get startup ideas is not to try to think of startup  
ideas. It's to look for problems, preferably problems you have  
yourself.The very best startup ideas tend to have three things in common:  
they're something the founders themselves want, that they themselves  
can build, and that few others realize are worth doing. Microsoft,  
Apple, Yahoo, Google, and Facebook all began this way.  
ProblemsWhy is it so important to work on a problem you have? Among other  
things, it ensures the problem really exists. It sounds obvious  
to say you should only work on problems that exist. And yet by far  
the most common mistake startups make is to solve problems no one  
has.I made it myself. In 1995 I started a company to put art galleries  
online. But galleries didn't want to be online. It's not how the  
art business works. So why did I spend 6 months working on this  
stupid idea? Because I didn't pay attention to users. I invented  
a model of the world that didn't correspond to reality, and worked  
from that. I didn't notice my model was wrong until I tried  
to convince users to pay for what we'd built. Even then I took  
embarrassingly long to catch on. I was attached to my model of the  
world, and I'd spent a lot of time on the software. They had to  
want it!Why do so many founders build things no one wants? Because they  
begin by trying to think of startup ideas. That m.o. is doubly  
dangerous: it doesn't merely yield few good ideas; it yields bad  
ideas that sound plausible enough to fool you into working on them.At YC we call these "made-up" or "sitcom" startup ideas. Imagine  
one of the characters on a TV show was starting a startup. The  
writers would have to invent something for it to do. But coming  
up with good startup ideas is hard. It's not something you can do  
for the asking. So (unless they got amazingly lucky) the writers  
would come up with an idea that sounded plausible, but was actually  
bad.For example, a social network for pet owners. It doesn't sound  
obviously mistaken. Millions of people have pets. Often they care  
a lot about their pets and spend a lot of money on them. Surely  
many of these people would like a site where they could talk to  
other pet owners. Not all of them perhaps, but if just 2 or 3  
percent were regular visitors, you could have millions of users.  
You could serve them targeted offers, and maybe charge for premium  
features.   
[1]The danger of an idea like this is that when you run it by your  
friends with pets, they don't say "I would never use this." They  
say "Yeah, maybe I could see using something like that." Even when  
the startup launches, it will sound plausible to a lot of people.  
They don't want to use it themselves, at least not right now, but  
they could imagine other people wanting it. Sum that reaction  
across the entire population, and you have zero users.   
[2]  
WellWhen a startup launches, there have to be at least some users who  
really need what they're making — not just people who could see  
themselves using it one day, but who want it urgently. Usually  
this initial group of users is small, for the simple reason that  
if there were something that large numbers of people urgently needed  
and that could be built with the amount of effort a startup usually  
puts into a version one, it would probably already exist. Which  
means you have to compromise on one dimension: you can either build  
something a large number of people want a small amount, or something  
a small number of people want a large amount. Choose the latter.  
Not all ideas of that type are good startup ideas, but nearly all  
good startup ideas are of that type.Imagine a graph whose x axis represents all the people who might  
want what you're making and whose y axis represents how much they  
want it. If you invert the scale on the y axis, you can envision  
companies as holes. Google is an immense crater: hundreds of  
millions of people use it, and they need it a lot. A startup just  
starting out can't expect to excavate that much volume. So you  
have two choices about the shape of hole you start with. You can  
either dig a hole that's broad but shallow, or one that's narrow  
and deep, like a well.Made-up startup ideas are usually of the first type. Lots of people  
are mildly interested in a social network for pet owners.Nearly all good startup ideas are of the second type. Microsoft  
was a well when they made Altair Basic. There were only a couple  
thousand Altair owners, but without this software they were programming  
in machine language. Thirty years later Facebook had the same  
shape. Their first site was exclusively for Harvard students, of  
which there are only a few thousand, but those few thousand users  
wanted it a lot.When you have an idea for a startup, ask yourself: who wants this  
right now? Who wants this so much that they'll use it even when  
it's a crappy version one made by a two-person startup they've never  
heard of? If you can't answer that, the idea is probably bad.   
[3]You don't need the narrowness of the well per se. It's depth you  
need; you get narrowness as a byproduct of optimizing for depth  
(and speed). But you almost always do get it. In practice the  
link between depth and narrowness is so strong that it's a good  
sign when you know that an idea will appeal strongly to a specific  
group or type of user.But while demand shaped like a well is almost a necessary condition  
for a good startup idea, it's not a sufficient one. If Mark  
Zuckerberg had built something that could only ever have appealed  
to Harvard students, it would not have been a good startup idea.  
Facebook was a good idea because it started with a small market  
there was a fast path out of. Colleges are similar enough that if  
you build a facebook that works at Harvard, it will work at any  
college. So you spread rapidly through all the colleges. Once you  
have all the college students, you get everyone else simply by  
letting them in.Similarly for Microsoft: Basic for the Altair; Basic for other  
machines; other languages besides Basic; operating systems;  
applications; IPO.  
SelfHow do you tell whether there's a path out of an idea? How do you  
tell whether something is the germ of a giant company, or just a  
niche product? Often you can't. The founders of Airbnb didn't  
realize at first how big a market they were tapping. Initially  
they had a much narrower idea. They were going to let hosts rent  
out space on their floors during conventions. They didn't foresee  
the expansion of this idea; it forced itself upon them gradually.  
All they knew at first is that they were onto something. That's  
probably as much as Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg knew at first.Occasionally it's obvious from the beginning when there's a path  
out of the initial niche. And sometimes I can see a path that's  
not immediately obvious; that's one of our specialties at YC. But  
there are limits to how well this can be done, no matter how much  
experience you have. The most important thing to understand about  
paths out of the initial idea is the meta-fact that these are hard  
to see.So if you can't predict whether there's a path out of an idea, how  
do you choose between ideas? The truth is disappointing but  
interesting: if you're the right sort of person, you have the right  
sort of hunches. If you're at the leading edge of a field that's  
changing fast, when you have a hunch that something is worth doing,  
you're more likely to be right.In Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Robert Pirsig says:  
  
 You want to know how to paint a perfect painting? It's easy. Make  
 yourself perfect and then just paint naturally.  
  
I've wondered about that passage since I read it in high school.  
I'm not sure how useful his advice is for painting specifically,  
but it fits this situation well. Empirically, the way to have good  
startup ideas is to become the sort of person who has them.Being at the leading edge of a field doesn't mean you have to be  
one of the people pushing it forward. You can also be at the leading  
edge as a user. It was not so much because he was a programmer  
that Facebook seemed a good idea to Mark Zuckerberg as because he  
used computers so much. If you'd asked most 40 year olds in 2004  
whether they'd like to publish their lives semi-publicly on the  
Internet, they'd have been horrified at the idea. But Mark already  
lived online; to him it seemed natural.Paul Buchheit says that people at the leading edge of a rapidly  
changing field "live in the future." Combine that with Pirsig and  
you get:  
  
 Live in the future, then build what's missing.  
  
That describes the way many if not most of the biggest startups got  
started. Neither Apple nor Yahoo nor Google nor Facebook were even  
supposed to be companies at first. They grew out of things their  
founders built because there seemed a gap in the world.If you look at the way successful founders have had their ideas,  
it's generally the result of some external stimulus hitting a  
prepared mind. Bill Gates and Paul Allen hear about the Altair and  
think "I bet we could write a Basic interpreter for it." Drew Houston  
realizes he's forgotten his USB stick and thinks "I really need to  
make my files live online." Lots of people heard about the Altair.  
Lots forgot USB sticks. The reason those stimuli caused those  
founders to start companies was that their experiences had prepared  
them to notice the opportunities they represented.The verb you want to be using with respect to startup ideas is not  
"think up" but "notice." At YC we call ideas that grow naturally  
out of the founders' own experiences "organic" startup ideas. The  
most successful startups almost all begin this way.That may not have been what you wanted to hear. You may have  
expected recipes for coming up with startup ideas, and instead I'm  
telling you that the key is to have a mind that's prepared in the  
right way. But disappointing though it may be, this is the truth.  
And it is a recipe of a sort, just one that in the worst case takes  
a year rather than a weekend.If you're not at the leading edge of some rapidly changing field,  
you can get to one. For example, anyone reasonably smart can  
probably get to an edge of programming (e.g. building mobile apps)  
in a year. Since a successful startup will consume at least 3-5  
years of your life, a year's preparation would be a reasonable  
investment. Especially if you're also looking for a cofounder.  
[4]You don't have to learn programming to be at the leading edge of a  
domain that's changing fast. Other domains change fast. But while  
learning to hack is not necessary, it is for the forseeable future  
sufficient. As Marc Andreessen put it, software is eating the world,  
and this trend has decades left to run.Knowing how to hack also means that when you have ideas, you'll be  
able to implement them. That's not absolutely necessary (Jeff Bezos  
couldn't) but it's an advantage. It's a big advantage, when you're  
considering an idea like putting a college facebook online, if  
instead of merely thinking "That's an interesting idea," you can  
think instead "That's an interesting idea. I'll try building an  
initial version tonight." It's even better when you're both a  
programmer and the target user, because then the cycle of generating  
new versions and testing them on users can happen inside one head.  
NoticingOnce you're living in the future in some respect, the way to notice  
startup ideas is to look for things that seem to be missing. If  
you're really at the leading edge of a rapidly changing field, there  
will be things that are obviously missing. What won't be obvious  
is that they're startup ideas. So if you want to find startup  
ideas, don't merely turn on the filter "What's missing?" Also turn  
off every other filter, particularly "Could this be a big company?"  
There's plenty of time to apply that test later. But if you're  
thinking about that initially, it may not only filter out lots  
of good ideas, but also cause you to focus on bad ones.Most things that are missing will take some time to see. You almost  
have to trick yourself into seeing the ideas around you.But you know the ideas are out there. This is not one of those  
problems where there might not be an answer. It's impossibly  
unlikely that this is the exact moment when technological progress  
stops. You can be sure people are going to build things in the  
next few years that will make you think "What did I do before x?"And when these problems get solved, they will probably seem flamingly  
obvious in retrospect. What you need to do is turn off the filters  
that usually prevent you from seeing them. The most powerful is  
simply taking the current state of the world for granted. Even the  
most radically open-minded of us mostly do that. You couldn't get  
from your bed to the front door if you stopped to question everything.But if you're looking for startup ideas you can sacrifice some of  
the efficiency of taking the status quo for granted and start to  
question things. Why is your inbox overflowing? Because you get  
a lot of email, or because it's hard to get email out of your inbox?  
Why do you get so much email? What problems are people trying to  
solve by sending you email? Are there better ways to solve them?  
And why is it hard to get emails out of your inbox? Why do you  
keep emails around after you've read them? Is an inbox the optimal  
tool for that?Pay particular attention to things that chafe you. The advantage  
of taking the status quo for granted is not just that it makes life  
(locally) more efficient, but also that it makes life more tolerable.  
If you knew about all the things we'll get in the next 50 years but  
don't have yet, you'd find present day life pretty constraining,  
just as someone from the present would if they were sent back 50  
years in a time machine. When something annoys you, it could be  
because you're living in the future.When you find the right sort of problem, you should probably be  
able to describe it as obvious, at least to you. When we started  
Viaweb, all the online stores were built by hand, by web designers  
making individual HTML pages. It was obvious to us as programmers  
that these sites would have to be generated by software.  
[5]Which means, strangely enough, that coming up with startup ideas  
is a question of seeing the obvious. That suggests how weird this  
process is: you're trying to see things that are obvious, and yet  
that you hadn't seen.Since what you need to do here is loosen up your own mind, it may  
be best not to make too much of a direct frontal attack on the  
problem — i.e. to sit down and try to think of ideas. The best  
plan may be just to keep a background process running, looking for  
things that seem to be missing. Work on hard problems, driven  
mainly by curiosity, but have a second self watching over your  
shoulder, taking note of gaps and anomalies.   
[6]Give yourself some time. You have a lot of control over the rate  
at which you turn yours into a prepared mind, but you have less  
control over the stimuli that spark ideas when they hit it. If  
Bill Gates and Paul Allen had constrained themselves to come up  
with a startup idea in one month, what if they'd chosen a month  
before the Altair appeared? They probably would have worked on a  
less promising idea. Drew Houston did work on a less promising  
idea before Dropbox: an SAT prep startup. But Dropbox was a much  
better idea, both in the absolute sense and also as a match for his  
skills.  
[7]A good way to trick yourself into noticing ideas is to work on  
projects that seem like they'd be cool. If you do that, you'll  
naturally tend to build things that are missing. It wouldn't seem  
as interesting to build something that already existed.Just as trying to think up startup ideas tends to produce bad ones,  
working on things that could be dismissed as "toys" often produces  
good ones. When something is described as a toy, that means it has  
everything an idea needs except being important. It's cool; users  
love it; it just doesn't matter. But if you're living in the future  
and you build something cool that users love, it may matter more  
than outsiders think. Microcomputers seemed like toys when Apple  
and Microsoft started working on them. I'm old enough to remember  
that era; the usual term for people with their own microcomputers  
was "hobbyists." BackRub seemed like an inconsequential science  
project. The Facebook was just a way for undergrads to stalk one  
another.At YC we're excited when we meet startups working on things that  
we could imagine know-it-alls on forums dismissing as toys. To us  
that's positive evidence an idea is good.If you can afford to take a long view (and arguably you can't afford  
not to), you can turn "Live in the future and build what's missing"  
into something even better:  
  
 Live in the future and build what seems interesting.  
  
SchoolThat's what I'd advise college students to do, rather than trying  
to learn about "entrepreneurship." "Entrepreneurship" is something  
you learn best by doing it. The examples of the most successful  
founders make that clear. What you should be spending your time  
on in college is ratcheting yourself into the future. College is  
an incomparable opportunity to do that. What a waste to sacrifice  
an opportunity to solve the hard part of starting a startup — becoming   
the sort of person who can have organic startup ideas — by   
spending time learning about the easy part. Especially since  
you won't even really learn about it, any more than you'd learn  
about sex in a class. All you'll learn is the words for things.The clash of domains is a particularly fruitful source of ideas.  
If you know a lot about programming and you start learning about  
some other field, you'll probably see problems that software could  
solve. In fact, you're doubly likely to find good problems in  
another domain: (a) the inhabitants of that domain are not as likely  
as software people to have already solved their problems with  
software, and (b) since you come into the new domain totally ignorant,  
you don't even know what the status quo is to take it for granted.So if you're a CS major and you want to start a startup, instead  
of taking a class on entrepreneurship you're better off taking a  
class on, say, genetics. Or better still, go work for a biotech  
company. CS majors normally get summer jobs at computer hardware  
or software companies. But if you want to find startup ideas, you  
might do better to get a summer job in some unrelated field.   
[8]Or don't take any extra classes, and just build things. It's no  
coincidence that Microsoft and Facebook both got started in January.  
At Harvard that is (or was) Reading Period, when students have no  
classes to attend because they're supposed to be studying for finals.  
[9]But don't feel like you have to build things that will become startups. That's  
premature optimization. Just build things. Preferably with other  
students. It's not just the classes that make a university such a  
good place to crank oneself into the future. You're also surrounded  
by other people trying to do the same thing. If you work together  
with them on projects, you'll end up producing not just organic  
ideas, but organic ideas with organic founding teams — and that,  
empirically, is the best combination.Beware of research. If an undergrad writes something all his friends  
start using, it's quite likely to represent a good startup idea.  
Whereas a PhD dissertation is extremely unlikely to. For some  
reason, the more a project has to count as research, the less likely  
it is to be something that could be turned into a startup.  
[10]  
I think the reason is that the subset of ideas that count as research  
is so narrow that it's unlikely that a project that satisfied that  
constraint would also satisfy the orthogonal constraint of solving  
users' problems. Whereas when students (or professors) build  
something as a side-project, they automatically gravitate toward  
solving users' problems — perhaps even with an additional energy  
that comes from being freed from the constraints of research.  
CompetitionBecause a good idea should seem obvious, when you have one you'll  
tend to feel that you're late. Don't let that deter you. Worrying  
that you're late is one of the signs of a good idea. Ten minutes  
of searching the web will usually settle the question. Even if you  
find someone else working on the same thing, you're probably not  
too late. It's exceptionally rare for startups to be killed by  
competitors — so rare that you can almost discount the possibility.  
So unless you discover a competitor with the sort of lock-in that  
would prevent users from choosing you, don't discard the idea.If you're uncertain, ask users. The question of whether you're too  
late is subsumed by the question of whether anyone urgently needs  
what you plan to make. If you have something that no competitor  
does and that some subset of users urgently need, you have a  
beachhead.   
[11]The question then is whether that beachhead is big enough. Or more  
importantly, who's in it: if the beachhead consists of people doing  
something lots more people will be doing in the future, then it's  
probably big enough no matter how small it is. For example, if  
you're building something differentiated from competitors by the  
fact that it works on phones, but it only works on the newest phones,  
that's probably a big enough beachhead.Err on the side of doing things where you'll face competitors.  
Inexperienced founders usually give competitors more credit than  
they deserve. Whether you succeed depends far more on you than on  
your competitors. So better a good idea with competitors than a  
bad one without.You don't need to worry about entering a "crowded market" so long  
as you have a thesis about what everyone else in it is overlooking.  
In fact that's a very promising starting point. Google was that  
type of idea. Your thesis has to be more precise than "we're going  
to make an x that doesn't suck" though. You have to be able to  
phrase it in terms of something the incumbents are overlooking.  
Best of all is when you can say that they didn't have the courage  
of their convictions, and that your plan is what they'd have done  
if they'd followed through on their own insights. Google was that  
type of idea too. The search engines that preceded them shied away  
from the most radical implications of what they were doing — particularly   
that the better a job they did, the faster users would  
leave.A crowded market is actually a good sign, because it means both  
that there's demand and that none of the existing solutions are  
good enough. A startup can't hope to enter a market that's obviously  
big and yet in which they have no competitors. So any startup that  
succeeds is either going to be entering a market with existing  
competitors, but armed with some secret weapon that will get them  
all the users (like Google), or entering a market that looks small  
but which will turn out to be big (like Microsoft).   
[12]  
FiltersThere are two more filters you'll need to turn off if you want to  
notice startup ideas: the unsexy filter and the schlep filter.Most programmers wish they could start a startup by just writing  
some brilliant code, pushing it to a server, and having users pay  
them lots of money. They'd prefer not to deal with tedious problems  
or get involved in messy ways with the real world. Which is a  
reasonable preference, because such things slow you down. But this  
preference is so widespread that the space of convenient startup  
ideas has been stripped pretty clean. If you let your mind wander  
a few blocks down the street to the messy, tedious ideas, you'll  
find valuable ones just sitting there waiting to be implemented.The schlep filter is so dangerous that I wrote a separate essay  
about the condition it induces, which I called   
schlep blindness.  
I gave Stripe as an example of a startup that benefited from turning  
off this filter, and a pretty striking example it is. Thousands  
of programmers were in a position to see this idea; thousands of  
programmers knew how painful it was to process payments before  
Stripe. But when they looked for startup ideas they didn't see  
this one, because unconsciously they shrank from having to deal  
with payments. And dealing with payments is a schlep for Stripe,  
but not an intolerable one. In fact they might have had net less  
pain; because the fear of dealing with payments kept most people  
away from this idea, Stripe has had comparatively smooth sailing  
in other areas that are sometimes painful, like user acquisition.  
They didn't have to try very hard to make themselves heard by users,  
because users were desperately waiting for what they were building.The unsexy filter is similar to the schlep filter, except it keeps  
you from working on problems you despise rather than ones you fear.  
We overcame this one to work on Viaweb. There were interesting  
things about the architecture of our software, but we weren't  
interested in ecommerce per se. We could see the problem was one  
that needed to be solved though.Turning off the schlep filter is more important than turning off  
the unsexy filter, because the schlep filter is more likely to be  
an illusion. And even to the degree it isn't, it's a worse form  
of self-indulgence. Starting a successful startup is going to be  
fairly laborious no matter what. Even if the product doesn't entail  
a lot of schleps, you'll still have plenty dealing with investors,  
hiring and firing people, and so on. So if there's some idea you  
think would be cool but you're kept away from by fear of the schleps  
involved, don't worry: any sufficiently good idea will have as many.The unsexy filter, while still a source of error, is not as entirely  
useless as the schlep filter. If you're at the leading edge of a  
field that's changing rapidly, your ideas about what's sexy will  
be somewhat correlated with what's valuable in practice. Particularly  
as you get older and more experienced. Plus if you find an idea  
sexy, you'll work on it more enthusiastically.   
[13]  
RecipesWhile the best way to discover startup ideas is to become the sort  
of person who has them and then build whatever interests you,  
sometimes you don't have that luxury. Sometimes you need an idea  
now. For example, if you're working on a startup and your initial  
idea turns out to be bad.For the rest of this essay I'll talk about tricks for coming up  
with startup ideas on demand. Although empirically you're better  
off using the organic strategy, you could succeed this way. You  
just have to be more disciplined. When you use the organic method,  
you don't even notice an idea unless it's evidence that something  
is truly missing. But when you make a conscious effort to think  
of startup ideas, you have to replace this natural constraint with  
self-discipline. You'll see a lot more ideas, most of them bad,  
so you need to be able to filter them.One of the biggest dangers of not using the organic method is the  
example of the organic method. Organic ideas feel like inspirations.  
There are a lot of stories about successful startups that began  
when the founders had what seemed a crazy idea but "just knew" it  
was promising. When you feel that about an idea you've had while  
trying to come up with startup ideas, you're probably mistaken.When searching for ideas, look in areas where you have some expertise.  
If you're a database expert, don't build a chat app for teenagers  
(unless you're also a teenager). Maybe it's a good idea, but you  
can't trust your judgment about that, so ignore it. There have to  
be other ideas that involve databases, and whose quality you can  
judge. Do you find it hard to come up with good ideas involving  
databases? That's because your expertise raises your standards.  
Your ideas about chat apps are just as bad, but you're giving  
yourself a Dunning-Kruger pass in that domain.The place to start looking for ideas is things you need. There  
must be things you need.  
[14]One good trick is to ask yourself whether in your previous job you  
ever found yourself saying "Why doesn't someone make x? If someone  
made x we'd buy it in a second." If you can think of any x people  
said that about, you probably have an idea. You know there's demand,  
and people don't say that about things that are impossible to build.More generally, try asking yourself whether there's something unusual  
about you that makes your needs different from most other people's.  
You're probably not the only one. It's especially good if you're  
different in a way people will increasingly be.If you're changing ideas, one unusual thing about you is the idea  
you'd previously been working on. Did you discover any needs while  
working on it? Several well-known startups began this way. Hotmail  
began as something its founders wrote to talk about their previous  
startup idea while they were working at their day jobs.   
[15]A particularly promising way to be unusual is to be young. Some  
of the most valuable new ideas take root first among people in their  
teens and early twenties. And while young founders are at a  
disadvantage in some respects, they're the only ones who really  
understand their peers. It would have been very hard for someone  
who wasn't a college student to start Facebook. So if you're a  
young founder (under 23 say), are there things you and your friends  
would like to do that current technology won't let you?The next best thing to an unmet need of your own is an unmet need  
of someone else. Try talking to everyone you can about the gaps  
they find in the world. What's missing? What would they like to  
do that they can't? What's tedious or annoying, particularly in  
their work? Let the conversation get general; don't be trying too  
hard to find startup ideas. You're just looking for something to  
spark a thought. Maybe you'll notice a problem they didn't consciously  
realize they had, because you know how to solve it.When you find an unmet need that isn't your own, it may be somewhat  
blurry at first. The person who needs something may not know exactly  
what they need. In that case I often recommend that founders act  
like consultants — that they do what they'd do if they'd been  
retained to solve the problems of this one user. People's problems  
are similar enough that nearly all the code you write this way will  
be reusable, and whatever isn't will be a small price to start out  
certain that you've reached the bottom of the well.  
[16]One way to ensure you do a good job solving other people's problems  
is to make them your own. When Rajat Suri of E la Carte decided  
to write software for restaurants, he got a job as a waiter to learn  
how restaurants worked. That may seem like taking things to extremes,  
but startups are extreme. We love it when founders do such things.In fact, one strategy I recommend to people who need a new idea is  
not merely to turn off their schlep and unsexy filters, but to seek  
out ideas that are unsexy or involve schleps. Don't try to start  
Twitter. Those ideas are so rare that you can't find them by looking  
for them. Make something unsexy that people will pay you for.A good trick for bypassing the schlep and to some extent the unsexy  
filter is to ask what you wish someone else would build, so that  
you could use it. What would you pay for right now?Since startups often garbage-collect broken companies and industries,  
it can be a good trick to look for those that are dying, or deserve  
to, and try to imagine what kind of company would profit from their  
demise. For example, journalism is in free fall at the moment.  
But there may still be money to be made from something like journalism.  
What sort of company might cause people in the future to say "this  
replaced journalism" on some axis?But imagine asking that in the future, not now. When one company  
or industry replaces another, it usually comes in from the side.  
So don't look for a replacement for x; look for something that  
people will later say turned out to be a replacement for x. And  
be imaginative about the axis along which the replacement occurs.  
Traditional journalism, for example, is a way for readers to get  
information and to kill time, a way for writers to make money and  
to get attention, and a vehicle for several different types of  
advertising. It could be replaced on any of these axes (it has  
already started to be on most).When startups consume incumbents, they usually start by serving  
some small but important market that the big players ignore. It's  
particularly good if there's an admixture of disdain in the big  
players' attitude, because that often misleads them. For example,  
after Steve Wozniak built the computer that became the Apple I, he  
felt obliged to give his then-employer Hewlett-Packard the option  
to produce it. Fortunately for him, they turned it down, and one  
of the reasons they did was that it used a TV for a monitor, which  
seemed intolerably déclassé to a high-end hardware company like HP  
was at the time.   
[17]Are there groups of   
scruffy   
but sophisticated users like the early  
microcomputer "hobbyists" that are currently being ignored by the  
big players? A startup with its sights set on bigger things can  
often capture a small market easily by expending an effort that  
wouldn't be justified by that market alone.Similarly, since the most successful startups generally ride some  
wave bigger than themselves, it could be a good trick to look for  
waves and ask how one could benefit from them. The prices of gene  
sequencing and 3D printing are both experiencing Moore's Law-like  
declines. What new things will we be able to do in the new world  
we'll have in a few years? What are we unconsciously ruling out  
as impossible that will soon be possible?  
OrganicBut talking about looking explicitly for waves makes it clear that  
such recipes are plan B for getting startup ideas. Looking for  
waves is essentially a way to simulate the organic method. If  
you're at the leading edge of some rapidly changing field, you don't  
have to look for waves; you are the wave.Finding startup ideas is a subtle business, and that's why most  
people who try fail so miserably. It doesn't work well simply to  
try to think of startup ideas. If you do that, you get bad ones  
that sound dangerously plausible. The best approach is more indirect:  
if you have the right sort of background, good startup ideas will  
seem obvious to you. But even then, not immediately. It takes  
time to come across situations where you notice something missing.  
And often these gaps won't seem to be ideas for companies, just  
things that would be interesting to build. Which is why it's good  
to have the time and the inclination to build things just because  
they're interesting.Live in the future and build what seems interesting. Strange as  
it sounds, that's the real recipe.  
Notes[1]  
This form of bad idea has been around as long as the web. It  
was common in the 1990s, except then people who had it used to say  
they were going to create a portal for x instead of a social network  
for x. Structurally the idea is stone soup: you post a sign saying  
"this is the place for people interested in x," and all those people  
show up and you make money from them. What lures founders into  
this sort of idea are statistics about the millions of people who  
might be interested in each type of x. What they forget is that  
any given person might have 20 affinities by this standard, and no  
one is going to visit 20 different communities regularly.[2]  
I'm not saying, incidentally, that I know for sure a social  
network for pet owners is a bad idea. I know it's a bad idea the  
way I know randomly generated DNA would not produce a viable organism.  
The set of plausible sounding startup ideas is many times larger  
than the set of good ones, and many of the good ones don't even  
sound that plausible. So if all you know about a startup idea is  
that it sounds plausible, you have to assume it's bad.[3]  
More precisely, the users' need has to give them sufficient  
activation energy to start using whatever you make, which can vary  
a lot. For example, the activation energy for enterprise software  
sold through traditional channels is very high, so you'd have to  
be a lot better to get users to switch. Whereas the activation  
energy required to switch to a new search engine is low. Which in  
turn is why search engines are so much better than enterprise  
software.[4]  
This gets harder as you get older. While the space of ideas  
doesn't have dangerous local maxima, the space of careers does.  
There are fairly high walls between most of the paths people take  
through life, and the older you get, the higher the walls become.[5]  
It was also obvious to us that the web was going to be a big  
deal. Few non-programmers grasped that in 1995, but the programmers  
had seen what GUIs had done for desktop computers.[6]  
Maybe it would work to have this second self keep a journal,  
and each night to make a brief entry listing the gaps and anomalies  
you'd noticed that day. Not startup ideas, just the raw gaps and  
anomalies.[7]  
Sam Altman points out that taking time to come up with an  
idea is not merely a better strategy in an absolute sense, but also  
like an undervalued stock in that so few founders do it.There's comparatively little competition for the best ideas, because  
few founders are willing to put in the time required to notice them.  
Whereas there is a great deal of competition for mediocre ideas,  
because when people make up startup ideas, they tend to make up the  
same ones.[8]  
For the computer hardware and software companies, summer jobs  
are the first phase of the recruiting funnel. But if you're good  
you can skip the first phase. If you're good you'll have no trouble  
getting hired by these companies when you graduate, regardless of  
how you spent your summers.[9]  
The empirical evidence suggests that if colleges want to help  
their students start startups, the best thing they can do is leave  
them alone in the right way.[10]  
I'm speaking here of IT startups; in biotech things are different.[11]  
This is an instance of a more general rule: focus on users,  
not competitors. The most important information about competitors  
is what you learn via users anyway.[12]  
In practice most successful startups have elements of both.  
And you can describe each strategy in terms of the other by adjusting  
the boundaries of what you call the market. But it's useful to  
consider these two ideas separately.[13]  
I almost hesitate to raise that point though. Startups are  
businesses; the point of a business is to make money; and with that  
additional constraint, you can't expect you'll be able to spend all  
your time working on what interests you most.[14]  
The need has to be a strong one. You can retroactively  
describe any made-up idea as something you need. But do you really  
need that recipe site or local event aggregator as much as Drew  
Houston needed Dropbox, or Brian Chesky and Joe Gebbia needed Airbnb?Quite often at YC I find myself asking founders "Would you use this  
thing yourself, if you hadn't written it?" and you'd be surprised  
how often the answer is no.[15]  
Paul Buchheit points out that trying to sell something bad  
can be a source of better ideas:"The best technique I've found for dealing with YC companies that  
have bad ideas is to tell them to go sell the product ASAP (before  
wasting time building it). Not only do they learn that nobody  
wants what they are building, they very often come back with a  
real idea that they discovered in the process of trying to sell  
the bad idea."[16]  
Here's a recipe that might produce the next Facebook, if  
you're college students. If you have a connection to one of the  
more powerful sororities at your school, approach the queen bees  
thereof and offer to be their personal IT consultants, building  
anything they could imagine needing in their social lives that  
didn't already exist. Anything that got built this way would be  
very promising, because such users are not just the most demanding  
but also the perfect point to spread from.I have no idea whether this would work.[17]  
And the reason it used a TV for a monitor is that Steve Wozniak  
started out by solving his own problems. He, like most of his  
peers, couldn't afford a monitor.Thanks to Sam Altman, Mike Arrington, Paul Buchheit, John Collison,  
Patrick Collison, Garry Tan, and Harj Taggar for reading drafts of  
this, and Marc Andreessen, Joe Gebbia, Reid Hoffman, Shel Kaphan,  
Mike Moritz and Kevin Systrom for answering my questions about  
startup history.Japanese TranslationItalian TranslationSpanish Translation

# The Hardware Renaissance

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2012One advantage of Y Combinator's early, broad focus is that we  
see trends before most other people. And one of the most conspicuous  
trends in the last batch was the large number of hardware startups.  
Out of 84 companies, 7 were making hardware. On the whole  
they've done better than the companies that weren't.They've faced resistance from investors of course. Investors have  
a deep-seated bias against hardware. But investors' opinions are  
a trailing indicator. The best founders are better at seeing the  
future than the best investors, because the best founders are making  
it.There is no one single force driving this trend. Hardware does  
well on crowdfunding sites. The spread of tablets makes it  
possible to build new things controlled  
by and even incorporating  
them. Electric motors  
 have improved.  
Wireless connectivity of various types can now be taken for granted.  
It's getting more straightforward to get things manufactured.  
Arduinos, 3D printing, laser cutters, and more accessible CNC milling are making hardware easier to prototype.  
Retailers are less of a bottleneck as customers increasingly buy  
online.One question I can answer is why hardware is suddenly cool.  
It always was cool.  
Physical things are great. They just haven't  
been as great a way to start a rapidly growing business  
as software. But that rule may not be permanent. It's not even  
that old; it only dates from about 1990. Maybe the advantage  
of software will turn out to have been temporary. Hackers love to  
build hardware, and customers love to buy it. So if the ease of  
shipping hardware even approached the ease of shipping software,  
we'd see a lot more hardware startups.It wouldn't be the first time something was a bad idea till it  
wasn't. And it wouldn't be the first time investors learned that  
lesson from founders.So if you want to work on hardware, don't be deterred from doing  
it because you worry investors will discriminate against you. And  
in particular, don't be deterred from applying to Y Combinator  
with a hardware idea, because we're especially interested in hardware  
startups.We know there's room for the next Steve Jobs.  
But there's almost certainly also room for the first   
<Your Name Here>.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, David Cann, Sanjay Dastoor,   
Paul Gerhardt, Cameron Robertson, Harj Taggar, and Garry Tan for reading drafts of this.A Hardware Renaissance while Software Eats the World?

# Startup = Growth

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
September 2012A startup is a company designed to grow fast. Being newly founded  
does not in itself make a company a startup. Nor is it necessary  
for a startup to work on technology, or take venture funding, or  
have some sort of "exit." The only essential thing is growth.  
Everything else we associate with startups follows from growth.If you want to start one it's important to understand that. Startups  
are so hard that you can't be pointed off to the side and hope to  
succeed. You have to know that growth is what you're after. The  
good news is, if you get growth, everything else tends to fall into  
place. Which means you can use growth like a compass to make almost  
every decision you face.  
RedwoodsLet's start with a distinction that should be obvious but is often  
overlooked: not every newly founded company is a startup. Millions  
of companies are started every year in the US. Only a tiny fraction  
are startups. Most are service businesses — restaurants, barbershops,  
plumbers, and so on. These are not startups, except in a few unusual  
cases. A barbershop isn't designed to grow fast. Whereas a search  
engine, for example, is.When I say startups are designed to grow fast, I mean it in two  
senses. Partly I mean designed in the sense of intended, because  
most startups fail. But I also mean startups are different by  
nature, in the same way a redwood seedling has a different destiny  
from a bean sprout.That difference is why there's a distinct word, "startup," for  
companies designed to grow fast. If all companies were essentially  
similar, but some through luck or the efforts of their founders  
ended up growing very fast, we wouldn't need a separate word. We  
could just talk about super-successful companies and less successful  
ones. But in fact startups do have a different sort of DNA from  
other businesses. Google is not just a barbershop whose founders  
were unusually lucky and hard-working. Google was different from  
the beginning.To grow rapidly, you need to make something you can sell to a big  
market. That's the difference between Google and a barbershop. A  
barbershop doesn't scale.For a company to grow really big, it must (a) make something lots  
of people want, and (b) reach and serve all those people. Barbershops  
are doing fine in the (a) department. Almost everyone needs their  
hair cut. The problem for a barbershop, as for any retail  
establishment, is (b). A barbershop serves customers in person,  
and few will travel far for a haircut. And even if they did, the  
barbershop couldn't accomodate them.   
[1]Writing software is a great way to solve (b), but you can still end  
up constrained in (a). If you write software to teach Tibetan to  
Hungarian speakers, you'll be able to reach most of the people who  
want it, but there won't be many of them. If you make software  
to teach English to Chinese speakers, however, you're in startup  
territory.Most businesses are tightly constrained in (a) or (b). The distinctive  
feature of successful startups is that they're not.  
IdeasIt might seem that it would always be better to start a startup  
than an ordinary business. If you're going to start a company, why  
not start the type with the most potential? The catch is that this  
is a (fairly) efficient market. If you write software to teach  
Tibetan to Hungarians, you won't have much competition. If you  
write software to teach English to Chinese speakers, you'll face  
ferocious competition, precisely because that's such a larger prize.  
[2]The constraints that limit ordinary companies also protect them.  
That's the tradeoff. If you start a barbershop, you only have to  
compete with other local barbers. If you start a search engine you  
have to compete with the whole world.The most important thing that the constraints on a normal business  
protect it from is not competition, however, but the difficulty of  
coming up with new ideas. If you open a bar in a particular  
neighborhood, as well as limiting your potential and protecting you  
from competitors, that geographic constraint also helps define your  
company. Bar + neighborhood is a sufficient idea for a small  
business. Similarly for companies constrained in (a). Your niche  
both protects and defines you.Whereas if you want to start a startup, you're probably going to  
have to think of something fairly novel. A startup has to make  
something it can deliver to a large market, and ideas of that type  
are so valuable that all the obvious ones are already taken.That space of ideas has been so thoroughly picked over that a startup  
generally has to work on something everyone else has overlooked.  
I was going to write that one has to make a conscious effort to  
find ideas everyone else has overlooked. But that's not how most  
startups get started. Usually successful startups happen because  
the founders are sufficiently different from other people that ideas  
few others can see seem obvious to them. Perhaps later they step  
back and notice they've found an idea in everyone else's blind spot,  
and from that point make a deliberate effort to stay there.   
[3]  
But at the moment when successful startups get started, much of the  
innovation is unconscious.What's different about successful founders is that they can see  
different problems. It's a particularly good combination both to  
be good at technology and to face problems that can be solved by  
it, because technology changes so rapidly that formerly bad ideas  
often become good without anyone noticing. Steve Wozniak's problem  
was that he wanted his own computer. That was an unusual problem  
to have in 1975. But technological change was about to make it a  
much more common one. Because he not only wanted a computer but  
knew how to build them, Wozniak was able to make himself one. And  
the problem he solved for himself became one that Apple solved for  
millions of people in the coming years. But by the time it was  
obvious to ordinary people that this was a big market, Apple was  
already established.Google has similar origins. Larry Page and Sergey Brin wanted to  
search the web. But unlike most people they had the technical  
expertise both to notice that existing search engines were not as  
good as they could be, and to know how to improve them. Over the  
next few years their problem became everyone's problem, as the web  
grew to a size where you didn't have to be a picky search expert  
to notice the old algorithms weren't good enough. But as happened  
with Apple, by the time everyone else realized how important search  
was, Google was entrenched.That's one connection between startup ideas and technology. Rapid  
change in one area uncovers big, soluble problems in other areas.  
Sometimes the changes are advances, and what they change is solubility.  
That was the kind of change that yielded Apple; advances in chip  
technology finally let Steve Wozniak design a computer he could  
afford. But in Google's case the most important change was the  
growth of the web. What changed there was not solubility but bigness.The other connection between startups and technology is that startups  
create new ways of doing things, and new ways of doing things are,  
in the broader sense of the word, new technology.   
When a startup both begins with an  
idea exposed by technological change and makes a product consisting  
of technology in the narrower sense (what used to be called "high  
technology"), it's easy to conflate the two. But the two connections  
are distinct and in principle one could start a startup that was  
neither driven by technological change, nor whose product consisted  
of technology except in the broader sense.   
[4]RateHow fast does a company have to grow to be considered a startup?  
There's no precise answer to that. "Startup" is a pole, not a  
threshold. Starting one is at first no more than a declaration of  
one's ambitions. You're committing not just to starting a company,  
but to starting a fast growing one, and you're thus committing to  
search for one of the rare ideas of that type. But at first you  
have no more than commitment. Starting a startup is like being an  
actor in that respect. "Actor" too is a pole rather than a threshold.  
At the beginning of his career, an actor is a waiter who goes to  
auditions. Getting work makes him a successful actor, but he doesn't  
only become an actor when he's successful.So the real question is not what growth rate makes a company a  
startup, but what growth rate successful startups tend to have.  
For founders that's more than a theoretical question, because it's  
equivalent to asking if they're on the right path.The growth of a successful startup usually has three phases:  
  
 There's an initial period of slow or no growth while the startup  
 tries to figure out what it's doing. As the startup figures out how to make something lots of people  
 want and how to reach those people, there's a period of rapid  
 growth. Eventually a successful startup will grow into a big company.  
 Growth will slow, partly due to internal limits and partly because  
 the company is starting to bump up against the limits of the  
 markets it serves.   
 [5]  
  
Together these three phases produce an S-curve. The phase whose  
growth defines the startup is the second one, the ascent. Its  
length and slope determine how big the company will be.The slope is the company's growth rate. If there's one number every  
founder should always know, it's the company's growth rate. That's  
the measure of a startup. If you don't know that number, you don't  
even know if you're doing well or badly.When I first meet founders and ask what their growth rate is,  
sometimes they tell me "we get about a hundred new customers a  
month." That's not a rate. What matters is not the absolute number  
of new customers, but the ratio of new customers to existing ones.  
If you're really getting a constant number of new customers every  
month, you're in trouble, because that means your growth rate is  
decreasing.During Y Combinator we measure growth rate per week, partly because  
there is so little time before Demo Day, and partly because startups  
early on need frequent feedback from their users to tweak what  
they're doing.   
[6]A good growth rate during YC is 5-7% a week. If you can hit 10% a  
week you're doing exceptionally well. If you can only manage 1%,  
it's a sign you haven't yet figured out what you're doing.The best thing to measure the growth rate of is revenue. The next  
best, for startups that aren't charging initially, is active users.  
That's a reasonable proxy for revenue growth because whenever the  
startup does start trying to make money, their revenues will probably  
be a constant multiple of active users.   
[7]  
CompassWe usually advise startups to pick a growth rate they think they  
can hit, and then just try to hit it every week. The key word here  
is "just." If they decide to grow at 7% a week and they hit that  
number, they're successful for that week. There's nothing more  
they need to do. But if they don't hit it, they've failed in the  
only thing that mattered, and should be correspondingly alarmed.Programmers will recognize what we're doing here. We're turning  
starting a startup into an optimization problem. And anyone who  
has tried optimizing code knows how wonderfully effective that sort  
of narrow focus can be. Optimizing code means taking an existing  
program and changing it to use less of something, usually time or  
memory. You don't have to think about what the program should do,  
just make it faster. For most programmers this is very satisfying  
work. The narrow focus makes it a sort of puzzle, and you're  
generally surprised how fast you can solve it.Focusing on hitting a growth rate reduces the otherwise bewilderingly  
multifarious problem of starting a startup to a single problem.  
You can use that target growth rate to make all your decisions for  
you; anything that gets you the growth you need is ipso facto right.  
Should you spend two days at a conference? Should you hire another  
programmer? Should you focus more on marketing? Should you spend  
time courting some big customer? Should you add x feature? Whatever  
gets you your target growth rate.   
[8]Judging yourself by weekly growth doesn't mean you can look no more  
than a week ahead. Once you experience the pain of missing your  
target one week (it was the only thing that mattered, and you failed  
at it), you become interested in anything that could spare you such  
pain in the future. So you'll be willing for example to hire another  
programmer, who won't contribute to this week's growth but perhaps  
in a month will have implemented some new feature that will get you  
more users. But only if (a) the distraction of hiring someone  
won't make you miss your numbers in the short term, and (b) you're  
sufficiently worried about whether you can keep hitting your numbers  
without hiring someone new.It's not that you don't think about the future, just that you think  
about it no more than necessary.In theory this sort of hill-climbing could get a startup into  
trouble. They could end up on a local maximum. But in practice  
that never happens. Having to hit a growth number every week forces  
founders to act, and acting versus not acting is the high bit of  
succeeding. Nine times out of ten, sitting around strategizing is  
just a form of procrastination. Whereas founders' intuitions about  
which hill to climb are usually better than they realize. Plus the  
maxima in the space of startup ideas are not spiky and isolated.  
Most fairly good ideas are adjacent to even better ones.The fascinating thing about optimizing for growth is that it can  
actually discover startup ideas. You can use the need for growth  
as a form of evolutionary pressure. If you start out with some  
initial plan and modify it as necessary to keep hitting, say, 10%  
weekly growth, you may end up with a quite different company than  
you meant to start. But anything that grows consistently at 10% a  
week is almost certainly a better idea than you started with.There's a parallel here to small businesses. Just as the constraint  
of being located in a particular neighborhood helps define a bar,  
the constraint of growing at a certain rate can help define a  
startup.You'll generally do best to follow that constraint wherever it leads  
rather than being influenced by some initial vision, just as a  
scientist is better off following the truth wherever it leads rather  
than being influenced by what he wishes were the case. When Richard  
Feynman said that the imagination of nature was greater than the  
imagination of man, he meant that if you just keep following the  
truth you'll discover cooler things than you could ever have made  
up. For startups, growth is a constraint much like truth. Every  
successful startup is at least partly a product of the imagination  
of growth.   
[9]  
ValueIt's hard to find something that grows consistently at several  
percent a week, but if you do you may have found something surprisingly  
valuable. If we project forward we see why.  
  
weeklyyearly  
1%1.7x  
2%2.8x  
5%12.6x  
7%33.7x  
10%142.0x  
  
  
  
A company that grows at 1% a week will grow 1.7x a year, whereas a  
company that grows at 5% a week will grow 12.6x. A company making  
$1000 a month (a typical number early in YC) and growing at 1% a  
week will 4 years later be making $7900 a month, which is less than  
a good programmer makes in salary in Silicon Valley. A startup  
that grows at 5% a week will in 4 years be making $25 million a  
month.   
[10]Our ancestors must rarely have encountered cases of exponential  
growth, because our intuitions are no guide here. What happens  
to fast growing startups tends to surprise even the founders.Small variations in growth rate produce qualitatively different  
outcomes. That's why there's a separate word for startups, and why  
startups do things that ordinary companies don't, like raising money  
and getting acquired. And, strangely enough, it's also why they  
fail so frequently.Considering how valuable a successful startup can become, anyone  
familiar with the concept of expected value would be surprised if  
the failure rate weren't high. If a successful startup could make  
a founder $100 million, then even if the chance of succeeding were  
only 1%, the expected value of starting one would be $1 million.  
And the probability of a group of sufficiently smart and determined  
founders succeeding on that scale might be significantly over 1%.  
For the right people — e.g. the young Bill Gates — the probability  
might be 20% or even 50%. So it's not surprising that so many want  
to take a shot at it. In an efficient market, the number of failed  
startups should be proportionate to the size of the successes. And  
since the latter is huge the former should be too.   
[11]What this means is that at any given time, the great majority of  
startups will be working on something that's never going to go  
anywhere, and yet glorifying their doomed efforts with the grandiose  
title of "startup."This doesn't bother me. It's the same with other high-beta vocations,  
like being an actor or a novelist. I've long since gotten used to  
it. But it seems to bother a lot of people, particularly those  
who've started ordinary businesses. Many are annoyed that these  
so-called startups get all the attention, when hardly any of them  
will amount to anything.If they stepped back and looked at the whole picture they might be  
less indignant. The mistake they're making is that by basing their  
opinions on anecdotal evidence they're implicitly judging by the  
median rather than the average. If you judge by the median startup,  
the whole concept of a startup seems like a fraud. You have to  
invent a bubble to explain why founders want to start them or  
investors want to fund them. But it's a mistake to use the median  
in a domain with so much variation. If you look at the average  
outcome rather than the median, you can understand why investors  
like them, and why, if they aren't median people, it's a rational  
choice for founders to start them.  
DealsWhy do investors like startups so much? Why are they so hot to  
invest in photo-sharing apps, rather than solid money-making  
businesses? Not only for the obvious reason.The test of any investment is the ratio of return to risk. Startups  
pass that test because although they're appallingly risky, the  
returns when they do succeed are so high. But that's not the only  
reason investors like startups. An ordinary slower-growing business  
might have just as good a ratio of return to risk, if both were  
lower. So why are VCs interested only in high-growth companies?  
The reason is that they get paid by getting their capital back,  
ideally after the startup IPOs, or failing that when it's acquired.The other way to get returns from an investment is in the form of  
dividends. Why isn't there a parallel VC industry that invests in  
ordinary companies in return for a percentage of their profits?  
Because it's too easy for people who control a private company to  
funnel its revenues to themselves (e.g. by buying overpriced  
components from a supplier they control) while making it look like  
the company is making little profit. Anyone who invested in private  
companies in return for dividends would have to pay close attention  
to their books.The reason VCs like to invest in startups is not simply the returns,  
but also because such investments are so easy to oversee. The  
founders can't enrich themselves without also enriching the investors.  
[12]Why do founders want to take the VCs' money? Growth, again. The  
constraint between good ideas and growth operates in both directions.  
It's not merely that you need a scalable idea to grow. If you have  
such an idea and don't grow fast enough, competitors will. Growing  
too slowly is particularly dangerous in a business with network  
effects, which the best startups usually have to some degree.Almost every company needs some amount of funding to get started.  
But startups often raise money even when they are or could be  
profitable. It might seem foolish to sell stock in a profitable  
company for less than you think it will later be worth, but it's  
no more foolish than buying insurance. Fundamentally that's how  
the most successful startups view fundraising. They could grow the  
company on its own revenues, but the extra money and help supplied  
by VCs will let them grow even faster. Raising money lets you  
choose your growth rate.Money to grow faster is always at the command of the most successful  
startups, because the VCs need them more than they need the VCs.  
A profitable startup could if it wanted just grow on its own revenues.  
Growing slower might be slightly dangerous, but chances are it  
wouldn't kill them. Whereas VCs need to invest in startups, and  
in particular the most successful startups, or they'll be out of  
business. Which means that any sufficiently promising startup will  
be offered money on terms they'd be crazy to refuse. And yet because  
of the scale of the successes in the startup business, VCs can still  
make money from such investments. You'd have to be crazy to believe  
your company was going to become as valuable as a high growth rate  
can make it, but some do.Pretty much every successful startup will get acquisition offers  
too. Why? What is it about startups that makes other companies  
want to buy them?   
[13]Fundamentally the same thing that makes everyone else want the stock  
of successful startups: a rapidly growing company is valuable. It's  
a good thing eBay bought Paypal, for example, because Paypal is now  
responsible for 43% of their sales and probably more of their growth.But acquirers have an additional reason to want startups. A rapidly  
growing company is not merely valuable, but dangerous. If it keeps  
expanding, it might expand into the acquirer's own territory. Most  
product acquisitions have some component of fear. Even if an  
acquirer isn't threatened by the startup itself, they might be  
alarmed at the thought of what a competitor could do with it. And  
because startups are in this sense doubly valuable to acquirers,  
acquirers will often pay more than an ordinary investor would.   
[14]  
UnderstandThe combination of founders, investors, and acquirers forms a natural  
ecosystem. It works so well that those who don't understand it are  
driven to invent conspiracy theories to explain how neatly things  
sometimes turn out. Just as our ancestors did to explain the  
apparently too neat workings of the natural world. But there is  
no secret cabal making it all work.If you start from the mistaken assumption that Instagram was  
worthless, you have to invent a secret boss to force Mark Zuckerberg  
to buy it. To anyone who knows Mark Zuckerberg, that is the reductio  
ad absurdum of the initial assumption. The reason he bought Instagram  
was that it was valuable and dangerous, and what made it so was  
growth.If you want to understand startups, understand growth. Growth  
drives everything in this world. Growth is why startups usually  
work on technology — because ideas for fast growing companies are  
so rare that the best way to find new ones is to discover those  
recently made viable by change, and technology is the best source  
of rapid change. Growth is why it's a rational choice economically  
for so many founders to try starting a startup: growth makes the  
successful companies so valuable that the expected value is high  
even though the risk is too. Growth is why VCs want to invest in  
startups: not just because the returns are high but also because  
generating returns from capital gains is easier to manage than  
generating returns from dividends. Growth explains why the most  
successful startups take VC money even if they don't need to: it  
lets them choose their growth rate. And growth explains why  
successful startups almost invariably get acquisition offers. To  
acquirers a fast-growing company is not merely valuable but dangerous  
too.It's not just that if you want to succeed in some domain, you have  
to understand the forces driving it. Understanding growth is what  
starting a startup consists of. What you're really doing (and  
to the dismay of some observers, all you're really doing) when you  
start a startup is committing to solve a harder type of problem  
than ordinary businesses do. You're committing to search for one  
of the rare ideas that generates rapid growth. Because these ideas  
are so valuable, finding one is hard. The startup is the embodiment  
of your discoveries so far. Starting a startup is thus very much  
like deciding to be a research scientist: you're not committing to  
solve any specific problem; you don't know for sure which problems  
are soluble; but you're committing to try to discover something no  
one knew before. A startup founder is in effect an economic research  
scientist. Most don't discover anything that remarkable, but some  
discover relativity.  
Notes[1]  
Strictly speaking it's not lots of customers you need but a big  
market, meaning a high product of number of customers times how  
much they'll pay. But it's dangerous to have too few customers  
even if they pay a lot, or the power that individual customers have  
over you could turn you into a de facto consulting firm. So whatever  
market you're in, you'll usually do best to err on the side of  
making the broadest type of product for it.[2]  
One year at Startup School David Heinemeier Hansson encouraged  
programmers who wanted to start businesses to use a restaurant as  
a model. What he meant, I believe, is that it's fine to start  
software companies constrained in (a) in the same way a restaurant  
is constrained in (b). I agree. Most people should not try to  
start startups.[3]  
That sort of stepping back is one of the things we focus on at  
Y Combinator. It's common for founders to have discovered something  
intuitively without understanding all its implications. That's  
probably true of the biggest discoveries in any field.[4]  
I got it wrong in "How to Make Wealth" when I said that a  
startup was a small company that takes on a hard technical  
problem. That is the most common recipe but not the only one.[5]  
In principle companies aren't limited by the size of the markets  
they serve, because they could just expand into new markets. But  
there seem to be limits on the ability of big companies to do that.  
Which means the slowdown that comes from bumping up against the  
limits of one's markets is ultimately just another way in which  
internal limits are expressed.It may be that some of these limits could be overcome by changing  
the shape of the organization — specifically by sharding it.[6]  
This is, obviously, only for startups that have already launched  
or can launch during YC. A startup building a new database will  
probably not do that. On the other hand, launching something small  
and then using growth rate as evolutionary pressure is such a  
valuable technique that any company that could start this way  
probably should.[7]  
If the startup is taking the Facebook/Twitter route and building  
something they hope will be very popular but from which they don't  
yet have a definite plan to make money, the growth rate has to be  
higher, even though it's a proxy for revenue growth, because such  
companies need huge numbers of users to succeed at all.Beware too of the edge case where something spreads rapidly but the  
churn is high as well, so that you have good net growth till you run  
through all the potential users, at which point it suddenly stops.[8]  
Within YC when we say it's ipso facto right to do whatever gets  
you growth, it's implicit that this excludes trickery like buying  
users for more than their lifetime value, counting users as active  
when they're really not, bleeding out invites at a regularly  
increasing rate to manufacture a perfect growth curve, etc. Even  
if you were able to fool investors with such tricks, you'd ultimately  
be hurting yourself, because you're throwing off your own compass.[9]  
Which is why it's such a dangerous mistake to believe that  
successful startups are simply the embodiment of some brilliant  
initial idea. What you're looking for initially is not so much a  
great idea as an idea that could evolve into a great one. The  
danger is that promising ideas are not merely blurry versions of  
great ones. They're often different in kind, because the early  
adopters you evolve the idea upon have different needs from the  
rest of the market. For example, the idea that evolves into Facebook  
isn't merely a subset of Facebook; the idea that evolves into  
Facebook is a site for Harvard undergrads.[10]  
What if a company grew at 1.7x a year for a really long time?  
Could it not grow just as big as any successful startup? In principle  
yes, of course. If our hypothetical company making $1000 a month  
grew at 1% a week for 19 years, it would grow as big as a company  
growing at 5% a week for 4 years. But while such trajectories may  
be common in, say, real estate development, you don't see them much  
in the technology business. In technology, companies that grow  
slowly tend not to grow as big.[11]  
Any expected value calculation varies from person to person  
depending on their utility function for money. I.e. the first  
million is worth more to most people than subsequent millions. How  
much more depends on the person. For founders who are younger or  
more ambitious the utility function is flatter. Which is probably  
part of the reason the founders of the most successful startups of  
all tend to be on the young side.[12]  
More precisely, this is the case in the biggest winners, which  
is where all the returns come from. A startup founder could pull  
the same trick of enriching himself at the company's expense by  
selling them overpriced components. But it wouldn't be worth it  
for the founders of Google to do that. Only founders of failing  
startups would even be tempted, but those are writeoffs from the  
VCs' point of view anyway.[13]  
Acquisitions fall into two categories: those where the acquirer  
wants the business, and those where the acquirer just wants the  
employees. The latter type is sometimes called an HR acquisition.  
Though nominally acquisitions and sometimes on a scale that has a  
significant effect on the expected value calculation for potential  
founders, HR acquisitions are viewed by acquirers as more akin to  
hiring bonuses.[14]  
I once explained this to some founders who had recently arrived  
from Russia. They found it novel that if you threatened a company  
they'd pay a premium for you. "In Russia they just kill you," they  
said, and they were only partly joking. Economically, the fact  
that established companies can't simply eliminate new competitors  
may be one of the most valuable aspects of the rule of law. And  
so to the extent we see incumbents suppressing competitors via  
regulations or patent suits, we should worry, not because it's a  
departure from the rule of law per se but from what the rule of law  
is aiming at.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Marc Andreessen, Paul Buchheit, Patrick  
Collison, Jessica Livingston, Geoff Ralston, and Harj Taggar for  
reading drafts of this.Arabic TranslationEstonian TranslationPortuguese TranslationItalian Translation

# Black Swan Farming

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
September 2012I've done several types of work over the years but I don't know  
another as counterintuitive as startup investing.The two most important things to understand about startup investing,  
as a business, are (1) that effectively all the returns are  
concentrated in a few big winners, and (2) that the best ideas look  
initially like bad ideas.The first rule I knew intellectually, but didn't really grasp till  
it happened to us. The total value of the companies we've funded  
is around 10 billion, give or take a few. But just two companies,  
Dropbox and Airbnb, account for about three quarters of it.In startups, the big winners are big to a degree that violates our  
expectations about variation. I don't know whether these expectations  
are innate or learned, but whatever the cause, we are just not  
prepared for the 1000x variation in outcomes that one finds in  
startup investing.That yields all sorts of strange consequences. For example, in  
purely financial terms, there is probably at most one company in  
each YC batch that will have a significant effect on our returns,  
and the rest are just a cost of doing business.   
[1]  
I haven't  
really assimilated that fact, partly because it's so counterintuitive,  
and partly because we're not doing this just for financial reasons;  
YC would be a pretty lonely place if we only had one company per  
batch. And yet it's true.To succeed in a domain that violates your intuitions, you need to  
be able to turn them off the way a pilot does when flying through  
clouds.   
[2]  
 You need to do what you know intellectually to be  
right, even though it feels wrong.It's a constant battle for us. It's hard to make ourselves take  
enough risks. When you interview a startup and think "they seem  
likely to succeed," it's hard not to fund them. And yet, financially  
at least, there is only one kind of success: they're either going  
to be one of the really big winners or not, and if not it doesn't  
matter whether you fund them, because even if they succeed the  
effect on your returns will be insignificant. In the same day of  
interviews you might meet some smart 19 year olds who aren't even  
sure what they want to work on. Their chances of succeeding seem  
small. But again, it's not their chances of succeeding that matter  
but their chances of succeeding really big. The probability that  
any group will succeed really big is microscopically small, but the  
probability that those 19 year olds will might be higher than that  
of the other, safer group.The probability that a startup will make it big is not simply a  
constant fraction of the probability that they will succeed at all.  
If it were, you could fund everyone who seemed likely to succeed  
at all, and you'd get that fraction of big hits. Unfortunately  
picking winners is harder than that. You have to ignore the elephant  
in front of you, the likelihood they'll succeed, and focus instead  
on the separate and almost invisibly intangible question of whether  
they'll succeed really big.HarderThat's made harder by the fact that the best startup ideas seem at  
first like bad ideas. I've written about this before: if a good  
idea were obviously good, someone else would already have done it.  
So the most successful founders tend to work on ideas that few  
beside them realize are good. Which is not that far from a description  
of insanity, till you reach the point where you see results.The first time Peter Thiel spoke at YC he drew a Venn diagram that  
illustrates the situation perfectly. He drew two intersecting  
circles, one labelled "seems like a bad idea" and the other "is a  
good idea." The intersection is the sweet spot for startups.This concept is a simple one and yet seeing it as a Venn diagram  
is illuminating. It reminds you that there is an intersection—that  
there are good ideas that seem bad. It also reminds you that the  
vast majority of ideas that seem bad are bad.The fact that the best ideas seem like bad ideas makes it even  
harder to recognize the big winners. It means the probability of  
a startup making it really big is not merely not a constant fraction  
of the probability that it will succeed, but that the startups with  
a high probability of the former will seem to have a disproportionately  
low probability of the latter.History tends to get rewritten by big successes, so that in retrospect  
it seems obvious they were going to make it big. For that reason  
one of my most valuable memories is how lame Facebook sounded to  
me when I first heard about it. A site for college students to  
waste time? It seemed the perfect bad idea: a site (1) for a niche  
market (2) with no money (3) to do something that didn't matter.One could have described Microsoft and Apple in exactly the same  
terms.  
[3]Harder StillWait, it gets worse. You not only have to solve this hard problem,  
but you have to do it with no indication of whether you're succeeding.  
When you pick a big winner, you won't know it for two years.Meanwhile, the one thing you can measure is dangerously  
misleading. The one thing we can track precisely is how well the  
startups in each batch do at fundraising after Demo Day. But we  
know that's the wrong metric. There's no correlation between the  
percentage of startups that raise money and the metric that does  
matter financially, whether that batch of startups contains a big  
winner or not.Except an inverse one. That's the scary thing: fundraising is not  
merely a useless metric, but positively misleading. We're in a  
business where we need to pick unpromising-looking outliers, and  
the huge scale of the successes means we can afford to spread our  
net very widely. The big winners could generate 10,000x returns.  
That means for each big winner we could pick a thousand companies  
that returned nothing and still end up 10x ahead.If we ever got to the point where 100% of the startups we funded  
were able to raise money after Demo Day, it would almost certainly  
mean we were being too conservative.  
[4]It takes a conscious effort not to do that too. After 15 cycles  
of preparing startups for investors and then watching how they do,  
I can now look at a group we're interviewing through Demo Day  
investors' eyes. But those are the wrong eyes to look through!We can afford to take at least 10x as much risk as Demo Day investors.  
And since risk is usually proportionate to reward, if you can afford  
to take more risk you should. What would it mean to take 10x more  
risk than Demo Day investors? We'd have to be willing to fund 10x  
more startups than they would. Which means that even if we're  
generous to ourselves and assume that YC can on average triple a  
startup's expected value, we'd be taking the right amount of risk  
if only 30% of the startups were able to raise significant funding  
after Demo Day.I don't know what fraction of them currently raise more after Demo  
Day. I deliberately avoid calculating that number, because if you  
start measuring something you start optimizing it, and I know it's  
the wrong thing to optimize.  
[5]  
But the percentage is certainly  
way over 30%. And frankly the thought of a 30% success rate at  
fundraising makes my stomach clench. A Demo Day where only 30% of  
the startups were fundable would be a shambles. Everyone would  
agree that YC had jumped the shark. We ourselves would feel that  
YC had jumped the shark. And yet we'd all be wrong.For better or worse that's never going to be more than a thought  
experiment. We could never stand it. How about that for  
counterintuitive? I can lay out what I know to be the right thing  
to do, and still not do it. I can make up all sorts of plausible  
justifications. It would hurt YC's brand (at least among the  
innumerate) if we invested in huge numbers of risky startups that  
flamed out. It might dilute the value of the alumni network.  
Perhaps most convincingly, it would be demoralizing for us to be  
up to our chins in failure all the time. But I know the real reason  
we're so conservative is that we just haven't assimilated the fact  
of 1000x variation in returns.We'll probably never be able to bring ourselves to take risks  
proportionate to the returns in this business. The best we can  
hope for is that when we interview a group and find ourselves  
thinking "they seem like good founders, but what are investors going  
to think of this crazy idea?" we'll continue to be able to say "who  
cares what investors think?" That's what we thought about Airbnb,  
and if we want to fund more Airbnbs we have to stay good at thinking  
it.Notes[1]  
I'm not saying that the big winners are all that matters, just  
that they're all that matters financially for investors. Since  
we're not doing YC mainly for financial reasons, the big winners  
aren't all that matters to us. We're delighted to have funded  
Reddit, for example. Even though we made comparatively little from  
it, Reddit has had a big effect on the world, and it introduced us  
to Steve Huffman and Alexis Ohanian, both of whom have become good  
friends.Nor do we push founders to try to become one of the big winners if  
they don't want to. We didn't "swing for the fences" in our own  
startup (Viaweb, which was acquired for $50 million), and it would  
feel pretty bogus to press founders to do something we didn't do.  
Our rule is that it's up to the founders. Some want to take over  
the world, and some just want that first few million. But we invest  
in so many companies that we don't have to sweat any one outcome.  
In fact, we don't have to sweat whether startups have exits at all.  
The biggest exits are the only ones that matter financially, and  
those are guaranteed in the sense that if a company becomes big  
enough, a market for its shares will inevitably arise. Since the  
remaining outcomes don't have a significant effect on returns, it's  
cool with us if the founders want to sell early for a small amount,  
or grow slowly and never sell (i.e. become a so-called lifestyle  
business), or even shut the company down. We're sometimes disappointed  
when a startup we had high hopes for doesn't do well, but this  
disappointment is mostly the ordinary variety that anyone feels  
when that happens.[2]  
Without visual cues (e.g. the horizon) you can't distinguish  
between gravity and acceleration. Which means if you're flying  
through clouds you can't tell what the attitude of  
the aircraft is. You could feel like you're flying straight and  
level while in fact you're descending in a spiral. The solution  
is to ignore what your body is telling you and listen only to your  
instruments. But it turns out to be very hard to ignore what your  
body is telling you. Every pilot knows about this   
problem and yet  
it is still a leading cause of accidents.[3]  
Not all big hits follow this pattern though. The reason Google  
seemed a bad idea was that there were already lots of search engines  
and there didn't seem to be room for another.[4]  
A startup's success at fundraising is a function of two things:  
what they're selling and how good they are at selling it. And while  
we can teach startups a lot about how to appeal to investors, even  
the most convincing pitch can't sell an idea that investors don't  
like. I was genuinely worried that Airbnb, for example, would not  
be able to raise money after Demo Day. I couldn't convince Fred Wilson to fund them. They might not  
have raised money at all but for the coincidence that Greg McAdoo,  
our contact at Sequoia, was one of a handful of VCs who understood  
the vacation rental business, having spent much of the previous two  
years investigating it.[5]  
I calculated it once for the last batch before a consortium of  
investors started offering investment automatically to every startup  
we funded, summer 2010. At the time it was 94% (33 of 35 companies  
that tried to raise money succeeded, and one didn't try because  
they were already profitable). Presumably it's lower now because  
of that investment; in the old days it was raise after Demo Day or  
die.Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Patrick Collison, Jessica  
Livingston, Geoff Ralston, and Harj Taggar for reading drafts of  
this.

# The Top of My Todo List

April 2012A palliative care nurse called Bronnie Ware made a list of the  
biggest regrets  
of the dying. Her list seems plausible. I could see  
myself — can see myself — making at least 4 of these  
5 mistakes.If you had to compress them into a single piece of advice, it might  
be: don't be a cog. The 5 regrets paint a portrait of post-industrial  
man, who shrinks himself into a shape that fits his circumstances,  
then turns dutifully till he stops.The alarming thing is, the mistakes that produce these regrets are  
all errors of omission. You forget your dreams, ignore your family,  
suppress your feelings, neglect your friends, and forget to be  
happy. Errors of omission are a particularly dangerous type of  
mistake, because you make them by default.I would like to avoid making these mistakes. But how do you avoid  
mistakes you make by default? Ideally you transform your life so  
it has other defaults. But it may not be possible to do that  
completely. As long as these mistakes happen by default, you probably  
have to be reminded not to make them. So I inverted the 5 regrets,  
yielding a list of 5 commands  
  
 Don't ignore your dreams; don't work too much; say what you  
 think; cultivate friendships; be happy.  
  
which I then put at the top of the file I use as a todo list.Japanese Translation

# Writing and Speaking

March 2012I'm not a very good speaker. I say "um" a lot. Sometimes I have  
to pause when I lose my train of thought. I wish I were a better  
speaker. But I don't wish I were a better speaker like I wish I  
were a better writer. What I really want is to have good ideas,  
and that's a much bigger part of being a good writer than being a  
good speaker.Having good ideas is most of writing well. If you know what you're  
talking about, you can say it in the plainest words and you'll be  
perceived as having a good style. With speaking it's the opposite:  
having good ideas is an alarmingly small component of being a good  
speaker.I first noticed this at a conference several years ago.  
There was another speaker who was much better than me.  
He had all of us roaring with laughter. I seemed awkward and  
halting by comparison. Afterward I put my talk online like I usually  
do. As I was doing it I tried to imagine what a transcript of the  
other guy's talk would be like, and it was only then I realized he  
hadn't said very much.Maybe this would have been obvious to someone who knew more about  
speaking, but it was a revelation to me how much less ideas mattered  
in speaking than writing.  
[1]A few years later I heard a talk by someone who was not merely a  
better speaker than me, but a famous speaker. Boy was he good. So  
I decided I'd pay close attention to what he said, to learn how he  
did it. After about ten sentences I found myself thinking "I don't  
want to be a good speaker."Being a really good speaker is not merely orthogonal to having good ideas,  
but in many ways pushes you in the opposite direction. For example,  
when I give a talk, I usually write it out beforehand. I know that's  
a mistake; I know delivering a   
prewritten   
talk makes it harder to  
engage with an audience. The way to get the attention of an audience  
is to give them your full attention, and when you're delivering  
a prewritten talk, your attention is always divided between the  
audience and the talk — even if you've memorized it. If you want  
to engage an audience, it's better to start with no more than an outline  
of what you want to say and   
ad lib the individual sentences. But  
if you do that, you might spend no more time thinking about each  
sentence than it takes to say it.  
[2]  
Occasionally the stimulation  
of talking to a live audience makes you think of new things, but  
in general this is not going to generate ideas as well as writing  
does, where you can spend as long on each sentence as you want.If you rehearse a prewritten speech enough, you can get  
asymptotically close to the sort of engagement you get when speaking  
ad lib. Actors do. But here again there's a tradeoff between  
smoothness and ideas. All the time you spend practicing a talk,  
you could instead spend making it better. Actors don't face  
that temptation, except in the rare cases where they've written the  
script, but any speaker does. Before I give a talk I can usually  
be found sitting in a corner somewhere with a copy printed out on  
paper, trying to rehearse it in my head. But I always end up  
spending most of the time rewriting it instead. Every talk I give  
ends up being given from a manuscript full of things crossed out  
and rewritten. Which of course makes me um even more, because I  
haven't had any time to practice the new bits.  
[3]Depending on your audience, there are even worse tradeoffs than  
these. Audiences like to be flattered; they like jokes; they like  
to be swept off their feet by a vigorous stream of words. As you  
decrease the intelligence of the audience, being a good speaker is  
increasingly a matter of being a good bullshitter. That's true in  
writing too of course, but the descent is steeper with talks. Any  
given person is dumber as a member of an audience than as a reader.  
Just as a speaker ad libbing can only spend as long thinking about  
each sentence as it takes to say it, a person hearing a talk can  
only spend as long thinking about each sentence as it takes to hear  
it. Plus people in an audience are always affected by the reactions  
of those around them, and the reactions that spread from person to  
person in an audience are disproportionately the more brutish sort,  
just as low notes travel through walls better than high ones. Every  
audience is an incipient mob, and a good speaker uses that. Part  
of the reason I laughed so much at the talk by the good speaker at  
that conference was that everyone else did.  
[4]So are talks useless? They're certainly inferior to the written  
word as a source of ideas. But that's not all talks are good for.  
When I go to a talk, it's usually because I'm interested in the  
speaker. Listening to a talk is the closest most of us can get to  
having a conversation with someone like the president, who doesn't  
have time to meet individually with all the people who want to meet  
him.Talks are also good at motivating me to do things. It's probably  
no coincidence that so many famous speakers are described as  
motivational speakers. That may be what public speaking is really  
for. It's probably what it was originally for. The emotional  
reactions you can elicit with a talk can be a powerful force.  
I wish I could say that this force was more often used for good than  
ill, but I'm not sure.Notes[1]  
I'm not talking here about academic talks, which are a   
different type of thing. While the  
audience at an academic talk might appreciate a joke, they will (or  
at least should) make a conscious effort to see what new ideas  
you're presenting.[2]  
That's the lower bound. In practice you can often do better,  
because talks are usually about things you've written or talked  
about before, and when you ad lib, you end up reproducing some of  
those sentences. Like early medieval architecture, impromptu talks  
are made of spolia. Which feels a bit dishonest, incidentally,  
because you have to deliver these sentences as if you'd just thought  
of them.[3]  
Robert Morris points out that there is a way in which practicing  
talks makes them better: reading a talk out loud can expose awkward  
parts. I agree and in fact I read most things I write out loud at  
least once for that reason.[4]  
For sufficiently small audiences, it may not be true that being  
part of an audience makes people dumber. The real decline seems  
to set in when the audience gets too big for the talk to feel like  
a conversation — maybe around 10 people.  
Thanks to Sam Altman and Robert Morris for reading drafts  
of this.

# How Y Combinator Started

March 2012Y Combinator's 7th birthday was March 11. As usual we were so  
busy we didn't notice till a few days after. I don't think we've  
ever managed to remember our birthday on our birthday.  
  
On March 11 2005, Jessica and I were walking home from dinner in  
Harvard Square. Jessica was working at an investment bank at the  
time, but she didn't like it much, so she had interviewed for a job  
as director of marketing at a Boston VC fund. The VC fund was doing  
what now seems a comically familiar thing for a VC fund to do:  
taking a long time to make up their mind. Meanwhile I had been  
telling Jessica all the things they should change about the VC  
business  essentially the ideas now underlying Y Combinator:  
investors  
should be making more, smaller investments, they should be funding  
hackers instead of suits, they should be willing to fund younger  
founders, etc.  
  
At the time I had been thinking about doing some angel investing. I  
had just given a talk to the undergraduate computer club at Harvard  
about  
how to start a  
startup, and it  
hit me afterward that although I had always  
meant to do angel investing, 7 years had now passed since I got  
enough money to do it, and I still hadn't started. I had also  
been thinking about ways to work with Robert Morris and Trevor  
Blackwell again. A few hours before I had  
sent them an email trying to figure out what we could do together.  
  
Between Harvard Square and my house the idea gelled. We'd start  
our own investment firm and Jessica could work for that instead.  
As we turned onto Walker Street we decided to do it. I agreed to  
put $100k into the new fund and Jessica agreed to quit her job to  
work for it. Over the next couple days I recruited Robert  
and Trevor, who put in another $50k each. So YC  
started with $200k.  
  
Jessica was so happy to be able to quit her job and start her own  
company that I took her picture  
 when we got home.  
  
The company wasn't called Y Combinator yet. At first we called it  
Cambridge Seed. But that name never saw the light of day, because  
by the time we announced it a few days later, we'd changed the name  
to Y Combinator. We realized early on that what we were doing could  
be national in scope and we didn't want a name that tied us to one  
place.  
  
Initially we only had part of the idea. We were going to do  
seed funding with standardized terms. Before YC, seed funding was  
very haphazard. You'd get that first $10k from your friend's rich  
uncle. The deal terms were often a disaster; often neither the  
investor nor the founders nor the lawyer knew what the documents  
should look like. Facebook's early history as a Florida LLC shows  
how random things could be in those days. We were going to be  
something there had not been before: a standard source of seed  
funding.  
  
We modelled YC on the seed funding we ourselves had taken  
when we started Viaweb. We started Viaweb with $10k we got from  
our friend Julian Weber,  
the husband of Idelle Weber, whose  
painting class I took as a grad student at Harvard. Julian knew  
about business, but you would not describe him as a suit. Among  
other things he'd been president of the National Lampoon. He was  
also a lawyer, and got all our paperwork set up properly. In return  
for $10k, getting us set up as a company, teaching us what  
business was about, and remaining calm in times of crisis, Julian  
got 10% of Viaweb. I remember thinking once what a good deal  
Julian got. And then a second later I realized that without  
Julian, Viaweb would never have made it. So even though it was a  
good deal for him, it was a good deal for us too. That's why I  
knew there was room for something like Y Combinator.  
  
Initially we didn't have what turned out to be the most important  
idea: funding startups synchronously, instead of asynchronously as  
it had always been done before. Or rather we had the idea, but we  
didn't realize its significance. We decided very early   
that the first thing we'd do would  
be to fund a bunch of startups over the coming summer. But we  
didn't realize initially that this would be the way we'd do all our  
investing. The reason we began by funding a bunch of startups at  
once was not that we thought it would be a better way to fund  
startups, but simply because we wanted to learn how to be angel  
investors, and a summer program for undergrads seemed the fastest  
way to do it. No one takes summer jobs that seriously. The  
opportunity cost for a bunch of undergrads to spend a summer working  
on startups was low enough that we wouldn't feel guilty encouraging  
them to do it.  
  
We knew students would already be making plans for the summer, so  
we did what we're always telling startups to do: we launched fast.  
Here are the  
initial announcement  
and description of what  
was at the time called the Summer Founders Program.  
  
We got lucky in that the length and structure of a summer program  
turns out to be perfect for what we do.  
The structure of the YC cycle is still almost identical to what  
it was that first summer.  
  
We also got lucky in who the first batch of founders were. We never  
expected to make any money from that first batch. We thought of  
the money we were investing as a combination of an educational expense  
and a charitable donation. But the  
founders in the first batch turned out to be surprisingly good.  
And great people too. We're still friends with a lot of them today.  
  
It's hard for people to realize now how inconsequential YC seemed at the  
time. I can't blame people who didn't take us seriously, because  
we ourselves didn't take that first summer program seriously in the  
very beginning. But as the summer progressed we were increasingly  
impressed by how well the startups were doing. Other people started  
to be impressed too. Jessica and I invented a term, "the Y Combinator  
effect," to describe the moment when the realization hit someone  
that YC was not totally lame. When people came to YC to speak  
at the dinners that first summer, they came in the spirit of someone  
coming to address a Boy Scout troop. By the time they left the  
building they were all saying some variant of "Wow, these  
companies might actually succeed."  
  
Now YC is well enough known that people are no longer surprised  
when the companies we fund are legit, but it took a  
while for reputation to catch up with reality. That's one of the  
reasons we especially like funding ideas that might be dismissed  
as "toys"  because YC itself was dismissed as one initially.  
  
When we saw how well it worked to fund companies synchronously,  
we decided we'd keep doing that. We'd fund two batches of  
startups a year.  
  
We funded the second batch in Silicon Valley. That was  
a last minute decision. In retrospect I think what pushed me over  
the edge was going to Foo Camp that fall. The density of startup  
people in the Bay Area was so much greater than in Boston, and the  
weather was so nice. I remembered that from living there in the  
90s. Plus I didn't want someone else to copy us and describe it  
as the Y Combinator of Silicon Valley. I wanted YC to be the Y Combinator   
of Silicon Valley. So doing the winter batch in California  
seemed like one of those rare cases where the self-indulgent choice  
and the ambitious one were the same.  
  
If we'd had enough time to do what we wanted, Y Combinator would  
have been in Berkeley. That was our favorite part of the Bay Area.  
But we didn't have time to get a building in Berkeley. We didn't  
have time to get our own building anywhere. The only way to get  
enough space in time was to convince Trevor to let us take over  
part of his (as it then seemed) giant building in Mountain View.  
Yet again we lucked out, because Mountain View turned out to be the  
ideal place to put something like YC. But even then we barely made  
it. The first dinner in California, we had to warn all the founders  
not to touch the walls, because the paint was still wet.

# Defining Property

March 2012As a child I read a book of stories about a famous judge in eighteenth  
century Japan called Ooka Tadasuke. One of the cases he decided  
was brought by the owner of a food shop. A poor student who could  
afford only rice was eating his rice while enjoying the delicious  
cooking smells coming from the food shop. The owner wanted the  
student to pay for the smells he was enjoying.The student was  
stealing his smells!This story often comes to mind when I hear the RIAA and MPAA accusing  
people of stealing music and movies.It sounds ridiculous to us to treat smells as property. But I can  
imagine scenarios in which one could charge for smells. Imagine  
we were living on a moon base where we had to buy air by the  
liter. I could imagine air suppliers adding scents at an extra  
charge.The reason it seems ridiculous to us to treat smells as property  
is that it wouldn't work to. It would work on a moon base, though.What counts as property depends on what works to treat as property.  
And that not only can change, but has changed. Humans may always  
(for some definition of human and always) have treated small items  
carried on one's person as property. But hunter gatherers didn't  
treat land, for example, as property in the way we do.  
[1]The reason so many people think of property as having a single  
unchanging definition is that its definition changes very slowly.  
[2]  
But we are in the midst of such a change now. The record  
labels and movie studios used to distribute what they made like air  
shipped through tubes on a moon base. But with the arrival of  
networks, it's as if we've moved to a planet with a breathable  
atmosphere. Data moves like smells now. And through a combination  
of wishful thinking and short-term greed, the labels and studios  
have put themselves in the position of the food shop owner, accusing  
us all of stealing their smells.(The reason I say short-term greed is that the underlying problem  
with the labels and studios is that the people who run them are  
driven by bonuses rather than equity. If they were driven by equity  
they'd be looking for ways to take advantage of technological change  
instead of fighting it. But building new things takes too long.  
Their bonuses depend on this year's revenues, and the best way to  
increase those is to extract more money from stuff they do already.)So what does this mean? Should people not be able to charge for  
content? There's not a single yes or no answer to that question.  
People should be able to charge for content when it works to charge  
for content.But by "works" I mean something more subtle than "when they can get  
away with it." I mean when people can charge for content without  
warping society in order to do it. After all, the companies selling  
smells on the moon base could continue to sell them on the Earth,  
if they lobbied successfully for laws requiring us all to continue  
to breathe through tubes down here too, even though we no longer  
needed to.The crazy legal measures that the labels and studios have been  
taking have a lot of that flavor. Newspapers and magazines are  
just as screwed, but they are at least declining gracefully. The  
RIAA and MPAA would make us breathe through tubes if they could.Ultimately it comes down to common sense. When you're abusing the  
legal system by trying to use mass lawsuits against randomly chosen  
people as a form of exemplary punishment, or lobbying for laws  
that would break the Internet if they passed, that's ipso facto  
evidence you're using a definition of property that doesn't work.This is where it's helpful to have working democracies and multiple  
sovereign countries. If the world had a single, autocratic government,  
the labels and studios could buy laws making the definition of  
property be whatever they wanted. But fortunately there are still  
some countries that are not copyright colonies of the US, and even  
in the US, politicians  
still seem to be afraid of actual voters, in sufficient numbers.  
[3]The people running the US may not like it when voters or other  
countries refuse to bend to their will, but ultimately it's in all  
our interest that there's not a single point of attack for people  
trying to warp the law to serve their own purposes. Private property  
is an extremely useful idea — arguably one of our greatest inventions.  
So far, each new definition of it has brought us increasing material  
wealth.  
[4]  
It seems reasonable to suppose the newest one will  
too. It would be a disaster if we all had to keep running an  
obsolete version just because a few powerful people were too lazy  
to upgrade.Notes[1]  
If you want to learn more about hunter gatherers I strongly  
recommend Elizabeth Marshall Thomas's The  
Harmless People and The  
Old Way.[2]  
Change in the definition of property is driven mostly by  
technological progress, however, and since technological progress  
is accelerating, so presumably will the rate of change in the  
definition of property. Which means it's all the more important  
for societies to be able to respond gracefully to such changes,  
because they will come at an ever increasing rate.[3]  
As far as I know, the term "copyright colony" was first used  
by Myles  
Peterson.[4]  
The state of technology isn't simply a function of  
the definition of property. They each constrain the other. But  
that being so, you can't mess with the definition of property without  
affecting (and probably harming) the state of technology. The  
history of the USSR offers a vivid illustration of that.Thanks to Sam Altman and Geoff Ralston for reading drafts  
of this.Japanese Translation

# Frighteningly Ambitious Startup Ideas

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
March 2012One of the more surprising things I've noticed while working  
on Y Combinator is how frightening the most ambitious startup  
ideas are. In this essay I'm going to demonstrate  
this phenomenon by describing some. Any one of them  
could make you a billionaire. That might sound like an attractive  
prospect, and yet when I describe these ideas you may  
notice you find yourself shrinking away from them.Don't worry, it's not a sign of weakness. Arguably it's a sign of  
sanity. The biggest startup ideas are terrifying. And not just  
because they'd be a lot of work. The biggest ideas seem to threaten  
your identity: you wonder if you'd have enough ambition to carry  
them through.There's a scene in Being John Malkovich where the nerdy hero  
encounters a very attractive, sophisticated woman. She says to  
him:  
  
 Here's the thing: If you ever got me, you wouldn't have a clue  
 what to do with me.  
  
That's what these ideas say to us.This phenomenon is one of the most important things you can understand  
about startups.   
[1]  
You'd expect big startup ideas to be  
attractive, but actually they tend to repel you. And that has a  
bunch of consequences. It means these ideas are invisible to most  
people who try to think of startup ideas, because their subconscious  
filters them out. Even the most ambitious people are probably best  
off approaching them obliquely.1. A New Search EngineThe best ideas are just on the right side of impossible. I don't  
know if this one is possible, but there are signs it might be.  
Making a new search engine means competing with Google, and recently  
I've noticed some cracks in their fortress.The point when it became clear to me that Microsoft had lost their  
way was when they decided to get into the search business. That  
was not a natural move for Microsoft. They did it because they  
were afraid of Google, and Google was in the search business. But  
this meant (a) Google was now setting Microsoft's agenda, and (b)  
Microsoft's agenda consisted of stuff they weren't good at.Microsoft : Google :: Google : Facebook.That does not by itself mean  
there's room for a new search engine, but lately when using Google  
search I've found myself nostalgic for the old days, when  
Google was true to its own slightly aspy self. Google used to give  
me a page of the right answers, fast, with no clutter. Now the  
results seem inspired by the Scientologist principle that what's  
true is what's true for you. And the pages don't have the  
clean, sparse feel they used to. Google search results used to  
look like the output of a Unix utility. Now if I accidentally put  
the cursor in the wrong place, anything might happen.The way to win here is to build the search engine all the hackers  
use. A search engine whose users consisted of the top 10,000 hackers  
and no one else would be in a very powerful position despite its  
small size, just as Google was when it was that search engine. And  
for the first time in over a decade the idea of switching seems  
thinkable to me.Since anyone capable of starting this company is one of those 10,000  
hackers, the route is at least straightforward: make the search  
engine you yourself want. Feel free to make it excessively hackerish.  
Make it really good for code search, for example. Would you like  
search queries to be Turing complete? Anything that gets you those  
10,000 users is ipso facto good.Don't worry if something you want to do will constrain you in the  
long term, because if you don't get that initial core of users,  
there won't be a long term. If you can just build something that  
you and your friends genuinely prefer to Google, you're already  
about 10% of the way to an IPO, just as Facebook was (though they  
probably didn't realize it) when they got all the Harvard undergrads.2. Replace EmailEmail was not designed to be used the way we use it now. Email is  
not a messaging protocol. It's a todo list. Or rather, my inbox  
is a todo list, and email is the way things get onto it. But it  
is a disastrously bad todo list.I'm open to different types of solutions to this problem, but I  
suspect that tweaking the inbox is not enough, and that email has  
to be replaced with a new protocol.   
This new protocol should be a todo list protocol, not  
a messaging protocol, although there is a degenerate case where  
what someone wants you to do is: read the following text.As a todo list protocol, the new protocol should give more power  
to the recipient than email does. I want there to be more restrictions  
on what someone can put on my todo list. And when someone can put  
something on my todo list, I want them to tell me more about what  
they want from me. Do they want me to do something beyond just  
reading some text? How important is it? (There obviously has to  
be some mechanism to prevent people from saying everything is  
important.) When does it have to be done?This is one of those ideas that's like an irresistible force meeting  
an immovable object. On one hand, entrenched protocols are impossible  
to replace. On the other, it seems unlikely that people in  
100 years will still be living in the same email hell we do now.  
And if email is going to get replaced eventually, why not now?If you do it right, you may be able to avoid the usual chicken   
and egg problem new protocols face, because some of the most powerful  
people in the world will be among the first to switch to it.   
They're all at the mercy of email too.Whatever you build, make it fast. GMail has become painfully slow.  
[2]  
If you made something no better than GMail, but fast, that  
alone would let you start to pull users away from GMail.GMail is slow because Google can't afford to spend a lot on it.  
But people will pay for this. I'd have no problem paying $50 a month.  
Considering how much time I spend in email, it's kind of scary to  
think how much I'd be justified in paying. At least $1000 a month.  
If I spend several hours a day reading and writing email, that would  
be a cheap way to make my life better.3. Replace UniversitiesPeople are all over this idea lately, and I think they're onto  
something. I'm reluctant to suggest that an institution that's  
been around for a millennium is finished just because of some mistakes  
they made in the last few decades, but certainly in the last few  
decades US universities seem to have been headed down the wrong  
path. One could do a lot better for a lot less money.I don't think universities will disappear. They won't be replaced  
wholesale. They'll just lose the de facto monopoly on certain types  
of learning that they once had. There will be many different ways  
to learn different things, and some may look quite different from  
universities. Y Combinator itself is arguably one of them.Learning is such a big problem that changing the way people do it  
will have a wave of secondary effects. For example, the name of  
the university one went to is treated by a lot of people (correctly  
or not) as a credential in its own right. If learning breaks up  
into many little pieces, credentialling may separate from it. There  
may even need to be replacements for campus social life (and oddly  
enough, YC even has aspects of that).You could replace high schools too, but there you face bureaucratic  
obstacles that would slow down a startup. Universities seem the  
place to start.4. Internet DramaHollywood has been slow to embrace the Internet. That was a   
mistake, because I think we can now call a winner in the race between  
delivery mechanisms, and it is the Internet, not cable.A lot of the reason is the horribleness of cable clients, also known  
as TVs. Our family didn't wait for Apple TV. We hated our last  
TV so much that a few months ago we replaced it with an iMac bolted  
to the wall. It's a little inconvenient to control it with a  
wireless mouse, but the overall experience is much better than the  
nightmare UI we had to deal with before.Some of the attention people currently devote to watching  
movies and TV can be stolen by things that seem completely unrelated,  
like social networking apps. More can be stolen by things that are  
a little more closely related, like games. But there will probably  
always remain some residual demand for conventional drama, where  
you sit passively and watch as a plot happens. So how do you deliver  
drama via the Internet? Whatever you make will have to be on a  
larger scale than Youtube clips. When people sit down to watch a  
show, they want to know what they're going to get: either part  
of a series with familiar characters, or a single longer "movie"  
whose basic premise they know in advance.There are two ways delivery and payment could play out. Either  
some company like Netflix or Apple will be the app store for  
entertainment, and you'll reach audiences through them. Or the  
would-be app stores will be too overreaching, or too technically  
inflexible, and companies will arise to supply payment and streaming  
a la carte to the producers of drama. If that's the way things  
play out, there will also be a need for such infrastructure companies.5. The Next Steve JobsI was talking recently to someone who knew Apple well, and I asked  
him if the people now running the company would be able to keep  
creating new things the way Apple had under Steve Jobs. His answer  
was simply "no." I already feared that would be the answer. I  
asked more to see how he'd qualify it. But he didn't qualify it  
at all. No, there will be no more great new stuff beyond whatever's  
currently in the pipeline. Apple's  
revenues may continue to rise for a long time, but as Microsoft  
shows, revenue is a lagging indicator in the technology business.So if Apple's not going to make the next iPad, who is? None of the  
existing players. None of them are run by product visionaries, and  
empirically you can't seem to get those by hiring them. Empirically  
the way you get a product visionary as CEO is for him to found the  
company and not get fired. So the company that creates the next  
wave of hardware is probably going to have to be a startup.I realize it sounds preposterously ambitious for a startup to try  
to become as big as Apple. But no more ambitious than it was for  
Apple to become as big as Apple, and they did it. Plus a startup  
taking on this problem now has an advantage the original Apple  
didn't: the example of Apple. Steve Jobs has shown us what's  
possible. That helps would-be successors both directly, as Roger  
Bannister did, by showing how much better you can do than people  
did before, and indirectly, as Augustus did, by lodging the idea  
in users' minds that a single person could unroll the future   
for them.   
[3]Now Steve is gone there's a vacuum we can all feel. If a new company  
led boldly into the future of hardware, users would follow. The  
CEO of that company, the "next Steve Jobs," might not measure up  
to Steve Jobs. But he wouldn't have to. He'd just have to do a  
better job than Samsung and HP and Nokia, and that seems pretty  
doable.6. Bring Back Moore's LawThe last 10 years have reminded us what Moore's Law actually says.  
Till about 2002 you could safely misinterpret it as promising that  
clock speeds would double every 18 months. Actually what it says  
is that circuit densities will double every 18 months. It used to  
seem pedantic to point that out. Not any more. Intel can no longer  
give us faster CPUs, just more of them.This Moore's Law is not as good as the old one. Moore's Law used  
to mean that if your software was slow, all you had to do was wait,  
and the inexorable progress of hardware would solve your problems.  
Now if your software is slow you have to rewrite it to do more  
things in parallel, which is a lot more work than waiting.It would be great if a startup could give us something of the old  
Moore's Law back, by writing software that could make a large number  
of CPUs look to the developer like one very fast CPU. There are  
several ways to approach this problem. The most ambitious is to  
try to do it automatically: to write a compiler that will parallelize  
our code for us. There's a name for this compiler, the sufficiently  
smart compiler, and it is a byword for impossibility. But is  
it really impossible? Is there no configuration of the bits in  
memory of a present day computer that is this compiler? If you  
really think so, you should try to prove it, because that would be  
an interesting result. And if it's not impossible but simply very  
hard, it might be worth trying to write it. The expected value  
would be high even if the chance of succeeding was low.The reason the expected value is so high is web services. If you  
could write software that gave programmers the convenience of the  
way things were in the old days, you could offer it to them as a  
web service. And that would in turn mean that you got practically  
all the users.Imagine there was another processor manufacturer that could still translate  
increased circuit densities into increased clock speeds. They'd  
take most of Intel's business. And since web services mean that  
no one sees their processors anymore, by writing the sufficiently  
smart compiler you could create a situation indistinguishable from  
you being that manufacturer, at least for the server market.The least ambitious way of approaching the problem is to start from  
the other end, and offer programmers more parallelizable Lego blocks  
to build programs out of, like Hadoop and MapReduce. Then the  
programmer still does much of the work of optimization.There's an intriguing middle ground where you build a semi-automatic  
weapon—where there's a human in the loop. You make something  
that looks to the user like the sufficiently smart compiler, but  
inside has people, using highly developed optimization tools to  
find and eliminate bottlenecks in users' programs. These people  
might be your employees, or you might create a marketplace for  
optimization.An optimization marketplace would be a way to generate the sufficiently  
smart compiler piecemeal, because participants would immediately  
start writing bots. It would be a curious state of affairs if you  
could get to the point where everything could be done by bots,  
because then you'd have made the sufficiently smart compiler, but  
no one person would have a complete copy of it.I realize how crazy all this sounds. In fact, what I like about  
this idea is all the different ways in which it's wrong. The whole  
idea of focusing on optimization is counter to the general trend  
in software development for the last several decades. Trying to  
write the sufficiently smart compiler is by definition a mistake.  
And even if it weren't, compilers are the sort of software that's  
supposed to be created by open source projects, not companies. Plus  
if this works it will deprive all the programmers who take pleasure  
in making multithreaded apps of so much amusing complexity. The  
forum troll I have by now internalized doesn't even know where to  
begin in raising objections to this project. Now that's what I  
call a startup idea.7. Ongoing DiagnosisBut wait, here's another that could face even greater resistance:  
ongoing, automatic medical diagnosis.One of my tricks for generating startup ideas is to imagine the  
ways in which we'll seem backward to future generations. And I'm  
pretty sure that to people 50 or 100 years in the future, it will  
seem barbaric that people in our era waited till they had symptoms  
to be diagnosed with conditions like heart disease and cancer.For example, in 2004 Bill Clinton found he was feeling short of  
breath. Doctors discovered that several of his arteries were over  
90% blocked and 3 days later he had a quadruple bypass. It seems  
reasonable to assume Bill Clinton has the best medical care available.  
And yet even he had to wait till his arteries were over 90% blocked  
to learn that the number was over 90%. Surely at some point in the  
future we'll know these numbers the way we now know something like  
our weight. Ditto for cancer. It will seem preposterous to future  
generations that we wait till patients have physical symptoms to  
be diagnosed with cancer. Cancer will show up on some sort of radar  
screen immediately.(Of course, what shows up on the radar screen may be different from  
what we think of now as cancer. I wouldn't be surprised if at any  
given time we have ten or even hundreds of microcancers going at  
once, none of which normally amount to anything.)A lot of the obstacles to ongoing diagnosis will come from the fact  
that it's going against the grain of the medical profession. The  
way medicine has always worked is that patients come to doctors  
with problems, and the doctors figure out what's wrong. A lot of  
doctors don't like the idea of going on the medical equivalent of  
what lawyers call a "fishing expedition," where you go looking for  
problems without knowing what you're looking for. They call the  
things that get discovered this way "incidentalomas," and they are  
something of a nuisance.For example, a friend of mine once had her brain scanned as part  
of a study. She was horrified when the doctors running the study  
discovered what appeared to be a large tumor. After further testing,  
it turned out to be a harmless cyst. But it cost her a few days  
of terror. A lot of doctors worry that if you start scanning people  
with no symptoms, you'll get this on a giant scale: a huge number  
of false alarms that make patients panic and require expensive and  
perhaps even dangerous tests to resolve. But I think that's just  
an artifact of current limitations. If people were scanned all the  
time and we got better at deciding what was a real problem, my  
friend would have known about this cyst her whole life and known  
it was harmless, just as we do a birthmark.There is room for a lot of startups here.   
In addition to the technical obstacles all  
startups face, and the bureaucratic obstacles all medical startups  
face, they'll be going against thousands of years of medical  
tradition. But it will happen, and it will be a great thing—so  
great that people in the future will feel as sorry for us as we do  
for the generations that lived before anaesthesia and antibiotics.TacticsLet me conclude with some tactical advice. If you want to take on  
a problem as big as the ones I've discussed, don't make a direct  
frontal attack on it. Don't say, for example, that you're going  
to replace email. If you do that you raise too many expectations.  
Your employees and investors will constantly be asking "are we there  
yet?" and you'll have an army of haters waiting to see you fail.  
Just say you're building todo-list software. That sounds harmless.  
People can notice you've replaced email when it's a fait accompli.  
[4]Empirically, the way to do really big things seems to be to start  
with deceptively small things. Want to dominate microcomputer  
software? Start by writing a Basic interpreter for a machine with  
a few thousand users. Want to make the universal web site? Start  
by building a site for Harvard undergrads to stalk one another.Empirically, it's not just for other people that you need to start  
small. You need to for your own sake. Neither Bill Gates nor Mark  
Zuckerberg knew at first how big their companies were going to get.  
All they knew was that they were onto something. Maybe it's a bad  
idea to have really big ambitions initially, because the bigger  
your ambition, the longer it's going to take, and the further you  
project into the future, the more likely you'll get it wrong.I think the way to use these big ideas is not to try to identify a  
precise point in the future and then ask yourself how to get from  
here to there, like the popular image of a visionary. You'll be  
better off if you operate like Columbus and just head in a general  
westerly direction. Don't try to construct the future like a  
building, because your current blueprint is almost certainly mistaken.  
Start with something you know works, and when you expand, expand  
westward.The popular image of the visionary is someone with a clear view of  
the future, but empirically it may be better to have a blurry one.Notes[1]  
It's also one of the most important things VCs fail to  
understand about startups. Most expect founders to walk in with a  
clear plan for the future, and judge them based on that. Few  
consciously realize that in the biggest successes there is the least  
correlation between the initial plan and what the startup eventually  
becomes.[2]  
This sentence originally read "GMail is painfully slow."  
Thanks to Paul Buchheit for the correction.[3]  
Roger Bannister is famous as the first person to run a mile  
in under 4 minutes. But his world record only lasted 46 days. Once  
he showed it could be done, lots of others followed. Ten years  
later Jim Ryun ran a 3:59 mile as a high school junior.[4]  
If you want to be the next Apple, maybe you don't even want to start  
with consumer electronics. Maybe at first you make something hackers  
use. Or you make something popular but apparently unimportant,  
like a headset or router. All you need is a bridgehead.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell,   
Paul Buchheit, Patrick Collison, Aaron Iba, Jessica  
Livingston, Robert Morris, Harj Taggar and Garry Tan  
for reading drafts of this.

# A Word to the Resourceful

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
January 2012A year ago I noticed a pattern in the least successful startups  
we'd funded: they all seemed hard to talk to. It felt as if there  
was some kind of wall between us. I could never quite tell if they  
understood what I was saying.This caught my attention because earlier we'd noticed a pattern  
among the most successful startups, and it seemed to hinge on a  
different quality. We found the startups that did best were the  
ones with the sort of founders about whom we'd say "they can take  
care of themselves." The startups that do best are fire-and-forget  
in the sense that all you have to do is give them a lead, and they'll  
close it, whatever type of lead it is. When they're raising money,  
for example, you can do the initial intros knowing that if you  
wanted to you could stop thinking about it at that point. You won't  
have to babysit the round to make sure it happens. That type of  
founder is going to come back with the money; the only question is  
how much on what terms.It seemed odd that the outliers at the two ends of the spectrum  
could be detected by what appeared to be unrelated tests. You'd  
expect that if the founders at one end were distinguished by the  
presence of quality x, at the other end they'd be distinguished by  
lack of x. Was there some kind of inverse relation between  
resourcefulness and being hard to talk to?It turns out there is, and the key to the mystery is the old adage  
"a word to the wise is sufficient." Because this phrase is not  
only overused, but overused in an indirect way (by prepending the  
subject to some advice), most people who've heard it don't know  
what it means. What it means is that if someone is wise, all you  
have to do is say one word to them, and they'll understand immediately.  
You don't have to explain in detail; they'll chase down all the  
implications.In much the same way that all you have to do is give the right sort  
of founder a one line intro to a VC, and he'll chase down the money.  
That's the connection. Understanding all the implications — even the  
inconvenient implications — of what someone tells you is a subset of  
resourcefulness. It's conversational resourcefulness.Like real world resourcefulness, conversational resourcefulness  
often means doing things you don't want to. Chasing down all the  
implications of what's said to you can sometimes lead to uncomfortable  
conclusions. The best word to describe the failure to do so is  
probably "denial," though that seems a bit too narrow. A better  
way to describe the situation would be to say that the unsuccessful  
founders had the sort of conservatism that comes from weakness.  
They traversed idea space as gingerly as a very old person  
traverses the physical world.  
[1]The unsuccessful founders weren't stupid. Intellectually they  
were as capable as  
the successful founders of following all the implications of what  
one said to them. They just weren't eager to.So being hard to talk to was not what was killing the  
unsuccessful startups. It  
was a sign of an underlying lack of resourcefulness. That's what  
was killing them. As well as  
failing to chase down the implications of what was said to them,  
the unsuccessful founders would also fail to chase down funding,  
and users, and sources of new ideas. But the most immediate evidence  
I had that something was amiss was that I couldn't talk to them.Notes[1]  
A YC partner wrote:My feeling with the bad groups is that coming into office hours,  
they've already decided what they're going to do and everything I  
say is being put through an internal process in their heads, which  
either desperately tries to munge what I've said into something  
that conforms with their decision or just outright dismisses it and  
creates a rationalization for doing so. They may not even be conscious  
of this process but that's what I think is happening when you say  
something to bad groups and they have that glazed over look. I don't  
think it's confusion or lack of understanding per se, it's this  
internal process at work.With the good groups, you can tell that everything you say is being  
looked at with fresh eyes and even if it's dismissed, it's because  
of some logical reason e.g. "we already tried that" or "from speaking  
to our users that isn't what they'd like," etc. Those groups never  
have that glazed over look.Thanks to Sam Altman, Patrick Collison, Aaron Iba, Jessica Livingston,  
Robert Morris, Harj Taggar, and Garry Tan for reading drafts of  
this.

# Schlep Blindness

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
January 2012There are great startup ideas lying around unexploited right under  
our noses. One reason we don't see them is a phenomenon I call  
schlep blindness. Schlep was originally a Yiddish word but has  
passed into general use in the US. It means a tedious, unpleasant  
task.No one likes schleps, but hackers especially dislike them.   
Most hackers who start startups wish they could do it by just writing  
some clever software, putting it on a server somewhere, and watching  
the money roll in—without ever having to talk to users, or negotiate  
with other companies, or deal with other people's broken code.  
Maybe that's possible, but I haven't seen it.One of the many things we do at Y Combinator is teach hackers about  
the inevitability of schleps. No, you can't start a startup by  
just writing code. I remember going through this realization myself.  
There was a point in 1995 when I was still trying to convince myself  
I could start a company by just writing code. But I soon learned  
from experience that schleps are not merely inevitable, but pretty  
much what business consists of. A company is defined by the schleps  
it will undertake. And schleps should be dealt with the same way  
you'd deal with a cold swimming pool: just jump in. Which is not  
to say you should seek out unpleasant work per se, but that you  
should never shrink from it if it's on the path to something great.The most dangerous thing about our dislike of schleps is that much  
of it is unconscious. Your unconscious won't even let you see ideas  
that involve painful schleps. That's schlep blindness.The phenomenon isn't limited to startups. Most people don't  
consciously decide not to be in as good physical shape as Olympic  
athletes, for example. Their unconscious mind decides for them,  
shrinking from the work involved.The most striking example I know of schlep blindness is   
Stripe, or  
rather Stripe's idea. For over a decade, every hacker who'd ever  
had to process payments online knew how painful the experience was.  
Thousands of people must have known about this problem. And yet  
when they started startups, they decided to build recipe sites, or  
aggregators for local events. Why? Why work on problems few care  
much about and no one will pay for, when you could fix one of the  
most important components of the world's infrastructure? Because  
schlep blindness prevented people from even considering the idea  
of fixing payments.Probably no one who applied to Y Combinator to work on a recipe  
site began by asking "should we fix payments, or build a recipe  
site?" and chose the recipe site. Though the idea of fixing payments  
was right there in plain sight, they never saw it, because their  
unconscious mind shrank from the complications involved. You'd  
have to make deals with banks. How do you do that? Plus you're  
moving money, so you're going to have to deal with fraud, and people  
trying to break into your servers. Plus there are probably all  
sorts of regulations to comply with. It's a lot more intimidating  
to start a startup like this than a recipe site.That scariness makes ambitious ideas doubly valuable. In addition  
to their intrinsic value, they're like undervalued stocks in the  
sense that there's less demand for them among founders. If you  
pick an ambitious idea, you'll have less competition, because  
everyone else will have been frightened off by the challenges  
involved. (This is also true of starting a startup generally.)How do you overcome schlep blindness? Frankly, the most valuable  
antidote to schlep blindness is probably ignorance. Most successful  
founders would probably say that if they'd known when they were  
starting their company about the obstacles they'd have to overcome,  
they might never have started it. Maybe that's one reason the most  
successful startups of all so often have young founders.In practice the founders grow with the problems. But no one seems  
able to foresee that, not even older, more experienced founders.  
So the reason younger founders have an advantage is that they make  
two mistakes that cancel each other out. They don't know how much  
they can grow, but they also don't know how much they'll need to.  
Older founders only make the first mistake.Ignorance can't solve everything though. Some ideas so obviously  
entail alarming schleps that anyone can see them. How do you see  
ideas like that? The trick I recommend is to take yourself out of  
the picture. Instead of asking "what problem should I solve?" ask  
"what problem do I wish someone else would solve for me?" If someone  
who had to process payments before Stripe had tried asking that,  
Stripe would have been one of the first things they wished for.It's too late now to be Stripe, but there's plenty still broken in  
the world, if you know how to see it.Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Patrick Collison,  
Aaron Iba, Jessica Livingston, Emmett Shear, and Harj Taggar  
for reading drafts of this.

# Snapshot: Viaweb, June 1998

January 2012A few hours before the Yahoo acquisition was announced in June 1998  
I took a snapshot of Viaweb's  
site. I thought it might be interesting to look at one day.The first thing one notices is is how tiny the pages are. Screens  
were a lot smaller in 1998. If I remember correctly, our frontpage  
used to just fit in the size window people typically used then.Browsers then (IE 6 was still 3 years in the future) had few fonts  
and they weren't antialiased. If you wanted to make pages that  
looked good, you had to render display text as images.You may notice a certain similarity between the Viaweb and Y Combinator logos. We did that  
as an inside joke when we started YC. Considering how basic a red  
circle is, it seemed surprising to me when we started Viaweb how  
few other companies used one as their logo. A bit later I realized  
why.On the Company  
page you'll notice a mysterious individual called John McArtyem.  
Robert Morris (aka Rtm) was so publicity averse after the   
Worm that he  
didn't want his name on the site. I managed to get him to agree  
to a compromise: we could use his bio but not his name. He has  
since relaxed a bit  
on that point.Trevor graduated at about the same time the acquisition closed, so in the  
course of 4 days he went from impecunious grad student to millionaire  
PhD. The culmination of my career as a writer of press releases  
was one celebrating  
his graduation, illustrated with a drawing I did of him during  
a meeting.(Trevor also appears as Trevino  
Bagwell in our directory of web designers merchants could hire  
to build stores for them. We inserted him as a ringer in case some  
competitor tried to spam our web designers. We assumed his logo  
would deter any actual customers, but it did not.)Back in the 90s, to get users you had to get mentioned in magazines  
and newspapers. There were not the same ways to get found online  
that there are today. So we used to pay a PR  
firm $16,000 a month to get us mentioned in the press. Fortunately  
reporters liked  
us.In our advice about  
getting traffic from search engines (I don't think the term SEO  
had been coined yet), we say there are only 7 that matter: Yahoo,  
AltaVista, Excite, WebCrawler, InfoSeek, Lycos, and HotBot. Notice  
anything missing? Google was incorporated that September.We supported online transactions via a company called   
Cybercash,  
since if we lacked that feature we'd have gotten beaten up in product  
comparisons. But Cybercash was so bad and most stores' order volumes  
were so low that it was better if merchants processed orders like phone orders. We had a page in our site trying to talk merchants  
out of doing real time authorizations.The whole site was organized like a funnel, directing people to the  
test drive.  
It was a novel thing to be able to try out software online. We put  
cgi-bin in our dynamic urls to fool competitors about how our  
software worked.We had some well  
known users. Needless to say, Frederick's of Hollywood got the  
most traffic. We charged a flat fee of $300/month for big stores,  
so it was a little alarming to have users who got lots of traffic.  
I once calculated how much Frederick's was costing us in bandwidth,  
and it was about $300/month.Since we hosted all the stores, which together were getting just  
over 10 million page views per month in June 1998, we consumed what  
at the time seemed a lot of bandwidth. We had 2 T1s (3 Mb/sec)  
coming into our offices. In those days there was no AWS. Even  
colocating servers seemed too risky, considering how often things  
went wrong with them. So we had our servers in our offices. Or  
more precisely, in Trevor's office. In return for the unique  
privilege of sharing his office with no other humans, he had to  
share it with 6 shrieking tower servers. His office was nicknamed  
the Hot Tub on account of the heat they generated. Most days his  
stack of window air conditioners could keep up.For describing pages, we had a template language called RTML, which  
supposedly stood for something, but which in fact I named after  
Rtm. RTML was Common Lisp augmented by some macros and libraries,  
and concealed under a structure editor that made it look like it  
had syntax.Since we did continuous releases, our software didn't actually have  
versions. But in those days the trade press expected versions, so  
we made them up. If we wanted to get lots of attention, we made  
the version number an  
integer. That "version 4.0" icon was generated by our own  
button generator, incidentally. The whole Viaweb site was made  
with our software, even though it wasn't an online store, because  
we wanted to experience what our users did.At the end of 1997, we released a general purpose shopping search  
engine called Shopfind. It  
was pretty advanced for the time. It had a programmable crawler  
that could crawl most of the different stores online and pick out  
the products.

# Why Startup Hubs Work

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2011If you look at a list of US cities sorted by population, the number  
of successful startups per capita varies by orders of magnitude.  
Somehow it's as if most places were sprayed with startupicide.I wondered about this for years. I could see the average town was  
like a roach motel for startup ambitions: smart, ambitious people  
went in, but no startups came out. But I was never able to figure  
out exactly what happened inside the motel—exactly what was  
killing all the potential startups.  
[1]A couple weeks ago I finally figured it out. I was framing the  
question wrong. The problem is not that most towns kill startups.  
It's that death is the default for startups,  
and most towns don't save them. Instead of thinking of most places  
as being sprayed with startupicide, it's more accurate to think of  
startups as all being poisoned, and a few places being sprayed with  
the antidote.Startups in other places are just doing what startups naturally do:  
fail. The real question is, what's saving startups in places  
like Silicon Valley?  
[2]EnvironmentI think there are two components to the antidote: being in a place  
where startups are the cool thing to do, and chance meetings with  
people who can help you. And what drives them both is the number  
of startup people around you.The first component is particularly helpful in the first stage of  
a startup's life, when you go from merely having an interest in  
starting a company to actually doing it. It's quite a leap to start  
a startup. It's an unusual thing to do. But in Silicon Valley it  
seems normal.  
[3]In most places, if you start a startup, people treat you as if  
you're unemployed. People in the Valley aren't automatically  
impressed with you just because you're starting a company, but they  
pay attention. Anyone who's been here any amount of time knows not  
to default to skepticism, no matter how inexperienced you seem or  
how unpromising your idea sounds at first, because they've all seen  
inexperienced founders with unpromising sounding ideas who a few  
years later were billionaires.Having people around you care about what you're doing is an  
extraordinarily powerful force. Even the  
most willful people are susceptible to it. About a year after we  
started Y Combinator I said something to a partner at a well known  
VC firm that gave him the (mistaken) impression I was considering  
starting another startup. He responded so eagerly that for about  
half a second I found myself considering doing it.In most other cities, the prospect of starting a startup just doesn't  
seem real. In the Valley it's not only real but fashionable. That  
no doubt causes a lot of people to start startups who shouldn't.  
But I think that's ok. Few people are suited to running a startup,  
and it's very hard to predict beforehand which are (as I know all  
too well from being in the business of trying to predict beforehand),  
so lots of people starting startups who shouldn't is probably the  
optimal state of affairs. As long as you're at a point in your  
life when you can bear the risk of failure, the best way to find  
out if you're suited to running a startup is to try  
it.ChanceThe second component of the antidote is chance meetings with people  
who can help you. This force works in both phases: both in the  
transition from the desire to start a startup to starting one, and  
the transition from starting a company to succeeding. The power  
of chance meetings is more variable than people around you caring  
about startups, which is like a sort of background radiation that  
affects everyone equally, but at its strongest it is far stronger.Chance meetings produce miracles to compensate for the disasters  
that characteristically befall startups. In the Valley, terrible  
things happen to startups all the time, just like they do to startups  
everywhere. The reason startups are more likely to make it here  
is that great things happen to them too. In the Valley, lightning  
has a sign bit.For example, you start a site for college students and you decide  
to move to the Valley for the summer to work on it. And then on a  
random suburban street in Palo Alto you happen to run into Sean  
Parker, who understands the domain really well because he started  
a similar startup himself, and also knows all the investors. And  
moreover has advanced views, for 2004, on founders retaining control of their companies.You can't say precisely what the miracle will be, or even for sure  
that one will happen. The best one can say is: if you're in a  
startup hub, unexpected good things will probably happen to you,  
especially if you deserve them.I bet this is true even for startups we fund. Even with us working  
to make things happen for them on purpose rather than by accident,  
the frequency of helpful chance meetings in the Valley is so high  
that it's still a significant increment on what we can deliver.Chance meetings play a role like the role relaxation plays in having  
ideas. Most people have had the experience of working hard on some  
problem, not being able to solve it, giving up and going to bed,  
and then thinking of the answer in the shower in the morning. What  
makes the answer appear is letting your thoughts drift a bit—and thus drift off the wrong  
path you'd been pursuing last night and onto the right one adjacent  
to it.Chance meetings let your acquaintance drift in the same way taking  
a shower lets your thoughts drift. The critical thing in both cases  
is that they drift just the right amount. The meeting between Larry  
Page and Sergey Brin was a good example. They let their acquaintance  
drift, but only a little; they were both meeting someone they had  
a lot in common with.For Larry Page the most important component of the antidote was  
Sergey Brin, and vice versa. The antidote is   
people. It's not the  
physical infrastructure of Silicon Valley that makes it work, or  
the weather, or anything like that. Those helped get it started,  
but now that the reaction is self-sustaining what drives it is the  
people.Many observers have noticed that one of the most distinctive things  
about startup hubs is the degree to which people help one another  
out, with no expectation of getting anything in return. I'm not  
sure why this is so. Perhaps it's because startups are less of a  
zero sum game than most types of business; they are rarely killed  
by competitors. Or perhaps it's because so many startup founders  
have backgrounds in the sciences, where collaboration is encouraged.A large part of YC's function is to accelerate that process. We're  
a sort of Valley within the Valley, where the density of people  
working on startups and their willingness to help one another are  
both artificially amplified.NumbersBoth components of the antidote—an environment that encourages  
startups, and chance meetings with people who help you—are  
driven by the same underlying cause: the number of startup people  
around you. To make a startup hub, you need a lot of people  
interested in startups.There are three reasons. The first, obviously, is that if you don't  
have enough density, the chance meetings don't happen.  
[4]  
The second is that different startups need such different things, so  
you need a lot of people to supply each startup with what they need  
most. Sean Parker was exactly what Facebook needed in 2004. Another  
startup might have needed a database guy, or someone with connections  
in the movie business.This is one of the reasons we fund such a large number of companies,  
incidentally. The bigger the community, the greater the chance it  
will contain the person who has that one thing you need most.The third reason you need a lot of people to make a startup hub is  
that once you have enough people interested in the same problem,  
they start to set the social norms. And it is a particularly  
valuable thing when the atmosphere around you encourages you to do  
something that would otherwise seem too ambitious. In most places  
the atmosphere pulls you back toward the mean.I flew into the Bay Area a few days ago. I notice this every time  
I fly over the Valley: somehow you can sense something is going on.   
Obviously you can sense prosperity in how well kept a  
place looks. But there are different kinds of prosperity. Silicon  
Valley doesn't look like Boston, or New York, or LA, or DC. I tried  
asking myself what word I'd use to describe the feeling the Valley  
radiated, and the word that came to mind was optimism.Notes[1]  
I'm not saying it's impossible to succeed in a city with few  
other startups, just harder. If you're sufficiently good at  
generating your own morale, you can survive without external  
encouragement. Wufoo was based in Tampa and they succeeded. But  
the Wufoos are exceptionally disciplined.[2]  
Incidentally, this phenomenon is not limited to startups. Most  
unusual ambitions fail, unless the person who has them manages to  
find the right sort of community.[3]  
Starting a company is common, but starting a startup is rare.  
I've talked about the distinction between the two elsewhere, but  
essentially a startup is a new business designed for scale. Most  
new businesses are service businesses and except in rare cases those  
don't scale.[4]  
As I was writing this, I had a demonstration of the density of  
startup people in the Valley. Jessica and I bicycled to University  
Ave in Palo Alto to have lunch at the fabulous Oren's Hummus. As  
we walked in, we met Charlie Cheever sitting near the door. Selina  
Tobaccowala stopped to say hello on her way out. Then Josh Wilson  
came in to pick up a take out order. After lunch we went to get  
frozen yogurt. On the way we met Rajat Suri. When we got to the  
yogurt place, we found Dave Shen there, and as we walked out we ran  
into Yuri Sagalov. We walked with him for a block or so and we ran  
into Muzzammil Zaveri, and then a block later we met Aydin Senkut.  
This is everyday life in Palo Alto. I wasn't trying to meet people;  
I was just having lunch. And I'm sure for every startup founder  
or investor I saw that I knew, there were 5 more I didn't. If Ron  
Conway had been with us he would have met 30 people he knew.Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Jessica Livingston, and  
Harj Taggar for reading drafts of this.

# The Patent Pledge

August 2011I realized recently that we may be able to solve part of the patent  
problem without waiting for the government.I've never been 100% sure whether patents help or hinder technological  
progress. When I was a kid I thought they helped. I thought they  
protected inventors from having their ideas stolen by big companies.  
Maybe that was truer in the past, when more things were physical.  
But regardless of whether patents are in general a good thing, there  
do seem to be bad ways of using them. And since bad uses of patents  
seem to be increasing, there is an increasing call for patent reform.The problem with patent reform is that it has to go through the  
government. That tends to be slow. But recently I realized we can  
also attack the problem downstream. As well as pinching off the  
stream of patents at the point where they're issued, we may in some  
cases be able to pinch it off at the point where they're used.One way of using patents that clearly does not encourage innovation  
is when established companies with bad products use patents to  
suppress small competitors with good products. This is the type  
of abuse we may be able to decrease without having to go through  
the government.The way to do it is to get the companies that are above pulling  
this sort of trick to pledge publicly not to. Then the ones that  
won't make such a pledge will be very conspicuous. Potential  
employees won't want to work for them. And investors, too, will  
be able to see that they're the sort of company that competes by  
litigation rather than by making good products.Here's the pledge:  
  
 No first use of software patents against companies with less   
 than 25 people.  
  
I've deliberately traded precision for brevity. The patent pledge  
is not legally binding. It's like Google's "Don't be evil." They  
don't define what evil is, but by publicly saying that, they're  
saying they're willing to be held to a standard that, say, Altria  
is not. And though constraining, "Don't be evil" has been good for  
Google. Technology companies win by attracting the most productive  
people, and the most productive people are attracted to employers  
who hold themselves to a higher standard than the law requires.  
[1]The patent pledge is in effect a narrower but open source "Don't  
be evil." I encourage every technology company to adopt it. If  
you want to help fix patents, encourage your employer to.Already most technology companies wouldn't sink to using patents  
on startups. You don't see Google or Facebook suing startups for  
patent infringement. They don't need to. So for the better technology  
companies, the patent pledge requires no change in behavior. They're  
just promising to do what they'd do anyway. And when all the  
companies that won't use patents on startups have said so, the  
holdouts will be very conspicuous.The patent pledge doesn't fix every problem with patents. It won't  
stop patent trolls, for example; they're already pariahs. But the  
problem the patent pledge does fix may be more serious than the  
problem of patent trolls. Patent trolls are just parasites. A  
clumsy parasite may occasionally kill the host, but that's not its  
goal. Whereas companies that sue startups for patent infringement  
generally do it with explicit goal of keeping their product off the  
market.Companies that use patents on startups are attacking innovation at  
the root. Now there's something any individual can do about this  
problem, without waiting for the government: ask companies where  
they stand.  
Patent Pledge Site  
Notes:[1]  
Because the pledge is deliberately vague, we're going to need  
common sense when intepreting it. And even more vice versa: the  
pledge is vague in order to make people use common sense when  
interpreting it.So for example I've deliberately avoided saying whether the 25  
people have to be employees, or whether contractors count too. If  
a company has to split hairs that fine about whether a suit would  
violate the patent pledge, it's probably still a dick move.The Investment That Didn't Happen

# Subject: Airbnb

March 2011Yesterday Fred Wilson published a remarkable post about missing  
Airbnb. VCs miss good startups all the time, but it's extraordinarily  
rare for one to talk about it publicly till long afterward. So  
that post is further evidence what a rare bird Fred is. He's  
probably the nicest VC I know.Reading Fred's post made me go back and look at the emails I exchanged  
with him at the time, trying to convince him to invest in Airbnb.  
It was quite interesting to read. You can see Fred's mind at work   
as he circles the deal.Fred and the Airbnb founders have generously agreed to let me publish  
this email exchange (with one sentence redacted about something  
that's strategically important to Airbnb and not an important part  
of the conversation). It's an interesting illustration of an element  
of the startup ecosystem that few except the participants ever see:  
investors trying to convince one another to invest in their portfolio  
companies. Hundreds if not thousands of conversations of this type  
are happening now, but if one has ever been published, I haven't  
seen it. The Airbnbs themselves never even saw these emails at the  
time.We do a lot of this behind the scenes stuff at YC, because we invest  
in such a large number of companies, and we invest so early that  
investors sometimes need a lot of convincing to see their merits.  
I don't always try as hard as this though. Fred must   
have found me quite annoying.  
  
from: Paul Graham  
to: Fred Wilson, AirBedAndBreakfast Founders  
date: Fri, Jan 23, 2009 at 11:42 AM  
subject: meet the airbedsOne of the startups from the batch that just started, AirbedAndBreakfast,  
is in NYC right now meeting their users. (NYC is their biggest  
market.) I'd recommend meeting them if your schedule allows.I'd been thinking to myself that though these guys were going to  
do really well, I should introduce them to angels, because VCs would  
never go for it. But then I thought maybe I should give you more  
credit. You'll certainly like meeting them. Be sure to ask about  
how they funded themselves with breakfast cereal.There's no reason this couldn't be as big as Ebay. And this team  
is the right one to do it.--pgfrom: Brian Chesky  
to: Paul Graham  
cc: Nathan Blecharczyk, Joe Gebbia  
date: Fri, Jan 23, 2009 at 11:40 AM  
subject: Re: meet the airbedsPG,Thanks for the intro!Brianfrom: Paul Graham  
to: Brian Chesky  
cc: Nathan Blecharczyk, Joe Gebbia  
date: Fri, Jan 23, 2009 at 12:38 PM  
subject: Re: meet the airbedsIt's a longshot, at this stage, but if there was any VC who'd get  
you guys, it would be Fred. He is the least suburban-golf-playing  
VC I know.He likes to observe startups for a while before acting, so don't  
be bummed if he seems ambivalent.--pgfrom: Fred Wilson  
to: Paul Graham,  
date: Sun, Jan 25, 2009 at 5:28 PM  
subject: Re: meet the airbedsThanks PaulWe are having a bit of a debate inside our partnership about the  
airbed concept. We'll finish that debate tomorrow in our weekly  
meeting and get back to you with our thoughtsThanksFredfrom: Paul Graham  
to: Fred Wilson  
date: Sun, Jan 25, 2009 at 10:48 PM  
subject: Re: meet the airbedsI'd recommend having the debate after meeting them instead of before.  
We had big doubts about this idea, but they vanished on meeting the  
guys.from: Fred Wilson  
to: Paul Graham  
date: Mon, Jan 26, 2009 at 11:08 AM  
subject: RE: meet the airbedsWe are still very suspect of this idea but will take a meeting as  
you suggestThanksfredfrom: Fred Wilson  
to: Paul Graham, AirBedAndBreakfast Founders  
date: Mon, Jan 26, 2009 at 11:09 AM  
subject: RE: meet the airbedsAirbed team -Are you still in NYC?We'd like to meet if you areThanksfredfrom: Paul Graham  
to: Fred Wilson  
date: Mon, Jan 26, 2009 at 1:42 PM  
subject: Re: meet the airbedsIdeas can morph. Practically every really big startup could say,  
five years later, "believe it or not, we started out doing \_\_\_."  
It just seemed a very good sign to me that these guys were actually  
on the ground in NYC hunting down (and understanding) their users.  
On top of several previous good signs.--pgfrom: Fred Wilson  
to: Paul Graham  
date: Sun, Feb 1, 2009 at 7:15 AM  
subject: Re: meet the airbedsIt's interestingOur two junior team members were enthusiasticThe three "old guys" didn't get itfrom: Paul Graham  
to: Fred Wilson  
date: Mon, Feb 9, 2009 at 5:58 PM  
subject: airbnbThe Airbeds just won the first poll among all the YC startups in  
their batch by a landslide. In the past this has not been a 100%  
indicator of success (if only anything were) but much better than  
random.--pgfrom: Fred Wilson  
to: Paul Graham  
date: Fri, Feb 13, 2009 at 5:29 PM  
subject: Re: airbnbI met them todayThey have an interesting businessI'm just not sure how big it's going to befredfrom: Paul Graham  
to: Fred Wilson  
date: Sat, Feb 14, 2009 at 9:50 AM  
subject: Re: airbnbDid they explain the long-term goal of being the market in accommodation  
the way eBay is in stuff? That seems like it would be huge. Hotels  
now are like airlines in the 1970s before they figured out how to  
increase their load factors.from: Fred Wilson  
to: Paul Graham  
date: Tue, Feb 17, 2009 at 2:05 PM  
subject: Re: airbnbThey did but I am not sure I buy thatABNB reminds me of Etsy in that it facilitates real commerce in a  
marketplace model directly between two peopleSo I think it can scale all the way to the bed and breakfast marketBut I am not sure they can take on the hotel marketI could be wrongBut even so, if you include short term room rental, second home  
rental, bed and breakfast, and other similar classes of accommodations,  
you get to a pretty big opportunityfredfrom: Paul Graham  
to: Fred Wilson  
date: Wed, Feb 18, 2009 at 12:21 AM  
subject: Re: airbnbSo invest in them! They're very capital efficient. They would  
make an investor's money go a long way.It's also counter-cyclical. They just arrived back from NYC, and  
when I asked them what was the most significant thing they'd observed,  
it was how many of their users actually needed to do these rentals  
to pay their rents.--pgfrom: Fred Wilson  
to: Paul Graham  
date: Wed, Feb 18, 2009 at 2:21 AM  
subject: Re: airbnbThere's a lot to likeI've done a few things, like intro it to my friends at Foundry who  
were investors in Service Metrics and understand this modelI am also talking to my friend Mark Pincus who had an idea like  
this a few years ago.So we are working on itThanks for the leadFredfrom: Paul Graham  
to: Fred Wilson  
date: Fri, Feb 20, 2009 at 10:00 PM  
subject: airbnb already spreading to prosI know you're skeptical they'll ever get hotels, but there's a  
continuum between private sofas and hotel rooms, and they just moved  
one step further along it.[link to an airbnb user]This is after only a few months. I bet you they will get hotels  
eventually. It will start with small ones. Just wait till all the  
10-room pensiones in Rome discover this site. And once it spreads  
to hotels, where is the point (in size of chain) at which it stops?  
Once something becomes a big marketplace, you ignore it at your  
peril.--pgfrom: Fred Wilson  
to: Paul Graham  
date: Sat, Feb 21, 2009 at 4:26 AM  
subject: Re: airbnb already spreading to prosThat's true. It's also true that there are quite a few marketplaces  
out there that serve this same marketIf you look at many of the people who list at ABNB, they list  
elsewhere tooI am not negative on this one, I am interested, but we are still  
in the gathering data phase.fred

# Founder Control

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
December 2010Someone we funded is talking to VCs now, and asked me how common  
it was for a startup's founders to retain control of the board after  
a series A round. He said VCs told him this almost never happened.Ten years ago that was true. In the past, founders rarely kept  
control of the board through a series A. The traditional series A  
board consisted of two founders, two VCs, and one independent member.  
More recently the recipe is often one founder, one VC, and one  
independent. In either case the founders lose their majority.But not always. Mark Zuckerberg kept control of Facebook's board  
through the series A and still has it today. Mark Pincus has kept  
control of Zynga's too. But are these just outliers? How common  
is it for founders to keep control after an A round? I'd heard of  
several cases among the companies we've funded, but I wasn't sure  
how many there were, so I emailed the ycfounders list.The replies surprised me. In a dozen companies we've funded, the  
founders still had a majority of the board seats after the series  
A round.I feel like we're at a tipping point here. A lot of VCs still act  
as if founders retaining board control after a series A is unheard-of.  
A lot of them try to make you feel bad if you even ask — as if  
you're a noob or a control freak for wanting such a thing. But the  
founders I heard from aren't noobs or control freaks. Or if they  
are, they are, like Mark Zuckerberg, the kind of noobs and control  
freaks VCs should be trying to fund more of.Founders retaining control after a series A is clearly heard-of.  
And barring financial catastrophe, I think in the coming year it  
will become the norm.Control of a company is a more complicated matter than simply  
outvoting other parties in board meetings. Investors usually get  
vetos over certain big decisions, like selling the company, regardless  
of how many board seats they have. And board votes are rarely  
split. Matters are decided in the discussion preceding the vote,  
not in the vote itself, which is usually unanimous. But if opinion  
is divided in such discussions, the side that knows it would lose  
in a vote will tend to be less insistent. That's what board control  
means in practice. You don't simply get to do whatever you want;  
the board still has to act in the interest of the shareholders; but  
if you have a majority of board seats, then your opinion about  
what's in the interest of the shareholders will tend to prevail.So while board control is not total control, it's not imaginary  
either. There's inevitably a difference in how things feel within  
the company. Which means if it becomes the norm for founders to  
retain board control after a series A, that will change the way  
things feel in the whole startup world.The switch to the new norm may be surprisingly fast, because the  
startups that can retain control tend to be the best ones. They're  
the ones that set the trends, both for other startups and for VCs.A lot of the reason VCs are harsh when negotiating with startups  
is that they're embarrassed to go back to their partners looking  
like they got beaten. When they sign a termsheet, they want to be  
able to brag about the good terms they got. A lot of them don't  
care that much personally about whether founders keep board control.  
They just don't want to seem like they had to make concessions.  
Which means if letting the founders keep control stops being perceived  
as a concession, it will rapidly become much more common.Like a lot of changes that have been forced on VCs, this change  
won't turn out to be as big a problem as they might think. VCs will  
still be able to convince; they just won't be able to compel. And  
the startups where they have to resort to compulsion are not the  
ones that matter anyway. VCs make most of their money from a few  
big hits, and those aren't them.Knowing that founders will keep control of the board may even help  
VCs pick better. If they know they can't fire the founders, they'll  
have to choose founders they can trust. And that's who they should  
have been choosing all along.Thanks to Sam Altman, John Bautista, Trevor Blackwell, Paul  
Buchheit, Brian Chesky, Bill Clerico, Patrick Collison, Adam  
Goldstein, James Lindenbaum, Jessica Livingston, and Fred Wilson  
for reading drafts of this.

# Tablets

December 2010I was thinking recently how inconvenient it was not to have a general  
term for iPhones, iPads, and the corresponding things running  
Android. The closest to a general term seems to be "mobile devices,"  
but that (a) applies to any mobile phone, and (b) doesn't really  
capture what's distinctive about the iPad.After a few seconds it struck me that what we'll end up calling  
these things is tablets. The only reason we even consider calling  
them "mobile devices" is that the iPhone preceded the iPad. If the  
iPad had come first, we wouldn't think of the iPhone as a phone;  
we'd think of it as a tablet small enough to hold up to your ear.The iPhone isn't so much a phone as a replacement for a phone.  
That's an important distinction, because it's an early instance of  
what will become a common pattern. Many if not most of the  
special-purpose objects around us are going to be replaced by apps  
running on tablets.This is already clear in cases like GPSes, music players, and  
cameras. But I think it will surprise people how many things are  
going to get replaced. We funded one startup that's   
replacing keys.  
The fact that you can change font sizes easily means the iPad  
effectively replaces reading glasses. I wouldn't be surprised if  
by playing some clever tricks with the accelerometer you could even  
replace the bathroom scale.The advantages of doing things in software on a single device are  
so great that everything that can get turned into software will.  
So for the next couple years, a good recipe for startups  
will be to look around you for things that people haven't realized  
yet can be made unnecessary by a tablet app.In 1938 Buckminster Fuller coined the term ephemeralization to  
describe the increasing tendency of physical machinery to be replaced  
by what we would now call software. The reason tablets are going  
to take over the world is not (just) that Steve Jobs and Co are  
industrial design wizards, but because they have this force behind  
them. The iPhone and the iPad have effectively drilled a hole that  
will allow ephemeralization to flow into a lot of new areas. No one  
who has studied the history of technology would want to underestimate  
the power of that force.I worry about the power Apple could have with this force behind  
them. I don't want to see another era of client monoculture like  
the Microsoft one in the 80s and 90s. But if ephemeralization is  
one of the main forces driving the spread of tablets, that suggests  
a way to compete with Apple: be a better platform for it.It has turned out to be a great thing that Apple tablets have  
accelerometers in them. Developers have used the accelerometer in  
ways Apple could never have imagined. That's the nature of platforms.  
The more versatile the tool, the less you can predict how people  
will use it. So tablet makers should be thinking: what else can  
we put in there? Not merely hardware, but software too. What else  
can we give developers access to? Give hackers an inch and they'll  
take you a mile.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Jessica Livingston, and  
Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.

# What We Look for in Founders

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2010  
  
(I wrote this for Forbes, who asked me to write something  
about the qualities we look for in founders. In print they had to cut  
the last item because they didn't have room.)1. DeterminationThis has turned out to be the most important quality in startup  
founders. We thought when we started Y Combinator that the most  
important quality would be intelligence. That's the myth in the  
Valley. And certainly you don't want founders to be stupid. But  
as long as you're over a certain threshold of intelligence, what  
matters most is determination. You're going to hit a lot of  
obstacles. You can't be the sort of person who gets demoralized  
easily.Bill Clerico and Rich Aberman of WePay   
are a good example. They're  
doing a finance startup, which means endless negotiations with big,  
bureaucratic companies. When you're starting a startup that depends  
on deals with big companies to exist, it often feels like they're  
trying to ignore you out of existence. But when Bill Clerico starts  
calling you, you may as well do what he asks, because he is not  
going away.  
2. FlexibilityYou do not however want the sort of determination implied by phrases  
like "don't give up on your dreams." The world of startups is so  
unpredictable that you need to be able to modify your dreams on the  
fly. The best metaphor I've found for the combination of determination  
and flexibility you need is a running back.   
He's determined to get  
downfield, but at any given moment he may need to go sideways or  
even backwards to get there.The current record holder for flexibility may be Daniel Gross of  
Greplin. He applied to YC with   
some bad ecommerce idea. We told  
him we'd fund him if he did something else. He thought for a second,  
and said ok. He then went through two more ideas before settling  
on Greplin. He'd only been working on it for a couple days when  
he presented to investors at Demo Day, but he got a lot of interest.  
He always seems to land on his feet.  
3. ImaginationIntelligence does matter a lot of course. It seems like the type  
that matters most is imagination. It's not so important to be able  
to solve predefined problems quickly as to be able to come up with  
surprising new ideas. In the startup world, most good ideas   
seem  
bad initially. If they were obviously good, someone would already  
be doing them. So you need the kind of intelligence that produces  
ideas with just the right level of craziness.Airbnb is that kind of idea.   
In fact, when we funded Airbnb, we  
thought it was too crazy. We couldn't believe large numbers of  
people would want to stay in other people's places. We funded them  
because we liked the founders so much. As soon as we heard they'd  
been supporting themselves by selling Obama and McCain branded  
breakfast cereal, they were in. And it turned out the idea was on  
the right side of crazy after all.  
4. NaughtinessThough the most successful founders are usually good people, they  
tend to have a piratical gleam in their eye. They're not Goody  
Two-Shoes type good. Morally, they care about getting the big  
questions right, but not about observing proprieties. That's why  
I'd use the word naughty rather than evil. They delight in   
breaking  
rules, but not rules that matter. This quality may be redundant  
though; it may be implied by imagination.Sam Altman of Loopt   
is one of the most successful alumni, so we  
asked him what question we could put on the Y Combinator application  
that would help us discover more people like him. He said to ask  
about a time when they'd hacked something to their advantage—hacked in the sense of beating the system, not breaking into  
computers. It has become one of the questions we pay most attention  
to when judging applications.  
5. FriendshipEmpirically it seems to be hard to start a startup with just   
one  
founder. Most of the big successes have two or three. And the  
relationship between the founders has to be strong. They must  
genuinely like one another, and work well together. Startups do  
to the relationship between the founders what a dog does to a sock:  
if it can be pulled apart, it will be.Emmett Shear and Justin Kan of Justin.tv   
are a good example of close  
friends who work well together. They've known each other since  
second grade. They can practically read one another's minds. I'm  
sure they argue, like all founders, but I have never once sensed  
any unresolved tension between them.Thanks to Jessica Livingston and Chris Steiner for reading drafts of this.

# The New Funding Landscape

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2010After barely changing at all for decades, the startup funding  
business is now in what could, at least by comparison, be called  
turmoil. At Y Combinator we've seen dramatic changes in the funding  
environment for startups. Fortunately one of them is much higher  
valuations.The trends we've been seeing are probably not YC-specific. I wish  
I could say they were, but the main cause is probably just that we  
see trends first—partly because the startups we fund are very  
plugged into the Valley and are quick to take advantage of anything  
new, and partly because we fund so many that we have enough data  
points to see patterns clearly.What we're seeing now, everyone's probably going to be seeing in  
the next couple years. So I'm going to explain what we're seeing,  
and what that will mean for you if you try to raise money.Super-AngelsLet me start by describing what the world of startup funding used  
to look like. There used to be two sharply differentiated types  
of investors: angels and venture capitalists. Angels are individual  
rich people who invest small amounts of their own money, while VCs  
are employees of funds that invest large amounts of other people's.For decades there were just those two types of investors, but now  
a third type has appeared halfway between them: the so-called  
super-angels.   
[1]  
 And VCs have been provoked by their arrival  
into making a lot of angel-style investments themselves. So the  
previously sharp line between angels and VCs has become hopelessly  
blurred.There used to be a no man's land between angels and VCs. Angels  
would invest $20k to $50k apiece, and VCs usually a million or more.  
So an angel round meant a collection of angel investments that  
combined to maybe $200k, and a VC round meant a series A round in  
which a single VC fund (or occasionally two) invested $1-5 million.The no man's land between angels and VCs was a very inconvenient  
one for startups, because it coincided with the amount many wanted  
to raise. Most startups coming out of Demo Day wanted to raise  
around $400k. But it was a pain to stitch together that much out  
of angel investments, and most VCs weren't interested in investments  
so small. That's the fundamental reason the super-angels have  
appeared. They're responding to the market.The arrival of a new type of investor is big news for startups,  
because there used to be only two and they rarely competed with one  
another. Super-angels compete with both angels and VCs. That's  
going to change the rules about how to raise money. I don't know  
yet what the new rules will be, but it looks like most of the changes  
will be for the better.A super-angel has some of the qualities of an angel, and some of  
the qualities of a VC. They're usually individuals, like angels.  
In fact many of the current super-angels were initially angels of  
the classic type. But like VCs, they invest other people's money.  
This allows them to invest larger amounts than angels: a typical  
super-angel investment is currently about $100k. They make investment  
decisions quickly, like angels. And they make a lot more investments  
per partner than VCs—up to 10 times as many.The fact that super-angels invest other people's money makes them  
doubly alarming to VCs. They don't just compete for startups; they  
also compete for investors. What super-angels really are is a new  
form of fast-moving, lightweight VC fund. And those of us in the  
technology world know what usually happens when something comes  
along that can be described in terms like that. Usually it's the  
replacement.Will it be? As of now, few of the startups that take money from  
super-angels are ruling out taking VC money. They're just postponing  
it. But that's still a problem for VCs. Some of the startups that  
postpone raising VC money may do so well on the angel money they  
raise that they never bother to raise more. And those who do raise  
VC rounds will be able to get higher valuations when they do. If  
the best startups get 10x higher valuations when they raise series  
A rounds, that would cut VCs' returns from winners at least tenfold.  
[2]So I think VC funds are seriously threatened by the super-angels.  
But one thing that may save them to some extent is the uneven  
distribution of startup outcomes: practically all the returns are  
concentrated in a few big successes. The expected value of a startup  
is the percentage chance it's Google. So to the extent that winning  
is a matter of absolute returns, the super-angels could win practically  
all the battles for individual startups and yet lose the war, if  
they merely failed to get those few big winners. And there's a  
chance that could happen, because the top VC funds have better  
brands, and can also do more for their portfolio companies.   
[3]Because super-angels make more investments per partner, they have  
less partner per investment. They can't pay as much attention to  
you as a VC on your board could. How much is that extra attention  
worth? It will vary enormously from one partner to another. There's  
no consensus yet in the general case. So for now this is something  
startups are deciding individually.Till now, VCs' claims about how much value they added were sort of  
like the government's. Maybe they made you feel better, but you  
had no choice in the matter, if you needed money on the scale only  
VCs could supply. Now that VCs have competitors, that's going to  
put a market price on the help they offer. The interesting thing  
is, no one knows yet what it will be.Do startups that want to get really big need the sort of advice and  
connections only the top VCs can supply? Or would super-angel money  
do just as well? The VCs will say you need them, and the super-angels  
will say you don't. But the truth is, no one knows yet, not even  
the VCs and super-angels themselves. All the super-angels know  
is that their new model seems promising enough to be worth trying,  
and all the VCs know is that it seems promising enough to worry  
about.RoundsWhatever the outcome, the conflict between VCs and super-angels is  
good news for founders. And not just for the obvious reason that  
more competition for deals means better terms. The whole shape of  
deals is changing.One of the biggest differences between angels and VCs is the amount  
of your company they want. VCs want a lot. In a series A round  
they want a third of your company, if they can get it. They don't  
care much how much they pay for it, but they want a lot because the  
number of series A investments they can do is so small. In a  
traditional series A investment, at least one partner from the VC  
fund takes a seat on your board.   
[4]  
 Since board seats last about  
5 years and each partner can't handle more than about 10 at once,  
that means a VC fund can only do about 2 series A deals per partner  
per year. And that means they need to get as much of the company  
as they can in each one. You'd have to be a very promising startup  
indeed to get a VC to use up one of his 10 board seats for only a  
few percent of you.Since angels generally don't take board seats, they don't have this  
constraint. They're happy to buy only a few percent of you. And  
although the super-angels are in most respects mini VC funds, they've  
retained this critical property of angels. They don't take board  
seats, so they don't need a big percentage of your company.Though that means you'll get correspondingly less attention from  
them, it's good news in other respects. Founders never really liked  
giving up as much equity as VCs wanted. It was a lot of the company  
to give up in one shot. Most founders doing series A deals would  
prefer to take half as much money for half as much stock, and then  
see what valuation they could get for the second half of the stock  
after using the first half of the money to increase its value. But  
VCs never offered that option.Now startups have another alternative. Now it's easy to raise angel  
rounds about half the size of series A rounds. Many of the startups  
we fund are taking this route, and I predict that will be true of  
startups in general.A typical big angel round might be $600k on a convertible note with  
a valuation cap of $4 million premoney. Meaning that when the note  
converts into stock (in a later round, or upon acquisition), the  
investors in that round will get .6 / 4.6, or 13% of the company.  
That's a lot less than the 30 to 40% of the company you usually  
give up in a series A round if you do it so early.   
[5]But the advantage of these medium-sized rounds is not just that  
they cause less dilution. You also lose less control. After an  
angel round, the founders almost always still have control of the  
company, whereas after a series A round they often don't. The  
traditional board structure after a series A round is two founders,  
two VCs, and a (supposedly) neutral fifth person. Plus series A  
terms usually give the investors a veto over various kinds of  
important decisions, including selling the company. Founders usually  
have a lot of de facto control after a series A, as long as things  
are going well. But that's not the same as just being able to do  
what you want, like you could before.A third and quite significant advantage of angel rounds is that  
they're less stressful to raise. Raising a traditional series A  
round has in the past taken weeks, if not months. When a VC firm  
can only do 2 deals per partner per year, they're careful about  
which they do. To get a traditional series A round you have to go  
through a series of meetings, culminating in a full partner meeting  
where the firm as a whole says yes or no. That's the really scary  
part for founders: not just that series A rounds take so long, but  
at the end of this long process the VCs might still say no. The  
chance of getting rejected after the full partner meeting averages  
about 25%. At some firms it's over 50%.Fortunately for founders, VCs have been getting a lot faster.  
Nowadays Valley VCs are more likely to take 2 weeks than 2 months.  
But they're still not as fast as angels and super-angels, the most  
decisive of whom sometimes decide in hours.Raising an angel round is not only quicker, but you get feedback  
as it progresses. An angel round is not an all or nothing thing  
like a series A. It's composed of multiple investors with varying  
degrees of seriousness, ranging from the upstanding ones who commit  
unequivocally to the jerks who give you lines like "come back to  
me to fill out the round." You usually start collecting money from  
the most committed investors and work your way out toward the  
ambivalent ones, whose interest increases as the round fills up.But at each point you know how you're doing. If investors turn  
cold you may have to raise less, but when investors in an angel  
round turn cold the process at least degrades gracefully, instead  
of blowing up in your face and leaving you with nothing, as happens  
if you get rejected by a VC fund after a full partner meeting.  
Whereas if investors seem hot, you can not only close the round  
faster, but now that convertible notes are becoming the norm,  
actually raise the price to reflect demand.ValuationHowever, the VCs have a weapon they can use against the super-angels,  
and they have started to use it. VCs have started making angel-sized  
investments too. The term "angel round" doesn't mean that all the  
investors in it are angels; it just describes the structure of the  
round. Increasingly the participants include VCs making investments  
of a hundred thousand or two. And when VCs invest in angel rounds  
they can do things that super-angels don't like. VCs are quite  
valuation-insensitive in angel rounds—partly because they are  
in general, and partly because they don't care that much about the  
returns on angel rounds, which they still view mostly as a way to  
recruit startups for series A rounds later. So VCs who invest in  
angel rounds can blow up the valuations for angels and super-angels  
who invest in them.   
[6]Some super-angels seem to care about valuations. Several turned  
down YC-funded startups after Demo Day because their valuations  
were too high. This was not a problem for the startups; by definition  
a high valuation means enough investors were willing to accept it.  
But it was mysterious to me that the super-angels would quibble  
about valuations. Did they not understand that the big returns  
come from a few big successes, and that it therefore mattered far  
more which startups you picked than how much you paid for them?After thinking about it for a while and observing certain other  
signs, I have a theory that explains why the super-angels may be  
smarter than they seem. It would make sense for super-angels to  
want low valuations if they're hoping to invest in startups that  
get bought early. If you're hoping to hit the next Google, you  
shouldn't care if the valuation is 20 million. But if you're looking  
for companies that are going to get bought for 30 million, you care.  
If you invest at 20 and the company gets bought for 30, you only  
get 1.5x. You might as well buy Apple.So if some of the super-angels were looking for companies that could  
get acquired quickly, that would explain why they'd care about  
valuations. But why would they be looking for those? Because  
depending on the meaning of "quickly," it could actually be very  
profitable. A company that gets acquired for 30 million is a failure  
to a VC, but it could be a 10x return for an angel, and moreover,  
a quick 10x return. Rate of return is what matters in  
investing—not the multiple you get, but the multiple per year.  
If a super-angel gets 10x in one year, that's a higher rate of  
return than a VC could ever hope to get from a company that took 6  
years to go public. To get the same rate of return, the VC would  
have to get a multiple of 10^6—one million x. Even Google  
didn't come close to that.So I think at least some super-angels are looking for companies  
that will get bought. That's the only rational explanation for  
focusing on getting the right valuations, instead of the right  
companies. And if so they'll be different to deal with than VCs.  
They'll be tougher on valuations, but more accommodating if you want  
to sell early.PrognosisWho will win, the super-angels or the VCs? I think the answer to  
that is, some of each. They'll each become more like one another.  
The super-angels will start to invest larger amounts, and the VCs  
will gradually figure out ways to make more, smaller investments  
faster. A decade from now the players will be hard to tell apart,  
and there will probably be survivors from each group.What does that mean for founders? One thing it means is that the  
high valuations startups are presently getting may not last forever.  
To the extent that valuations are being driven up by price-insensitive  
VCs, they'll fall again if VCs become more like super-angels and  
start to become more miserly about valuations. Fortunately if this  
does happen it will take years.The short term forecast is more competition between investors, which  
is good news for you. The super-angels will try to undermine the  
VCs by acting faster, and the VCs will try to undermine the  
super-angels by driving up valuations. Which for founders will  
result in the perfect combination: funding rounds that close fast,  
with high valuations.But remember that to get that combination, your startup will have  
to appeal to both super-angels and VCs. If you don't seem like you  
have the potential to go public, you won't be able to use VCs to  
drive up the valuation of an angel round.There is a danger of having VCs in an angel round: the so-called  
signalling risk. If VCs are only doing it in the hope of investing  
more later, what happens if they don't? That's a signal to everyone  
else that they think you're lame.How much should you worry about that? The seriousness of signalling  
risk depends on how far along you are. If by the next time you  
need to raise money, you have graphs showing rising revenue or  
traffic month after month, you don't have to worry about any signals  
your existing investors are sending. Your results will speak for  
themselves.   
[7]Whereas if the next time you need to raise money you won't yet have  
concrete results, you may need to think more about the message your  
investors might send if they don't invest more. I'm not sure yet  
how much you have to worry, because this whole phenomenon of VCs  
doing angel investments is so new. But my instincts tell me you  
don't have to worry much. Signalling risk smells like one of those  
things founders worry about that's not a real problem. As a rule,  
the only thing that can kill a good startup is the startup itself.  
Startups hurt themselves way more often than competitors hurt them,  
for example. I suspect signalling risk is in this category too.One thing YC-funded startups have been doing to mitigate the risk  
of taking money from VCs in angel rounds is not to take too much  
from any one VC. Maybe that will help, if you have the luxury of  
turning down money.Fortunately, more and more startups will. After decades of competition  
that could best be described as intramural, the startup funding  
business is finally getting some real competition. That should  
last several years at least, and maybe a lot longer. Unless there's  
some huge market crash, the next couple years are going to be a  
good time for startups to raise money. And that's exciting because  
it means lots more startups will happen.  
Notes[1]  
I've also heard them called "Mini-VCs" and "Micro-VCs." I  
don't know which name will stick.There were a couple predecessors. Ron Conway had angel funds  
starting in the 1990s, and in some ways First Round Capital is closer to a  
super-angel than a VC fund.[2]  
It wouldn't cut their overall returns tenfold, because investing  
later would probably (a) cause them to lose less on investments  
that failed, and (b) not allow them to get as large a percentage  
of startups as they do now. So it's hard to predict precisely what  
would happen to their returns.[3]  
The brand of an investor derives mostly from the success of  
their portfolio companies. The top VCs thus have a big brand  
advantage over the super-angels. They could make it self-perpetuating  
if they used it to get all the best new startups. But I don't think  
they'll be able to. To get all the best startups, you have to do  
more than make them want you. You also have to want them; you have  
to recognize them when you see them, and that's much harder.  
Super-angels will snap up stars that VCs miss. And that will cause  
the brand gap between the top VCs and the super-angels gradually  
to erode.[4]  
Though in a traditional series A round VCs put two partners  
on your board, there are signs now that VCs may begin to conserve  
board seats by switching to what used to be considered an angel-round  
board, consisting of two founders and one VC. Which is also to the  
founders' advantage if it means they still control the company.[5]  
In a series A round, you usually have to give up more than  
the actual amount of stock the VCs buy, because they insist you  
dilute yourselves to set aside an "option pool" as well. I predict  
this practice will gradually disappear though.[6]  
The best thing for founders, if they can get it, is a convertible  
note with no valuation cap at all. In that case the money invested  
in the angel round just converts into stock at the valuation of the  
next round, no matter how large. Angels and super-angels tend not  
to like uncapped notes. They have no idea how much of the company  
they're buying. If the company does well and the valuation of the  
next round is high, they may end up with only a sliver of it. So  
by agreeing to uncapped notes, VCs who don't care about valuations  
in angel rounds can make offers that super-angels hate to match.[7]  
Obviously signalling risk is also not a problem if you'll  
never need to raise more money. But startups are often mistaken  
about that.Thanks to Sam Altman, John Bautista, Patrick Collison, James  
Lindenbaum, Reid Hoffman, Jessica Livingston and Harj Taggar  
for reading drafts  
of this.

# Where to See Silicon Valley

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2010Silicon Valley proper is mostly suburban sprawl. At first glance  
it doesn't seem there's anything to see. It's not the sort of place  
that has conspicuous monuments. But if you look, there are subtle  
signs you're in a place that's different from other places.1. Stanford  
UniversityStanford is a strange place. Structurally it is to an ordinary  
university what suburbia is to a city. It's enormously spread out,  
and feels surprisingly empty much of the time. But notice the  
weather. It's probably perfect. And notice the beautiful mountains  
to the west. And though you can't see it, cosmopolitan San Francisco  
is 40 minutes to the north. That combination is much of the reason  
Silicon Valley grew up around this university and not some other  
one.2. University  
AveA surprising amount of the work of the Valley is done in the cafes  
on or just off University Ave in Palo Alto. If you visit on a  
weekday between 10 and 5, you'll often see founders pitching  
investors. In case you can't tell, the founders are the ones leaning  
forward eagerly, and the investors are the ones sitting back with  
slightly pained expressions.3. The Lucky  
OfficeThe office at 165 University Ave was Google's first. Then it was  
Paypal's. (Now it's Wepay's.) The interesting thing about it is  
the location. It's a smart move to put a startup in a place with  
restaurants and people walking around instead of in an office park,  
because then the people who work there want to stay there, instead  
of fleeing as soon as conventional working hours end. They go out  
for dinner together, talk about ideas, and then come back and  
implement them.It's important to realize that Google's current location in an  
office park is not where they started; it's just where they were  
forced to move when they needed more space. Facebook was till  
recently across the street, till they too had to move because they  
needed more space.4. Old  
Palo AltoPalo Alto was not originally a suburb. For the first 100 years or  
so of its existence, it was a college town out in the countryside.  
Then in the mid 1950s it was engulfed in a wave of suburbia that  
raced down the peninsula. But Palo Alto north of Oregon expressway  
still feels noticeably different from the area around it. It's one  
of the nicest places in the Valley. The buildings are old (though  
increasingly they are being torn down and replaced with generic  
McMansions) and the trees are tall. But houses are very  
expensive—around $1000 per square foot. This is post-exit  
Silicon Valley.  
5. Sand  
Hill RoadIt's interesting to see the VCs' offices on the north side of Sand  
Hill Road precisely because they're so boringly uniform. The  
buildings are all more or less the same, their exteriors express  
very little, and they are arranged in a confusing maze. (I've been  
visiting them for years and I still occasionally get lost.) It's  
not a coincidence. These buildings are a pretty accurate reflection  
of the VC business.If you go on a weekday you may see groups of founders there to meet  
VCs. But mostly you won't see anyone; bustling is the last word  
you'd use to describe the atmos. Visiting Sand Hill Road reminds  
you that the opposite of "down and dirty" would be "up and clean."6. Castro  
StreetIt's a tossup whether Castro Street or University Ave should be  
considered the heart of the Valley now. University Ave would have  
been 10 years ago. But Palo Alto is getting expensive. Increasingly  
startups are located in Mountain View, and Palo Alto is a place  
they come to meet investors. Palo Alto has a lot of different  
cafes, but there is one that clearly dominates in Mountain View:  
Red  
Rock.7. GoogleGoogle spread out from its first building in Mountain View   
to a lot of the surrounding ones. But because the  
buildings were built at different times by different people,  
the place doesn't have the sterile, walled-off feel that a typical  
large company's headquarters have. It definitely has a flavor of  
its own though. You sense there is something afoot. The general  
atmos is vaguely utopian; there are lots of Priuses, and people who  
look like they drive them.You can't get into Google unless you know someone there. It's very  
much worth seeing inside if you can, though. Ditto for Facebook,  
at the end of California Ave in Palo Alto, though there is nothing  
to see outside.8. Skyline  
DriveSkyline Drive runs along the crest of the Santa Cruz mountains. On  
one side is the Valley, and on the other is the sea—which  
because it's cold and foggy and has few harbors, plays surprisingly  
little role in the lives of people in the Valley, considering how  
close it is. Along some parts of Skyline the dominant trees are  
huge redwoods, and in others they're live oaks. Redwoods mean those  
are the parts where the fog off the coast comes in at night; redwoods  
condense rain out of fog. The MROSD manages a collection of great walking trails off  
Skyline.9. 280Silicon Valley has two highways running the length of it: 101, which  
is pretty ugly, and 280, which is one of the more beautiful highways  
in the world. I always take 280 when I have a choice. Notice the  
long narrow lake to the west? That's the San Andreas Fault. It  
runs along the base of the hills, then heads uphill through Portola  
Valley. One of the MROSD trails runs right along  
the fault. A string of rich neighborhoods runs along the  
foothills to the west of 280: Woodside, Portola Valley, Los Altos  
Hills, Saratoga, Los Gatos.SLAC goes right under 280 a little bit south of Sand Hill Road. And a couple miles south of that is the Valley's equivalent of the "Welcome to Las Vegas" sign: The Dish.  
NotesI skipped the Computer  
History Museum because this is a list of where to see the Valley  
itself, not where to see artifacts from it. I also skipped San  
Jose. San Jose calls itself the capital of Silicon Valley, but  
when people in the Valley use the phrase "the city," they mean San  
Francisco. San Jose is a dotted line on a map.Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Patrick Collison, and Jessica Livingston  
for reading drafts of this.

# High Resolution Fundraising

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
September 2010The reason startups have been using   
more convertible notes in angel  
rounds is that they make deals close faster. By making it easier  
for startups to give different prices to different investors, they  
help them break the sort of deadlock that happens when investors  
all wait to see who else is going to invest.By far the biggest influence on investors' opinions of a startup  
is the opinion of other investors. There are very, very few who  
simply decide for themselves. Any startup founder can tell you the  
most common question they hear from investors is not about the  
founders or the product, but "who else is investing?"That tends to produce deadlocks. Raising an old-fashioned   
fixed-size equity round can take weeks, because all the angels sit around  
waiting for the others to commit, like competitors in a bicycle  
sprint who deliberately ride slowly at the start so they can follow  
whoever breaks first.Convertible notes let startups beat such deadlocks by rewarding  
investors willing to move first with lower (effective) valuations.  
Which they deserve because they're taking more risk. It's much  
safer to invest in a startup Ron Conway has already invested in;  
someone who comes after him should pay a higher price.The reason convertible notes allow more flexibility in price is  
that valuation caps aren't actual valuations, and notes are cheap  
and easy to do. So you can do high-resolution fundraising: if you  
wanted you could have a separate note with a different cap for each  
investor.That cap need not simply rise monotonically. A startup could   
also give better deals to investors they expected to help  
them most. The point is simply that different investors,   
whether because of the help they offer or their willingness to  
commit, have different values for  
startups, and their terms should reflect that.Different terms for different investors is  
clearly the way of the future. Markets always evolve toward higher  
resolution. You may not need to use convertible notes to do it.  
With sufficiently lightweight standardized equity terms (and some  
changes in investors' and lawyers' expectations about equity rounds)  
you might be able to do the same thing with equity instead of debt.  
Either would be fine with startups, so long as they can easily  
change their valuation.Deadlocks weren't the only problem with fixed-size equity rounds.  
Another was that startups had to decide in advance how much to  
raise. I think it's a mistake for a startup to fix upon a specific  
number. If investors are easily convinced, the startup should raise more  
now, and if investors are skeptical, the startup should take a  
smaller amount and use that to get the company to the point where  
it's more convincing.It's just not reasonable to expect startups to pick an optimal round  
size in advance, because that depends on the reactions of investors,  
and those are impossible to predict.Fixed-size, multi-investor angel rounds are such a bad idea for  
startups that one wonders why things were ever done that way. One  
possibility is that this custom reflects the way investors like to  
collude when they can get away with it. But I think the actual  
explanation is less sinister. I think angels (and their lawyers)  
organized rounds this way in unthinking imitation of VC series A  
rounds. In a series A, a fixed-size equity round with a lead makes  
sense, because there is usually just one big investor, who is  
unequivocally the lead. Fixed-size series A rounds already are  
high res. But the more investors you have in a round, the less  
sense it makes for everyone to get the same price.The most interesting question here may be what high res fundraising  
will do to the world of investors. Bolder investors will now get  
rewarded with lower prices. But more important, in a  
hits-driven business, is that they'll be able to get into the deals  
they want. Whereas the "who else is investing?" type of investors  
will not only pay higher prices, but may not be able to get into  
the best deals at all.Thanks to Immad Akhund, Sam Altman, John Bautista, Pete Koomen,   
Jessica Livingston, Dan Siroker, Harj Taggar, and  
Fred Wilson for reading drafts of this.

# What Happened to Yahoo

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
August 2010When I went to work for Yahoo after they bought our startup in 1998,  
it felt like the center of the world. It was supposed to be the  
next big thing. It was supposed to be what Google turned out to  
be.What went wrong? The problems that hosed Yahoo go back a long time,  
practically to the beginning of the company. They were already  
very visible when I got there in 1998. Yahoo had two problems  
Google didn't: easy money, and ambivalence about being a technology  
company.MoneyThe first time I met Jerry Yang, we thought we were meeting for  
different reasons. He thought we were meeting so he could check  
us out in person before buying us. I thought we were meeting so we  
could show him our new technology, Revenue Loop. It was a way of  
sorting shopping search results. Merchants bid a percentage of  
sales for traffic, but the results were sorted not by the bid but  
by the bid times the average amount a user would buy. It was  
like the algorithm Google uses now to sort ads, but this was in the  
spring of 1998, before Google was founded.Revenue Loop was the optimal sort for shopping search, in the sense  
that it sorted in order of how much money Yahoo would make from  
each link. But it wasn't just optimal in that sense. Ranking  
search results by user behavior also makes search better. Users  
train the search: you can start out finding matches based on mere  
textual similarity, and as users buy more stuff the search results  
get better and better.Jerry didn't seem to care. I was confused. I was showing him  
technology that extracted the maximum value from search traffic,  
and he didn't care? I couldn't tell whether I was explaining it  
badly, or he was just very poker faced.I didn't realize the answer till later, after I went to work at  
Yahoo. It was neither of my guesses. The reason Yahoo didn't care  
about a technique that extracted the full value of traffic was that  
advertisers were already overpaying for it. If Yahoo merely extracted  
the actual value, they'd have made less.Hard as it is to believe now, the big money then was in banner ads.  
Advertisers were willing to pay ridiculous amounts for banner ads.  
So Yahoo's sales force had evolved to exploit this source of revenue.  
Led by a large and terrifyingly formidable man called Anil Singh,  
Yahoo's sales guys would fly out to Procter & Gamble and come back  
with million dollar orders for banner ad impressions.The prices seemed cheap compared to print, which was what advertisers,  
for lack of any other reference, compared them to. But they were  
expensive compared to what they were worth. So these big, dumb  
companies were a dangerous source of revenue to depend on. But  
there was another source even more dangerous: other Internet startups.By 1998, Yahoo was the beneficiary of a de facto Ponzi scheme.  
Investors were excited about the Internet. One reason they were  
excited was Yahoo's revenue growth. So they invested in new Internet  
startups. The startups then used the money to buy ads on Yahoo to  
get traffic. Which caused yet more revenue growth for Yahoo, and  
further convinced investors the Internet was worth investing in.  
When I realized this one day, sitting in my cubicle, I jumped up  
like Archimedes in his bathtub, except instead of "Eureka!" I was  
shouting "Sell!"Both the Internet startups and the Procter & Gambles were doing  
brand advertising. They didn't care about targeting. They just  
wanted lots of people to see their ads. So traffic became the thing  
to get at Yahoo. It didn't matter what type.  
[1]It wasn't just Yahoo. All the search engines were doing it. This  
was why they were trying to get people to start calling them "portals"  
instead of "search engines." Despite the actual meaning of the word  
portal, what they meant by it was a site where users would find  
what they wanted on the site itself, instead of just passing through  
on their way to other destinations, as they did at a search engine.I remember telling David Filo in late 1998 or early 1999 that Yahoo  
should buy Google, because I and most of the other programmers in  
the company were using it instead of Yahoo for search. He told me  
that it wasn't worth worrying about. Search was only 6% of our  
traffic, and we were growing at 10% a month. It wasn't worth doing  
better.I didn't say "But search traffic is worth more than other traffic!"  
I said "Oh, ok." Because I didn't realize either how much search  
traffic was worth. I'm not sure even Larry and Sergey did then.  
If they had, Google presumably wouldn't have expended any effort  
on enterprise search.If circumstances had been different, the people running Yahoo might  
have realized sooner how important search was. But they had the  
most opaque obstacle in the world between them and the truth: money.  
As long as customers were writing big checks for banner ads, it was  
hard to take search seriously. Google didn't have that to distract  
them.HackersBut Yahoo also had another problem that made it hard to change  
directions. They'd been thrown off balance from the start by their  
ambivalence about being a technology company.One of the weirdest things about Yahoo when I went to work there  
was the way they insisted on calling themselves a "media company."  
If you walked around their offices, it seemed like a software  
company. The cubicles were full of programmers writing code, product  
managers thinking about feature lists and ship dates, support people  
(yes, there were actually support people) telling users to restart  
their browsers, and so on, just like a software company. So why  
did they call themselves a media company?One reason was the way they made money: by selling ads. In 1995  
it was hard to imagine a technology company making money that way.  
Technology companies made money by selling their software to users.  
Media companies sold ads. So they must be a media company.Another big factor was the fear of Microsoft. If anyone at Yahoo  
considered the idea that they should be a technology company, the  
next thought would have been that Microsoft would crush them.It's hard for anyone much younger than me to understand the fear  
Microsoft still inspired in 1995. Imagine a company with several  
times the power Google has now, but way meaner. It was perfectly  
reasonable to be afraid of them. Yahoo watched them crush the first  
hot Internet company, Netscape. It was reasonable to worry that  
if they tried to be the next Netscape, they'd suffer the same fate.  
How were they to know that Netscape would turn out to be Microsoft's  
last victim?It would have been a clever move to pretend to be a media company  
to throw Microsoft off their scent. But unfortunately Yahoo actually  
tried to be one, sort of. Project managers at Yahoo were called  
"producers," for example, and the different parts of the company  
were called "properties." But what Yahoo really needed to be was a  
technology company, and by trying to be something else, they ended  
up being something that was neither here nor there. That's why  
Yahoo as a company has never had a sharply defined identity.The worst consequence of trying to be a media company was that they  
didn't take programming seriously enough. Microsoft (back in the  
day), Google, and Facebook have all had hacker-centric cultures.  
But Yahoo treated programming as a commodity. At Yahoo, user-facing software  
was controlled by product managers and designers. The job of  
programmers was just to take the work of the product managers and  
designers the final step, by translating it into code.One obvious result of this practice was that when Yahoo built things,  
they often weren't very good. But that wasn't the worst problem.  
The worst problem was that they hired bad programmers.Microsoft (back in the day), Google, and Facebook have all been  
obsessed with hiring the best programmers. Yahoo wasn't. They  
preferred good programmers to bad ones, but they didn't have the  
kind of single-minded, almost obnoxiously elitist focus on hiring  
the smartest people that the big winners have had. And when you  
consider how much competition there was for programmers when they  
were hiring, during the Bubble, it's not surprising that the quality  
of their programmers was uneven.In technology, once you have bad programmers, you're doomed. I  
can't think of an instance where a company has sunk into technical  
mediocrity and recovered. Good programmers want to work with other  
good programmers. So once the quality of programmers at your company  
starts to drop, you enter a death spiral from which there is no  
recovery.  
[2]At Yahoo this death spiral started early. If there was ever a time when  
Yahoo was a Google-style talent magnet, it was over by the time I  
got there in 1998.The company felt prematurely old. Most technology companies  
eventually get taken over by suits and middle managers. At Yahoo  
it felt as if they'd deliberately accelerated this process. They  
didn't want to be a bunch of hackers. They wanted to be suits. A  
media company should be run by suits.The first time I visited Google, they had about 500 people, the  
same number Yahoo had when I went to work there. But boy did things  
seem different. It was still very much a hacker-centric culture.  
I remember talking to some programmers in the cafeteria about the  
problem of gaming search results (now known as SEO), and they asked  
"what should we do?" Programmers at Yahoo wouldn't have asked that.  
Theirs was not to reason why; theirs was to build what product  
managers spec'd. I remember coming away from Google thinking "Wow,  
it's still a startup."There's not much we can learn from Yahoo's first fatal flaw. It's  
probably too much to hope any company could avoid being damaged by  
depending on a bogus source of revenue. But startups can learn an  
important lesson from the second one. In the software business,  
you can't afford not to have a hacker-centric culture.Probably the most impressive commitment I've heard to having a  
hacker-centric culture came from Mark Zuckerberg, when he spoke at  
Startup School in 2007. He said that in the early days Facebook  
made a point of hiring programmers even for jobs that would not  
ordinarily consist of programming, like HR and marketing.So which companies need to have a hacker-centric culture? Which  
companies are "in the software business" in this respect? As Yahoo  
discovered, the area covered by this rule is bigger than most people  
realize. The answer is: any company that needs to have good software.Why would great programmers want to work for a company that didn't  
have a hacker-centric culture, as long as there were others that  
did? I can imagine two reasons: if they were paid a huge amount,  
or if the domain was interesting and none of the companies in it  
were hacker-centric. Otherwise you can't attract good programmers  
to work in a suit-centric culture. And without good programmers  
you won't get good software, no matter how many people you put on  
a task, or how many procedures you establish to ensure "quality."Hacker culture   
often seems kind of irresponsible. That's why people  
proposing to destroy it use phrases like "adult supervision." That  
was the phrase they used at Yahoo. But there are worse things than  
seeming irresponsible. Losing, for example.  
Notes[1]  
The closest we got to targeting when I was there was when we  
created pets.yahoo.com in order to provoke a bidding war between 3  
pet supply startups for the spot as top sponsor.[2]  
In theory you could beat the death spiral by buying good  
programmers instead of hiring them. You can get programmers  
who would never have come to you as employees by buying their   
startups. But so far the only companies smart enough  
to do this are companies smart enough not to need to.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and  
Geoff Ralston for  
reading drafts of this.

# The Future of Startup Funding

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
August 2010Two years ago I  
wrote about what I called "a huge, unexploited  
opportunity in startup funding:" the growing disconnect between  
VCs, whose current business model requires them to invest large  
amounts, and a large class of startups that need less than they  
used to. Increasingly, startups want a couple hundred thousand  
dollars, not a couple million.   
[1]The opportunity is a lot less unexploited now. Investors have  
poured into this territory from both directions. VCs are much more  
likely to make angel-sized investments than they were a year ago.  
And meanwhile the past year has seen a dramatic increase in a new  
type of investor: the super-angel, who operates like an angel, but  
using other people's money, like a VC.Though a lot of investors are entering this territory, there is  
still room for more. The distribution of investors should mirror  
the distribution of startups, which has the usual power law dropoff.  
So there should be a lot more people investing tens or hundreds of  
thousands than millions.   
[2]In fact, it may be good for angels that there are more people doing  
angel-sized deals, because if angel rounds become more legitimate,  
then startups may start to opt for angel rounds even when they  
could, if they wanted, raise series A rounds from VCs. One reason  
startups prefer series A rounds is that they're more prestigious.  
But if angel investors become more active and better known, they'll  
increasingly be able to compete with VCs in brand.Of course, prestige isn't the main reason to prefer a series A  
round. A startup will probably get more attention from investors  
in a series A round than an angel round. So if a startup is choosing  
between an angel round and an A round from a good VC fund, I usually  
advise them to take the A round.   
[3]But while series A rounds aren't going away, I think VCs should be  
more worried about super-angels than vice versa. Despite their  
name, the super-angels are really mini VC funds, and they clearly  
have existing VCs in their sights.They would seem to have history on their side.   
The pattern here seems the same  
one we see when startups and established companies enter a new  
market. Online video becomes possible, and YouTube plunges right  
in, while existing media companies embrace it only half-willingly,  
driven more by fear than hope, and aiming more to protect their  
turf than to do great things for users. Ditto for PayPal. This  
pattern is repeated over and over, and it's usually the invaders  
who win. In this case the super-angels are the invaders. Angel  
rounds are their whole business, as online video was for YouTube.  
Whereas VCs who make angel investments mostly do it as a way to  
generate deal flow for series A rounds.  
[4]On the other hand, startup investing is a very strange business.  
Nearly all the returns are concentrated in a few big winners. If  
the super-angels merely fail to invest in (and to some extent  
produce) the big winners, they'll be out of business, even if they  
invest in all the others.VCsWhy don't VCs start doing smaller series A rounds? The sticking  
point is board seats. In a traditional series A round, the partner  
whose deal it is takes a seat on the startup's board. If we assume  
the average startup runs for 6 years and a partner can bear to be  
on 12 boards at once, then a VC fund can do 2 series A deals per  
partner per year.It has always seemed to me the solution is to take fewer board  
seats. You don't have to be on the board to help a startup. Maybe  
VCs feel they need the power that comes with board membership to  
ensure their money isn't wasted. But have they tested that theory?  
Unless they've tried not taking board seats and found their returns  
are lower, they're not bracketing the problem.I'm not saying VCs don't help startups. The good ones help them a  
lot. What I'm saying is that the kind of help that matters, you  
may not have to be a board member to give.  
[5]How will this all play out? Some VCs will probably adapt, by doing  
more, smaller deals. I wouldn't be surprised if by streamlining  
their selection process and taking fewer board seats, VC funds could  
do 2 to 3 times as many series A rounds with no loss of quality.But other VCs will make no more than superficial changes. VCs are  
conservative, and the threat to them isn't mortal. The VC funds  
that don't adapt won't be violently displaced. They'll edge gradually  
into a different business without realizing it. They'll still do  
what they will call series A rounds, but these will increasingly  
be de facto series B rounds.  
[6]In such rounds they won't get the 25 to 40% of the company they do  
now. You don't give up as much of the company in later rounds  
unless something is seriously wrong. Since the VCs who don't adapt  
will be investing later, their returns from winners may be smaller.  
But investing later should also mean they have fewer losers. So  
their ratio of risk to return may be the same or even better.  
They'll just have become a different, more conservative, type of  
investment.AngelsIn the big angel rounds that increasingly compete with series A  
rounds, the investors won't take as much equity as VCs do now. And  
VCs who try to compete with angels by doing more, smaller deals  
will probably find they have to take less equity to do it. Which  
is good news for founders: they'll get to keep more of the company.The deal terms of angel rounds will become less restrictive  
too—not just less restrictive than series A terms, but less  
restrictive than angel terms have traditionally been.In the future, angel rounds will less often be for specific amounts  
or have a lead investor. In the old days, the standard m.o. for  
startups was to find one angel to act as the lead investor. You'd  
negotiate a round size and valuation with the lead, who'd supply  
some but not all of the money. Then the startup and the lead would  
cooperate to find the rest.The future of angel rounds looks more like this: instead of a fixed  
round size, startups will do a rolling close, where they take money  
from investors one at a time till they feel they have enough.  
[7]  
And though there's going to be one investor who gives them the first  
check, and his or her help in recruiting other investors will  
certainly be welcome, this initial investor will no longer be the  
lead in the old sense of managing the round. The startup will now  
do that themselves.There will continue to be lead investors in the sense of investors  
who take the lead in advising a startup. They may also make  
the biggest investment. But they won't always have to be the one  
terms are negotiated with, or be the first money in, as they have  
in the past. Standardized paperwork will do away with the need to  
negotiate anything except the valuation, and that will get easier  
too.If multiple investors have to share a valuation, it will be whatever  
the startup can get from the first one to write a check, limited  
by their guess at whether this will make later investors balk. But  
there may not have to be just one valuation. Startups are increasingly  
raising money on convertible notes, and convertible notes have not  
valuations but at most valuation caps: caps on what the  
effective valuation will be when the debt converts to equity (in a  
later round, or upon acquisition if that happens first). That's  
an important difference because it means a startup could do multiple  
notes at once with different caps. This is now starting to happen,  
and I predict it will become more common.SheepThe reason things are moving this way is that the old way sucked  
for startups. Leads could (and did) use a fixed size round as a  
legitimate-seeming way of saying what all founders hate to hear:  
I'll invest if other people will. Most investors, unable to judge  
startups for themselves, rely instead on the opinions of other  
investors. If everyone wants in, they want in too; if not, not.  
Founders hate this because it's a recipe for deadlock, and delay  
is the thing a startup can least afford. Most investors know this  
m.o. is lame, and few say openly that they're doing it. But the  
craftier ones achieve the same result by offering to lead rounds  
of fixed size and supplying only part of the money. If the startup  
can't raise the rest, the lead is out too. How could they go ahead  
with the deal? The startup would be underfunded!In the future, investors will increasingly be unable to offer  
investment subject to contingencies like other people investing.  
Or rather, investors who do that will get last place in line.  
Startups will go to them only to fill up rounds that are mostly  
subscribed. And since hot startups tend to have rounds that are  
oversubscribed, being last in line means they'll probably miss the  
hot deals. Hot deals and successful startups are not identical,  
but there is a significant correlation.   
[8]  
So investors who won't invest unilaterally will have lower returns.Investors will probably find they do better when deprived of this  
crutch anyway. Chasing hot deals doesn't make investors choose  
better; it just makes them feel better about their choices. I've  
seen feeding frenzies both form and fall apart many times, and as  
far as I can tell they're mostly random.   
[9]  
If investors can  
no longer rely on their herd instincts, they'll have to think more  
about each startup before investing. They may be surprised how  
well this works.Deadlock wasn't the only disadvantage of letting a lead investor  
manage an angel round. The investors would not infrequently collude  
to push down the valuation. And rounds took too long to close,  
because however motivated the lead was to get the round closed, he  
was not a tenth as motivated as the startup.Increasingly, startups are taking charge of their own angel rounds.  
Only a few do so far, but I think we can already declare the old  
way dead, because those few are the best startups. They're the  
ones in a position to tell investors how the round is going to work.  
And if the startups you want to invest in do things a certain way,  
what difference does it make what the others do?TractionIn fact, it may be slightly misleading to say that angel rounds  
will increasingly take the place of series A rounds. What's really  
happening is that startup-controlled rounds are taking the place  
of investor-controlled rounds.This is an instance of a very important meta-trend, one that Y  
Combinator itself has been based on from the beginning: founders  
are becoming increasingly powerful relative to investors. So if  
you want to predict what the future of venture funding will be like,  
just ask: how would founders like it to be? One by one, all the  
things founders dislike about raising money are going to get  
eliminated.   
[10]Using that heuristic, I'll predict a couple more things. One is  
that investors will increasingly be unable to wait for startups to  
have "traction" before they put in significant money. It's hard  
to predict in advance which startups will succeed. So most investors  
prefer, if they can, to wait till the startup is already succeeding,  
then jump in quickly with an offer. Startups hate this as well,  
partly because it tends to create deadlock, and partly because it  
seems kind of slimy. If you're a promising startup but don't yet  
have significant growth, all the investors are your friends in  
words, but few are in actions. They all say they love you, but  
they all wait to invest. Then when you start to see growth, they  
claim they were your friend all along, and are aghast at the thought  
you'd be so disloyal as to leave them out of your round. If founders  
become more powerful, they'll be able to make investors give them  
more money upfront.(The worst variant of this behavior is the tranched deal, where the  
investor makes a small initial investment, with more to follow if  
the startup does well. In effect, this structure gives the investor  
a free option on the next round, which they'll only take if it's  
worse for the startup than they could get in the open market.  
Tranched deals are an abuse. They're increasingly rare, and they're  
going to get rarer.)   
[11]Investors don't like trying to predict which startups will succeed,  
but increasingly they'll have to. Though the way that happens won't  
necessarily be that the behavior of existing investors will change;  
it may instead be that they'll be replaced by other investors with  
different behavior—that investors who understand startups  
well enough to take on the hard problem of predicting their trajectory  
will tend to displace suits whose skills lie more in raising money  
from LPs.SpeedThe other thing founders hate most about fundraising is how long  
it takes. So as founders become more powerful, rounds should start  
to close faster.Fundraising is still terribly distracting for startups. If you're  
a founder in the middle of raising a round, the round is the top idea in your mind, which means working on the  
company isn't. If a round takes 2 months to close, which is  
reasonably fast by present standards, that means 2 months during  
which the company is basically treading water. That's the worst  
thing a startup could do.So if investors want to get the best deals, the way to do it will  
be to close faster. Investors don't need weeks to make up their  
minds anyway. We decide based on about 10 minutes of reading an  
application plus 10 minutes of in person interview, and we only  
regret about 10% of our decisions. If we can decide in 20 minutes,  
surely the next round of investors can decide in a couple days.  
[12]There are a lot of institutionalized delays in startup funding: the  
multi-week mating dance with investors; the distinction between  
termsheets and deals; the fact that each series A has enormously  
elaborate, custom paperwork. Both founders and investors tend to  
take these for granted. It's the way things have always been. But  
ultimately the reason these delays exist is that they're to the  
advantage of investors. More time gives investors more information  
about a startup's trajectory, and it also tends to make startups  
more pliable in negotiations, since they're usually short of money.These conventions weren't designed to drag out the funding process,  
but that's why they're allowed to persist. Slowness is to the  
advantage of investors, who have in the past been the ones with the  
most power. But there is no need for rounds to take months or even  
weeks to close, and once founders realize that, it's going to stop.  
Not just in angel rounds, but in series A rounds too. The future  
is simple deals with standard terms, done quickly.One minor abuse that will get corrected in the process is option  
pools. In a traditional series A round, before the VCs invest they  
make the company set aside a block of stock for future hires—usually  
between 10 and 30% of the company. The point is to ensure this  
dilution is borne by the existing shareholders. The practice isn't  
dishonest; founders know what's going on. But it makes deals  
unnecessarily complicated. In effect the valuation is 2 numbers.  
There's no need to keep doing this.  
[13]The final thing founders want is to be able to sell some of  
their own stock in later rounds. This won't be a change,   
because the practice is now quite common. A lot of investors  
hated the idea, but the world hasn't exploded as a result,  
so it will happen more, and more openly.SurpriseI've talked here about a bunch of changes that will be forced on  
investors as founders become more powerful. Now the good news:  
investors may actually make more money as a result.A couple days ago an interviewer   
asked   
me if founders having more  
power would be better or worse for the world. I was surprised,  
because I'd never considered that question. Better or worse, it's  
happening. But after a second's reflection, the answer seemed  
obvious. Founders understand their companies better than investors,  
and it has to be better if the people with more knowledge have more  
power.One of the mistakes novice pilots make is overcontrolling the  
aircraft: applying corrections too vigorously, so the aircraft  
oscillates about the desired configuration instead of approaching  
it asymptotically. It seems probable that investors have till now  
on average been overcontrolling their portfolio companies. In a  
lot of startups, the biggest source of stress for the founders is  
not competitors but investors. Certainly it was for us at Viaweb.  
And this is not a new phenomenon: investors were James Watt's biggest  
problem too. If having less power prevents investors from  
overcontrolling startups, it should be better not just for founders  
but for investors too.Investors may end up with less stock per startup, but startups will  
probably do better with founders more in control, and there will  
almost certainly be more of them. Investors all compete with one  
another for deals, but they aren't one another's main competitor.  
Our main competitor is employers. And so far that competitor is  
crushing us. Only a tiny fraction of people who could start a  
startup do. Nearly all customers choose the competing product, a  
job. Why? Well, let's look at the product we're offering. An  
unbiased review would go something like this:  
  
 Starting a startup gives you more freedom and the opportunity to  
 make a lot more money than a job, but it's also hard work and at  
 times very stressful.  
  
Much of the stress comes from dealing with investors. If reforming  
the investment process removed that stress, we'd make our product  
much more attractive. The kind of people who make good startup  
founders don't mind dealing with technical problems—they enjoy  
technical problems—but they hate the type of problems investors  
cause.Investors have no  
idea that when they maltreat one startup, they're preventing 10  
others from happening, but they are. Indirectly, but they are. So  
when investors stop trying to squeeze a little more out of their  
existing deals, they'll find they're net ahead, because so many  
more new deals appear.One of our axioms at Y Combinator is not to think of deal flow as  
a zero-sum game. Our main focus is to encourage more startups to happen,  
not to win a larger share of the existing stream. We've found this  
principle very useful, and we think as it spreads outward it will  
help later stage investors as well."Make something people want"  
applies to us too.Notes[1]  
In this essay I'm talking mainly about software startups.  
These points don't apply to types of startups that are still expensive  
to start, e.g. in energy or biotech.Even the cheap kinds of startups will generally raise large amounts  
at some point, when they want to hire a lot of people. What has  
changed is how much they can get done before that.[2]  
It's not the distribution of good startups that has a power  
law dropoff, but the distribution of potentially good startups,  
which is to say, good deals. There are lots of potential winners,  
from which a few actual winners emerge with superlinear certainty.[3]  
As I was writing this, I asked some founders who'd taken  
series A rounds from top VC funds whether it was worth it, and they  
unanimously said yes.The quality of investor is more important than the type of round,  
though. I'd take an angel round from good angels over a series A  
from a mediocre VC.[4]  
Founders also worry that taking an angel investment from a  
VC means they'll look bad if the VC declines to participate in the  
next round. The trend of VC angel investing is so new that it's  
hard to say how justified this worry is.Another danger, pointed out by Mitch Kapor, is that if VCs are only  
doing angel deals to generate series A deal flow, then their  
incentives aren't aligned with the founders'. The founders want  
the valuation of the next round to be high, and the VCs want it to  
be low. Again, hard to say yet how much of a problem this will be.[5]  
Josh Kopelman pointed out that another way to be on fewer  
boards at once is to take board seats for shorter periods.[6]  
Google was in this respect as so many others the pattern for  
the future. It would be great for VCs if the similarity extended  
to returns. That's probably too much to hope for, but the returns  
may be somewhat higher, as I explain later.[7]  
Doing a rolling close doesn't mean the company is always  
raising money. That would be a distraction. The point of a rolling  
close is to make fundraising take less time, not more. With a  
classic fixed sized round, you don't get any money till all the  
investors agree, and that often creates a situation where they all  
sit waiting for the others to act. A rolling close usually prevents  
this.  
[8]  
There are two (non-exclusive) causes of hot deals: the quality  
of the company, and domino effects among investors. The former is  
obviously a better predictor of success.[9]  
Some of the randomness is concealed by the fact that investment  
is a self fulfilling prophecy.[10]  
The shift in power to founders is exaggerated now because  
it's a seller's market. On the next downtick it will seem like I  
overstated the case. But on the next uptick after that, founders  
will seem more powerful than ever.[11]  
More generally, it will become less common for the same  
investor to invest in successive rounds, except when exercising an  
option to maintain their percentage. When the same investor invests  
in successive rounds, it often means the startup isn't getting  
market price. They may not care; they may prefer to work with an  
investor they already know; but as the investment market becomes  
more efficient, it will become increasingly easy to get market price  
if they want it. Which in turn means the investment community will  
tend to become more stratified.[12]  
The two 10 minuteses have 3 weeks between them so founders  
can get cheap plane tickets, but except for that they could be  
adjacent.[13]  
I'm not saying option pools themselves will go away. They're  
an administrative convenience. What will go away is investors  
requiring them.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, John Bautista, Trevor Blackwell,  
Paul Buchheit, Jeff Clavier,  
Patrick Collison, Ron Conway, Matt Cohler, Chris Dixon, Mitch Kapor,  
Josh Kopelman, Pete Koomen, Carolynn Levy, Jessica Livingston, Ariel  
Poler, Geoff Ralston, Naval Ravikant, Dan Siroker, Harj Taggar, and   
Fred Wilson  
for reading drafts of this.

# The Acceleration of Addictiveness

July 2010What hard liquor, cigarettes, heroin, and crack have in common is  
that they're all more concentrated forms of less addictive predecessors.  
Most if not all the things we describe as addictive are. And the  
scary thing is, the process that created them is accelerating.We wouldn't want to stop it. It's the same process that cures  
diseases: technological progress. Technological progress means  
making things do more of what we want. When the thing we want is  
something we want to want, we consider technological progress good.  
If some new technique makes solar cells x% more efficient, that  
seems strictly better. When progress concentrates something we  
don't want to want — when it transforms opium into heroin — it seems  
bad. But it's the same process at work.  
[1]No one doubts this process is accelerating, which means increasing  
numbers of things we like will be transformed into things we like  
too much.  
[2]As far as I know there's no word for something we like too much.  
The closest is the colloquial sense of "addictive." That usage has  
become increasingly common during my lifetime. And it's clear why:  
there are an increasing number of things we need it for. At the  
extreme end of the spectrum are crack and meth. Food has been  
transformed by a combination of factory farming and innovations in  
food processing into something with way more immediate bang for the  
buck, and you can see the results in any town in America. Checkers  
and solitaire have been replaced by World of Warcraft and FarmVille.  
TV has become much more engaging, and even so it can't compete with Facebook.The world is more addictive than it was 40 years ago. And unless  
the forms of technological progress that produced these things are  
subject to different laws than technological progress in general,  
the world will get more addictive in the next 40 years than it did  
in the last 40.The next 40 years will bring us some wonderful things. I don't  
mean to imply they're all to be avoided. Alcohol is a dangerous  
drug, but I'd rather live in a world with wine than one without.  
Most people can coexist with alcohol; but you have to be careful.  
More things we like will mean more things we have to be careful  
about.Most people won't, unfortunately. Which means that as the world  
becomes more addictive, the two senses in which one can live a  
normal life will be driven ever further apart. One sense of "normal"  
is statistically normal: what everyone else does. The other is the  
sense we mean when we talk about the normal operating range of a  
piece of machinery: what works best.These two senses are already quite far apart. Already someone  
trying to live well would seem eccentrically abstemious in most of  
the US. That phenomenon is only going to become more pronounced.  
You can probably take it as a rule of thumb from now on that if  
people don't think you're weird, you're living badly.Societies eventually develop antibodies to addictive new things.  
I've seen that happen with cigarettes. When cigarettes first  
appeared, they spread the way an infectious disease spreads through  
a previously isolated population. Smoking rapidly became a  
(statistically) normal thing. There were ashtrays everywhere. We  
had ashtrays in our house when I was a kid, even though neither of  
my parents smoked. You had to for guests.As knowledge spread about the dangers of smoking, customs changed.  
In the last 20 years, smoking has been transformed from something  
that seemed totally normal into a rather seedy habit: from something  
movie stars did in publicity shots to something small huddles of  
addicts do outside the doors of office buildings. A lot of the  
change was due to legislation, of course, but the legislation  
couldn't have happened if customs hadn't already changed.It took a while though—on the order of 100 years. And unless the  
rate at which social antibodies evolve can increase to match the  
accelerating rate at which technological progress throws off new  
addictions, we'll be increasingly unable to rely on customs to  
protect us.  
[3]  
Unless we want to be canaries in the coal mine  
of each new addiction—the people whose sad example becomes a  
lesson to future generations—we'll have to figure out for ourselves  
what to avoid and how. It will actually become a reasonable strategy  
(or a more reasonable strategy) to suspect   
everything new.In fact, even that won't be enough. We'll have to worry not just  
about new things, but also about existing things becoming more  
addictive. That's what bit me. I've avoided most addictions, but  
the Internet got me because it became addictive while I was using  
it.  
[4]Most people I know have problems with Internet addiction. We're  
all trying to figure out our own customs for getting free of it.  
That's why I don't have an iPhone, for example; the last thing I  
want is for the Internet to follow me out into the world.  
[5]  
My latest trick is taking long hikes. I used to think running was a  
better form of exercise than hiking because it took less time. Now  
the slowness of hiking seems an advantage, because the longer I  
spend on the trail, the longer I have to think without interruption.Sounds pretty eccentric, doesn't it? It always will when you're  
trying to solve problems where there are no customs yet to guide  
you. Maybe I can't plead Occam's razor; maybe I'm simply eccentric.  
But if I'm right about the acceleration of addictiveness, then this  
kind of lonely squirming to avoid it will increasingly be the fate  
of anyone who wants to get things done. We'll increasingly be  
defined by what we say no to.  
Notes[1]  
Could you restrict technological progress to areas where you  
wanted it? Only in a limited way, without becoming a police state.  
And even then your restrictions would have undesirable side effects.  
"Good" and "bad" technological progress aren't sharply differentiated,  
so you'd find you couldn't slow the latter without also slowing the  
former. And in any case, as Prohibition and the "war on drugs"  
show, bans often do more harm than good.[2]  
Technology has always been accelerating. By Paleolithic  
standards, technology evolved at a blistering pace in the Neolithic  
period.[3]  
Unless we mass produce social customs. I suspect the recent  
resurgence of evangelical Christianity in the US is partly a reaction  
to drugs. In desperation people reach for the sledgehammer; if  
their kids won't listen to them, maybe they'll listen to God. But  
that solution has broader consequences than just getting kids to  
say no to drugs. You end up saying no to   
science as well.  
I worry we may be heading for a future in which only a few people  
plot their own itinerary through no-land, while everyone else books  
a package tour. Or worse still, has one booked for them by the  
government.[4]  
People commonly use the word "procrastination" to describe  
what they do on the Internet. It seems to me too mild to describe  
what's happening as merely not-doing-work. We don't call it  
procrastination when someone gets drunk instead of working.[5]  
Several people have told me they like the iPad because it  
lets them bring the Internet into situations where a laptop would  
be too conspicuous. In other words, it's a hip flask. (This is  
true of the iPhone too, of course, but this advantage isn't as  
obvious because it reads as a phone, and everyone's used to those.)Thanks to Sam Altman, Patrick Collison, Jessica Livingston, and  
Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.

# The Top Idea in Your Mind

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
July 2010I realized recently that what one thinks about in the shower in the  
morning is more important than I'd thought. I knew it was a good  
time to have ideas. Now I'd go further: now I'd say it's hard to  
do a really good job on anything you don't think about in the shower.Everyone who's worked on difficult problems is probably familiar  
with the phenomenon of working hard to figure something out, failing,  
and then suddenly seeing the answer a bit later while doing something  
else. There's a kind of thinking you do without trying to. I'm  
increasingly convinced this type of thinking is not merely helpful  
in solving hard problems, but necessary. The tricky part is, you  
can only control it indirectly.  
[1]I think most people have one top idea in their mind at any given  
time. That's the idea their thoughts will drift toward when they're  
allowed to drift freely. And this idea will thus tend to get all  
the benefit of that type of thinking, while others are starved of  
it. Which means it's a disaster to let the wrong idea become the  
top one in your mind.What made this clear to me was having an idea I didn't want as the  
top one in my mind for two long stretches.I'd noticed startups got way less done when they started raising  
money, but it was not till we ourselves raised money that I understood  
why. The problem is not the actual time it takes to meet with  
investors. The problem is that once you start raising money, raising  
money becomes the top idea in your mind. That becomes what you  
think about when you take a shower in the morning. And that means  
other questions aren't.I'd hated raising money when I was running Viaweb, but I'd forgotten  
why I hated it so much. When we raised money for Y Combinator, I  
remembered. Money matters are particularly likely to become the  
top idea in your mind. The reason is that they have to be. It's  
hard to get money. It's not the sort of thing that happens by  
default. It's not going to happen unless you let it become the  
thing you think about in the shower. And then you'll make little  
progress on anything else you'd rather be working on.  
[2](I hear similar complaints from friends who are professors. Professors  
nowadays seem to have become professional fundraisers who do a  
little research on the side. It may be time to fix that.)The reason this struck me so forcibly is that for most of the  
preceding 10 years I'd been able to think about what I wanted. So  
the contrast when I couldn't was sharp. But I don't think this  
problem is unique to me, because just about every startup I've seen  
grinds to a halt when they start raising money  or talking  
to acquirers.You can't directly control where your thoughts drift. If you're  
controlling them, they're not drifting. But you can control them  
indirectly, by controlling what situations you let yourself get  
into. That has been the lesson for me: be careful what you let  
become critical to you. Try to get yourself into situations where  
the most urgent problems are ones you want to think about.You don't have complete control, of course. An emergency could  
push other thoughts out of your head. But barring emergencies you  
have a good deal of indirect control over what becomes the top idea  
in your mind.I've found there are two types of thoughts especially worth  
avoiding  thoughts like the Nile Perch in the way they push  
out more interesting ideas. One I've already mentioned: thoughts  
about money. Getting money is almost by definition an attention  
sink.  
The other is disputes. These too are engaging in the  
wrong way: they have the same velcro-like shape as genuinely  
interesting ideas, but without the substance. So avoid disputes  
if you want to get real work done.  
[3]Even Newton fell into this trap. After publishing his theory of  
colors in 1672 he found himself distracted by disputes for years,  
finally concluding that the only solution was to stop publishing:  
  
 I see I have made myself a slave to Philosophy, but if I get free  
 of Mr Linus's business I will resolutely bid adew to it eternally,  
 excepting what I do for my privat satisfaction or leave to come  
 out after me. For I see a man must either resolve to put out  
 nothing new or become a slave to defend it.  
[4]  
  
Linus and his students at Liege were among the more tenacious  
critics. Newton's biographer Westfall seems to feel he was  
overreacting:  
  
 Recall that at the time he wrote, Newton's "slavery" consisted  
 of five replies to Liege, totalling fourteen printed pages, over  
 the course of a year.  
  
I'm more sympathetic to Newton. The problem was not the 14 pages,  
but the pain of having this stupid controversy constantly reintroduced  
as the top idea in a mind that wanted so eagerly to think about  
other things.Turning the other cheek turns out to have selfish advantages.  
Someone who does you an injury hurts you twice: first by the injury  
itself, and second by taking up your time afterward thinking about  
it. If you learn to ignore injuries you can at least avoid the  
second half. I've found I can to some extent avoid thinking about  
nasty things people have done to me by telling myself: this doesn't  
deserve space in my head. I'm always delighted to find I've forgotten  
the details of disputes, because that means I hadn't been thinking  
about them. My wife thinks I'm more forgiving than she is, but my  
motives are purely selfish.I suspect a lot of people aren't sure what's the top idea in their  
mind at any given time. I'm often mistaken about it. I tend to  
think it's the idea I'd want to be the top one, rather than the one  
that is. But it's easy to figure this out: just take a shower.  
What topic do your thoughts keep returning to? If it's not what  
you want to be thinking about, you may want to change something.Notes[1]  
No doubt there are already names for this type of thinking, but  
I call it "ambient thought."[2]  
This was made particularly clear in our case, because neither  
of the funds we raised was difficult, and yet in both cases the  
process dragged on for months. Moving large amounts of money around  
is never something people treat casually. The attention required  
increases with the amount—maybe not linearly, but definitely  
monotonically.[3]  
Corollary: Avoid becoming an administrator, or your job will  
consist of dealing with money and disputes.[4]  
Letter to Oldenburg, quoted in Westfall, Richard, Life of  
Isaac Newton, p. 107.Thanks to Sam Altman, Patrick Collison, Jessica Livingston,  
and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.

# How to Lose Time and Money

July 2010When we sold our startup in 1998 I suddenly got a lot of money. I  
now had to think about something I hadn't had to think about before:  
how not to lose it. I knew it was possible to go from rich to  
poor, just as it was possible to go from poor to rich. But while  
I'd spent a lot of the past several years studying the paths from  
poor to rich,   
I knew practically nothing about the paths from rich  
to poor. Now, in order to avoid them, I had to learn where they  
were.So I started to pay attention to how fortunes are lost. If you'd  
asked me as a kid how rich people became poor, I'd have said by  
spending all their money. That's how it happens in books and movies,  
because that's the colorful way to do it. But in fact the way most  
fortunes are lost is not through excessive expenditure, but through  
bad investments.It's hard to spend a fortune without noticing. Someone with ordinary  
tastes would find it hard to blow through more than a few tens of  
thousands of dollars without thinking "wow, I'm spending a lot of  
money." Whereas if you start trading derivatives, you can lose a  
million dollars (as much as you want, really) in the blink of an  
eye.In most people's minds, spending money on luxuries sets off alarms  
that making investments doesn't. Luxuries seem self-indulgent.  
And unless you got the money by inheriting it or winning a lottery,  
you've already been thoroughly trained that self-indulgence leads  
to trouble. Investing bypasses those alarms. You're not spending  
the money; you're just moving it from one asset to another. Which  
is why people trying to sell you expensive things say "it's an  
investment."The solution is to develop new alarms. This can be a tricky business,  
because while the alarms that prevent you from overspending are so  
basic that they may even be in our DNA, the ones that prevent you  
from making bad investments have to be learned, and are sometimes  
fairly counterintuitive.A few days ago I realized something surprising: the situation with  
time is much the same as with money. The most dangerous way to  
lose time is not to spend it having fun, but to spend it doing fake  
work. When you spend time having fun, you know you're being  
self-indulgent. Alarms start to go off fairly quickly. If I woke  
up one morning and sat down on the sofa and watched TV all day, I'd  
feel like something was terribly wrong. Just thinking about it  
makes me wince. I'd start to feel uncomfortable after sitting on  
a sofa watching TV for 2 hours, let alone a whole day.And yet I've definitely had days when I might as well have sat in  
front of a TV all day — days at the end of which, if I asked myself  
what I got done that day, the answer would have been: basically,  
nothing. I feel bad after these days too, but nothing like as bad  
as I'd feel if I spent the whole day on the sofa watching TV. If  
I spent a whole day watching TV I'd feel like I was descending into  
perdition. But the same alarms don't go off on the days when I get  
nothing done, because I'm doing stuff that seems, superficially,  
like real work. Dealing with email, for example. You do it sitting  
at a desk. It's not fun. So it must be work.With time, as with money, avoiding pleasure is no longer enough to  
protect you. It probably was enough to protect hunter-gatherers,  
and perhaps all pre-industrial societies. So nature and nurture  
combine to make us avoid self-indulgence. But the world has gotten  
more complicated: the most dangerous traps now are new behaviors  
that bypass our alarms about self-indulgence by mimicking more  
virtuous types. And the worst thing is, they're not even fun.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Patrick Collison, Jessica  
Livingston, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.

# Organic Startup Ideas

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
April 2010The best way to come up with startup ideas is to ask yourself the  
question: what do you wish someone would make for you?There are two types of startup ideas: those that grow organically  
out of your own life, and those that you decide, from afar, are  
going to be necessary to some class of users other than you. Apple  
was the first type. Apple happened because Steve Wozniak wanted a  
computer. Unlike most people who wanted computers, he could design  
one, so he did. And since lots of other people wanted the same  
thing, Apple was able to sell enough of them to get the company  
rolling. They still rely on this principle today, incidentally.  
The iPhone is the phone Steve Jobs wants.  
[1]Our own startup, Viaweb, was of the second type. We made software  
for building online stores. We didn't need this software ourselves.  
We weren't direct marketers. We didn't even know when we started  
that our users were called "direct marketers." But we were  
comparatively old when we started the company (I was 30 and Robert  
Morris was 29), so we'd seen enough to know users would need this  
type of software.  
[2]There is no sharp line between the two types of ideas, but  
the most successful startups seem to be closer to the Apple type  
than the Viaweb type. When he was writing that first Basic interpreter  
for the Altair, Bill Gates was writing something he would use, as  
were Larry and Sergey when they wrote the first versions of Google.Organic ideas are generally preferable to the made up kind, but  
particularly so when the founders are young. It takes experience  
to predict what other people will want. The worst ideas we see at  
Y Combinator are from young founders making things they think other  
people will want.So if you want to start a startup and don't know yet what you're  
going to do, I'd encourage you to focus initially on organic ideas.  
What's missing or broken in your daily life? Sometimes if you just  
ask that question you'll get immediate answers. It must have seemed  
obviously broken to Bill Gates that you could only program the  
Altair in machine language.You may need to stand outside yourself a bit to see brokenness,  
because you tend to get used to it and take it for granted. You  
can be sure it's there, though. There are always great ideas sitting  
right under our noses. In 2004 it was ridiculous that Harvard  
undergrads were still using a Facebook printed on paper. Surely  
that sort of thing should have been online.There are ideas that obvious lying around now. The reason you're  
overlooking them is the same reason you'd have overlooked the idea  
of building Facebook in 2004: organic startup ideas usually don't  
seem like startup ideas at first. We know now that Facebook was  
very successful, but put yourself back in 2004. Putting undergraduates'  
profiles online wouldn't have seemed like much of a startup idea.  
And in fact, it wasn't initially a startup idea. When Mark spoke  
at a YC dinner this winter he said he wasn't trying to start a  
company when he wrote the first version of Facebook. It was just  
a project. So was the Apple I when Woz first started working on  
it. He didn't think he was starting a company. If these guys had  
thought they were starting companies, they might have been tempted  
to do something more "serious," and that would have been a mistake.So if you want to come up with organic startup ideas, I'd encourage  
you to focus more on the idea part and less on the startup part.  
Just fix things that seem broken, regardless of whether it seems  
like the problem is important enough to build a company on. If you  
keep pursuing such threads it would be hard not to end up making  
something of value to a lot of people, and when you do, surprise,  
you've got a company.  
[3]Don't be discouraged if what you produce initially is something  
other people dismiss as a toy. In fact, that's a good sign.  
That's probably why everyone else has been overlooking the idea. The first  
microcomputers were dismissed as toys. And the first planes, and  
the first cars. At this point, when someone comes to us with  
something that users like but that we could envision forum trolls  
dismissing as a toy, it makes us especially likely to invest.While young founders are at a disadvantage when coming up with  
made-up ideas, they're the best source of organic ones, because  
they're at the forefront of technology. They use the latest stuff.  
They only just decided what to use, so why wouldn't they? And  
because they use the latest stuff, they're in a position to discover  
valuable types of fixable brokenness first.There's nothing more valuable than an unmet need that is just  
becoming fixable. If you find something broken that you can fix  
for a lot of people, you've found a gold mine. As with an actual  
gold mine, you still have to work hard to get the gold out of it.  
But at least you know where the seam is, and that's the hard part.Notes[1]  
This suggests a way to predict areas where Apple will be weak:  
things Steve Jobs doesn't use. E.g. I doubt he is much into gaming.  
[2]  
In retrospect, we should have become direct marketers. If  
I were doing Viaweb again, I'd open our own online store. If we  
had, we'd have understood users a lot better. I'd encourage anyone  
starting a startup to become one of its users, however unnatural it  
seems.[3]  
Possible exception: It's hard to compete directly with open source software.  
You can build things for programmers, but there has to be some part  
you can charge for.Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, and Jessica Livingston  
for reading drafts of this.

# Apple's Mistake

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
November 2009I don't think Apple realizes how badly the App Store approval process  
is broken. Or rather, I don't think they realize how much it matters  
that it's broken.The way Apple runs the App Store has harmed their reputation with  
programmers more than anything else they've ever done.   
Their reputation with programmers used to be great.  
It used to be the most common complaint you heard  
about Apple was that their fans admired them too uncritically.  
The App Store has changed that. Now a lot of programmers  
have started to see Apple as evil.How much of the goodwill Apple once had with programmers have they  
lost over the App Store? A third? Half? And that's just so far.  
The App Store is an ongoing karma leak.\* \* \*How did Apple get into this mess? Their fundamental problem is  
that they don't understand software.They treat iPhone apps the way they treat the music they sell through  
iTunes. Apple is the channel; they own the user; if you want to  
reach users, you do it on their terms. The record labels agreed,  
reluctantly. But this model doesn't work for software. It doesn't  
work for an intermediary to own the user. The software business  
learned that in the early 1980s, when companies like VisiCorp showed  
that although the words "software" and "publisher" fit together,  
the underlying concepts don't. Software isn't like music or books.  
It's too complicated for a third party to act as an intermediary  
between developer and user. And yet that's what Apple is trying  
to be with the App Store: a software publisher. And a particularly  
overreaching one at that, with fussy tastes and a rigidly enforced  
house style.If software publishing didn't work in 1980, it works even less now  
that software development has evolved from a small number of big  
releases to a constant stream of small ones. But Apple doesn't  
understand that either. Their model of product development derives  
from hardware. They work on something till they think it's finished,  
then they release it. You have to do that with hardware, but because  
software is so easy to change, its design can benefit from evolution.  
The standard way to develop applications now is to launch fast and  
iterate. Which means it's a disaster to have long, random delays  
each time you release a new version.Apparently Apple's attitude is that developers should be more careful  
when they submit a new version to the App Store. They would say  
that. But powerful as they are, they're not powerful enough to  
turn back the evolution of technology. Programmers don't use  
launch-fast-and-iterate out of laziness. They use it because it  
yields the best results. By obstructing that process, Apple is  
making them do bad work, and programmers hate that as much as Apple  
would.How would Apple like it if when they discovered a serious bug in  
OS X, instead of releasing a software update immediately, they had  
to submit their code to an intermediary who sat on it for a month  
and then rejected it because it contained an icon they didn't like?By breaking software development, Apple gets the opposite of what  
they intended: the version of an app currently available in the App  
Store tends to be an old and buggy one. One developer told me:  
  
 As a result of their process, the App Store is full of half-baked  
 applications. I make a new version almost every day that I release  
 to beta users. The version on the App Store feels old and crappy.  
 I'm sure that a lot of developers feel this way: One emotion is  
 "I'm not really proud about what's in the App Store", and it's  
 combined with the emotion "Really, it's Apple's fault."  
  
Another wrote:  
  
 I believe that they think their approval process helps users by  
 ensuring quality. In reality, bugs like ours get through all the  
 time and then it can take 4-8 weeks to get that bug fix approved,  
 leaving users to think that iPhone apps sometimes just don't work.  
 Worse for Apple, these apps work just fine on other platforms  
 that have immediate approval processes.  
  
Actually I suppose Apple has a third misconception: that all the  
complaints about App Store approvals are not a serious problem.  
They must hear developers complaining. But partners and suppliers  
are always complaining. It would be a bad sign if they weren't;  
it would mean you were being too easy on them. Meanwhile the iPhone  
is selling better than ever. So why do they need to fix anything?They get away with maltreating developers, in the short term, because  
they make such great hardware. I just bought a new 27" iMac a  
couple days ago. It's fabulous. The screen's too shiny, and the  
disk is surprisingly loud, but it's so beautiful that you can't  
make yourself care.So I bought it, but I bought it, for the first time, with misgivings.  
I felt the way I'd feel buying something made in a country with a  
bad human rights record. That was new. In the past when I bought  
things from Apple it was an unalloyed pleasure. Oh boy! They make  
such great stuff. This time it felt like a Faustian bargain. They  
make such great stuff, but they're such assholes. Do I really want  
to support this company?\* \* \*Should Apple care what people like me think? What difference does  
it make if they alienate a small minority of their users?There are a couple reasons they should care. One is that these  
users are the people they want as employees. If your company seems  
evil, the best programmers won't work for you. That hurt Microsoft  
a lot starting in the 90s. Programmers started to feel sheepish  
about working there. It seemed like selling out. When people from  
Microsoft were talking to other programmers and they mentioned where  
they worked, there were a lot of self-deprecating jokes about having  
gone over to the dark side. But the real problem for Microsoft  
wasn't the embarrassment of the people they hired. It was the  
people they never got. And you know who got them? Google and  
Apple. If Microsoft was the Empire, they were the Rebel Alliance.  
And it's largely because they got more of the best people that  
Google and Apple are doing so much better than Microsoft today.Why are programmers so fussy about their employers' morals? Partly  
because they can afford to be. The best programmers can work  
wherever they want. They don't have to work for a company they  
have qualms about.But the other reason programmers are fussy, I think, is that evil  
begets stupidity. An organization that wins by exercising power  
starts to lose the ability to win by doing better work. And it's  
not fun for a smart person to work in a place where the best ideas  
aren't the ones that win. I think the reason Google embraced "Don't  
be evil" so eagerly was not so much to impress the outside world  
as to inoculate themselves against arrogance.  
[1]That has worked for Google so far. They've become more  
bureaucratic, but otherwise they seem to have held true to their  
original principles. With Apple that seems less the case. When you  
look at the famous   
1984 ad   
now, it's easier to imagine Apple as the  
dictator on the screen than the woman with the hammer.  
[2]  
In fact, if you read the dictator's speech it sounds uncannily like a  
prophecy of the App Store.  
  
 We have triumphed over the unprincipled dissemination of facts.We have created, for the first time in all history, a garden of  
 pure ideology, where each worker may bloom secure from the pests  
 of contradictory and confusing truths.  
  
The other reason Apple should care what programmers think of them  
is that when you sell a platform, developers make or break you. If  
anyone should know this, Apple should. VisiCalc made the Apple II.And programmers build applications for the platforms they use. Most  
applications—most startups, probably—grow out of personal projects.  
Apple itself did. Apple made microcomputers because that's what  
Steve Wozniak wanted for himself. He couldn't have afforded a  
minicomputer.   
[3]  
 Microsoft likewise started out making interpreters  
for little microcomputers because  
Bill Gates and Paul Allen were interested in using them. It's a  
rare startup that doesn't build something the founders use.The main reason there are so many iPhone apps is that so many programmers  
have iPhones. They may know, because they read it in an article,  
that Blackberry has such and such market share. But in practice  
it's as if RIM didn't exist. If they're going to build something,  
they want to be able to use it themselves, and that means building  
an iPhone app.So programmers continue to develop iPhone apps, even though Apple  
continues to maltreat them. They're like someone stuck in an abusive  
relationship. They're so attracted to the iPhone that they can't  
leave. But they're looking for a way out. One wrote:  
  
 While I did enjoy developing for the iPhone, the control they  
 place on the App Store does not give me the drive to develop  
 applications as I would like. In fact I don't intend to make any  
 more iPhone applications unless absolutely necessary.  
[4]  
  
Can anything break this cycle? No device I've seen so far could.  
Palm and RIM haven't a hope. The only credible contender is Android.  
But Android is an orphan; Google doesn't really care about it, not  
the way Apple cares about the iPhone. Apple cares about the iPhone  
the way Google cares about search.\* \* \*Is the future of handheld devices one locked down by Apple? It's  
a worrying prospect. It would be a bummer to have another grim  
monoculture like we had in the 1990s. In 1995, writing software  
for end users was effectively identical with writing Windows  
applications. Our horror at that prospect was the single biggest  
thing that drove us to start building web apps.At least we know now what it would take to break Apple's lock.  
You'd have to get iPhones out of programmers' hands. If programmers  
used some other device for mobile web access, they'd start to develop  
apps for that instead.How could you make a device programmers liked better than the iPhone?  
It's unlikely you could make something better designed. Apple  
leaves no room there. So this alternative device probably couldn't  
win on general appeal. It would have to win by virtue of some  
appeal it had to programmers specifically.One way to appeal to programmers is with software. If you  
could think of an application programmers had to have, but that  
would be impossible in the circumscribed world of the iPhone,   
you could presumably get them to switch.That would definitely happen if programmers started to use handhelds  
as development machines—if handhelds displaced laptops the  
way laptops displaced desktops. You need more control of a development  
machine than Apple will let you have over an iPhone.Could anyone make a device that you'd carry around in your pocket  
like a phone, and yet would also work as a development machine?  
It's hard to imagine what it would look like. But I've learned  
never to say never about technology. A phone-sized device that  
would work as a development machine is no more miraculous by present  
standards than the iPhone itself would have seemed by the standards  
of 1995.My current development machine is a MacBook Air, which I use with  
an external monitor and keyboard in my office, and by itself when  
traveling. If there was a version half the size I'd prefer it.  
That still wouldn't be small enough to carry around everywhere like  
a phone, but we're within a factor of 4 or so. Surely that gap is  
bridgeable. In fact, let's make it an  
RFS. Wanted:   
Woman with hammer.Notes[1]  
When Google adopted "Don't be evil," they were still so small  
that no one would have expected them to be, yet.  
[2]  
The dictator in the 1984 ad isn't Microsoft, incidentally;  
it's IBM. IBM seemed a lot more frightening in those days, but  
they were friendlier to developers than Apple is now.[3]  
He couldn't even afford a monitor. That's why the Apple  
I used a TV as a monitor.[4]  
Several people I talked to mentioned how much they liked the  
iPhone SDK. The problem is not Apple's products but their policies.  
Fortunately policies are software; Apple can change them instantly  
if they want to. Handy that, isn't it?Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Ross Boucher,   
James Bracy, Gabor Cselle,  
Patrick Collison, Jason Freedman, John Gruber, Joe Hewitt, Jessica Livingston,  
Robert Morris, Teng Siong Ong, Nikhil Pandit, Savraj Singh, and Jared Tame for reading drafts of this.Russian Translation

# What Startups Are Really Like

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2009(This essay is derived from a talk at the 2009 Startup School.)I wasn't sure what to talk about at Startup School, so I decided  
to ask the founders of the startups we'd funded. What hadn't I  
written about yet?I'm in the unusual position of being able to test the essays I write  
about startups. I hope the ones on other topics are right, but I  
have no way to test them. The ones on startups get tested by about  
70 people every 6 months.So I sent all the founders an email asking what surprised them about  
starting a startup. This amounts to asking what I got wrong, because  
if I'd explained things well enough, nothing should have surprised  
them.I'm proud to report I got one response saying:  
  
 What surprised me the most is that everything was actually  
 fairly predictable!  
  
The bad news is that I got over 100 other responses listing the  
surprises they encountered.There were very clear patterns in the responses; it was remarkable  
how often several people had been surprised by exactly the same  
thing. These were the biggest:  
1. Be Careful with CofoundersThis was the surprise mentioned by the most founders. There were  
two types of responses: that you have to be careful who you pick  
as a cofounder, and that you have to work hard to maintain your  
relationship.What people wished they'd paid more attention to when choosing  
cofounders was character and commitment, not ability. This was  
particularly true with startups that failed. The lesson: don't  
pick cofounders who will flake.Here's a typical reponse:  
  
 You haven't seen someone's true colors unless you've worked  
 with them on a startup.  
  
The reason character is so important is that it's tested more  
severely than in most other situations. One founder said explicitly  
that the relationship between founders was more important than  
ability:  
  
 I would rather cofound a startup with a friend than a stranger  
 with higher output. Startups are so hard and emotional that  
 the bonds and emotional and social support that come with  
 friendship outweigh the extra output lost.  
  
We learned this lesson a long time ago. If you look at the YC  
application, there are more questions about the commitment and  
relationship of the founders than their ability.Founders of successful startups talked less about choosing cofounders  
and more about how hard they worked to maintain their relationship.  
  
 One thing that surprised me is how the relationship of startup  
 founders goes from a friendship to a marriage. My relationship  
 with my cofounder went from just being friends to seeing each  
 other all the time, fretting over the finances and cleaning up  
 shit. And the startup was our baby. I summed it up once like  
 this: "It's like we're married, but we're not fucking."  
  
Several people used that word "married." It's a far more intense  
relationship than you usually see between coworkers—partly because  
the stresses are so much greater, and partly because at first the  
founders are the whole company. So this relationship has to be  
built of top quality materials and carefully maintained. It's the  
basis of everything.  
2. Startups Take Over Your LifeJust as the relationship between cofounders is more intense than  
it usually is between coworkers, so is the relationship between the  
founders and the company. Running a startup is not like having a  
job or being a student, because it never stops. This is so foreign  
to most people's experience that they don't get it till it happens.  
[1]  
  
 I didn't realize I would spend almost every waking moment either  
 working or thinking about our startup. You enter a whole  
 different way of life when it's your company vs. working for  
 someone else's company.  
  
It's exacerbated by the fast pace of startups, which makes it seem  
like time slows down:  
  
 I think the thing that's been most surprising to me is how one's  
 perspective on time shifts. Working on our startup, I remember  
 time seeming to stretch out, so that a month was a huge interval.  
  
In the best case, total immersion can be exciting:  
  
 It's surprising how much you become consumed by your startup,  
 in that you think about it day and night, but never once does  
 it feel like "work."  
  
Though I have to say, that quote is from someone we funded this  
summer. In a couple years he may not sound so chipper.  
3. It's an Emotional Roller-coasterThis was another one lots of people were surprised about. The ups  
and downs were more extreme than they were prepared for.In a startup, things seem great one moment and hopeless the next.  
And by next, I mean a couple hours later.  
  
 The emotional ups and downs were the biggest surprise for me.  
 One day, we'd think of ourselves as the next Google and dream  
 of buying islands; the next, we'd be pondering how to let our  
 loved ones know of our utter failure; and on and on.  
  
The hard part, obviously, is the lows. For a lot of founders that  
was the big surprise:  
  
 How hard it is to keep everyone motivated during rough days or  
 weeks, i.e. how low the lows can be.  
  
After a while, if you don't have significant success to cheer you  
up, it wears you out:  
  
 Your most basic advice to founders is "just don't die," but the  
 energy to keep a company going in lieu of unburdening success  
 isn't free; it is siphoned from the founders themselves.  
  
There's a limit to how much you can take. If you get to the point  
where you can't keep working anymore, it's not the end of the world.  
Plenty of famous founders have had some failures along the way.  
4. It Can Be FunThe good news is, the highs are also very high. Several founders  
said what surprised them most about doing a startup was how fun it  
was:  
  
 I think you've left out just how fun it is to do a startup. I  
 am more fulfilled in my work than pretty much any of my friends  
 who did not start companies.  
  
What they like most is the freedom:  
  
 I'm surprised by how much better it feels to be working on  
 something that is challenging and creative, something I believe  
 in, as opposed to the hired-gun stuff I was doing before. I  
 knew it would feel better; what's surprising is how much better.  
  
Frankly, though, if I've misled people here, I'm not eager to fix  
that. I'd rather have everyone think starting a startup is grim  
and hard than have founders go into it expecting it to be fun, and  
a few months later saying "This is supposed to be fun? Are you  
kidding?"The truth is, it wouldn't be fun for most people. A lot of what  
we try to do in the application process is to weed out the people  
who wouldn't like it, both for our sake and theirs.The best way to put it might be that starting a startup is fun the  
way a survivalist training course would be fun, if you're into that  
sort of thing. Which is to say, not at all, if you're not.  
5. Persistence Is the KeyA lot of founders were surprised how important persistence was in  
startups. It was both a negative and a positive surprise: they were  
surprised both by the degree of persistence required  
  
 Everyone said how determined and resilient you must be, but  
 going through it made me realize that the determination required  
 was still understated.  
  
and also by the degree to which persistence alone was able to  
dissolve obstacles:  
  
 If you are persistent, even problems that seem out of your  
 control (i.e. immigration) seem to work themselves out.  
  
Several founders mentioned specifically how much more important  
persistence was than intelligence.  
  
 I've been surprised again and again by just how much more  
 important persistence is than raw intelligence.  
  
This applies not just to intelligence but to ability in general,  
and that's why so many people said character was more important in  
choosing cofounders.  
6. Think Long-TermYou need persistence because everything takes longer than you expect.  
A lot of people were surprised by that.  
  
 I'm continually surprised by how long everything can take.  
 Assuming your product doesn't experience the explosive growth  
 that very few products do, everything from development to  
 dealmaking (especially dealmaking) seems to take 2-3x longer  
 than I always imagine.  
  
One reason founders are surprised is that because they work fast,  
they expect everyone else to. There's a shocking amount of shear  
stress at every point where a startup touches a more bureaucratic  
organization, like a big company or a VC fund. That's why fundraising  
and the enterprise market kill and maim so many startups.   
[2]But I think the reason most founders are surprised by how long it  
takes is that they're overconfident. They think they're going to  
be an instant success, like YouTube or Facebook. You tell them  
only 1 out of 100 successful startups has a trajectory like that,  
and they all think "we're going to be that 1."Maybe they'll listen to one of the more successful founders:  
  
 The top thing I didn't understand before going into it is that  
 persistence is the name of the game. For the vast majority of  
 startups that become successful, it's going to be a really  
 long journey, at least 3 years and probably 5+.  
  
There is a positive side to thinking longer-term. It's not just  
that you have to resign yourself to everything taking longer than  
it should. If you work patiently it's less stressful, and you can  
do better work:  
  
 Because we're relaxed, it's so much easier to have fun doing  
 what we do. Gone is the awkward nervous energy fueled by the  
 desperate need to not fail guiding our actions. We can concentrate  
 on doing what's best for our company, product, employees and  
 customers.  
  
That's why things get so much better when you hit ramen profitability.  
You can shift into a different mode of working.7. Lots of Little ThingsWe often emphasize how rarely startups win simply because they hit  
on some magic idea. I think founders have now gotten that into  
their heads. But a lot were surprised to find this also applies  
within startups. You have to do lots of different things:  
  
 It's much more of a grind than glamorous. A timeslice selected  
 at random would more likely find me tracking down a weird DLL  
 loading bug on Swedish Windows, or tracking down a bug in the  
 financial model Excel spreadsheet the night before a board  
 meeting, rather than having brilliant flashes of strategic  
 insight.  
  
Most hacker-founders would like to spend all their time programming.  
You won't get to, unless you fail. Which can be transformed into:  
If you spend all your time programming, you will fail.The principle extends even into programming. There is rarely a  
single brilliant hack that ensures success:  
  
 I learnt never to bet on any one feature or deal or anything  
 to bring you success. It is never a single thing. Everything  
 is just incremental and you just have to keep doing lots of  
 those things until you strike something.  
  
Even in the rare cases where a clever hack makes your fortune, you  
probably won't know till later:  
  
 There is no such thing as a killer feature. Or at least you  
 won't know what it is.  
  
So the best strategy is to try lots of different things. The reason  
not to put all your eggs in one basket is not the usual one,  
which applies even when you know which basket is best. In a startup  
you don't even know that.  
8. Start with Something MinimalLots of founders mentioned how important it was to launch with the  
simplest possible thing. By this point everyone knows you should  
release fast and iterate. It's practically a mantra at YC. But  
even so a lot of people seem to have been burned by not doing it:  
  
 Build the absolute smallest thing that can be considered a  
 complete application and ship it.  
  
Why do people take too long on the first version? Pride, mostly.  
They hate to release something that could be better. They worry  
what people will say about them. But you have to overcome this:  
  
 Doing something "simple" at first glance does not mean you  
 aren't doing something meaningful, defensible, or valuable.  
  
Don't worry what people will say. If your first version is so  
impressive that trolls don't make fun of it, you waited too long  
to launch.   
[3]One founder said this should be your approach to all programming,  
not just startups, and I tend to agree.  
  
 Now, when coding, I try to think "How can I write this such  
 that if people saw my code, they'd be amazed at how little there  
 is and how little it does?"  
  
Over-engineering is poison. It's not like doing extra work for  
extra credit. It's more like telling a lie that you then have to  
remember so you don't contradict it.  
9. Engage UsersProduct development is a conversation with the user that doesn't  
really start till you launch. Before you launch, you're like a  
police artist before he's shown the first version of his sketch to  
the witness.It's so important to launch fast that it may be better to think of  
your initial version not as a product, but as a trick for getting  
users to start talking to you.  
  
 I learned to think about the initial stages of a startup as a  
 giant experiment. All products should be considered experiments,  
 and those that have a market show promising results extremely  
 quickly.  
  
Once you start talking to users, I guarantee you'll be surprised  
by what they tell you.  
  
 When you let customers tell you what they're after, they will  
 often reveal amazing details about what they find valuable as  
 well what they're willing to pay for.  
  
The surprise is generally positive as well as negative. They won't  
like what you've built, but there will be other things they would  
like that would be trivially easy to implement. It's not till you  
start the conversation by launching the wrong thing that they can  
express (or perhaps even realize) what they're looking for.  
10. Change Your IdeaTo benefit from engaging with users you have to be willing to change  
your idea. We've always encouraged founders to see a startup idea  
as a hypothesis rather than a blueprint. And yet they're still  
surprised how well it works to change the idea.  
  
 Normally if you complain about something being hard, the general  
 advice is to work harder. With a startup, I think you should  
 find a problem that's easy for you to solve. Optimizing in  
 solution-space is familiar and straightforward, but you can  
 make enormous gains playing around in problem-space.  
  
Whereas mere determination, without flexibility, is a greedy algorithm  
that may get you nothing more than a mediocre local maximum:  
  
 When someone is determined, there's still a danger that they'll  
 follow a long, hard path that ultimately leads nowhere.  
  
You want to push forward, but at the same time twist and turn to  
find the most promising path. One founder put it very succinctly:  
  
 Fast iteration is the key to success.  
  
One reason this advice is so hard to follow is that people don't  
realize how hard it is to judge startup ideas, particularly their  
own. Experienced founders learn to keep an open mind:  
  
 Now I don't laugh at ideas anymore, because I realized how  
 terrible I was at knowing if they were good or not.  
  
You can never tell what will work. You just have to do whatever  
seems best at each point. We do this with YC itself. We still  
don't know if it will work, but it seems like a decent hypothesis.  
11. Don't Worry about CompetitorsWhen you think you've got a great idea, it's sort of like having a  
guilty conscience about something. All someone has to do is look  
at you funny, and you think "Oh my God, they know."These alarms are almost always false:  
  
 Companies that seemed like competitors and threats at first  
 glance usually never were when you really looked at it. Even  
 if they were operating in the same area, they had a different  
 goal.  
  
One reason people overreact to competitors is that they overvalue  
ideas. If ideas really were the key, a competitor with the same  
idea would be a real threat. But it's usually execution that  
matters:  
  
 All the scares induced by seeing a new competitor pop up are  
 forgotten weeks later. It always comes down to your own product  
 and approach to the market.  
  
This is generally true even if competitors get lots of attention.  
  
 Competitors riding on lots of good blogger perception aren't  
 really the winners and can disappear from the map quickly. You  
 need consumers after all.  
  
Hype doesn't make satisfied users, at least not for something as  
complicated as technology.12. It's Hard to Get UsersA lot of founders complained about how hard it was to get users,  
though.  
  
 I had no idea how much time and effort needed to go into attaining  
 users.  
  
This is a complicated topic. When you can't get users, it's hard  
to say whether the problem is lack of exposure, or whether the  
product's simply bad. Even good products can be blocked by switching  
or integration costs:  
  
 Getting people to use a new service is incredibly difficult.  
 This is especially true for a service that other companies can  
 use, because it requires their developers to do work. If you're  
 small, they don't think it is urgent.   
[4]  
  
The sharpest criticism of YC came from a founder who said we didn't  
focus enough on customer acquisition:  
  
 YC preaches "make something people want" as an engineering task,  
 a never ending stream of feature after feature until enough  
 people are happy and the application takes off. There's very  
 little focus on the cost of customer acquisition.  
  
This may be true; this may be something we need to fix, especially  
for applications like games. If you make something where the  
challenges are mostly technical, you can rely on word of mouth,  
like Google did. One founder was surprised by how well that worked  
for him:  
  
 There is an irrational fear that no one will buy your product.  
 But if you work hard and incrementally make it better, there  
 is no need to worry.  
  
But with other types of startups you may win less by features and  
more by deals and marketing.  
13. Expect the Worst with DealsDeals fall through. That's a constant of the startup world. Startups  
are powerless, and good startup ideas generally seem wrong. So  
everyone is nervous about closing deals with you, and you have no  
way to make them.This is particularly true with investors:  
  
 In retrospect, it would have been much better if we had operated  
 under the assumption that we would never get any additional  
 outside investment. That would have focused us on finding  
 revenue streams early.  
  
My advice is generally pessimistic. Assume you won't get money,  
and if someone does offer you any, assume you'll never get any more.  
  
 If someone offers you money, take it. You say it a lot, but I  
 think it needs even more emphasizing. We had the opportunity  
 to raise a lot more money than we did last year and I wish we  
 had.  
  
Why do founders ignore me? Mostly because they're optimistic by  
nature. The mistake is to be optimistic about things you can't  
control. By all means be optimistic about your ability to make  
something great. But you're asking for trouble if you're optimistic  
about big companies or investors.  
14. Investors Are CluelessA lot of founders mentioned how surprised they were by the cluelessness  
of investors:  
  
 They don't even know about the stuff they've invested in. I  
 met some investors that had invested in a hardware device and  
 when I asked them to demo the device they had difficulty switching  
 it on.  
  
Angels are a bit better than VCs, because they usually have startup  
experience themselves:  
  
 VC investors don't know half the time what they are talking  
 about and are years behind in their thinking. A few were great,  
 but 95% of the investors we dealt with were unprofessional,  
 didn't seem to be very good at business or have any kind of  
 creative vision. Angels were generally much better to talk to.  
  
Why are founders surprised that VCs are clueless? I think it's  
because they seem so formidable.The reason VCs seem formidable is that it's their profession to.  
You get to be a VC by convincing asset managers to trust you with  
hundreds of millions of dollars. How do you do that? You have to  
seem confident, and you have to seem like you understand technology.  
[5]  
15. You May Have to Play GamesBecause investors are so bad at judging you, you have to work harder  
than you should at selling yourself. One founder said the thing  
that surprised him most was  
  
 The degree to which feigning certitude impressed investors.  
  
This is the thing that has surprised me most about YC founders'  
experiences. This summer we invited some of the alumni to talk to  
the new startups about fundraising, and pretty much 100% of their  
advice was about investor psychology. I thought I was cynical about  
VCs, but the founders were much more cynical.  
  
 A lot of what startup founders do is just posturing. It works.  
  
VCs themselves have no idea of the extent to which the startups  
they like are the ones that are best at selling themselves to VCs.  
[6]  
It's exactly the same phenomenon we saw a step earlier. VCs get  
money by seeming confident to LPs, and founders get money by seeming  
confident to VCs.  
16. Luck Is a Big FactorWith two such random linkages in the path between startups and  
money, it shouldn't be surprising that luck is a big factor in  
deals. And yet a lot of founders are surprised by it.  
  
 I didn't realize how much of a role luck plays and how much is  
 outside of our control.  
  
If you think about famous startups, it's pretty clear how big a  
role luck plays. Where would Microsoft be if IBM insisted on an  
exclusive license for DOS?Why are founders fooled by this? Business guys probably aren't,  
but hackers are used to a world where skill is paramount, and you  
get what you deserve.  
  
 When we started our startup, I had bought the hype of the startup  
 founder dream: that this is a game of skill. It is, in some  
 ways. Having skill is valuable. So is being determined as all  
 hell. But being lucky is the critical ingredient.  
  
Actually the best model would be to say that the outcome is the  
product of skill, determination, and luck. No matter how much  
skill and determination you have, if you roll a zero for luck, the  
outcome is zero.These quotes about luck are not from founders whose startups failed.  
Founders who fail quickly tend to blame themselves. Founders who  
succeed quickly don't usually realize how lucky they were. It's  
the ones in the middle who see how important luck is.  
17. The Value of CommunityA surprising number of founders said what surprised them most about  
starting a startup was the value of community. Some meant the  
micro-community of YC founders:  
  
 The immense value of the peer group of YC companies, and facing  
 similar obstacles at similar times.  
  
which shouldn't be that surprising, because that's why it's structured  
that way. Others were surprised at the value of the startup community  
in the larger sense:  
  
 How advantageous it is to live in Silicon Valley, where you  
 can't help but hear all the cutting-edge tech and startup news,  
 and run into useful people constantly.  
  
The specific thing that surprised them most was the general spirit  
of benevolence:  
  
 One of the most surprising things I saw was the willingness of  
 people to help us. Even people who had nothing to gain went out  
 of their way to help our startup succeed.  
  
and particularly how it extended all the way to the top:  
  
 The surprise for me was how accessible important and interesting  
 people are. It's amazing how easily you can reach out to people  
 and get immediate feedback.  
  
This is one of the reasons I like being part of this world. Creating  
wealth is not a zero-sum game, so you don't have to stab people in  
the back to win.  
18. You Get No RespectThere was one surprise founders mentioned that I'd forgotten about:  
that outside the startup world, startup founders get no respect.  
  
 In social settings, I found that I got a lot more respect when  
 I said, "I worked on Microsoft Office" instead of "I work at a  
 small startup you've never heard of called x."  
  
Partly this is because the rest of the world just doesn't get  
startups, and partly it's yet another consequence of the fact that  
most good startup ideas seem bad:  
  
 If you pitch your idea to a random person, 95% of the time  
 you'll find the person instinctively thinks the idea will be a  
 flop and you're wasting your time (although they probably won't  
 say this directly).  
  
Unfortunately this extends even to dating:  
  
 It surprised me that being a startup founder does not get you  
 more admiration from women.  
  
I did know about that, but I'd forgotten.  
19. Things Change as You GrowThe last big surprise founders mentioned is how much things changed  
as they grew. The biggest change was that you got to program even  
less:  
  
 Your job description as technical founder/CEO is completely  
 rewritten every 6-12 months. Less coding, more  
 managing/planning/company building, hiring, cleaning up messes,  
 and generally getting things in place for what needs to happen  
 a few months from now.  
  
In particular, you now have to deal with employees, who often have  
different motivations:  
  
 I knew the founder equation and had been focused on it since I  
 knew I wanted to start a startup as a 19 year old. The employee  
 equation is quite different so it took me a while to get it  
 down.  
  
Fortunately, it can become a lot less stressful once you reach  
cruising altitude:  
  
 I'd say 75% of the stress is gone now from when we first started.  
 Running a business is so much more enjoyable now. We're more  
 confident. We're more patient. We fight less. We sleep more.  
  
I wish I could say it was this way for every startup that succeeded,  
but 75% is probably on the high side.  
The Super-PatternThere were a few other patterns, but these were the biggest. One's  
first thought when looking at them all is to ask if there's a  
super-pattern, a pattern to the patterns.I saw it immediately, and so did a YC founder I read the list to.  
These are supposed to be the surprises, the things I didn't tell  
people. What do they all have in common? They're all things I  
tell people. If I wrote a new essay with the same outline as this  
that wasn't summarizing the founders' responses, everyone would say  
I'd run out of ideas and was just repeating myself.What is going on here?When I look at the responses, the common theme is that  
starting a startup was like I said, but way more so. People just  
don't seem to get how different it is till they do it. Why? The  
key to that mystery is to ask, how different from what? Once you  
phrase it that way, the answer is obvious: from a job. Everyone's  
model of work is a job. It's completely pervasive. Even if you've  
never had a job, your parents probably did, along with practically  
every other adult you've met.Unconsciously, everyone expects a startup to be like a job, and  
that explains most of the surprises. It explains why people are  
surprised how carefully you have to choose cofounders and how hard  
you have to work to maintain your relationship. You don't have to  
do that with coworkers. It explains why the ups and downs are  
surprisingly extreme. In a job there is much more damping. But  
it also explains why the good times are surprisingly good: most  
people can't imagine such freedom. As you go down the list, almost  
all the surprises are surprising in how much a startup differs from  
a job.You probably can't overcome anything so pervasive as the model of  
work you grew up with. So the best solution is to be consciously  
aware of that. As you go into a startup, you'll be thinking "everyone  
says it's really extreme." Your next thought will probably be "but  
I can't believe it will be that bad." If you want to avoid being  
surprised, the next thought after that should be: "and the reason  
I can't believe it will be that bad is that my model of work is a  
job."  
Notes[1]  
Graduate students might understand it. In grad school you  
always feel you should be working on your thesis. It doesn't end  
every semester like classes do.[2]  
The best way for a startup to engage with slow-moving  
organizations is to fork off separate processes to deal with them.  
It's when they're on the critical path that they kill you—when  
you depend on closing a deal to move forward. It's worth taking  
extreme measures to avoid that.[3]  
This is a variant of Reid Hoffman's principle that if you  
aren't embarrassed by what you launch with, you waited too long to  
launch.[4]  
The question to ask about what you've built is not whether it's  
good, but whether it's good enough to supply the activation energy  
required.[5]  
Some VCs seem to understand technology because they actually  
do, but that's overkill; the defining test is whether you can talk  
about it well enough to convince limited partners.[6]  
This is the same phenomenon you see with defense contractors  
or fashion brands. The dumber the customers, the more effort you  
expend on the process of selling things to them rather than making  
the things you sell.Thanks: to Jessica Livingston for reading drafts of this,  
and to all the founders who responded to my email.Related:Startups in 13 SentencesThe Hardest Lessons for Startups to LearnHow Not to DieThe 18 Mistakes That Kill StartupsA Fundraising Survival GuideRussian TranslationKorean TranslationHebrew Translation

# Persuade xor Discover

September 2009When meeting people you don't know very well, the convention is  
to seem extra friendly. You smile and say "pleased to meet you,"  
whether you are or not. There's nothing dishonest about this.  
Everyone knows that these little social lies aren't meant  
to be taken literally, just as everyone knows that   
"Can you pass the salt?" is only grammatically a question.I'm perfectly willing to smile and say "pleased to meet you"  
when meeting new people. But there is another set of   
customs for being ingratiating in print that are not so  
harmless.The reason there's a convention of being ingratiating in print  
is that most essays are written to persuade.  
And as any politician could tell  
you, the way to persuade people is not just to baldly state the  
facts. You have to add a spoonful of sugar to make the medicine  
go down.For example, a politician announcing the cancellation of   
a government program will not merely say "The  
program is canceled." That would seem offensively  
curt. Instead he'll spend most of his time talking about the  
noble effort made by the people who worked on it.The reason these conventions are more dangerous is that they  
interact with the ideas. Saying "pleased to meet you" is just  
something you prepend to a conversation, but the sort of spin   
added by politicians is woven through it. We're starting to  
move from social lies to real lies.Here's an example of a paragraph from an essay I wrote about  
labor unions. As written,  
it tends to offend people who like unions.  
  
 People who think the labor movement was the creation of heroic  
 union organizers have a problem to explain: why are unions shrinking  
 now? The best they can do is fall back on the default explanation  
 of people living in fallen civilizations. Our ancestors were  
 giants. The workers of the early twentieth century must have had  
 a moral courage that's lacking today.  
  
Now here's the same paragraph rewritten to please instead of  
offending them:  
  
 Early union organizers made heroic sacrifices to improve conditions  
 for workers. But though  
 labor unions are shrinking now, it's not because present union  
 leaders are any less courageous. An employer couldn't get away  
 with hiring thugs to beat up union leaders today, but if they  
 did, I see no reason to believe today's union leaders would shrink  
 from the challenge. So I think it would be a mistake to attribute  
 the decline of unions to some kind of decline in the people who  
 run them. Early union leaders were heroic, certainly, but we  
 should not suppose that if unions have declined, it's because  
 present union leaders are somehow inferior. The cause must be  
 external.  
[1]  
  
It makes the same point: that it can't have been the personal  
qualities of early union organizers that made unions successful,  
but must have been some external factor, or otherwise present-day  
union leaders would have to be inferior people. But written this  
way it seems like a defense of present-day union organizers rather  
than an attack on early ones. That makes it more persuasive to  
people who like unions, because it seems sympathetic to their cause.I believe everything I wrote in the second version. Early union  
leaders did make heroic sacrifices. And  
present union leaders probably would rise to the occasion if  
necessary. People tend to; I'm skeptical about the idea of "the  
greatest generation."   
[2]If I believe everything I said in the second version, why didn't I  
write it that way? Why offend people needlessly?Because I'd rather offend people than pander to them,   
and if you write about controversial topics you have to choose one or the other. The degree of  
courage of past or present union leaders is beside the point; all  
that matters for the argument is that they're the same.  
But if you want to please  
people who are mistaken, you can't simply tell the truth. You're  
always going to have to add some sort of padding to protect their  
misconceptions from bumping against reality.Most writers do. Most writers write to persuade, if only out of  
habit or politeness. But I don't write to persuade; I write to  
figure out. I write to persuade a hypothetical perfectly unbiased  
reader.Since the custom is to write to persuade the actual reader, someone  
who doesn't will seem arrogant. In fact, worse than arrogant: since  
readers are used to essays that try to please someone, an essay  
that displeases one side in a dispute reads as an attempt to pander  
to the other. To a lot of pro-union readers, the first paragraph  
sounds like the sort of thing a right-wing radio talk show host  
would say to stir up his followers. But it's not. Something that  
curtly contradicts one's beliefs can be hard to distinguish from a  
partisan attack on them, but though they can end up in the same  
place they come from different sources.Would it be so bad to add a few extra words, to make people feel  
better? Maybe not. Maybe I'm excessively attached to conciseness.  
I write code the same way I write essays,   
making pass after pass  
looking for anything I can cut. But I have a legitimate reason for  
doing this. You don't know what the ideas are until you get them  
down to the fewest words.   
[3]The danger of the second paragraph  
is not merely that it's longer. It's that you start to lie to  
yourself. The ideas start to get mixed together with the spin  
you've added to get them past the readers' misconceptions.I think the goal of an essay should be to discover   
surprising things. That's my goal, at least.  
And most surprising means most different from what people currently  
believe. So writing to persuade and writing to discover are  
diametrically opposed. The more your conclusions disagree with  
readers' present beliefs, the more effort you'll have to expend on  
selling your ideas rather than having them. As you accelerate,  
this drag increases, till eventually you reach a point where 100%  
of your energy is devoted to overcoming it and you can't go any  
faster.It's hard enough to overcome one's own misconceptions without having  
to think about how to get the resulting ideas past other people's.  
I worry that if I wrote to persuade, I'd start to shy away unconsciously  
from ideas I knew would be hard to sell. When I notice something  
surprising, it's usually very faint at first. There's nothing more  
than a slight stirring of discomfort. I don't want anything to get  
in the way of noticing it consciously.  
Notes[1]  
I had a strange feeling of being back in high school writing  
this. To get a good grade you had to both write the sort of pious  
crap you were expected to, but also seem to be writing with conviction.  
The solution was a kind of method acting. It was revoltingly  
familiar to slip back into it.[2]  
Exercise for the reader:  
rephrase that thought to please the same people the first version  
would offend.[3]  
Come to think of it, there is one way in which I deliberately  
pander to readers, because it doesn't change the number of words:  
I switch person. This flattering distinction seems so natural to  
the average reader that they probably don't notice even when I  
switch in mid-sentence, though you tend to notice when it's done  
as conspicuously as this.Thanks to Jessica Livingston and Robert Morris  
for reading drafts of this.Note: An earlier version of this essay began by talking  
about why people dislike Michael Arrington. I now believe that  
was mistaken, and that most people don't dislike him for the  
same reason I did when I first met him, but simply because  
he writes about controversial things.

# Post-Medium Publishing

September 2009Publishers of all types, from news to music, are unhappy that  
consumers won't pay for content anymore. At least, that's how they  
see it.In fact consumers never really were paying for content, and publishers  
weren't really selling it either. If the content was what they  
were selling, why has the price of books or music or movies always  
depended mostly on the format? Why didn't better content cost more?  
[1]A copy of Time costs $5 for 58 pages, or 8.6 cents a page.   
The Economist costs $7 for 86 pages, or 8.1 cents a page. Better  
journalism is actually slightly cheaper.Almost every form of publishing has been organized as if the medium  
was what they were selling, and the content was irrelevant. Book  
publishers, for example, set prices based on the cost of producing  
and distributing books. They treat the words printed in the book  
the same way a textile manufacturer treats the patterns printed on  
its fabrics.Economically, the print media are in the business of marking up  
paper. We can all imagine an old-style editor getting a scoop and  
saying "this will sell a lot of papers!" Cross out that final S and  
you're describing their business model. The reason they make less  
money now is that people don't need as much paper.A few months ago I ran into a friend in a cafe. I had a copy of  
the New York Times, which I still occasionally buy on weekends. As  
I was leaving I offered it to him, as I've done countless times  
before in the same situation. But this time something new happened.  
I felt that sheepish feeling you get when you offer someone something  
worthless. "Do you, er, want a printout of yesterday's news?" I  
asked. (He didn't.)Now that the medium is evaporating, publishers have nothing left  
to sell. Some seem to think they're going to sell content—that  
they were always in the content business, really. But they weren't,  
and it's unclear whether anyone could be.SellingThere have always been people in the business of selling information,  
but that has historically been a distinct business from publishing.  
And the business of selling information to consumers has always  
been a marginal one. When I was a kid there were people who used  
to sell newsletters containing stock tips, printed on colored paper  
that made them hard for the copiers of the day to reproduce. That  
is a different world, both culturally and economically, from the  
one publishers currently inhabit.People will pay for information they think they can make money from.  
That's why they paid for those stock tip newsletters, and why  
companies pay now for Bloomberg terminals and Economist Intelligence  
Unit reports. But will people pay for information otherwise?  
History offers little encouragement.If audiences were willing to pay more for better content, why wasn't  
anyone already selling it to them? There was no reason you couldn't  
have done that in the era of physical media. So were the print  
media and the music labels simply overlooking this opportunity? Or  
is it, rather, nonexistent?What about iTunes? Doesn't that show people will pay for content?  
Well, not really. iTunes is more of a tollbooth than a store. Apple  
controls the default path onto the iPod. They offer a convenient  
list of songs, and whenever you choose one they ding your credit  
card for a small amount, just below the threshold of attention.  
Basically, iTunes makes money by taxing people, not selling them  
stuff. You can only do that if you own the channel, and even then  
you don't make much from it, because a toll has to be ignorable to  
work. Once a toll becomes painful, people start to find ways around  
it, and that's pretty easy with digital content.The situation is much the same with digital books. Whoever controls  
the device sets the terms. It's in their interest for content to  
be as cheap as possible, and since they own the channel, there's a  
lot they can do to drive prices down. Prices will fall even further  
once writers realize they don't need publishers. Getting a book  
printed and distributed is a daunting prospect for a writer, but  
most can upload a file.Is software a counterexample? People pay a lot for desktop software,  
and that's just information. True, but I don't think publishers  
can learn much from software. Software companies can charge a lot  
because (a) many of the customers are businesses, who get in   
trouble  
if they use pirated versions, and (b) though in form merely  
information, software is treated by both maker and purchaser as a  
different type of thing from a song or an article. A Photoshop  
user needs Photoshop in a way that no one needs a particular song  
or article.That's why there's a separate word, "content," for information  
that's not software. Software is a different business. Software  
and content blur together in some of the most lightweight software,  
like casual games. But those are usually free. To make money the  
way software companies do, publishers would have to become software  
companies, and being publishers gives them no particular head start  
in that domain.   
[2]The most promising countertrend is the premium cable channel. People  
still pay for those. But broadcasting isn't publishing: you're not  
selling a copy of something. That's one reason the movie business  
hasn't seen their revenues decline the way the news and music  
businesses have. They only have one foot in publishing.To the extent the movie business can avoid becoming publishers,  
they may avoid publishing's problems. But there are limits to how  
well they'll be able to do that. Once publishing—giving people  
copies—becomes the most natural way of distributing your content,  
it probably doesn't work to stick to old forms of distribution just  
because you make more that way. If free copies of your content are  
available online, then you're competing with publishing's form of  
distribution, and that's just as bad as being a publisher.Apparently some people in the music business hope to retroactively  
convert it away from publishing, by getting listeners to pay for  
subscriptions. It seems unlikely that will work if they're just  
streaming the same files you can get as mp3s.NextWhat happens to publishing if you can't sell content? You have two  
choices: give it away and make money from it indirectly, or find  
ways to embody it in things people will pay for.The first is probably the future of most current media.   
Give music  
away and make money from concerts and t-shirts. Publish articles  
for free and make money from one of a dozen permutations of  
advertising. Both publishers and investors are down on advertising  
at the moment, but it has more potential than they realize.I'm not claiming that potential will be realized by the existing  
players. The optimal  
ways to make money from the written word  
probably require different words written by different people.It's harder to say what will happen to movies. They could evolve  
into ads. Or they could return to their roots and make going to  
the theater a treat. If they made the experience good enough,  
audiences might start to prefer it to watching pirated movies at  
home.   
[3]  
Or maybe the movie business will dry up, and the people  
working in it will go to work for game developers.I don't know how big embodying information in physical form will  
be. It may be surprisingly large; people overvalue   
physical stuff.  
There should remain some market for printed books, at least.I can see the evolution of book publishing in the books on my  
shelves. Clearly at some point in the 1960s the big publishing  
houses started to ask: how cheaply can we make books before people  
refuse to buy them? The answer turned out to be one step short of  
phonebooks. As long as it isn't floppy, consumers still perceive  
it as a book.That worked as long as buying printed books was the only way to  
read them. If printed books are optional, publishers will have to  
work harder to entice people to buy them. There should be some  
market, but it's hard to foresee how big, because its size will  
depend not on macro trends like the amount people read, but on the  
ingenuity of individual publishers.   
[4]Some magazines may thrive by focusing on the magazine as a physical  
object. Fashion magazines could be made lush in a way that would  
be hard to match digitally, at least for a while. But this is  
probably not an option for most magazines.I don't know exactly what the future will look like, but I'm not  
too worried about it. This sort of change tends to create as many  
good things as it kills. Indeed, the really interesting question is not  
what will happen to existing forms, but what new forms will appear.The reason I've been writing about existing forms is that I don't  
know what new forms will appear. But though I can't predict  
specific winners, I can offer a recipe for recognizing them. When  
you see something that's taking advantage of new technology to give  
people something they want that they couldn't have before, you're  
probably looking at a winner. And when you see something that's  
merely reacting to new technology in an attempt to preserve some  
existing source of revenue, you're probably looking at a loser.  
Notes[1]  
I don't like the word "content" and tried for a while to avoid  
using it, but I have to admit there's no other word that means the  
right thing. "Information" is too general.Ironically, the main reason I don't like "content" is the thesis  
of this essay. The word suggests an undifferentiated slurry, but  
economically that's how both publishers and audiences treat it.  
Content is information you don't need.[2]  
Some types of publishers would be at a disadvantage trying  
to enter the software business. Record labels, for example, would  
probably find it more natural to expand into casinos than software,  
because the kind of people who run them would be more at home at  
the mafia end of the business spectrum than the don't-be-evil end.[3]  
I never watch movies in theaters anymore. The tipping point  
for me was the ads they show first.[4]  
Unfortunately, making physically nice books will only be a  
niche within a niche. Publishers are more likely to resort to  
expedients like selling autographed copies, or editions with the  
buyer's picture on the cover.Thanks to Michael Arrington, Trevor Blackwell, Steven Levy, Robert  
Morris, and Geoff Ralston for reading drafts of this.

# The List of N Things

September 2009I bet you the current issue of Cosmopolitan has an article  
whose title begins with a number. "7 Things He Won't Tell You about  
Sex," or something like that. Some popular magazines  
feature articles of this type on the cover of every  
issue. That can't be happening by accident. Editors must know  
they attract readers.Why do readers like the list of n things so much? Mainly because  
it's easier to read than a regular article.   
[1]  
Structurally, the list of n things is a degenerate case of essay.  
An essay can go anywhere the writer wants. In a list of n things  
the writer agrees to constrain himself to a collection of points  
of roughly equal importance, and he tells the reader explicitly  
what they are.Some of the work of reading an article is understanding its  
structure—figuring out what in high school we'd have called  
its "outline." Not explicitly, of course, but someone who really  
understands an article probably has something in his brain afterward  
that corresponds to such an outline. In a list of n things, this  
work is done for you. Its structure is an exoskeleton.As well as being explicit, the structure is guaranteed to be of the  
simplest possible type: a few main points with few to no subordinate  
ones, and no particular connection between them.Because the main points are unconnected, the list of n things is  
random access. There's no thread of reasoning you have to follow. You could  
read the list in any order. And because the points are independent  
of one another, they work like watertight compartments in an  
unsinkable ship. If you get bored with, or can't understand, or  
don't agree with one point, you don't have to give up on the article.  
You can just abandon that one and skip to the next. A list of n  
things is parallel and therefore fault tolerant.There are times when this format is what a writer wants. One, obviously,  
is when what you have to say actually is a list of n  
things. I once wrote an essay about the mistakes that kill startups, and a few people made fun of me  
for writing something whose title began with a number. But in that  
case I really was trying to make a complete catalog of a number of  
independent things. In fact, one of the questions I was trying to  
answer was how many there were.There are other less legitimate reasons for using this format. For  
example, I use it when I get close to a deadline. If I have to  
give a talk and I haven't started it a few days beforehand, I'll  
sometimes play it safe and make the talk a list of n things.The list of n things is easier for writers as well as readers. When  
you're writing a real essay, there's always a chance you'll hit a  
dead end. A real essay is a train of thought, and some trains of  
thought just peter out. That's an alarming possibility when you  
have to give a talk in a few days. What if you run out of ideas?  
The compartmentalized structure of the list of n things protects  
the writer from his own stupidity in much the same way it protects  
the reader. If you run out of ideas on one point, no problem: it  
won't kill the essay. You can take out the whole point if you need  
to, and the essay will still survive.Writing a list of n things is so relaxing. You think of n/2 of  
them in the first 5 minutes. So bang, there's the structure, and  
you just have to fill it in. As you think of more points, you just  
add them to the end. Maybe you take out or rearrange or combine a  
few, but at every stage you have a valid (though initially low-res)  
list of n things. It's like the sort of programming where you write  
a version 1 very quickly and then gradually modify it, but at every  
point have working code—or the style of painting where you begin  
with a complete but very blurry sketch done in an hour, then spend  
a week cranking up the resolution.Because the list of n things is easier for writers too, it's not  
always a damning sign when readers prefer it. It's not necessarily  
evidence readers are lazy; it could also mean they don't have  
much confidence in the writer. The list of n things is in that  
respect the cheeseburger of essay forms. If you're eating at a  
restaurant you suspect is bad, your best bet is to order the  
cheeseburger. Even a bad cook can make a decent cheeseburger. And  
there are pretty strict conventions about what a cheeseburger should  
look like. You can assume the cook isn't going to try something  
weird and artistic. The list of n things similarly limits the  
damage that can be done by a bad writer. You know it's going to  
be about whatever the title says, and the format prevents the writer  
from indulging in any flights of fancy.Because the list of n things is the easiest essay form, it should  
be a good one for beginning writers. And in fact it is what most  
beginning writers are taught. The classic 5 paragraph essay is  
really a list of n things for n = 3. But the students writing them  
don't realize they're using the same structure as the articles they  
read in Cosmopolitan. They're not allowed to include the numbers,  
and they're expected to spackle over the gaps with gratuitous  
transitions ("Furthermore...") and cap the thing at either end with  
introductory and concluding paragraphs so it will look superficially  
like a real essay.  
[2]It seems a fine plan to start students off with the list of n things.  
It's the easiest form. But if we're going to do that, why not do  
it openly? Let them write lists of n things like the pros, with  
numbers and no transitions or "conclusion."There is one case where the list of n things is a dishonest format:  
when you use it to attract attention by falsely claiming the list  
is an exhaustive one. I.e. if you write an article that purports  
to be about the 7 secrets of success. That kind of title is the  
same sort of reflexive challenge as a whodunit. You have to at least  
look at the article to check whether they're the same 7 you'd list.  
Are you overlooking one of the secrets of success? Better check.It's fine to put "The" before the number if you really believe  
you've made an exhaustive list. But evidence suggests most things  
with titles like this are linkbait.The greatest weakness of the list of n things is that there's so  
little room for new thought. The main point of essay writing, when  
done right, is the new ideas you have while doing it. A real essay,  
as the name implies, is   
dynamic: you don't know what you're going  
to write when you start. It will be about whatever you discover  
in the course of writing it.This can only happen in a very limited way in a list of n things.  
You make the title first, and that's what it's going to be about.  
You can't have more new ideas in the writing than will fit in the  
watertight compartments you set up initially. And your brain seems  
to know this: because you don't have room for new ideas, you don't  
have them.Another advantage of admitting to beginning writers that the 5  
paragraph essay is really a list of n things is that we can warn  
them about this. It only lets you experience the defining  
characteristic of essay writing on a small scale: in thoughts of a  
sentence or two. And it's particularly dangerous that the 5 paragraph  
essay buries the list of n things within something that looks like  
a more sophisticated type of essay. If you don't know you're using  
this form, you don't know you need to escape it.Notes[1]  
Articles of this type are also startlingly popular on Delicious,  
but I think that's because   
delicious/popular   
is driven by bookmarking,  
not because Delicious users are stupid. Delicious users are  
collectors, and a list of n things seems particularly collectible  
because it's a collection itself.[2]  
Most "word problems" in school math textbooks are similarly  
misleading. They look superficially like the application of math  
to real problems, but they're not. So if anything they reinforce  
the impression that math is merely a complicated but pointless  
collection of stuff to be memorized.Russian Translation

# The Anatomy of Determination

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
September 2009Like all investors, we spend a lot of time trying to learn how to  
predict which startups will succeed. We probably spend more time  
thinking about it than most, because we invest the earliest.  
Prediction is usually all we have to rely on.We learned quickly that the most important predictor of success is  
determination. At first we thought it might be intelligence.  
Everyone likes to believe that's what makes startups succeed. It  
makes a better story that a company won because its founders were  
so smart. The PR people and reporters who spread such stories  
probably believe them themselves. But while it certainly helps to  
be smart, it's not the deciding factor. There are plenty of people  
as smart as Bill Gates who achieve nothing.In most domains, talent is overrated compared to determination—partly  
because it makes a better story, partly because it gives onlookers  
an excuse for being lazy, and partly because after a while determination  
starts to look like talent.I can't think of any field in which determination is overrated, but  
the relative importance of determination and talent probably do  
vary somewhat. Talent probably matters more in types of work that  
are purer, in the sense that one is solving mostly a single type  
of problem instead of many different types. I suspect determination  
would not take you as far in math as it would in, say, organized  
crime.I don't mean to suggest by this comparison that types of work that  
depend more on talent are always more admirable. Most people would  
agree it's more admirable to be good at math than memorizing long  
strings of digits, even though the latter depends more on natural  
ability.Perhaps one reason people believe startup founders win by being  
smarter is that intelligence does matter more in technology startups  
than it used to in earlier types of companies. You probably do  
need to be a bit smarter to dominate Internet search than you had  
to be to dominate railroads or hotels or newspapers. And that's  
probably an ongoing trend. But even in the highest of high tech  
industries, success still depends more on determination than brains.If determination is so important, can we isolate its components?  
Are some more important than others? Are there some you can  
cultivate?The simplest form of determination is sheer willfulness. When you  
want something, you must have it, no matter what.A good deal of willfulness must be inborn, because it's common to  
see families where one sibling has much more of it than another.  
Circumstances can alter it, but at the high end of the scale, nature  
seems to be more important than nurture. Bad circumstances can  
break the spirit of a strong-willed person, but I don't think there's  
much you can do to make a weak-willed person stronger-willed.Being strong-willed is not enough, however. You also have to be  
hard on yourself. Someone who was strong-willed but self-indulgent  
would not be called determined. Determination implies your willfulness  
is balanced by discipline.That word balance is a significant one. The more willful you are,  
the more disciplined you have to be. The stronger your will, the  
less anyone will be able to argue with you except yourself. And  
someone has to argue with you, because everyone has base impulses,  
and if you have more will than discipline you'll just give into  
them and end up on a local maximum like drug addiction.We can imagine will and discipline as two fingers squeezing a  
slippery melon seed. The harder they squeeze, the further the seed  
flies, but they must both squeeze equally or the seed spins off  
sideways.If this is true it has interesting implications, because discipline  
can be cultivated, and in fact does tend to vary quite a lot in the  
course of an individual's life. If determination is effectively  
the product of will and discipline, then you can become more  
determined by being more disciplined.  
[1]Another consequence of the melon seed model is that the more willful  
you are, the more dangerous it is to be undisciplined. There seem  
to be plenty of examples to confirm that. In some very energetic  
people's lives you see something like wing flutter, where they  
alternate between doing great work and doing absolutely nothing.  
Externally this would look a lot like bipolar disorder.The melon seed model is inaccurate in at least one respect, however:  
it's static. In fact the dangers of indiscipline increase with  
temptation. Which means, interestingly, that determination tends  
to erode itself. If you're sufficiently determined to achieve great  
things, this will probably increase the number of temptations around  
you. Unless you become proportionally more disciplined, willfulness  
will then get the upper hand, and your achievement will revert to  
the mean.That's why Shakespeare's Caesar thought thin men so dangerous. They weren't  
tempted by the minor perquisites of power.The melon seed model implies it's possible to be too disciplined.  
Is it? I think there probably are people whose willfulness is  
crushed down by excessive discipline, and who would achieve more  
if they weren't so hard on themselves. One reason the young sometimes  
succeed where the old fail is that they don't realize how incompetent  
they are. This lets them do a kind of deficit spending. When they  
first start working on something, they overrate their achievements.  
But that gives them confidence to keep working, and their performance  
improves. Whereas someone clearer-eyed would see their initial  
incompetence for what it was, and perhaps be discouraged from  
continuing.There's one other major component of determination: ambition. If  
willfulness and discipline are what get you to your destination,  
ambition is how you choose it.I don't know if it's exactly right to say that ambition is a component  
of determination, but they're not entirely orthogonal. It would  
seem a misnomer if someone said they were very determined to do  
something trivially easy.And fortunately ambition seems to be quite malleable; there's a lot  
you can do to increase it. Most people don't know how ambitious  
to be, especially when they're young. They don't know what's hard,  
or what they're capable of. And this problem is exacerbated by  
having few peers. Ambitious people are rare, so if everyone is  
mixed together randomly, as they tend to be early in people's lives,  
then the ambitious ones won't have many ambitious peers. When you  
take people like this and put them together with other ambitious  
people, they bloom like dying plants given water. Probably most  
ambitious people are starved for the sort of encouragement they'd  
get from ambitious peers, whatever their age.  
[2]Achievements also tend to increase your ambition. With each step  
you gain confidence to stretch further next time.So here in sum is how determination seems to work: it consists of  
willfulness balanced with discipline, aimed by ambition. And  
fortunately at least two of these three qualities can be cultivated.  
You may be able to increase your strength of will somewhat; you can  
definitely learn self-discipline; and almost everyone is practically  
malnourished when it comes to ambition.I feel like I understand determination a bit better now. But only  
a bit: willfulness, discipline, and ambition are all concepts almost  
as complicated as determination.  
[3]Note too that determination and talent are not the whole story.  
There's a third factor in achievement: how much you like the work.  
If you really love working on something,  
you don't need determination to drive you; it's what you'd do anyway.  
But most types of work have aspects one doesn't like, because most  
types of work consist of doing things for other people, and it's  
very unlikely that the tasks imposed by their needs will happen to  
align exactly with what you want to do.Indeed, if you want to create the most wealth,  
the way to do it is to focus more on their needs than your interests,  
and make up the difference with determination.Notes[1]  
Loosely speaking. What I'm claiming with the melon seed model  
is more like determination is proportionate to wd^m - k|w - d|^n,  
where w is will and d discipline.[2]  
Which means one of the best ways to help a society generally  
is to create events and institutions that bring ambitious  
people together. It's like pulling the control rods out of a  
reactor: the energy they emit encourages other ambitious people,  
instead of being absorbed by the normal people they're usually  
surrounded with.Conversely, it's probably a mistake to do as some European countries  
have done and try to ensure none of your universities is significantly  
better than the others.[3]  
For example, willfulness clearly has two subcomponents,  
stubbornness and energy. The first alone yields someone who's  
stubbornly inert. The second alone yields someone flighty.  
As willful people get older or otherwise lose their energy, they  
tend to become merely stubborn.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Jessica Livingston, and Robert Morris  
for reading drafts of this.Italian TranslationPortuguese TranslationRussian Translation

# What Kate Saw in Silicon Valley

August 2009Kate Courteau is the architect who designed Y Combinator's office.  
Recently we managed to recruit her to help us run YC when she's not  
busy with architectural projects. Though she'd heard a lot about  
YC since the beginning, the last 9 months have been a total immersion.I've been around the startup world for so long that it seems normal  
to me, so I was curious to hear what had surprised her most about  
it. This was her list:1. How many startups fail.Kate knew in principle that startups  
were very risky, but she was surprised to see how constant the  
threat of failure was — not just for the minnows, but even for the  
famous startups whose founders came to speak at YC dinners.  
2. How much startups' ideas change.As usual, by Demo Day about  
half the startups were doing something significantly different than  
they started with. We encourage that. Starting a startup is like  
science in that you have to follow the truth wherever it leads. In  
the rest of the world, people don't start things till they're sure  
what they want to do, and once started they tend to continue on their  
initial path even if it's mistaken.  
3. How little money it can take to start a startup.In Kate's  
world, everything is still physical and expensive. You can barely  
renovate a bathroom for the cost of starting a startup.  
4. How scrappy founders are.That was her actual word. I agree  
with her, but till she mentioned this it never occurred to me how  
little this quality is appreciated in most of the rest of the world.  
It wouldn't be a compliment in most organizations to call someone  
scrappy.What does it mean, exactly? It's basically the diminutive form of  
belligerent. Someone who's scrappy manages to be both threatening  
and undignified at the same time. Which seems to me exactly what  
one would want to be, in any kind of work. If you're not threatening,  
you're probably not doing anything new, and dignity is merely a  
sort of plaque.  
5. How tech-saturated Silicon Valley is."It seems like everybody  
here is in the industry." That isn't literally true, but there is  
a qualitative difference between Silicon Valley and other places.  
You tend to keep your voice down, because there's a good chance the  
person at the next table would know some of the people you're talking  
about. I never felt that in Boston. The good news is, there's  
also a good chance the person at the next table could help you in  
some way.  
6. That the speakers at YC were so consistent in their advice.  
Actually, I've noticed this too. I always worry the speakers will  
put us in an embarrassing position by contradicting what we tell the  
startups, but it happens surprisingly rarely.When I asked her what specific things she remembered speakers always  
saying, she mentioned: that the way to succeed was to launch something  
fast, listen to users, and then iterate; that startups required  
resilience because they were always an emotional rollercoaster; and  
that most VCs were sheep.I've been impressed by how consistently the speakers advocate  
launching fast and iterating. That was contrarian advice 10 years  
ago, but it's clearly now the established practice.  
7. How casual successful startup founders are.Most of the famous  
founders in Silicon Valley are people you'd overlook on the street.  
It's not merely that they don't dress up. They don't project any  
kind of aura of power either. "They're not trying to impress  
anyone."Interestingly, while Kate said that she could never pick out  
successful founders, she could recognize VCs, both by the way they  
dressed and the way they carried themselves.  
8. How important it is for founders to have people to ask for advice.(I swear I didn't prompt this one.) Without advice "they'd just  
be sort of lost." Fortunately, there are a lot of people to help  
them. There's a strong tradition within YC of helping other YC-funded  
startups. But we didn't invent that idea: it's just a slightly  
more concentrated form of existing Valley culture.  
9. What a solitary task startups are.Architects are constantly  
interacting face to face with other people, whereas doing a technology  
startup, at least, tends to require long stretches of uninterrupted  
time to work. "You could do it in a box."By inverting this list, we can get a portrait of the "normal" world.  
It's populated by people who talk a lot with one another as they  
work slowly but harmoniously on conservative, expensive projects  
whose destinations are decided in advance, and who carefully adjust  
their manner to reflect their position in the hierarchy.That's also a fairly accurate description of the past. So startup  
culture may not merely be different in the way you'd expect any  
subculture to be, but a leading indicator.Japanese Translation

# The Trouble with the Segway

July 2009The Segway hasn't delivered on its initial promise, to put it mildly.  
There are several reasons why, but one is that people don't want  
to be seen riding them. Someone riding a Segway looks like a dork.My friend Trevor Blackwell built   
his own Segway,   
which we called  
the Segwell. He also built a one-wheeled version,   
the Eunicycle,  
which looks exactly like a regular unicycle till you realize the  
rider isn't pedaling. He has ridden them both to downtown Mountain  
View to get coffee. When he rides the Eunicycle, people smile at  
him. But when he rides the Segwell, they shout abuse from their  
cars: "Too lazy to walk, ya fuckin homo?"Why do Segways provoke this reaction? The reason you look like a  
dork riding a Segway is that you look smug. You don't seem to  
be working hard enough.Someone riding a motorcycle isn't working any harder. But because  
he's sitting astride it, he seems to be making an effort. When  
you're riding a Segway you're just standing there. And someone who's  
being whisked along while seeming to do no work — someone in a sedan  
chair, for example — can't help but look smug.Try this thought experiment and it becomes clear: imagine something  
that worked like the Segway, but that you rode with one foot in  
front of the other, like a skateboard. That wouldn't seem nearly  
as uncool.So there may be a way to capture more of the market Segway hoped  
to reach: make a version that doesn't look so easy for the rider.  
It would also be helpful if the styling was in the tradition of  
skateboards or bicycles rather than medical devices.Curiously enough, what got Segway into this problem was that the  
company was itself a kind of Segway. It was too easy for them;  
they were too successful raising money. If they'd had to grow the  
company gradually, by iterating through several versions they sold  
to real users, they'd have learned pretty quickly that people looked  
stupid riding them. Instead they had enough to work in secret. They  
had focus groups aplenty, I'm sure, but they didn't have the people  
yelling insults out of cars. So they never realized they were  
zooming confidently down a blind alley.

# Ramen Profitable

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
July 2009Now that the term "ramen profitable" has become widespread, I ought  
to explain precisely what the idea entails.Ramen profitable means a startup makes just enough to pay the  
founders' living expenses. This is a different form of profitability  
than startups have traditionally aimed for. Traditional profitability  
means a big bet is finally paying off, whereas the main importance  
of ramen profitability is that it buys you time.  
[1]In the past, a startup would usually become profitable only  
after raising and spending quite a lot of money. A company making  
computer hardware might not become profitable for 5 years, during  
which they spent $50 million. But when they did  
they might have revenues of $50 million a year. This kind of  
profitability means the startup has succeeded.Ramen profitability is the other extreme: a startup that becomes  
profitable after 2 months, even though its revenues are only $3000  
a month, because the only employees are a couple 25 year old founders  
who can live on practically nothing. Revenues of $3000 a month do  
not mean the company has succeeded.  
But it does share something with the one  
that's profitable in the traditional way: they don't need to raise  
money to survive.Ramen profitability is an unfamiliar idea to most people because  
it only recently became feasible. It's still not feasible for a  
lot of startups; it would not be for most biotech startups, for  
example; but it is for many software startups because they're now  
so cheap. For many, the only real cost is the founders'  
living expenses.The main significance of this type of profitability is that you're  
no longer at the mercy of investors. If you're still losing money,  
then eventually you'll either have to raise more  
or shut down. Once you're  
ramen profitable this painful choice goes away.  
You can still raise money, but you don't have to do it now.\* \* \*The most obvious advantage of not needing money is that  
you can get better terms. If investors know you need money, they'll  
sometimes take advantage of you. Some may even deliberately  
stall, because they know that as you run out of money you'll become  
increasingly pliable.But there are also three less obvious advantages of ramen profitability.  
One is that it makes you more attractive to investors. If you're  
already profitable, on however small a scale, it shows that (a) you  
can get at least someone to pay you, (b) you're serious about  
building things people want, and (c) you're disciplined enough to  
keep expenses low.This is reassuring to investors, because you've addressed three of  
their biggest worries. It's common for them to fund companies that  
have smart founders and a big market, and yet still fail. When  
these companies fail, it's usually because (a) people wouldn't pay  
for what they made, e.g. because it was too hard to sell to them,  
or the market wasn't ready yet, (b) the founders solved the wrong  
problem, instead of paying attention to what users needed, or (c)  
the company spent too much and burned through their funding before  
they started to make money. If you're ramen profitable, you're  
already avoiding these mistakes.Another advantage of ramen profitability is that it's good for  
morale. A company  
tends to feel rather theoretical when you first start it. It's  
legally a company, but you feel like you're lying when you call it  
one. When people start to pay you significant amounts, the company  
starts to feel real. And your own living expenses are the milestone  
you feel most, because at that point the future flips state. Now  
survival is the default, instead of dying.A morale boost on that scale is very valuable in a startup, because  
the moral weight of running a startup is what makes it hard. Startups  
are still very rare. Why don't more people do it? The financial  
risk? Plenty of 25 year olds save nothing anyway. The long hours?  
Plenty of people work just as long hours in regular jobs. What keeps  
people from starting startups is the fear of having so much  
responsibility. And this is not an irrational fear: it really is  
hard to bear. Anything that takes some of that weight off you will   
greatly increase your chances of surviving.A startup that reaches ramen profitability may be more likely  
to succeed than not. Which is pretty exciting, considering the  
bimodal distribution of outcomes in startups: you either fail or  
make a lot of money.The fourth advantage of ramen profitability is the least obvious  
but may be the most important. If you don't need to raise money,  
you don't have to interrupt working on the company to do it.Raising money is terribly distracting.   
You're lucky if your  
productivity is a third of what it was before. And it can last for  
months.I didn't understand (or rather, remember) precisely why raising  
money was so distracting till earlier this year. I'd noticed that  
startups we funded would usually grind to a halt when they switched  
to raising money, but I didn't remember exactly why till YC raised  
money itself. We had a comparatively easy time of it; the first  
people I asked said yes; but it took months to work out the  
details, and during that time I got hardly any real work done. Why?  
Because I thought about it all the time.At any given time there tends to be one problem that's the most  
urgent for a startup. This is what you think about as you fall  
asleep at night and when you take a shower in the morning. And  
when you start raising money, that becomes the problem you think  
about. You only take one shower in the morning, and if you're  
thinking about investors during it, then you're not thinking about  
the product.Whereas if you can choose when you raise money, you can pick a time  
when you're not in the middle of something else, and you can probably  
also insist that the round close fast. You may even be able to  
avoid having the round occupy your thoughts, if you don't care  
whether it closes.\* \* \*Ramen profitable means no more than the definition implies. It  
does not, for example, imply that you're "bootstrapping" the  
startup—that you're never going to take money from investors.  
Empirically that doesn't seem to work very well. Few startups  
succeed without taking investment. Maybe as startups get cheaper  
it will become more common. On the other hand, the money is there,  
waiting to be invested. If startups need it less, they'll be able  
to get it on better terms, which will make them more inclined to  
take it. That will tend to produce an equilibrium.  
[2]Another thing ramen profitability doesn't imply is Joe Kraus's idea  
that you should put your   
business model in beta when you put your  
product in beta. He believes you should get  
people to pay you from the beginning. I think that's too constraining.  
Facebook didn't, and they've done better than most startups. Making  
money right away was not only unnecessary for them, but probably  
would have been harmful. I do think Joe's rule could be useful for  
many startups, though. When founders seem unfocused, I sometimes  
suggest they try to get customers to pay them for something, in the  
hope that this constraint will prod them into action.The difference between Joe's idea and ramen profitability is that  
a ramen profitable company doesn't have to be making money the way  
it ultimately will. It just has to be making money. The most  
famous example is Google, which initially made money by licensing  
search to sites like Yahoo.Is there a downside to ramen profitability? Probably the biggest  
danger is that it might turn you into a consulting firm. Startups  
have to be product companies, in the sense of making a single thing  
that everyone uses. The defining quality of startups is that they  
grow fast, and consulting just can't scale the way a product can.  
[3]  
But it's pretty easy to make $3000 a month consulting; in  
fact, that would be a low rate for contract programming. So there  
could be a temptation to slide into consulting, and telling  
yourselves you're a ramen profitable startup, when in fact  
you're not a startup at all.It's ok to do a little consulting-type work at first. Startups  
usually have to do something weird at first. But remember  
that ramen profitability is not the destination. A startup's  
destination is to grow really big; ramen profitability is a trick  
for not dying en route.Notes[1]  
The "ramen" in "ramen profitable" refers to instant ramen,  
which is just about the cheapest food available.Please do not take the term literally. Living on instant ramen  
would be very unhealthy. Rice and beans are a better source of  
food. Start by investing in a rice cooker, if you don't have one.Rice and Beans for 2n  
  
 olive oil or butter  
 n yellow onions  
 other fresh vegetables; experiment  
 3n cloves garlic  
 n 12-oz cans white, kidney, or black beans  
 n cubes Knorr beef or vegetable bouillon  
 n teaspoons freshly ground black pepper  
 3n teaspoons ground cumin  
 n cups dry rice, preferably brown  
  
Put rice in rice cooker. Add water as specified on rice package.  
(Default: 2 cups water per cup of rice.) Turn on rice cooker and  
forget about it.Chop onions and other vegetables and fry in oil, over fairly low  
heat, till onions are glassy. Put in chopped garlic, pepper, cumin,  
and a little more fat, and stir. Keep heat low. Cook another 2 or  
3 minutes, then add beans (don't drain the beans), and stir. Throw  
in the bouillon cube(s), cover, and cook on lowish heat for at least  
10 minutes more. Stir vigilantly to avoid sticking.If you want to save money, buy beans in giant cans from discount  
stores. Spices are also much cheaper when bought in bulk.  
If there's an Indian grocery store near you, they'll have big   
bags of cumin for the same price as the little jars in supermarkets.[2]  
There's a good chance that a shift in power from investors  
to founders would actually increase the size of the venture business.  
I think investors currently err too far on the side of being harsh  
to founders. If they were forced to stop, the whole venture business  
would work better, and you might see something like the increase  
in trade you always see when restrictive laws are removed.Investors  
are one of the biggest sources of pain for founders; if they stopped  
causing so much pain, it would be better to be a founder; and if  
it were better to be a founder, more people would do it.[3]  
It's conceivable that a startup could grow big by transforming  
consulting into a form that would scale. But if they did that  
they'd really be a product company.Thanks to Jessica Livingston for reading drafts of this.Japanese Translation

# Maker's Schedule, Manager's Schedule

"...the mere consciousness of an engagement will sometimes worry a whole day." Charles Dickens  
  
  
  
  
July 2009One reason programmers dislike meetings so much is that they're on  
a different type of schedule from other people. Meetings cost them  
more.There are two types of schedule, which I'll call the manager's  
schedule and the maker's schedule. The manager's schedule is for  
bosses. It's embodied in the traditional appointment book, with  
each day cut into one hour intervals. You can block off several  
hours for a single task if you need to, but by default you change  
what you're doing every hour.When you use time that way, it's merely a practical problem to meet  
with someone. Find an open slot in your schedule, book them, and  
you're done.Most powerful people are on the manager's schedule. It's the  
schedule of command. But there's another way of using time that's  
common among people who make things, like programmers and writers.  
They generally prefer to use time in units of half a day at least.  
You can't write or program well in units of an hour. That's barely  
enough time to get started.When you're operating on the maker's schedule, meetings are a  
disaster. A single meeting can blow a whole afternoon, by breaking  
it into two pieces each too small to do anything hard in. Plus you  
have to remember to go to the meeting. That's no problem for someone  
on the manager's schedule. There's always something coming on the  
next hour; the only question is what. But when someone on the  
maker's schedule has a meeting, they have to think about it.For someone on the maker's schedule, having a meeting is like  
throwing an exception. It doesn't merely cause you to switch from  
one task to another; it changes the mode in which you work.I find one meeting can sometimes affect a whole day. A meeting  
commonly blows at least half a day, by breaking up a morning or  
afternoon. But in addition there's sometimes a cascading effect.  
If I know the afternoon is going to be broken up, I'm slightly less  
likely to start something ambitious in the morning. I know this  
may sound oversensitive, but if you're a maker, think of your own  
case. Don't your spirits rise at the thought of having an entire  
day free to work, with no appointments at all? Well, that means  
your spirits are correspondingly depressed when you don't. And  
ambitious projects are by definition close to the limits of your  
capacity. A small decrease in morale is enough to kill them off.Each type of schedule works fine by itself. Problems arise when  
they meet. Since most powerful people operate on the manager's  
schedule, they're in a position to make everyone resonate at their  
frequency if they want to. But the smarter ones restrain themselves,  
if they know that some of the people working for them need long  
chunks of time to work in.Our case is an unusual one. Nearly all investors, including all  
VCs I know, operate on the manager's schedule. But   
Y Combinator  
runs on the maker's schedule. Rtm and Trevor and I do because we  
always have, and Jessica does too, mostly, because she's gotten  
into sync with us.I wouldn't be surprised if there start to be more companies like  
us. I suspect founders may increasingly be able to resist, or at  
least postpone, turning into managers, just as a few decades ago  
they started to be able to resist switching from jeans  
to suits.How do we manage to advise so many startups on the maker's schedule?  
By using the classic device for simulating the manager's schedule  
within the maker's: office hours. Several times a week I set aside  
a chunk of time to meet founders we've funded. These chunks of  
time are at the end of my working day, and I wrote a signup program  
that ensures all the appointments within a given set of office hours  
are clustered at the end. Because they come at the end of my day  
these meetings are never an interruption. (Unless their working  
day ends at the same time as mine, the meeting presumably interrupts  
theirs, but since they made the appointment it must be worth it to  
them.) During busy periods, office hours sometimes get long enough  
that they compress the day, but they never interrupt it.  
When we were working on our own startup, back in the 90s, I evolved  
another trick for partitioning the day. I used to program from  
dinner till about 3 am every day, because at night no one could  
interrupt me. Then I'd sleep till about 11 am, and come in and  
work until dinner on what I called "business stuff." I never thought  
of it in these terms, but in effect I had two workdays each day,  
one on the manager's schedule and one on the maker's.When you're operating on the manager's schedule you can do something  
you'd never want to do on the maker's: you can have speculative  
meetings. You can meet someone just to get to know one another.  
If you have an empty slot in your schedule, why not? Maybe it will  
turn out you can help one another in some way.Business people in Silicon Valley (and the whole world, for that  
matter) have speculative meetings all the time. They're effectively  
free if you're on the manager's schedule. They're so common that  
there's distinctive language for proposing them: saying that you  
want to "grab coffee," for example.Speculative meetings are terribly costly if you're on the maker's  
schedule, though. Which puts us in something of a bind. Everyone  
assumes that, like other investors, we run on the manager's schedule.  
So they introduce us to someone they think we ought to meet, or  
send us an email proposing we grab coffee. At this point we have  
two options, neither of them good: we can meet with them, and lose  
half a day's work; or we can try to avoid meeting them, and probably  
offend them.Till recently we weren't clear in our own minds about the source  
of the problem. We just took it for granted that we had to either  
blow our schedules or offend people. But now that I've realized  
what's going on, perhaps there's a third option: to write something  
explaining the two types of schedule. Maybe eventually, if the  
conflict between the manager's schedule and the maker's schedule  
starts to be more widely understood, it will become less of a  
problem.Those of us on the maker's schedule are willing to compromise. We  
know we have to have some number of meetings. All we ask from those  
on the manager's schedule is that they understand the cost.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit, Jessica Livingston,  
and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.Related:How to Do What You LoveGood and Bad ProcrastinationTurkish TranslationFrench TranslationKorean TranslationGerman Translation

# A Local Revolution?

April 2009Recently I realized I'd been holding two ideas in my head that would explode if combined.The first is that startups may represent a new economic phase, on the scale of the Industrial Revolution. I'm not sure of this, but there seems a decent chance it's true. People are dramatically more   
productive as founders or early employees of startups—imagine how much less Larry and Sergey would have achieved if they'd gone to work for a big company—and that scale of improvement can change social customs.The second idea is that startups are a type of business that flourishes in certain places that specialize in it—that Silicon Valley specializes in startups in the same way Los Angeles specializes in movies, or New York in finance. [1]What if both are true? What if startups are both a new economic phase and also a type of business that only flourishes in certain centers?If so, this revolution is going to be particularly revolutionary. All previous revolutions have spread. Agriculture, cities, and industrialization all spread widely. If startups end up being like the movie business, with just a handful of centers and one dominant one, that's going to have novel consequences.There are already signs that startups may not spread particularly well. The spread of startups seems to be proceeding slower than the spread of the Industrial Revolution, despite the fact that communication is so much faster now.Within a few decades of the founding of Boulton & Watt there were steam engines scattered over northern Europe and North America. Industrialization didn't spread much beyond those regions for a while. It only spread to places where there was a strong middle class—countries where a private citizen could make a fortune without having it confiscated. Otherwise it wasn't worth investing in factories. But in a country with a strong middle class it was easy for industrial techniques to take root. An individual mine or factory owner could decide to install a steam engine, and within a few years he could probably find someone local to make him one. So steam engines spread fast. And they spread widely, because the locations of mines and factories were determined by features like rivers, harbors, and sources of raw materials.   
 [2]Startups don't seem to spread so well, partly because they're more a social than a technical phenomenon, and partly because they're not tied to geography. An individual European manufacturer could import industrial techniques and they'd work fine. This doesn't seem to work so well with startups: you need a community of expertise, as you do in the movie business. [3]  
 Plus there aren't the same forces driving startups to spread. Once railroads or electric power grids were invented, every region had to have them. An area without railroads or power was a rich potential market. But this isn't true with startups. There's no need for a Microsoft of France or Google of Germany.Governments may decide they want to encourage startups locally, but government policy can't call them into being the way a genuine need could.How will this all play out? If I had to predict now, I'd say that startups will spread, but very slowly, because their spread will be driven not by government policies (which won't work) or by market need (which doesn't exist) but, to the extent that it happens at all, by the same random factors that have caused startup culture to spread thus far. And such random factors will increasingly be outweighed by the pull of existing startup hubs.Silicon Valley is where it is because William Shockley wanted to move back to Palo Alto, where he grew up, and the experts he lured west to work with him liked it so much they stayed. Seattle owes much of its position as a tech center to the same cause: Gates and Allen wanted to move home. Otherwise Albuquerque might have Seattle's place in the rankings. Boston is a tech center because it's the intellectual capital of the US and probably the world. And if Battery Ventures hadn't turned down Facebook, Boston would be significantly bigger now on the startup radar screen.But of course it's not a coincidence that Facebook got funded in the Valley and not Boston. There are more and bolder investors in Silicon Valley than in Boston, and even undergrads know it.Boston's case illustrates the difficulty you'd have establishing a new startup hub this late in the game. If you wanted to create a startup hub by reproducing the way existing ones happened, the   
way to do it would be to establish a first-rate research university in a place so nice that rich people wanted to live there. Then the town would be hospitable to both groups you need: both founders and investors. That's the combination that yielded Silicon Valley. But Silicon Valley didn't have Silicon Valley to compete with. If you tried now to create a startup hub by planting a great university in a nice place, it would have a harder time getting started, because many of the best startups it produced would be sucked away to existing startup hubs.Recently I suggested a potential shortcut:   
pay startups to move. Once you had enough good startups in one place, it would create a self-sustaining chain reaction. Founders would start to move there without being paid, because that was where their peers were, and investors would appear too, because that was where the deals were.In practice I doubt any government would have the balls to try this, or the brains to do it right. I didn't mean it as a practical suggestion, but more as an exploration of the lower bound of what it would take to create a startup hub deliberately.The most likely scenario is (1) that no government will successfully establish a startup hub, and (2) that the spread of startup culture will thus be driven by the random factors that have driven it so far, but (3) that these factors will be increasingly outweighed by the pull of existing startup hubs. Result: this revolution, if it is one, will be unusually localized.  
Notes[1]  
There are two very different types of startup: one kind that evolves naturally, and one kind that's called into being to "commercialize" a scientific discovery. Most computer/software startups are now the first type, and most pharmaceutical startups the second. When I talk about startups in this essay, I mean type I startups. There is no difficulty making type II startups spread: all you have to do is fund medical research labs; commercializing whatever new discoveries the boffins throw off is as straightforward as building a new airport. Type II startups neither require nor produce startup culture. But that means having type II startups won't get you type I startups. Philadelphia is a case in point: lots of type II startups, but hardly any type I.Incidentally, Google may appear to be an instance of a type II startup, but it wasn't. Google is not pagerank commercialized. They could have used another algorithm and everything would have turned out the same. What made Google Google is that they cared about doing search well at a critical point in the evolution of the web.[2]  
 Watt didn't invent the steam engine. His critical invention was a refinement that made steam engines dramatically more efficient: the separate condenser. But that oversimplifies his role. He had such a different attitude to the problem and approached it with such energy that he transformed the field. Perhaps the most accurate way to put it would be to say that Watt reinvented the steam engine.[3]  
The biggest counterexample here is Skype. If you're doing  
something that would get shut down in the US, it becomes an   
advantage to be located elsewhere. That's why Kazaa took  
the place of Napster. And the expertise and connections the   
founders gained from running Kazaa helped ensure the success  
of Skype.Thanks to Patrick Collison, Jessica Livingston, and Fred Wilson for reading drafts of this.

# Why Twitter is a Big Deal

April 2009Om Malik is the most recent of many people  
to ask why Twitter is such a big deal.The reason is that it's a new messaging   
protocol, where you don't specify the recipients.  
New protocols are rare. Or more precisely, new  
protocols that take off are.  
There are only a handful of commonly used ones: TCP/IP   
(the Internet), SMTP (email), HTTP (the web), and so on. So any  
new protocol is a big deal. But Twitter is a protocol owned  
by a private company. That's even rarer.Curiously, the fact that the founders of Twitter   
have been slow to monetize it may in the long run  
prove to be an advantage. Because they haven't tried  
to control it too much, Twitter feels to everyone like  
previous protocols. One forgets it's owned by a  
private company. That must have made it easier for  
Twitter to spread.

# The Founder Visa

April 2009I usually avoid politics, but since we now seem to have an administration that's open to suggestions, I'm going to risk making one. The single biggest thing the government could do to increase the number of startups in this country is a policy that would cost nothing: establish a new class of visa for startup founders.The biggest constraint on the number of new startups that get created in the US is not tax policy or employment law or even Sarbanes-Oxley. It's that we won't let the people who want to start them into the country.Letting just 10,000 startup founders into the country each year could have a visible effect on the economy. If we assume 4 people per startup, which is probably an overestimate, that's 2500 new companies. Each year. They wouldn't all grow as big as Google, but out of 2500 some would come close.By definition these 10,000 founders wouldn't be taking jobs from Americans: it could be part of the terms of the visa that they couldn't work for existing companies, only new ones they'd founded. In fact they'd cause there to be   
more jobs for Americans, because the companies they started would hire more employees as they grew.The tricky part might seem to be how one defined a startup. But that could be solved quite easily: let the market decide. Startup investors work hard to find the best startups. The government could not do better than to piggyback on their expertise, and use investment by recognized startup investors as the test of whether a company was a real startup.How would the government decide who's a startup investor? The same way they decide what counts as a university for student visas. We'll establish our own accreditation procedure. We know who one another are.10,000 people is a drop in the bucket by immigration standards, but would represent a huge increase in the pool of startup founders. I think this would have such a visible effect on the economy that it would make the legislator who introduced the bill famous. The only way to know for sure would be to try it, and that would cost practically nothing.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit, Jeff Clavier, David Hornik, Jessica Livingston, Greg Mcadoo, Aydin Senkut, and Fred Wilson for reading drafts of this.Related:The United States of Entrepreneurs About Half of VC-Backed Company Founders are Immigrants

# Five Founders

April 2009Inc recently asked me who I thought were the 5 most  
interesting startup founders of the last 30 years. How do  
you decide who's the most interesting? The best test seemed  
to be influence: who are the 5  
who've influenced me most? Who do I use as examples when I'm  
talking to companies we fund? Who do I find myself quoting?1. Steve JobsI'd guess Steve is the most influential founder not just for me but  
for most people you could ask. A lot of startup culture is Apple  
culture. He was the original young founder. And while the concept  
of "insanely great" already existed in the arts, it was a novel  
idea to introduce into a company in the 1980s.More remarkable still, he's stayed interesting for 30 years. People  
await new Apple products the way they'd await new books by a popular  
novelist. Steve may not literally design them, but they wouldn't  
happen if he weren't CEO.Steve is clever and driven, but so are a lot of people in the Valley.  
What makes him unique is his   
sense of   
design. Before him, most  
companies treated design as a frivolous extra. Apple's competitors  
now know better.2. TJ RodgersTJ Rodgers isn't as famous as Steve Jobs, but he may be the best  
writer among Silicon Valley CEOs. I've probably learned more from  
him about the startup way of thinking than from anyone else. Not  
so much from specific things he's written as by reconstructing the  
mind that produced them: brutally candid; aggressively garbage-collecting  
outdated ideas; and yet driven by pragmatism rather than ideology.The first essay of his that I read was so electrifying that I  
remember exactly where I was at the time. It was   
High  
Technology Innovation: Free Markets or Government Subsidies? and  
I was downstairs in the Harvard Square T Station. It felt as if  
someone had flipped on a light switch inside my head.3. Larry & SergeyI'm sorry to treat Larry and Sergey as one person. I've always  
thought that was unfair to them. But it does seem as if Google was a  
collaboration.Before Google, companies in Silicon Valley already knew it was  
important to have the best hackers. So they claimed, at least.  
But Google pushed this idea further than anyone had before. Their  
hypothesis seems to have been that, in the initial stages at least,  
all you need is good hackers: if you hire all the smartest people  
and put them to work on a problem where their success can be measured,  
you win. All the other stuff—which includes all the stuff that  
business schools think business consists of—you can figure out  
along the way. The results won't be perfect, but they'll be optimal.  
If this was their hypothesis, it's now been verified experimentally.4. Paul BuchheitFew know this, but one person, Paul Buchheit, is responsible for  
three of the best things Google has done. He was the original  
author of GMail, which is the most impressive thing Google has after  
search. He also wrote the first prototype of AdSense, and was the  
author of Google's mantra "Don't be evil."PB made a point in a talk once that I now mention to every startup  
we fund: that it's better, initially, to make a small number of  
users really love you than a large number kind of like you. If I  
could tell startups only   
ten sentences,   
this would be one of them.Now he's cofounder of a startup called Friendfeed. It's only a  
year old, but already everyone in the Valley is watching them.  
Someone responsible for three of the biggest ideas at Google is  
going to come up with more.5. Sam AltmanI was told I shouldn't mention founders of YC-funded companies in  
this list. But Sam Altman can't be stopped by such flimsy rules.  
If he wants to be on this list, he's going to be.Honestly, Sam is, along with Steve Jobs, the founder I refer to  
most when I'm advising startups. On questions of design, I ask  
"What would Steve do?" but on questions of strategy or ambition I  
ask "What would Sama do?"What I learned from meeting Sama is that the doctrine of the elect  
applies to startups. It applies way less than most people think:  
startup investing does not consist of trying to pick winners the  
way you might in a horse race. But there are a few people with  
such force of will that they're going to get whatever they want.

# Relentlessly Resourceful

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
March 2009A couple days ago I finally got being a good startup founder down  
to two words: relentlessly resourceful.Till then the best I'd managed was to get the opposite quality down  
to one: hapless. Most dictionaries say hapless means unlucky. But  
the dictionaries are not doing a very good job. A team that outplays  
its opponents but loses because of a bad decision by the referee  
could be called unlucky, but not hapless. Hapless implies passivity.  
To be hapless is to be battered by circumstances—to let the world  
have its way with you, instead of having your way with the world.  
  
[1]Unfortunately there's no antonym of hapless, which makes it difficult  
to tell founders what to aim for. "Don't be hapless" is not much  
of rallying cry.It's not hard to express the quality we're looking for in metaphors.  
The best is probably a running back. A good running back is not  
merely determined, but flexible as well. They want to get downfield,  
but they adapt their plans on the fly.Unfortunately this is just a metaphor, and not a useful one to most  
people outside the US. "Be like a running back" is no better than  
"Don't be hapless."But finally I've figured out how to express this quality directly.  
I was writing a talk for   
investors, and I had to explain what to  
look for in founders. What would someone who was the opposite of  
hapless be like? They'd be relentlessly resourceful. Not merely  
relentless. That's not enough to make things go your way except  
in a few mostly uninteresting domains. In any interesting domain,  
the difficulties will be novel. Which means you can't simply plow  
through them, because you don't know initially how hard they are;  
you don't know whether you're about to plow through a block of foam  
or granite. So you have to be resourceful. You have to keep  
trying new things.Be relentlessly resourceful.That sounds right, but is it simply a description  
of how to be successful in general? I don't think so. This isn't  
the recipe for success in writing or painting, for example. In  
that kind of work the recipe is more to be actively curious.  
Resourceful implies the obstacles are external, which they generally  
are in startups. But in writing and painting they're mostly internal;  
the obstacle is your own obtuseness.  
[2]There probably are other fields where "relentlessly resourceful"  
is the recipe for success. But though other fields may share it,  
I think this is the best short description we'll find of what makes  
a good startup founder. I doubt it could be made more precise.Now that we know what we're looking for, that leads to other  
questions. For example, can this quality be taught? After four  
years of trying to teach it to people, I'd say that yes, surprisingly  
often it can. Not to everyone, but to many people.   
[3]  
Some  
people are just constitutionally passive, but others have a latent  
ability to be relentlessly resourceful that only needs to be brought  
out.This is particularly true of young people who have till now always  
been under the thumb of some kind of authority. Being relentlessly  
resourceful is definitely not the recipe for success in big companies,  
or in most schools. I don't even want to think what the recipe is  
in big companies, but it is certainly longer and messier, involving  
some combination of resourcefulness, obedience, and building  
alliances.Identifying this quality also brings us closer to answering a  
question people often wonder about: how many startups there could  
be. There is not, as some people seem to think, any economic upper  
bound on this number. There's no reason to believe there is any  
limit on the amount of newly created wealth consumers can absorb,  
any more than there is a limit on the number of theorems that can  
be proven. So probably the limiting factor on the number of startups  
is the pool of potential founders. Some people would make good  
founders, and others wouldn't. And now that we can say what makes  
a good founder, we know how to put an upper bound on the size of  
the pool.This test is also useful to individuals. If you want to know whether  
you're the right sort of person to start a startup, ask yourself  
whether you're relentlessly resourceful. And if you want to know  
whether to recruit someone as a cofounder, ask if they are.You can even use it tactically. If I were running a startup, this  
would be the phrase I'd tape to the mirror. "Make something people  
want" is the destination, but "Be relentlessly resourceful" is how  
you get there.  
Notes[1]  
I think the reason the dictionaries are wrong is that the  
meaning of the word has shifted. No one writing a dictionary from  
scratch today would say that hapless meant unlucky. But a couple  
hundred years ago they might have. People were more at the mercy  
of circumstances in the past, and as a result a lot of the words  
we use for good and bad outcomes have origins in words about luck.When I was living in Italy, I was once trying to tell someone  
that I hadn't had much success in doing something, but I couldn't  
think of the Italian word for success. I spent some time trying  
to describe the word I meant. Finally she said "Ah! Fortuna!"[2]  
There are aspects of startups where the recipe is to be  
actively curious. There can be times when what you're doing is  
almost pure discovery. Unfortunately these times are a small  
proportion of the whole. On the other hand, they are in research  
too.[3]  
I'd almost say to most people, but I realize (a) I have no  
idea what most people are like, and (b) I'm pathologically optimistic  
about people's ability to change.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell and Jessica Livingston for reading drafts  
of this.

# How to Be an Angel Investor

March 2009(This essay is derived from a talk at AngelConf.)When we sold our startup in 1998 I thought one day I'd do some angel  
investing. Seven years later I still hadn't started. I put it off  
because it seemed mysterious and complicated. It turns out to be   
easier than I expected, and also more interesting.The part I thought was hard, the mechanics of investing, really  
isn't. You give a startup money and they give you stock. You'll  
probably get either preferred stock, which means stock with extra  
rights like getting your money back first in a sale, or convertible  
debt, which means (on paper) you're lending the company money, and  
the debt converts to stock at the next sufficiently big funding  
round.   
[1]There are sometimes minor tactical advantages to using one or the  
other. The paperwork for convertible debt is simpler. But really  
it doesn't matter much which you use. Don't spend much time worrying  
about the details of deal terms, especially when you first start  
angel investing. That's not how you win at this game. When you  
hear people talking about a successful angel investor, they're not  
saying "He got a 4x liquidation preference." They're saying "He  
invested in Google."That's how you win: by investing in the right startups. That is  
so much more important than anything else that I worry I'm misleading  
you by even talking about other things.MechanicsAngel investors often syndicate deals, which means they join together  
to invest on the same terms. In a syndicate there is usually a  
"lead" investor who negotiates the terms with the startup. But not  
always: sometimes the startup cobbles together a syndicate of  
investors who approach them independently, and the startup's lawyer  
supplies the paperwork.The easiest way to get started in angel investing is to find a  
friend who already does it, and try to get included in his syndicates.  
Then all you have to do is write checks.Don't feel like you have to join a syndicate, though. It's not that  
hard to do it yourself. You can just use the standard   
series AA  
documents Wilson Sonsini and Y Combinator published online.  
You should of course have your lawyer review everything. Both you  
and the startup should have lawyers. But the lawyers don't have  
to create the agreement from scratch.   
[2]  
When you negotiate terms with a startup, there are two numbers you  
care about: how much money you're putting in, and the valuation of  
the company. The valuation determines how much stock you get. If  
you put $50,000 into a company at a pre-money valuation of $1  
million, then the post-money valuation is $1.05 million, and you  
get .05/1.05, or 4.76% of the company's stock.If the company raises more money later, the new investor will take  
a chunk of the company away from all the existing shareholders just  
as you did. If in the next round they sell 10% of the company to  
a new investor, your 4.76% will be reduced to 4.28%.That's ok. Dilution is normal. What saves you from being mistreated  
in future rounds, usually, is that you're in the same boat as the  
founders. They can't dilute you without diluting themselves just  
as much. And they won't dilute themselves unless they end up   
net ahead. So in theory, each further   
round of investment leaves you  
with a smaller share of an even more valuable company, till after  
several more rounds you end up with .5% of the company at the point  
where it IPOs, and you are very happy because your $50,000 has  
become $5 million.   
[3]The agreement by which you invest should have provisions that   
let you contribute to  
future rounds to maintain your percentage. So it's your choice  
whether you get diluted.   
[4]  
If the company does really well,  
you eventually will, because eventually the valuations will get so  
high it's not worth it for you.How much does an angel invest? That varies enormously, from $10,000  
to hundreds of thousands or in rare cases even millions. The upper  
bound is obviously the total amount the founders want to raise.  
The lower bound is 5-10% of the total or $10,000, whichever  
is greater. A typical angel round these days might be $150,000  
raised from 5 people.Valuations don't vary as much. For angel rounds it's rare to see  
a valuation lower than half a million or higher than 4 or 5 million.  
4 million is starting to be VC territory.How do you decide what valuation to offer? If you're part of a  
round led by someone else, that problem is solved for you. But  
what if you're investing by yourself? There's no real answer.  
There is no rational way to value an early stage startup. The  
valuation reflects nothing more than the strength of the company's  
bargaining position. If they really want you, either because they  
desperately need money, or you're someone who can help them a lot,  
they'll let you invest at a low valuation. If they don't need you,  
it will be higher. So guess. The startup may not have any more  
idea what the number should be than you do.   
[5]Ultimately it doesn't matter much. When angels make a lot of money  
from a deal, it's not because they invested at a valuation of $1.5  
million instead of $3 million. It's because the company was really  
successful.I can't emphasize that too much. Don't get hung up on mechanics  
or deal terms. What you should spend your time thinking about is  
whether the company is good.(Similarly, founders also should not get hung up on deal  
terms, but should spend their time thinking about how to make the  
company good.)There's a second less obvious component of an angel investment: how  
much you're expected to help the startup. Like the amount you  
invest, this can vary a lot. You don't have to do anything if you  
don't want to; you could simply be a source of money. Or you can  
become a de facto employee of the company. Just make sure that you  
and the startup agree in advance about roughly how much you'll do  
for them.Really hot companies sometimes have high standards for angels. The  
ones everyone wants to invest in practically audition investors,  
and only take money from people who are famous and/or will work  
hard for them. But don't feel like you have to put in a lot of  
time or you won't get to invest in any good startups. There is a  
surprising lack of correlation between how hot a deal a startup is  
and how well it ends up doing. Lots of hot startups will end up  
failing, and lots of startups no one likes will end up succeeding.  
And the latter are so desperate for money that they'll take it from  
anyone at a low valuation.   
[6]Picking WinnersIt would be nice to be able to pick those out, wouldn't it? The  
part of angel investing that has most effect on your returns, picking  
the right companies, is also the hardest. So you should practically  
ignore (or more precisely, archive, in the Gmail sense) everything  
I've told you so far. You may need to refer to it at some point,  
but it is not the central issue.The central issue is picking the right startups. What "Make something  
people want" is for startups, "Pick the right startups" is for  
investors. Combined they yield "Pick the startups that will make  
something people want."How do you do that? It's not as simple as picking startups that  
are already making something wildly popular. By then it's  
too late for angels. VCs will already be onto them. As an angel,  
you have to pick startups before they've got a hit—either  
because they've made something great but users don't realize it  
yet, like Google early on, or because they're still an iteration  
or two away from the big hit, like Paypal when they were making  
software for transferring money between PDAs.To be a good angel investor, you have to be a good judge of potential.  
That's what it comes down to. VCs can be fast followers. Most of  
them don't try to predict what will win. They just try to notice  
quickly when something already is winning. But angels have to be  
able to predict.   
[7]One interesting consequence of this fact is that there are a lot  
of people out there who have never even made an angel investment  
and yet are already better angel investors than they realize.  
Someone who doesn't know the first thing about the mechanics of  
venture funding but knows what a successful startup founder looks  
like is actually far ahead of someone who knows termsheets inside  
out, but thinks   
"hacker" means someone who breaks into computers.  
If you can recognize good startup founders by empathizing with  
them—if you both resonate at the same frequency—then  
you may already be a better startup picker than the median professional  
VC.   
[8]Paul Buchheit, for example, started angel investing about a year  
after me, and he was pretty much immediately as good as me at picking  
startups. My extra year of experience was rounding error compared  
to our ability to empathize with founders.What makes a good founder? If there were a word that meant the  
opposite of hapless, that would be the one. Bad founders seem  
hapless. They may be smart, or not, but somehow events overwhelm  
them and they get discouraged and give up. Good founders make  
things happen the way they want. Which is not to say they force  
things to happen in a predefined way. Good founders have a healthy  
respect for reality. But they are relentlessly resourceful. That's  
the closest I can get to the opposite of hapless. You want to fund  
people who are relentlessly resourceful.Notice we started out talking about things, and now we're talking  
about people. There is an ongoing debate between investors which  
is more important, the people, or the idea—or more precisely,  
the market. Some, like Ron Conway, say it's the people—that  
the idea will change, but the people are the foundation of the  
company. Whereas Marc Andreessen says he'd back ok founders in a  
hot market over great founders in a bad one.   
[9]These two positions are not so far apart as they seem, because good  
people find good markets. Bill Gates would probably have ended up  
pretty rich even if IBM hadn't happened to drop the PC standard in  
his lap.I've thought a lot about the disagreement between the investors who  
prefer to bet on people and those who prefer to bet on markets.  
It's kind of surprising that it even exists. You'd expect opinions  
to have converged more.But I think I've figured out what's going on. The three most  
prominent people I know who favor markets are Marc, Jawed Karim,  
and Joe Kraus. And all three of them, in their own startups,  
basically flew into a thermal: they hit a market growing so fast  
that it was all they could do to keep up with it. That kind of  
experience is hard to ignore. Plus I think they underestimate  
themselves: they think back to how easy it felt to ride that huge  
thermal upward, and they think "anyone could have done it." But  
that isn't true; they are not ordinary people.So as an angel investor I think you want to go with Ron Conway and  
bet on people. Thermals happen, yes, but no one can predict  
them—not even the founders, and certainly not you as an  
investor. And only good people can ride the thermals if they hit  
them anyway.Deal FlowOf course the question of how to choose startups presumes you  
have startups to choose between. How do you find them? This is  
yet another problem that gets solved for you by syndicates. If you  
tag along on a friend's investments, you don't have to find startups.The problem is not finding startups, exactly, but finding a stream  
of reasonably high quality ones. The traditional way to do this  
is through contacts. If you're friends with a lot of investors and  
founders, they'll send deals your way. The Valley basically runs  
on referrals. And once you start to become known as reliable,  
useful investor, people will refer lots of deals to you. I certainly  
will.There's also a newer way to find startups, which is to come to  
events like Y Combinator's Demo Day, where a batch of newly created  
startups presents to investors all at once. We have two Demo Days  
a year, one in March and one in August. These are basically mass  
referrals.But events like Demo Day only account for a fraction of matches  
between startups and investors. The personal referral is still the  
most common route. So if you want to hear about new startups, the  
best way to do it is to get lots of referrals.The best way to get lots of referrals is to invest in startups. No  
matter how smart and nice you seem, insiders will be reluctant to  
send you referrals until you've proven yourself by doing a couple  
investments. Some smart, nice guys turn out to be flaky,  
high-maintenance investors. But once you prove yourself as a good  
investor, the deal flow, as they call it, will increase rapidly in  
both quality and quantity. At the extreme, for someone like Ron  
Conway, it is basically identical with the deal flow of the whole  
Valley.So if you want to invest seriously, the way to get started is to  
bootstrap yourself off your existing connections, be a good investor  
in the startups you meet that way, and eventually you'll start a  
chain reaction. Good investors are rare, even in Silicon Valley.  
There probably aren't more than a couple hundred serious angels in the whole  
Valley, and yet they're probably the single most important ingredient  
in making the Valley what it is. Angels are the limiting reagent  
in startup formation.If there are only a couple hundred serious angels in the Valley,   
then by deciding to become one you could single-handedly make the pipeline  
for startups in Silicon Valley significantly wider. That is kind  
of mind-blowing.Being GoodHow do you be a good angel investor? The first thing you need is  
to be decisive. When we talk to founders about good and bad  
investors, one of the ways we describe the good ones is to say "he  
writes checks." That doesn't mean the investor says yes to everyone.  
Far from it. It means he makes up his mind quickly,  
and follows through. You may be thinking, how hard could that be?  
You'll see when you try it. It follows from the nature of angel  
investing that the decisions are hard. You have to guess early,  
at the stage when the most promising ideas still seem counterintuitive,  
because if they were obviously good, VCs would already have funded  
them.Suppose it's 1998. You come across a startup founded by a couple  
grad students. They say they're going to work on Internet search.  
There are already a bunch of big public companies doing search.  
How can these grad students possibly compete with them? And does  
search even matter anyway? All the search engines are trying to  
get people to start calling them "portals" instead. Why would you  
want to invest in a startup run by a couple of nobodies who are  
trying to compete with large, aggressive companies in an area they  
themselves have declared passe? And yet the grad students seem  
pretty smart. What do you do?There's a hack for being decisive when you're inexperienced: ratchet  
down the size of your investment till it's an amount you wouldn't  
care too much about losing. For every rich person (you probably  
shouldn't try angel investing unless you think of yourself as rich)  
there's some amount that would be painless, though annoying, to  
lose. Till you feel comfortable investing, don't invest more than  
that per startup.For example, if you have $5 million in investable assets, it would  
probably be painless (though annoying) to lose $15,000. That's  
less than .3% of your net worth. So start by making 3 or 4 $15,000  
investments. Nothing will teach you about angel investing like  
experience. Treat the first few as an educational expense. $60,000  
is less than a lot of graduate programs. Plus you get equity.What's really uncool is to be strategically indecisive: to string  
founders along while trying to gather more information about the  
startup's trajectory.   
[10]  
 There's always a temptation to do that,  
because you just have so little to go on, but you have to consciously  
resist it. In the long term it's to your advantage to be good.The other component of being a good angel investor is simply to be  
a good person. Angel investing is not a business where you make  
money by screwing people over. Startups create wealth, and  
creating wealth is not a zero sum game. No one has to lose for you  
to win. In fact, if you mistreat the founders you invest in, they'll  
just get demoralized and the company will do worse. Plus your  
referrals will dry up. So I recommend being good.The most successful angel investors I know are all basically good  
people. Once they invest in a company, all they want to do is help  
it. And they'll help people they haven't invested in too. When  
they do favors they don't seem to keep track of them. It's too  
much overhead. They just try to help everyone, and assume good  
things will flow back to them somehow. Empirically that seems to  
work.  
Notes[1]  
Convertible debt can be either capped at a particular valuation,  
or can be done at a discount to whatever the valuation turns out  
to be when it converts. E.g. convertible debt at a discount of 30%  
means when it converts you get stock as if you'd invested at a 30%  
lower valuation. That can be useful in cases where you can't or  
don't want to figure out what the valuation should be. You leave  
it to the next investor. On the other hand, a lot of investors  
want to know exactly what they're getting, so they will only do  
convertible debt with a cap.[2]  
The expensive part of creating an agreement from scratch is  
not writing the agreement, but bickering at several hundred  
dollars an hour over the details. That's why the series AA paperwork  
aims at a middle ground. You can just start from the compromise  
you'd have reached after lots of back and forth.When you fund a startup, both your lawyers should be specialists  
in startups. Do not use ordinary corporate lawyers for this. Their  
inexperience makes them overbuild: they'll create huge, overcomplicated  
agreements, and spend hours arguing over irrelevant things.In the Valley, the top startup law firms are Wilson Sonsini, Orrick,  
Fenwick & West, Gunderson Dettmer, and Cooley Godward. In Boston  
the best are Goodwin Procter, Wilmer Hale, and Foley Hoag.[3]  
Your mileage may vary.[4]  
These anti-dilution provisions also protect you against  
tricks like a later investor trying to steal the company by doing  
another round that values the company at $1. If you have a competent  
startup lawyer handle the deal for you, you should be protected  
against such tricks initially. But it could become a problem later.  
If a big VC firm wants to invest in the startup after you, they may  
try to make you take out your anti-dilution protections. And if  
they do the startup will be pressuring you to agree. They'll tell  
you that if you don't, you're going to kill their deal with the VC.  
I recommend you solve this problem by having a gentlemen's agreement  
with the founders: agree with them in advance that you're not going  
to give up your anti-dilution protections. Then it's up to them  
to tell VCs early on.The reason you don't want to give them up is the following scenario.  
The VCs recapitalize the company, meaning they give it additional  
funding at a pre-money valuation of zero. This wipes out the  
existing shareholders, including both you and the founders. They  
then grant the founders lots of options, because they need them to  
stay around, but you get nothing.Obviously this is not a nice thing to do. It doesn't happen often.  
Brand-name VCs wouldn't recapitalize a company just to steal a few  
percent from an angel. But there's a continuum here. A less  
upstanding, lower-tier VC might be tempted to do it to steal a big  
chunk of stock.I'm not saying you should always absolutely refuse to give up your  
anti-dilution protections. Everything is a negotiation. If you're  
part of a powerful syndicate, you might be able to give up legal  
protections and rely on social ones. If you invest in a deal led  
by a big angel like Ron Conway, for example, you're pretty well  
protected against being mistreated, because any VC would think twice  
before crossing him. This kind of protection is one of the reasons  
angels like to invest in syndicates.[5]  
Don't invest so much, or at such a low valuation, that you  
end up with an excessively large share of a startup, unless you're  
sure your money will be the last they ever need. Later stage  
investors won't invest in a company if the founders don't have  
enough equity left to motivate them. I talked to a VC recently who  
said he'd met with a company he really liked, but he turned  
them down because investors already owned more than half of it.  
Those investors probably thought they'd been pretty clever by getting  
such a large chunk of this desirable company, but in fact they were  
shooting themselves in the foot.[6]  
At any given time I know of at least 3 or 4 YC alumni who I  
believe will be big successes but who are running on vapor,  
financially, because investors don't yet get what they're doing.  
(And no, unfortunately, I can't tell you who they are. I can't  
refer a startup to an investor I don't know.)[7]  
There are some VCs who can predict instead of reacting. Not  
surprisingly, these are the most successful ones.[8]  
It's somewhat sneaky of me to put it this way, because the  
median VC loses money. That's one of the most surprising things  
I've learned about VC while working on Y Combinator. Only a fraction  
of VCs even have positive returns. The rest exist to satisfy demand  
among fund managers for venture capital as an asset class. Learning  
this explained a lot about some of the VCs I encountered when we  
were working on Viaweb.[9]  
VCs also generally say they prefer great markets to great  
people. But what they're really saying is they want both. They're  
so selective that they only even consider great people. So when  
they say they care above all about big markets, they mean that's  
how they choose between great people.[10]  
Founders rightly dislike the sort of investor who says he's  
interested in investing but doesn't want to lead. There are  
circumstances where this is an acceptable excuse, but more often  
than not what it means is "No, but if you turn out to be a hot deal,  
I want to be able to claim retroactively I said yes."If you like a startup enough to invest in it, then invest in it.  
Just use the standard series   
AA terms and write them a check.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Jessica Livingston,  
Robert Morris, and Fred Wilson for reading drafts of this.  
Comment on this essay.

# Why TV Lost

March 2009About twenty years ago people noticed computers and TV were on a  
collision course and started to speculate about what they'd produce  
when they converged. We now know the answer: computers. It's clear  
now that even by using the word "convergence" we were giving TV too  
much credit. This won't be convergence so much as replacement.  
People may still watch things they call "TV shows," but they'll  
watch them mostly on computers.What decided the contest for computers? Four forces, three of which  
one could have predicted, and one that would have been harder to.One predictable cause of victory is that the Internet is an open  
platform. Anyone can build whatever they want on it, and the market  
picks the winners. So innovation happens at hacker speeds instead  
of big company speeds.The second is Moore's Law, which has worked its usual magic on  
Internet bandwidth.   
[1]The third reason computers won is piracy. Users prefer it   
not just because it's free, but because it's  
more convenient. Bittorrent and YouTube have already trained a new  
generation of viewers that the place to watch shows is on a computer  
screen.  
[2]The somewhat more surprising force was one specific type of innovation:  
social applications. The average teenage kid has a pretty much  
infinite capacity for talking to their friends. But they can't  
physically be with them all the time. When I was in high school  
the solution was the telephone. Now it's social networks, multiplayer  
games, and various messaging applications. The way you reach them  
all is through a computer.  
[3]  
Which means every teenage kid (a)  
wants a computer with an Internet connection, (b) has an incentive  
to figure out how to use it, and (c) spends countless hours in front  
of it.This was the most powerful force of all. This was what made everyone  
want computers. Nerds got computers because they liked them. Then  
gamers got them to play games on. But it was connecting to other  
people that got everyone else: that's what made even grandmas and  
14 year old girls want computers.  
After decades of running an IV drip right into their audience,  
people in the entertainment business had understandably come to  
think of them as rather passive. They thought they'd be able to  
dictate the way shows reached audiences. But they underestimated  
the force of their desire to connect with one another.Facebook killed TV. That is wildly oversimplified, of course, but  
probably as close to the truth as you can get in three words.\_\_\_The TV networks already seem, grudgingly, to see where things are  
going, and have responded by putting their stuff, grudgingly, online.  
But they're still dragging their heels. They still seem to wish  
people would watch shows on TV instead, just as newspapers that put  
their stories online still seem to wish people would wait till the  
next morning and read them printed on paper. They should both just  
face the fact that the Internet is the primary medium.They'd be in a better position if they'd done that earlier. When  
a new medium arises that's powerful enough to make incumbents  
nervous, then it's probably powerful enough to win, and the best  
thing they can do is jump in immediately.Whether they like it or not, big changes are coming, because the  
Internet dissolves the two cornerstones of broadcast media:  
synchronicity and locality. On the Internet, you don't have to  
send everyone the same signal, and you don't have to send it to  
them from a local source. People will watch what they want when  
they want it, and group themselves according to whatever shared  
interest they feel most strongly. Maybe their strongest shared  
interest will be their physical location, but I'm guessing not.  
Which means local TV is probably dead. It was an artifact of  
limitations imposed by old technology. If someone were creating  
an Internet-based TV company from scratch now, they might have some  
plan for shows aimed at specific regions, but it wouldn't be a top  
priority.Synchronicity and locality are tied together. TV network affiliates  
care what's on at 10 because that delivers viewers for local news  
at 11. This connection adds more brittleness than strength, however:  
people don't watch what's on at 10 because they want to watch the  
news afterward.TV networks will fight these trends, because they don't have  
sufficient flexibility to adapt to them. They're hemmed in by local  
affiliates in much the same way car companies are hemmed in by  
dealers and unions. Inevitably, the people running the networks  
will take the easy route and try to keep the old model running for  
a couple more years, just as the record labels have done.A recent article in the Wall Street Journal described how TV networks  
were trying to add more live shows, partly as a way to make viewers  
watch TV synchronously instead of watching recorded shows when it  
suited them. Instead of delivering what viewers want, they're  
trying to force them to change their habits to suit the networks'  
obsolete business model. That never works unless you have a monopoly  
or cartel to enforce it, and even then it only works temporarily.The other reason networks like live shows is that they're cheaper  
to produce. There they have the right idea, but they haven't  
followed it to its conclusion. Live content can be way cheaper  
than networks realize, and the way to take advantage of dramatic  
decreases in cost is to   
increase volume. The networks are prevented  
from seeing this whole line of reasoning because they still think  
of themselves as being in the broadcast business—as sending one  
signal to everyone.  
[4]\_\_\_Now would be a good time to start any company that competes with  
TV networks. That's what a lot of Internet startups are, though  
they may not have had this as an explicit goal. People only have  
so many leisure hours a day, and TV is premised on such long sessions  
(unlike Google, which prides itself on sending users on their way  
quickly) that anything that takes up their time is competing with  
it. But in addition to such indirect competitors, I think TV  
companies will increasingly face direct ones.Even in cable TV, the long tail was lopped off prematurely by the  
threshold you had to get over to start a new channel. It will be  
longer on the Internet, and there will be more mobility within it.  
In this new world, the existing players will only have the advantages  
any big company has in its market.That will change the balance of power between the networks and the  
people who produce shows. The networks used to be gatekeepers.  
They distributed your work, and sold advertising on it. Now the  
people who produce a show can distribute it themselves. The main  
value networks supply now is ad sales. Which will tend to put them  
in the position of service providers rather than publishers.Shows will change even more. On the Internet there's no reason to  
keep their current format, or even the fact that they have a single  
format. Indeed, the more interesting sort of convergence that's  
coming is between shows and games. But on the question of what  
sort of entertainment gets distributed on the Internet in 20 years,  
I wouldn't dare to make any predictions, except that things will  
change a lot. We'll get whatever the most imaginative people can  
cook up. That's why the Internet won.  
Notes[1]  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell for this point. He adds: "I  
remember the eyes of phone companies gleaming in the early 90s when  
they talked about convergence. They thought most programming would  
be on demand, and they would implement it and make a lot of money.  
It didn't work out. They assumed that their local network infrastructure  
would be critical to do video on-demand, because you couldn't  
possibly stream it from a few data centers over the internet. At  
the time (1992) the entire cross-country Internet bandwidth wasn't  
enough for one video stream. But wide-area bandwidth increased more  
than they expected and they were beaten by iTunes and Hulu."[2]  
Copyright owners tend to focus on the aspect they see of  
piracy, which is the lost revenue. They therefore think what drives  
users to do it is the desire to get something for free. But iTunes  
shows that people will pay for stuff online, if you make it easy.  
A significant component of piracy is simply that it offers a better  
user experience.[3]  
Or a phone that is actually a computer. I'm not making any  
predictions about the size of the device that will replace TV, just  
that it will have a browser and get data via the Internet.[4]  
Emmett Shear writes: "I'd argue the long tail for sports may  
be even larger than the long tail for other kinds of content. Anyone  
can broadcast a high school football game that will be interesting  
to 10,000 people or so, even if the quality of production is not  
so good."  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Nancy Cook, Michael Seibel,  
Emmett Shear, and Fred Wilson for reading drafts of this.Japanese Translation

# Can You Buy a Silicon Valley? Maybe.

February 2009A lot of cities look at Silicon Valley and ask "How could we make  
something like that happen here?" The   
organic way to do it is to  
establish a first-rate university in a place where rich people want  
to live. That's how Silicon Valley happened. But could you shortcut  
the process by funding startups?Possibly. Let's consider what it would take.The first thing to understand is that encouraging startups is a  
different problem from encouraging startups in a particular city.  
The latter is much more expensive.People sometimes think they could improve the startup scene in their  
town by starting something like Y   
Combinator there, but in fact it  
will have near zero effect. I know because Y Combinator itself had  
near zero effect on Boston when we were based there half the year.  
The people we funded came from all over the country (indeed, the  
world) and afterward they went wherever they could get more  
funding—which generally meant Silicon Valley.The seed funding business is not a regional business, because at  
that stage startups are mobile. They're just a couple founders with  
laptops.   
[1]If you want to encourage startups in a particular city, you have  
to fund startups that won't leave. There are two ways to do that:  
have rules preventing them from leaving, or fund them at the point  
in their life when they naturally take root. The first approach  
is a mistake, because it becomes a filter for selecting bad startups.  
If your terms force startups to do things they don't want to, only  
the desperate ones will take your money.Good startups will move to another city as a condition of funding.  
What they won't do is agree not to move the next time they need  
funding. So the only way to get them to stay is to give them enough  
that they never need to leave.\_\_\_How much would that take? If you want to keep startups from leaving  
your town, you have to give them enough that they're not tempted  
by an offer from Silicon Valley VCs that requires them to move. A  
startup would be able to refuse such an offer if they had grown to  
the point where they were (a) rooted in your town and/or (b) so  
successful that VCs would fund them even if they didn't move.How much would it cost to grow a startup to that point? A minimum  
of several hundred thousand dollars. Wufoo   
seem to have rooted  
themselves in Tampa on $118k, but they're an extreme case. On  
average it would take at least half a million.So if it seems too good to be true to think you could grow a local  
silicon valley by giving startups $15-20k each like Y Combinator,  
that's because it is. To make them stick around you'd have to give  
them at least 20 times that much.However, even that is an interesting prospect. Suppose to be on  
the safe side it would cost a million dollars per startup. If you  
could get startups to stick to your town for a million apiece, then  
for a billion dollars you could bring in a thousand startups. That probably wouldn't push you past Silicon Valley itself,   
but it might get you second place.For the price of a football stadium, any town that was decent to  
live in could make itself one of the biggest startup hubs in the  
world.What's more, it wouldn't take very long. You could probably do  
it in five years. During the term of one mayor. And it would get  
easier over time, because the more startups you had in town, the  
less it would take to get new ones to move there. By the time you  
had a thousand startups in town, the VCs wouldn't be trying so hard  
to get them to move to Silicon Valley; instead they'd be opening  
local offices. Then you'd really be in good shape. You'd have  
started a self-sustaining chain reaction like the one that drives  
the Valley.\_\_\_But now comes the hard part. You have to pick the startups. How  
do you do that? Picking startups is a rare and valuable skill, and  
the handful of people who have it are not readily hireable. And  
this skill is so hard to measure that if a government did try to  
hire people with it, they'd almost certainly get the wrong ones.For example, a city could give money to a VC fund to establish a  
local branch, and let them make the choices. But only a bad VC  
fund would take that deal. They wouldn't seem bad to the city  
officials. They'd seem very impressive. But they'd be bad at  
picking startups. That's the characteristic failure mode of VCs.  
All VCs look impressive to limited partners. The difference between  
the good ones and the bad ones only becomes visible in the other  
half of their jobs: choosing and advising startups.  
[2]What you really want is a pool of local angel investors—people  
investing money they made from their own startups. But unfortunately  
you run into a chicken and egg problem here. If your city isn't  
already a startup hub, there won't be people there who got rich  
from startups. And there is no way I can think of that a city could  
attract angels from outside. By definition they're rich. There's  
no incentive that would make them move.  
[3]However, a city could select startups by piggybacking on the expertise  
of investors who weren't local. It would be pretty straightforward  
to make a list of the most eminent Silicon Valley angels and from  
that to generate a list of all the startups they'd invested in. If  
a city offered these companies a million dollars each to move, a  
lot of the earlier stage ones would probably take it.Preposterous as this plan sounds, it's probably the most efficient  
way a city could select good startups.It would hurt the startups somewhat to be separated from their  
original investors. On the other hand, the extra million dollars  
would give them a lot more runway.\_\_\_Would the transplanted startups survive? Quite possibly. The only  
way to find out would be to try it. It would be a pretty cheap  
experiment, as civil expenditures go. Pick 30 startups that eminent  
angels have recently invested in, give them each a million dollars  
if they'll relocate to your city, and see what happens after a year.  
If they seem to be thriving, you can try importing startups on a  
larger scale.Don't be too legalistic about the conditions under which they're  
allowed to leave. Just have a gentlemen's agreement.Don't try to do it on the cheap and pick only 10 for the initial  
experiment. If you do this on too small a scale you'll just guarantee  
failure. Startups need to be around other startups. 30 would be  
enough to feel like a community.Don't try to make them all work in some renovated warehouse you've  
made into an "incubator." Real startups prefer to work in their  
own spaces.In fact, don't impose any restrictions on the startups at all.  
Startup founders are mostly hackers,   
and hackers are much more  
constrained by gentlemen's agreements than regulations. If they  
shake your hand on a promise, they'll keep it. But show them a  
lock and their first thought is how to pick it.Interestingly, the 30-startup experiment could be done by any  
sufficiently rich private citizen. And what pressure it would   
put on the city if it worked.  
[4]\_\_\_Should the city take stock in return for the money?  
In principle they're entitled to, but how would they choose valuations  
for the startups? You couldn't just give them all the same valuation:  
that would be too low for some (who'd turn you down) and too high  
for others (because it might make their next round a "down round").  
And since we're assuming we're doing this without being able to  
pick startups, we also have to assume we can't value them, since  
that's practically the same thing.Another reason not to take stock in the startups is that startups  
are often involved in disreputable things. So are established  
companies, but they don't get blamed for it. If someone gets  
murdered by someone they met on Facebook, the press will treat the  
story as if it were about Facebook. If someone gets murdered by  
someone they met at a supermarket, the press will just treat it as  
a story about a murder. So understand that if you invest in startups,  
they might build things that get used for pornography, or file-sharing,  
or the expression of unfashionable opinions. You should probably  
sponsor this project jointly with your political opponents, so they  
can't use whatever the startups do as a club to beat you with.It would be too much of a political liability just to give  
the startups the money, though. So the best plan would be to   
make it convertible debt, but which didn't convert except in  
a really big round, like $20 million.\_\_\_How well this scheme worked would depend on the   
city. There are  
some towns, like Portland, that would be easy to turn into startup  
hubs, and others, like Detroit, where it would really be an uphill  
battle. So be honest with yourself about the sort of town you have  
before you try this.It will be easier in proportion to how much your town resembles San  
Francisco. Do you have good weather? Do people live downtown, or  
have they abandoned the center for the suburbs? Would the city be  
described as "hip" and "tolerant," or as reflecting "traditional  
values?" Are there good universities nearby? Are there walkable  
neighborhoods? Would nerds feel at home? If you answered yes to  
all these questions, you might be able not only to pull off this  
scheme, but to do it for less than a million per startup.I realize the chance of any city having  
the political will to carry out this plan is microscopically  
small. I just wanted to explore what it would take if one did.  
How hard would it be to jumpstart a silicon valley? It's  
fascinating to think this prize might be within  
the reach of so many cities. So even though they'll all still  
spend the money on the stadium, at least now someone can ask them:  
why did you choose to do that instead of becoming a serious  
rival to Silicon Valley?  
Notes[1]  
What people who start these supposedly local seed firms always  
find is that (a) their applicants come from all over, not just the  
local area, and (b) the local startups also apply to the other seed  
firms. So what ends up happening is that the applicant pool gets  
partitioned by quality rather than geography.[2]  
Interestingly, the bad VCs fail by choosing startups run by  
people like them—people who are good presenters, but have no  
real substance. It's a case of the fake leading the fake. And  
since everyone involved is so plausible, the LPs who invest in these  
funds have no idea what's happening till they measure their returns.[3]  
Not even being a tax haven, I suspect. That makes some rich  
people move, but not the type who would make good angel investors  
in startups.[4]  
Thanks to Michael Keenan for pointing this out.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, Robert  
Morris, and Fred Wilson for reading drafts of this.

# What I've Learned from Hacker News

February 2009Hacker News was two years  
old last week. Initially it was supposed to be a side project—an  
application to sharpen Arc on, and a place for current and future  
Y Combinator founders to exchange news. It's grown bigger and taken  
up more time than I expected, but I don't regret that because I've  
learned so much from working on it.GrowthWhen we launched in February 2007, weekday traffic was around 1600  
daily uniques. It's since grown to around 22,000. This growth  
rate is a bit higher than I'd like. I'd like the site to grow,  
since a site that isn't growing at least slowly is probably dead.  
But I wouldn't want it to grow as large as Digg or Reddit—mainly  
because that would dilute the character of the site, but also because  
I don't want to spend all my time dealing with scaling.I already have problems enough with that. Remember, the original  
motivation for HN was to test a new programming language, and  
moreover one that's focused on experimenting with language design,  
not performance. Every time the site gets slow, I fortify myself  
by recalling McIlroy and Bentley's famous quote  
  
 The key to performance is elegance, not battalions of special  
 cases.  
  
and look for the bottleneck I can remove with least code. So far  
I've been able to keep up, in the sense that performance has remained  
consistently mediocre despite 14x growth. I don't know what I'll  
do next, but I'll probably think of something.This is my attitude to the site generally. Hacker News is an  
experiment, and an experiment in a very young field. Sites of this  
type are only a few years old. Internet conversation generally is  
only a few decades old. So we've probably only discovered a fraction  
of what we eventually will.That's why I'm so optimistic about HN. When a technology is this  
young, the existing solutions are usually terrible; which means it  
must be possible to do much better; which means many problems that  
seem insoluble aren't. Including, I hope, the problem that has  
afflicted so many previous communities: being ruined by growth.DilutionUsers have worried about that since the site was a few months old.  
So far these alarms have been false, but they may not always be.  
Dilution is a hard problem. But probably soluble; it doesn't mean  
much that open conversations have "always" been destroyed by growth  
when "always" equals 20 instances.But it's important to remember we're trying to solve a new problem,  
because that means we're going to have to try new things, most of  
which probably won't work. A couple weeks ago I tried displaying  
the names of users with the highest average comment scores in orange.  
[1]  
That was a mistake. Suddenly a culture that had been more  
or less united was divided into haves and have-nots. I didn't  
realize how united the culture had been till I saw it divided. It  
was painful to watch.  
[2]So orange usernames won't be back. (Sorry about that.) But there  
will be other equally broken-seeming ideas in the future, and the  
ones that turn out to work will probably seem just as broken as  
those that don't.Probably the most important thing I've learned about dilution is  
that it's measured more in behavior than users. It's bad behavior  
you want to keep out more than bad people. User behavior turns out  
to be surprisingly malleable. If people are   
expected to behave  
well, they tend to; and vice versa.Though of course forbidding bad behavior does tend to keep away bad  
people, because they feel uncomfortably constrained in a place where  
they have to behave well. But this way of keeping them out is  
gentler and probably also more effective than overt barriers.It's pretty clear now that the broken windows theory applies to  
community sites as well. The theory is that minor forms of bad  
behavior encourage worse ones: that a neighborhood with lots of  
graffiti and broken windows becomes one where robberies occur. I  
was living in New York when Giuliani introduced the reforms that  
made the broken windows theory famous, and the transformation was  
miraculous. And I was a Reddit user when the opposite happened  
there, and the transformation was equally dramatic.I'm not criticizing Steve and Alexis. What happened to Reddit  
didn't happen out of neglect. From the start they had a policy of  
censoring nothing except spam. Plus Reddit had different goals  
from Hacker News. Reddit was a startup, not a side project; its  
goal was to grow as fast as possible. Combine rapid growth and  
zero censorship, and the result is a free for all. But I don't  
think they'd do much differently if they were doing it again.  
Measured by traffic, Reddit is much more successful than Hacker  
News.But what happened to Reddit won't inevitably happen to HN. There  
are several local maxima. There can be places that are free for  
alls and places that are more thoughtful, just as there are in the  
real world; and people will behave differently depending on which  
they're in, just as they do in the real world.I've observed this in the wild. I've seen people cross-posting on  
Reddit and Hacker News who actually took the trouble to write two  
versions, a flame for Reddit and a more subdued version for HN.SubmissionsThere are two major types of problems a site like Hacker News needs  
to avoid: bad stories and bad comments. So far the danger of bad  
stories seems smaller. The stories on the frontpage now are still  
roughly the ones that would have been there when HN started.I once thought I'd have to weight votes to keep crap off the  
frontpage, but I haven't had to yet. I wouldn't have predicted the  
frontpage would hold up so well, and I'm not sure why it has.  
Perhaps only the more thoughtful users care enough to submit and  
upvote links, so the marginal cost of one random new user approaches  
zero. Or perhaps the frontpage protects itself, by advertising what type of submission is expected.The most dangerous thing for the frontpage is stuff that's too easy  
to upvote. If someone proves a new theorem, it takes some work by  
the reader to decide whether or not to upvote it. An amusing cartoon  
takes less. A rant with a rallying cry as the title takes zero,  
because people vote it up without even reading it.Hence what I call the Fluff Principle: on a user-voted news site,  
the links that are easiest to judge will take over unless you take  
specific measures to prevent it.Hacker News has two kinds of protections against fluff. The most  
common types of fluff links are banned as off-topic. Pictures of  
kittens, political diatribes, and so on are explicitly banned. This  
keeps out most fluff, but not all of it. Some links are both fluff,  
in the sense of being very short, and also on topic.There's no single solution to that. If a link is just an empty  
rant, editors will sometimes kill it even if it's on topic in the  
sense of being about hacking, because it's not on topic by the real  
standard, which is to engage one's intellectual curiosity. If the  
posts on a site are characteristically of this type I sometimes ban  
it, which means new stuff at that url is auto-killed. If a post  
has a linkbait title, editors sometimes rephrase it to be more  
matter-of-fact. This is especially necessary with links whose  
titles are rallying cries, because otherwise they become implicit  
"vote up if you believe such-and-such" posts, which are the most  
extreme form of fluff.The techniques for dealing with links have to evolve, because the  
links do. The existence of aggregators has already affected what  
they aggregate. Writers now deliberately write things to draw traffic  
from aggregators—sometimes even specific ones. (No, the irony  
of this statement is not lost on me.) Then there are the more  
sinister mutations, like linkjacking—posting a paraphrase of  
someone else's article and submitting that instead of the original.  
These can get a lot of upvotes, because a lot of what's good in an  
article often survives; indeed, the closer the paraphrase is to  
plagiarism, the more survives.  
[3]I think it's important that a site that kills submissions provide  
a way for users to see what got killed if they want to. That keeps  
editors honest, and just as importantly, makes users confident  
they'd know if the editors stopped being honest. HN users can do  
this by flipping a switch called showdead in their profile.  
[4]CommentsBad comments seem to be a harder problem than bad submissions.  
While the quality of links on the frontpage of HN hasn't changed  
much, the quality of the median comment may have decreased somewhat.There are two main kinds of badness in comments: meanness and  
stupidity. There is a lot of overlap between the two—mean  
comments are disproportionately likely also to be dumb—but  
the strategies for dealing with them are different. Meanness is  
easier to control. You can have rules saying one shouldn't be mean,  
and if you enforce them it seems possible to keep a lid on meanness.Keeping a lid on stupidity is harder, perhaps because stupidity is  
not so easily distinguishable. Mean people are more likely to know  
they're being mean than stupid people are to know they're being  
stupid.The most dangerous form of stupid comment is not the long but  
mistaken argument, but the dumb joke. Long but mistaken arguments  
are actually quite rare. There is a strong correlation between  
comment quality and length; if you wanted to compare the quality  
of comments on community sites, average length would be a good  
predictor. Probably the cause is human nature rather than anything  
specific to comment threads. Probably it's simply that stupidity  
more often takes the form of having few ideas than wrong ones.Whatever the cause, stupid comments tend to be short. And since  
it's hard to write a short comment that's distinguished for the  
amount of information it conveys, people try to distinguish them  
instead by being funny. The most tempting format for stupid comments  
is the supposedly witty put-down, probably because put-downs are  
the easiest form of humor.   
[5]  
So one advantage of forbidding  
meanness is that it also cuts down on these.Bad comments are like kudzu: they take over rapidly. Comments have  
much more effect on new comments than submissions have on new  
submissions. If someone submits a lame article, the other submissions  
don't all become lame. But if someone posts a stupid comment on a  
thread, that sets the tone for the region around it. People reply  
to dumb jokes with dumb jokes.Maybe the solution is to add a delay before people can respond to  
a comment, and make the length of the delay inversely proportional  
to some prediction of its quality. Then dumb threads would grow  
slower.  
[6]  
PeopleI notice most of the techniques I've described are conservative:  
they're aimed at preserving the character of the site rather than  
enhancing it. I don't think that's a bias of mine. It's due to  
the shape of the problem. Hacker News had the good fortune to start  
out good, so in this case it's literally a matter of preservation.  
But I think this principle would also apply to sites with different  
origins.The good things in a community site come from people more than  
technology; it's mainly in the prevention of bad things that  
technology comes into play. Technology certainly can enhance  
discussion. Nested comments do, for example. But I'd rather use  
a site with primitive features and smart, nice users than a more  
advanced one whose users were idiots or trolls.So the most important thing a community site can do is attract the  
kind of people it wants. A site trying to be as big as possible  
wants to attract everyone. But a site aiming at a particular subset  
of users has to attract just those—and just as importantly,  
repel everyone else. I've made a conscious effort to do this on  
HN. The graphic design is as plain as possible, and the site rules  
discourage dramatic link titles. The goal is that the only thing  
to interest someone arriving at HN for the first time should be the  
ideas expressed there.The downside of tuning a site to attract certain people is that,  
to those people, it can be too attractive. I'm all too aware how  
addictive Hacker News can be. For me, as for many users, it's a  
kind of virtual town square. When I want to take a break from  
working, I walk into the square, just as I might into Harvard Square  
or University Ave in the physical world.  
[7]  
But an online square is  
more dangerous than a physical one. If I spent half the day loitering  
on University Ave, I'd notice. I have to walk a mile to get there,  
and sitting in a cafe feels different from working. But visiting  
an online forum takes just a click, and feels superficially very  
much like working. You may be wasting your time, but you're not  
idle. Someone is wrong on the Internet, and you're fixing the  
problem.Hacker News is definitely useful. I've learned a lot from things  
I've read on HN. I've written several essays that began as comments  
there. So I wouldn't want the site to go away. But I would like  
to be sure it's not a net drag on productivity. What a disaster  
that would be, to attract thousands of smart people to a site that  
caused them to waste lots of time. I wish I could be 100% sure  
that's not a description of HN.I feel like the addictiveness of games and social applications is  
still a mostly unsolved problem. The situation now is like it was  
with crack in the 1980s: we've invented terribly addictive new  
things, and we haven't yet evolved ways to protect ourselves from  
them. We will eventually, and that's one of the problems I hope  
to focus on next.  
Notes[1]  
I tried ranking users by both average and median comment  
score, and average (with the high score thrown out) seemed the more  
accurate predictor of high quality. Median may be the more accurate  
predictor of low quality though.[2]  
Another thing I learned from this experiment is that if you're  
going to distinguish between people, you better be sure you do it  
right. This is one problem where rapid prototyping doesn't work.Indeed, that's the intellectually honest argument for not discriminating  
between various types of people. The reason not to do it is not  
that everyone's the same, but that it's bad to do wrong and hard  
to do right.[3]  
When I catch egregiously linkjacked posts I replace the url  
with that of whatever they copied. Sites that habitually linkjack  
get banned.[4]  
Digg is notorious for its lack of transparency. The root of  
the problem is not that the guys running Digg are especially sneaky,  
but that they use the wrong algorithm for generating their frontpage.  
Instead of bubbling up from the bottom as they get more votes, as  
on Reddit, stories start at the top and get pushed down by new  
arrivals.The reason for the difference is that Digg is derived from Slashdot,  
while Reddit is derived from Delicious/popular. Digg is Slashdot  
with voting instead of editors, and Reddit is Delicious/popular  
with voting instead of bookmarking. (You can still see fossils of  
their origins in their graphic design.)Digg's algorithm is very vulnerable to gaming, because any story  
that makes it onto the frontpage is the new top story. Which in  
turn forces Digg to respond with extreme countermeasures. A lot  
of startups have some kind of secret about the subterfuges they had  
to resort to in the early days, and I suspect Digg's is the extent  
to which the top stories were de facto chosen by human editors.[5]  
The dialog on Beavis and Butthead was composed largely of  
these, and when I read comments on really bad sites I can hear them  
in their voices.[6]  
I suspect most of the techniques for discouraging stupid  
comments have yet to be discovered. Xkcd implemented a particularly  
clever one in its IRC channel: don't allow the same thing twice.  
Once someone has said "fail," no one can ever say it again. This  
would penalize short comments especially, because they have less  
room to avoid collisions in.Another promising idea is the stupid   
filter, which is just like a  
probabilistic spam filter, but trained on corpora of stupid and  
non-stupid comments instead.You may not have to kill bad comments to solve the problem. Comments  
at the bottom of a long thread are rarely seen, so it may be enough  
to incorporate a prediction of quality in the comment sorting  
algorithm.[7]  
What makes most suburbs so demoralizing is that there's no  
center to walk to.  
Thanks to Justin Kan, Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris,  
Alexis Ohanian, Emmet Shear, and Fred Wilson for reading drafts of  
this.  
Comment on this essay.

# Startups in 13 Sentences

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
  
Watch how this essay was  
written.  
  
  
  
  
February 2009One of the things I always tell startups is a principle I learned  
from Paul Buchheit: it's better to make a few people really happy  
than to make a lot of people semi-happy. I was saying recently to  
a reporter that if I could only tell startups 10 things, this would  
be one of them. Then I thought: what would the other 9 be?When I made the list there turned out to be 13:  
  
1. Pick good cofounders.Cofounders are for a startup what location is for real estate. You  
can change anything about a house except where it is. In a startup  
you can change your idea easily, but changing your cofounders is  
hard.   
[1]  
And the success of a startup is almost always a function  
of its founders.2. Launch fast.The reason to launch fast is not so much that it's critical to get  
your product to market early, but that you haven't really started  
working on it till you've launched. Launching teaches you what you  
should have been building. Till you know that you're wasting your  
time. So the main value of whatever you launch with is as a pretext  
for engaging users.3. Let your idea evolve.This is the second half of launching fast. Launch fast and iterate.  
It's a big mistake to treat a startup as if it were merely a matter  
of implementing some brilliant initial idea. As in an essay, most  
of the ideas appear in the implementing.4. Understand your users.You can envision the wealth created by a startup as a rectangle,  
where one side is the number of users and the other is how much you  
improve their lives.  
[2]  
The second dimension is the one you have  
most control over. And indeed, the growth in the first will be  
driven by how well you do in the second. As in science, the hard  
part is not answering questions but asking them: the hard part is  
seeing something new that users lack. The better you understand  
them the better the odds of doing that. That's why so many successful  
startups make something the founders needed.5. Better to make a few users love you than a lot ambivalent.Ideally you want to make large numbers of users love you, but you  
can't expect to hit that right away. Initially you have to choose  
between satisfying all the needs of a subset of potential users,  
or satisfying a subset of the needs of all potential users. Take  
the first. It's easier to expand userwise than satisfactionwise.  
And perhaps more importantly, it's harder to lie to yourself. If  
you think you're 85% of the way to a great product, how do you know  
it's not 70%? Or 10%? Whereas it's easy to know how many users  
you have.6. Offer surprisingly good customer service.Customers are used to being maltreated. Most of the companies they  
deal with are quasi-monopolies that get away with atrocious customer  
service. Your own ideas about what's possible have been unconsciously  
lowered by such experiences. Try making your customer service not  
merely good, but   
surprisingly good. Go out of your way to make  
people happy. They'll be overwhelmed; you'll see. In the earliest  
stages of a startup, it pays to offer customer service on a level  
that wouldn't scale, because it's a way of learning about your  
users.7. You make what you measure.I learned this one from Joe Kraus.   
[3]  
Merely measuring something  
has an uncanny tendency to improve it. If you want to make your  
user numbers go up, put a big piece of paper on your wall and every  
day plot the number of users. You'll be delighted when it goes up  
and disappointed when it goes down. Pretty soon you'll start  
noticing what makes the number go up, and you'll start to do more  
of that. Corollary: be careful what you measure.8. Spend little.I can't emphasize enough how important it is for a startup to be cheap.  
Most startups fail before they make something people want, and the  
most common form of failure is running out of money. So being cheap  
is (almost) interchangeable with iterating rapidly.  
[4]  
But it's  
more than that. A culture of cheapness keeps companies young in  
something like the way exercise keeps people young.9. Get ramen profitable."Ramen profitable" means a startup makes just enough to pay the  
founders' living expenses. It's not rapid prototyping for business  
models (though it can be), but more a way of hacking the investment  
process. Once you cross over into ramen profitable, it completely  
changes your relationship with investors. It's also great for  
morale.10. Avoid distractions.Nothing kills startups like distractions. The worst type are those  
that pay money: day jobs, consulting, profitable side-projects.  
The startup may have more long-term potential, but you'll always  
interrupt working on it to answer calls from people paying you now.  
Paradoxically, fundraising is this type of distraction, so try to  
minimize that too.11. Don't get demoralized.Though the immediate cause of death in a startup tends to be running  
out of money, the underlying cause is usually lack of focus. Either  
the company is run by stupid people (which can't be fixed with  
advice) or the people are smart but got demoralized. Starting a  
startup is a huge moral weight. Understand this and make a conscious  
effort not to be ground down by it, just as you'd be careful to  
bend at the knees when picking up a heavy box.12. Don't give up.Even if you get demoralized, don't give up. You can get surprisingly  
far by just not giving up. This isn't true in all fields. There  
are a lot of people who couldn't become good mathematicians no  
matter how long they persisted. But startups aren't like that.  
Sheer effort is usually enough, so long as you keep morphing your  
idea.13. Deals fall through.One of the most useful skills we learned from Viaweb was not getting  
our hopes up. We probably had 20 deals of various types fall  
through. After the first 10 or so we learned to treat deals as  
background processes that we should ignore till they terminated.  
It's very dangerous to morale to start to depend on deals closing,  
not just because they so often don't, but because it makes them  
less likely to.  
  
Having gotten it down to 13 sentences, I asked myself which I'd  
choose if I could only keep one.Understand your users. That's the key. The essential task in a  
startup is to create wealth; the dimension of wealth you have most  
control over is how much you improve users' lives; and the hardest  
part of that is knowing what to make for them. Once you know what  
to make, it's mere effort to make it, and most decent hackers are  
capable of that.Understanding your users is part of half the principles in this  
list. That's the reason to launch early, to understand your users.  
Evolving your idea is the embodiment of understanding your users.  
Understanding your users well will tend to push you toward making  
something that makes a few people deeply happy. The most important  
reason for having surprisingly good customer service is that it  
helps you understand your users. And understanding your users will  
even ensure your morale, because when everything else is collapsing  
around you, having just ten users who love you will keep you going.Notes[1]  
Strictly speaking it's impossible without a time machine.[2]  
In practice it's more like a ragged comb.[3]  
Joe thinks one of the founders of Hewlett Packard said it first,  
but he doesn't remember which.[4]  
They'd be interchangeable if markets stood still. Since they  
don't, working twice as fast is better than having twice as much  
time.Turkish TranslationSpanish TranslationBulgarian TranslationJapanese TranslationPersian Translation

# Keep Your Identity Small

February 2009I finally realized today why politics and religion yield such  
uniquely useless discussions.As a rule, any mention of religion on an online forum degenerates  
into a religious argument. Why? Why does this happen with religion  
and not with Javascript or baking or other topics people talk about  
on forums?What's different about religion is that people don't feel they need  
to have any particular expertise to have opinions about  
it. All they need is strongly held beliefs, and anyone can have  
those. No thread about Javascript will grow as fast as one about  
religion, because people feel they have to be over some threshold  
of expertise to post comments about that. But on religion everyone's  
an expert.Then it struck me: this is the problem with politics too. Politics,  
like religion, is a topic where there's no threshold of expertise  
for expressing an opinion. All you need is strong convictions.Do religion and politics have something in common that explains  
this similarity? One possible explanation is that they deal with  
questions that have no definite answers, so there's no back pressure  
on people's opinions. Since no one can be proven wrong, every  
opinion is equally valid, and sensing this, everyone lets fly with  
theirs.But this isn't true. There are certainly some political questions  
that have definite answers, like how much a new government policy  
will cost. But the more precise political questions suffer the  
same fate as the vaguer ones.I think what religion and politics have in common is that they  
become part of people's identity, and people can never have a  
fruitful argument about something that's part of their identity.  
By definition they're partisan.Which topics engage people's identity depends on the people, not  
the topic. For example, a discussion about a battle that included  
citizens of one or more of the countries involved would probably  
degenerate into a political argument. But a discussion today about  
a battle that took place in the Bronze Age probably wouldn't. No  
one would know what side to be on. So it's not politics that's the  
source of the trouble, but identity. When people say a discussion  
has degenerated into a religious war, what they really mean is that  
it has started to be driven mostly by people's identities.  
[1]Because the point at which this happens depends on the people rather  
than the topic, it's a mistake to conclude that because a question  
tends to provoke religious wars, it must have no answer. For example,  
the question of the relative merits of programming languages often  
degenerates into a religious war, because so many programmers  
identify as X programmers or Y programmers. This sometimes leads  
people to conclude the question must be unanswerable—that all  
languages are equally good. Obviously that's false: anything else  
people make can be well or badly designed; why should this be  
uniquely impossible for programming languages? And indeed, you can  
have a fruitful discussion about the relative merits of programming  
languages, so long as you exclude people who respond from identity.More generally, you can have a fruitful discussion about a topic  
only if it doesn't engage the identities of any of the  
participants. What makes politics and religion such minefields is  
that they engage so many people's identities. But you could in  
principle have a useful conversation about them with some people.  
And there are other topics that might seem harmless, like the  
relative merits of Ford and Chevy pickup trucks, that you couldn't  
safely talk about with others.The most intriguing thing about this theory, if it's right, is that  
it explains not merely which kinds of discussions to avoid, but how  
to have better ideas. If people can't think clearly about anything  
that has become part of their identity, then all other things being  
equal, the best plan is to let as few things into your identity as  
possible.   
[2]Most people reading this will already be fairly tolerant. But there  
is a step beyond thinking of yourself as x but tolerating y: not  
even to consider yourself an x. The more labels you have for  
yourself, the dumber they make you.Notes[1]  
When that happens, it tends to happen fast, like a core going  
critical. The threshold for participating goes down to zero, which  
brings in more people. And they tend to say incendiary things,  
which draw more and angrier counterarguments.[2]  
There may be some things it's a net win to include in your  
identity. For example, being a scientist. But arguably that is  
more of a placeholder than an actual label—like putting NMI on a  
form that asks for your middle initial—because it doesn't commit  
you to believing anything in particular. A scientist isn't committed  
to believing in natural selection in the same way a biblical  
literalist is committed to rejecting it. All he's committed to is  
following the evidence wherever it leads.Considering yourself a scientist is equivalent to putting a sign  
in a cupboard saying "this cupboard must be kept empty." Yes,  
strictly speaking, you're putting something in the cupboard, but  
not in the ordinary sense.Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit, and Robert  
Morris for reading drafts of this.Russian TranslationPortuguese TranslationRomanian Translation

# After Credentials

December 2008A few months ago I read a New York Times article on South  
Korean cram schools that said   
 Admission to the right university can make or break an ambitious  
 young South Korean.  
 A parent added:   
 "In our country, college entrance exams determine 70 to 80 percent  
 of a person's future."  
 It was striking how old fashioned this sounded. And  
yet when I was in high school it wouldn't have seemed too far off  
as a description of the US. Which means things must have been  
changing here.The course of people's lives in the US now seems to be determined  
less by credentials and more by performance than it was 25 years  
ago. Where you go to college still matters, but not like it used  
to.What happened?\_\_\_\_\_Judging people by their academic credentials was in its time an  
advance. The practice seems to have begun in China, where starting  
in 587 candidates for the imperial civil service had to take an  
exam on classical literature. [1] It was also a test of wealth,  
because the knowledge it tested was so specialized that passing  
required years of expensive training. But though wealth was a  
necessary condition for passing, it was not a sufficient one. By  
the standards of the rest of the world in 587, the Chinese system  
was very enlightened. Europeans didn't introduce formal civil  
service exams till the nineteenth century, and even then they seem  
to have been influenced by the Chinese example.Before credentials, government positions were obtained mainly by  
family influence, if not outright bribery. It was a great step  
forward to judge people by their performance on a test. But by no  
means a perfect solution. When you judge people that way, you tend  
to get cram schools—which they did in Ming China and nineteenth  
century England just as much as in present day South Korea.What cram schools are, in effect, is leaks in a seal. The use of  
credentials  
was an attempt to seal off the direct transmission of power between  
generations, and cram schools represent that power finding holes  
in the seal. Cram schools turn wealth in one generation into  
credentials in the next.It's hard to beat this phenomenon, because the schools adjust to suit  
whatever the tests measure. When the tests are narrow and  
predictable, you get cram schools on the classic model, like those  
that prepared candidates for Sandhurst (the British West Point) or  
the classes American students take now to improve their SAT scores.  
But as the tests get broader, the schools do too. Preparing a  
candidate for the Chinese imperial civil service exams took years,  
as prep school does today. But the raison d'etre of all these  
institutions has been the same: to beat the system. [2]\_\_\_\_\_History suggests that, all other things being equal, a society  
prospers in proportion to its ability to prevent parents from  
influencing their children's success directly. It's a fine thing  
for parents to help their children indirectly—for example,  
by helping them to become smarter or more disciplined, which then  
makes them more successful. The problem comes when parents use  
direct methods: when they are able to use their own wealth or power  
as a substitute for their children's qualities.Parents will tend to do this when they can. Parents will die for  
their kids, so it's not surprising to find they'll also push their  
scruples to the limits for them. Especially if other parents are  
doing it.Sealing off this force has a double advantage. Not only does a  
society get "the best man for the job," but  
parents' ambitions are diverted from direct methods to indirect  
ones—to actually trying to raise their kids well.But we should expect it to be very hard to contain parents' efforts  
to obtain an unfair advantage for their kids. We're dealing with  
one of the most powerful forces in human nature. We shouldn't expect  
naive solutions to work, any more than we'd expect naive solutions  
for keeping heroin out of a prison to work.\_\_\_\_\_The obvious way to solve the problem is to make credentials better.  
If the tests a society uses are currently hackable, we can study  
the way people beat them and try to plug the holes. You can use  
the cram schools to show you where most of the holes are. They  
also tell you when you're succeeding in fixing them: when cram  
schools become less popular.A more general solution  
would be to push for increased transparency, especially at critical  
social bottlenecks like college admissions. In the US this process  
still shows many outward signs of corruption. For example, legacy  
admissions. The official story is that legacy status doesn't carry  
much weight, because all it does is break ties: applicants are  
bucketed by ability, and legacy status is only used to decide between  
the applicants in the bucket that straddles the cutoff. But what  
this means is that a university can make legacy status have as much  
or as little weight as they want, by adjusting the size of the  
bucket that straddles the cutoff.By gradually chipping away at the abuse of credentials, you could  
probably make them more airtight. But what a long fight it would  
be. Especially when the institutions administering the tests don't  
really want them to be airtight.\_\_\_\_\_Fortunately there's a better way to prevent the direct transmission  
of power between generations. Instead of trying to make credentials  
harder to hack, we can also make them matter less.Let's think about what credentials are for. What they are,  
functionally, is a way of predicting performance. If you could  
measure actual performance, you wouldn't need them.So why did they even evolve? Why haven't we just been measuring  
actual performance? Think about where credentialism first appeared:  
in selecting candidates for large organizations. Individual  
performance is hard to measure in large organizations, and the  
harder performance is to measure, the more important it is  
to predict it. If an organization could immediately and cheaply  
measure the performance of recruits, they wouldn't need to examine  
their credentials. They could take everyone and keep just the good  
ones.Large organizations can't do this. But a bunch of small organizations  
in a market can come close. A market takes every organization and  
keeps just the good ones. As organizations get smaller, this  
approaches taking every person and keeping just the good ones. So  
all other things being equal, a society consisting of more, smaller  
organizations will care less about credentials.\_\_\_\_\_That's what's been happening in the US. That's why those quotes  
from Korea sound so old fashioned. They're talking about an economy  
like America's a few decades ago, dominated by a few big companies.  
The route for the ambitious in that sort of environment is to join  
one and climb to the top. Credentials matter a lot then. In the   
culture of a large organization, an elite pedigree becomes a self-fulfilling  
prophecy.This doesn't work in small companies. Even if your colleagues were  
impressed by your credentials, they'd soon be parted from you if  
your performance didn't match, because the company would go out of  
business and the people would be dispersed.In a world of small companies, performance is all anyone cares  
about. People hiring for a startup don't care whether you've even  
graduated from college, let alone which one. All they care about  
is what you can do. Which is in fact all that should matter, even  
in a large organization. The reason credentials have such prestige  
is that for so long the large organizations  
in a society tended to be the most powerful. But in the US at least  
they don't have the monopoly on power they once did, precisely  
because they can't measure (and thus reward) individual performance.  
Why spend twenty years climbing the corporate ladder when you can  
get rewarded directly by the market?I realize I see a more exaggerated version of the change than most  
other people. As a partner at an early stage venture funding firm,  
I'm like a jumpmaster shoving people out of the old world of  
credentials and into the new one of performance. I'm an agent of  
the change I'm seeing. But I don't think I'm imagining it. It was  
not so easy 25 years ago for an ambitious person to choose to be  
judged directly by the market. You had to go through bosses, and  
they were influenced by where you'd been to college.\_\_\_\_\_What made it possible for small organizations to succeed in America?  
I'm still not entirely sure. Startups are certainly a large part  
of it. Small organizations can develop new ideas faster than large  
ones, and new ideas are increasingly valuable.But I don't think startups account for all the shift from credentials  
to measurement. My friend Julian Weber told me that when he went  
to work for a New York law firm in the 1950s they paid associates  
far less than firms do today. Law firms then made no pretense of  
paying people according to the value of the work they'd done. Pay  
was based on seniority. The younger employees were paying their  
dues. They'd be rewarded later.The same principle prevailed at industrial companies. When my  
father was working at Westinghouse in the 1970s, he had people  
working for him who made more than he did, because they'd been there  
longer.Now companies increasingly have to pay employees market price for  
the work they do. One reason is that employees no longer trust  
companies to deliver   
deferred rewards: why work to accumulate  
deferred rewards at a company that might go bankrupt, or be taken  
over and have all its implicit obligations wiped out? The other  
is that some companies broke ranks and started to pay young employees  
large amounts. This was particularly true in consulting, law, and  
finance, where it led to the phenomenon of yuppies. The word is  
rarely used today because it's no longer surprising to see a 25  
year old with money, but in 1985 the sight of a 25 year old  
professional able to afford a new BMW was so novel that it  
called forth a new word.The classic yuppie worked for a small organization. He didn't work  
for General Widget, but for the law firm that handled General  
Widget's acquisitions or the investment bank that floated their  
bond issues.Startups and yuppies entered the American conceptual vocabulary  
roughly simultaneously in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I don't  
think there was a causal connection. Startups happened because  
technology started to change so fast that big companies could no  
longer keep a lid on the smaller ones. I don't think the rise of  
yuppies was inspired by it; it seems more as if there was a change  
in the social conventions (and perhaps the laws) governing the way  
big companies worked. But the two phenomena rapidly fused to produce  
a principle that now seems obvious: paying energetic young people  
market rates, and getting correspondingly high performance from  
them.At about the same time the US economy rocketed out of the doldrums  
that had afflicted it for most of the 1970s. Was there a connection?  
I don't know enough to say, but it felt like it at the time. There  
was a lot of energy released.\_\_\_\_\_Countries worried about their competitiveness are right to be  
concerned about the number of startups started within them. But  
they would do even better to examine the underlying principle. Do  
they let energetic young people get paid market rate for the work  
they do? The young are the test, because when people aren't rewarded  
according to performance, they're invariably rewarded according to  
seniority instead.All it takes is a few beachheads in your economy that pay for  
performance. Measurement spreads like heat. If one part of a  
society is better at measurement than others, it tends to push the  
others to do better. If people who are young but smart and driven  
can make more by starting their own companies than by working for  
existing ones, the existing companies are forced to pay more to  
keep them. So market rates gradually permeate every organization,  
even the government. [3]The measurement of performance will tend to push even the organizations  
issuing credentials into line. When we were kids I used to annoy  
my sister by ordering her to do things I knew she was about to do  
anyway. As credentials are superseded by performance, a similar  
role is the best former gatekeepers can hope for. Once credential  
granting institutions are no longer in the self-fullfilling prophecy  
business, they'll have to work harder to predict the future.\_\_\_\_\_Credentials are a step beyond bribery and influence. But they're  
not the final step. There's an even better way to block the  
transmission of power between generations: to encourage the trend  
toward an economy made of more, smaller units. Then you can measure  
what credentials merely predict.No one likes the transmission of power between generations—not  
the left or the right. But the market forces favored by the right  
turn out to be a better way of preventing it than the credentials  
the left are forced to fall back on.The era of credentials began to end when the power of large  
organizations peaked   
in the late twentieth century. Now we seem  
to be entering a new era based on measurement. The reason the new  
model has advanced so rapidly is that it works so much better. It  
shows no sign of slowing.Notes[1] Miyazaki, Ichisada  
(Conrad Schirokauer trans.), China's Examination Hell: The Civil  
Service Examinations of Imperial China, Yale University Press,  
1981.Scribes in ancient Egypt took exams, but they were more the type  
of proficiency test any apprentice might have to pass.[2] When I say the  
raison d'etre of prep schools is to get kids into better colleges,  
I mean this in the narrowest sense. I'm not saying that's all prep  
schools do, just that if they had zero effect on college admissions  
there would be far less demand for them.[3] Progressive tax  
rates will tend to damp this effect, however, by decreasing the  
difference between good and bad measurers.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Sarah Harlin, Jessica Livingston, and David  
Sloo for reading drafts of this.

# Could VC be a Casualty of the Recession?

December 2008(I originally wrote this at the request of a company producing  
a report about entrepreneurship. Unfortunately after reading it  
they decided it was too controversial to include.)  
VC funding will probably dry up somewhat during the present recession,  
like it usually does in bad times. But this time the result may  
be different. This time the number of new startups may not decrease.  
And that could be dangerous for VCs.When VC funding dried up after the Internet Bubble, startups dried  
up too. There were not a lot of new startups being founded in  
2003. But startups aren't tied to VC the way they were 10 years  
ago. It's now possible for VCs and startups to diverge. And if  
they do, they may not reconverge once the economy gets better.The reason startups no longer depend so much on VCs is one that  
everyone in the startup business knows by now: it has gotten much  
cheaper to start a startup. There are four main reasons: Moore's  
law has made hardware cheap; open source has made software free;  
the web has made marketing and distribution free; and more powerful  
programming languages mean development teams can be smaller. These  
changes have pushed the cost of starting a startup down into the  
noise. In a lot of startups—probaby most startups funded by  
Y Combinator—the biggest expense is simply the founders'  
living expenses. We've had startups that were profitable on revenues  
of $3000 a month.$3000 is insignificant as revenues go. Why should anyone care about  
a startup making $3000 a month? Because, although insignificant  
as revenue, this amount of money can change a startup's  
funding situation completely.Someone running a startup is always calculating in the back of their  
mind how much "runway" they have—how long they have till the  
money in the bank runs out and they either have to be profitable,  
raise more money, or go out of business. Once you cross the threshold  
of profitability, however low, your runway becomes infinite. It's  
a qualitative change, like the stars turning into lines and  
disappearing when the Enterprise accelerates to warp speed. Once  
you're profitable you don't need investors' money. And because  
Internet startups have become so cheap to run, the threshold of  
profitability can be trivially low. Which means many Internet  
startups don't need VC-scale investments anymore. For many startups,  
VC funding has, in the language of VCs, gone from a must-have to a  
nice-to-have.This change happened while no one was looking, and its effects have  
been largely masked so far. It was during the trough after the  
Internet Bubble that it became trivially cheap to start a startup,  
but few realized it because startups were so out of fashion. When  
startups came back into fashion, around 2005, investors were starting  
to write checks again. And while founders may not have needed VC  
money the way they used to, they were willing to take it if  
offered—partly because there was a tradition of startups  
taking VC money, and partly because startups, like dogs, tend to  
eat when given the opportunity. As long as VCs were writing checks,  
founders were never forced to explore the limits of how little they  
needed them. There were a few startups who hit these limits  
accidentally because of their unusual circumstances—most  
famously 37signals, which hit the limit because they crossed into  
startup land from the other direction: they started as a consulting  
firm, so they had revenue before they had a product.VCs and founders are like two components that used to be bolted  
together. Around 2000 the bolt was removed. Because the components  
have so far been subjected to the same forces, they still seem to  
be joined together, but really one is just resting on the other.  
A sharp impact would make them fly apart. And the present recession  
could be that impact.Because of Y Combinator's position at the extreme end of the spectrum,  
we'd be the first to see signs of a separation between founders and  
investors, and we are in fact seeing it. For example, though the  
stock market crash does seem to have made investors more cautious,  
it doesn't seem to have had any effect on the number of people who  
want to start startups. We take applications for funding every 6  
months. Applications for the current funding cycle closed on October  
17, well after the markets tanked, and even so we got a record  
number, up 40% from the same cycle a year before.Maybe things will be different a year from now, if the economy  
continues to get worse, but so far there is zero slackening of  
interest among potential founders. That's different from the way  
things felt in 2001. Then there was a widespread feeling among  
potential founders that startups were over, and that one should  
just go to grad school. That isn't happening this time, and part  
of the reason is that even in a bad economy it's not that hard to  
build something that makes $3000 a month. If investors stop writing  
checks, who cares?We also see signs of a divergence between founders and investors  
in the attitudes of existing startups we've funded. I was talking  
to one recently that had a round fall through at the last minute  
over the sort of trifle that breaks deals when investors feel they  
have the upper hand—over an uncertainty about whether the  
founders had correctly filed their 83(b) forms, if you can believe  
that. And yet this startup is obviously going to succeed: their  
traffic and revenue graphs look like a jet taking off. So I asked  
them if they wanted me to introduce them to more investors. To my  
surprise, they said no—that they'd just spent four months  
dealing with investors, and they were actually a lot happier now  
that they didn't have to. There was a friend they wanted to hire  
with the investor money, and now they'd have to postpone that. But  
otherwise they felt they had enough in the bank to make it to  
profitability. To make sure, they were moving to a cheaper apartment.  
And in this economy I bet they got a good deal on it.I've detected this "investors aren't worth the trouble" vibe from  
several YC founders I've talked to recently. At least one startup  
from the most recent (summer) cycle may not even raise angel money,  
let alone VC. Ticketstumbler  
made it to profitability on Y Combinator's $15,000 investment and  
they hope not to need more. This surprised even us. Although YC  
is based on the idea of it being cheap to start a startup, we never  
anticipated that founders would grow successful startups on nothing  
more than YC funding.If founders decide VCs aren't worth the trouble, that could be bad  
for VCs. When the economy bounces back in a few years and they're  
ready to write checks again, they may find that founders have moved  
on.There is a founder community just as there's a VC community. They  
all know one another, and techniques spread rapidly between them.  
If one tries a new programming language or a new hosting provider  
and gets good results, 6 months later half of them are using it.  
And the same is true for funding. The current generation of founders  
want to raise money from VCs, and Sequoia specifically, because  
Larry and Sergey took money from VCs, and Sequoia specifically.  
Imagine what it would do to the VC business if the next hot company  
didn't take VC at all.VCs think they're playing a zero sum game. In fact, it's not even  
that. If you lose a deal to Benchmark, you lose that deal, but VC  
as an industry still wins. If you lose a deal to None, all VCs  
lose.This recession may be different from the one after the Internet  
Bubble. This time founders may keep starting startups. And if  
they do, VCs will have to keep writing checks, or they could become  
irrelevant.Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, David Hornik, Jessica  
Livingston, Robert Morris, and Fred Wilson for reading drafts of  
this.Russian Translation

# The High-Res Society

December 2008For nearly all of history the success of a society was proportionate  
to its ability to assemble large and disciplined organizations.  
Those who bet on economies of scale generally won, which meant the  
largest organizations were the most successful ones.Things have already changed so much that this is hard for us to  
believe, but till just a few decades ago the largest organizations  
tended to be the most progressive. An ambitious kid graduating  
from college in 1960 wanted to work in the huge, gleaming offices  
of Ford, or General Electric, or NASA. Small meant small-time.  
Small in 1960 didn't mean a cool little startup. It meant uncle  
Sid's shoe store.When I grew up in the 1970s, the idea of the "corporate ladder" was  
still very much alive. The standard plan was to try to get into a  
good college, from which one would be drafted into some organization  
and then rise to positions of gradually increasing responsibility.  
The more ambitious merely hoped to climb the same ladder faster.  
[1]But in the late twentieth century something changed. It turned out  
that economies of scale were not the only force at work. Particularly  
in technology, the increase in speed one could get from smaller  
groups started to trump the advantages of size.The future turned out to be different from the one we were expecting  
in 1970. The domed cities and flying cars we expected have failed  
to materialize. But fortunately so have the jumpsuits with badges  
indicating our specialty and rank. Instead of being dominated by  
a few, giant tree-structured organizations, it's now looking like  
the economy of the future will be a fluid network of smaller,  
independent units.It's not so much that large organizations stopped working. There's  
no evidence that famously successful organizations like the Roman  
army or the British East India Company were any less afflicted by  
protocol and politics than organizations of the same size today.  
But they were competing against opponents who couldn't change the  
rules on the fly by discovering new technology. Now it turns out  
the rule "large and disciplined organizations win" needs to have a  
qualification appended: "at games that change slowly." No one knew  
till change reached a sufficient speed.Large organizations will start to do worse now, though,  
because for the first time in history they're no longer getting the  
best people. An ambitious kid graduating from college now doesn't  
want to work for a big company. They want to work for the hot  
startup that's rapidly growing into one. If they're really ambitious,  
they want to start it.   
[2]This doesn't mean big companies will disappear. To say that  
startups will succeed implies that big companies will exist, because  
startups that succeed either become big companies or are acquired  
by them.   
[3]  
But large organizations will probably never again  
play the leading role they did up till the last quarter of the  
twentieth century.It's kind of surprising that a trend that lasted so long would ever  
run out. How often does it happen that a rule works for thousands  
of years, then switches polarity?The millennia-long run of bigger-is-better left us with a lot of  
traditions that are now obsolete,   
but extremely deeply rooted.  
Which means the ambitious can now do arbitrage on them. It will  
be very valuable to understand precisely which ideas to keep and  
which can now be discarded.The place to look is where the spread of smallness began: in the  
world of startups.There have always been occasional cases, particularly in the US,  
of ambitious people who grew the ladder under them instead of  
climbing it. But till recently this was an anomalous route that  
tended to be followed only by outsiders. It was no coincidence  
that the great industrialists of the nineteenth century had so  
little formal education. As huge as their companies eventually  
became, they were all essentially mechanics and shopkeepers at  
first. That was a social step no one with a college education would  
take if they could avoid it. Till the rise of technology startups,  
and in particular, Internet startups, it was very unusual for  
educated people to start their own businesses.The eight men who left Shockley Semiconductor to found Fairchild  
Semiconductor, the original Silicon Valley startup, weren't even  
trying to start a company at first. They were just looking for a  
company willing to hire them as a group. Then one of their parents  
introduced them to a small investment bank that offered to find  
funding for them to start their own, so they did. But starting a  
company was an alien idea to them; it was something they backed  
into.  
[4]Now I would guess that practically every Stanford or Berkeley  
undergrad who knows how to program has at least considered the idea  
of starting a startup. East Coast universities are not far behind,  
and British universities only a little behind them. This pattern  
suggests that attitudes at Stanford and Berkeley are not an anomaly,  
but a leading indicator. This is the way the world is going.Of course, Internet startups are still only a fraction of the world's  
economy. Could a trend based on them be that powerful?I think so. There's no reason to suppose there's any limit to the  
amount of work that could be done in this area. Like science,  
wealth seems to expand fractally. Steam power was a sliver of the  
British economy when Watt started working on it. But his work led  
to more work till that sliver had expanded into something bigger  
than the whole economy of which it had initially been a part.The same thing could happen with the Internet. If Internet startups  
offer the best opportunity for ambitious people, then a lot of  
ambitious people will start them, and this bit of the economy will  
balloon in the usual fractal way.Even if Internet-related applications only become a tenth of the  
world's economy, this component will set the tone for the rest.  
The most dynamic part of the economy always does, in everything  
from salaries to standards of dress. Not just because of its  
prestige, but because the principles underlying the most dynamic  
part of the economy tend to be ones that work.For the future, the trend to bet on seems to be networks of small,  
autonomous groups whose performance is measured individually. And  
the societies that win will be the ones with the least impedance.As with the original industrial revolution, some societies are going  
to be better at this than others. Within a generation of its birth  
in England, the Industrial Revolution had spread to continental  
Europe and North America. But it didn't spread everywhere. This  
new way of doing things could only take root in places that were  
prepared for it. It could only spread to places that already had  
a vigorous middle class.There is a similar social component to the transformation that began  
in Silicon Valley in the 1960s. Two new kinds of techniques were  
developed there: techniques for building integrated circuits, and  
techniques for building a new type of company designed to grow fast  
by creating new technology. The techniques for building integrated  
circuits spread rapidly to other countries. But the techniques for  
building startups didn't. Fifty years later, startups are ubiquitous  
in Silicon Valley and common in a handful of other US cities, but  
they're still an anomaly in most of the world.Part of the reason—possibly the main reason—that startups  
have not spread as broadly as the Industrial Revolution did is their  
social disruptiveness. Though it brought many social changes, the  
Industrial Revolution was not fighting the principle that bigger  
is better. Quite the opposite: the two dovetailed beautifully.  
The new industrial companies adapted the customs of existing large  
organizations like the military and the civil service, and the  
resulting hybrid worked well. "Captains of industry" issued orders  
to "armies of workers," and everyone knew what they were supposed  
to do.Startups seem to go more against the grain, socially. It's hard  
for them to flourish in societies that value hierarchy and stability,  
just as it was hard for industrialization to flourish in societies  
ruled by people who stole at will from the merchant class. But  
there were already a handful of countries past that stage when the  
Industrial Revolution happened. There do not seem to be that many  
ready this time.  
Notes[1]  
One of the bizarre consequences of this model was that the usual  
way to make more money was to become a manager. This is one of the  
things startups fix.[2]  
There are a lot of reasons American car companies have been  
doing so much worse than Japanese car companies, but at least one  
of them is a cause for optimism: American graduates have more  
options.[3]  
It's possible that companies will one day be able to grow big  
in revenues without growing big in people, but we are not very far  
along that trend yet.[4]  
Lecuyer, Christophe, Making Silicon Valley, MIT Press, 2006.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit, Jessica Livingston,  
and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.

# The Other Half of "Artists Ship"

November 2008One of the differences between big companies and startups is that  
big companies tend to have developed procedures to protect themselves  
against mistakes. A startup walks like a toddler, bashing  
into things and falling over all the time. A big company is more  
deliberate.The gradual accumulation of checks in an organization is a kind of  
learning, based on disasters that have happened to it or others  
like it. After giving a contract to a supplier who goes bankrupt  
and fails to deliver, for example, a company might require all  
suppliers to prove they're solvent before submitting bids.As companies grow they invariably get more such checks, either in  
response to disasters they've suffered, or (probably more often)  
by hiring people from bigger companies who bring with them customs  
for protecting against new types of disasters.It's natural for organizations to learn from mistakes. The problem  
is, people who propose new checks almost never consider that the  
check itself has a cost.Every check has a cost. For example, consider the case of making  
suppliers verify their solvency. Surely that's mere prudence? But  
in fact it could have substantial costs. There's obviously the  
direct cost in time of the people on both sides who supply and check  
proofs of the supplier's solvency. But the real costs are the ones  
you never hear about: the company that would be the best supplier,  
but doesn't bid because they can't spare the effort to get verified.  
Or the company that would be the best supplier, but falls just short  
of the threshold for solvency—which will of course have been set  
on the high side, since there is no apparent cost of increasing it.Whenever someone in an organization proposes to add a new check,  
they should have to explain not just the benefit but the cost. No  
matter how bad a job they did of analyzing it, this meta-check would  
at least remind everyone there had to be a cost, and send them  
looking for it.If companies started doing that, they'd find some surprises. Joel  
Spolsky recently spoke at Y Combinator about selling software to  
corporate customers. He said that in most companies software costing  
up to about $1000 could be bought by individual managers without  
any additional approvals. Above that threshold, software purchases  
generally had to be approved by a committee. But babysitting this  
process was so expensive for software vendors that it didn't make  
sense to charge less than $50,000. Which means if you're making  
something you might otherwise have charged $5000 for, you have to  
sell it for $50,000 instead.The purpose of the committee is presumably to ensure that the company  
doesn't waste money. And yet the result is that the company pays  
10 times as much.Checks on purchases will always be expensive, because the harder  
it is to sell something to you, the more it has to cost. And not  
merely linearly, either. If you're hard enough to sell to, the  
people who are best at making things don't want to bother. The  
only people who will sell to you are companies that specialize in  
selling to you. Then you've sunk to a whole new level of inefficiency.  
Market mechanisms no longer protect you, because the good suppliers  
are no longer in the market.Such things happen constantly to the biggest organizations of all,  
governments. But checks instituted by governments can cause much  
worse problems than merely overpaying. Checks instituted by  
governments can cripple a country's whole economy. Up till about  
1400, China was richer and more technologically advanced than Europe.  
One reason Europe pulled ahead was that the Chinese government  
restricted long trading voyages. So it was left to the Europeans  
to explore and eventually to dominate the rest of the world, including  
China.In more recent times, Sarbanes-Oxley has practically destroyed the  
US IPO market. That wasn't the intention of the legislators who  
wrote it. They just wanted to add a few more checks on public  
companies. But they forgot to consider the cost. They forgot that  
companies about to go public are usually rather stretched, and that  
the weight of a few extra checks that might be easy for General  
Electric to bear are enough to prevent younger companies from being  
public at all.Once you start to think about the cost of checks, you can start to  
ask other interesting questions. Is the cost increasing or decreasing?  
Is it higher in some areas than others? Where does it increase  
discontinuously? If large organizations started to ask questions  
like that, they'd learn some frightening things.I think the cost of checks may actually be increasing. The reason  
is that software plays an increasingly important role in companies,  
and the people who write software are particularly harmed by checks.Programmers are unlike many types of workers in that the best ones  
actually prefer to work hard. This doesn't seem to be the case in  
most types of work. When I worked in fast food, we didn't prefer  
the busy times. And when I used to mow lawns, I definitely didn't  
prefer it when the grass was long after a week of rain.Programmers, though, like it better when they write more code. Or  
more precisely, when they release more code. Programmers like to  
make a difference. Good ones, anyway.For good programmers, one of the best things about working for a  
startup is that there are few checks on releases. In true startups,  
there are no external checks at all. If you have an idea for a new  
feature in the morning, you can write it and push it to the production  
servers before lunch. And when you can do that, you have more  
ideas.At big companies, software has to go through various approvals  
before it can be launched. And the cost of doing this can be  
enormous—in fact, discontinuous. I was talking recently to a  
group of three programmers whose startup had been acquired a few  
years before by a big company. When they'd been independent, they  
could release changes instantly. Now, they said, the absolute  
fastest they could get code released on the production servers was  
two weeks.This didn't merely make them less productive. It made them hate  
working for the acquirer.Here's a sign of how much programmers like to be able to work hard:  
these guys would have paid to be able to release code immediately,  
the way they used to. I asked them if they'd trade 10% of the  
acquisition price for the ability to release code immediately, and  
all three instantly said yes. Then I asked what was the maximum  
percentage of the acquisition price they'd trade for it. They said  
they didn't want to think about it, because they didn't want to  
know how high they'd go, but I got the impression it might be as  
much as half.They'd have sacrificed hundreds of thousands of dollars, perhaps  
millions, just to be able to deliver more software to users. And  
you know what? It would have been perfectly safe to let them. In  
fact, the acquirer would have been better off; not only wouldn't  
these guys have broken anything, they'd have gotten a lot more done.  
So the acquirer is in fact getting worse performance at greater  
cost. Just like the committee approving software purchases.And just as the greatest danger of being hard to sell to is not  
that you overpay but that the best suppliers won't even sell to  
you, the greatest danger of applying too many checks to your  
programmers is not that you'll make them unproductive, but that  
good programmers won't even want to work for you.Steve Jobs's famous maxim "artists ship" works both ways. Artists  
aren't merely capable of shipping. They insist on it. So if you  
don't let people ship, you won't have any artists.

# Why to Start a Startup in a Bad Economy

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2008The economic situation is apparently so grim that some experts fear  
we may be in for a stretch as bad as the mid seventies.When Microsoft and Apple were founded.As those examples suggest, a recession may not be such a bad time  
to start a startup. I'm not claiming it's a particularly good time  
either. The truth is more boring: the state of the economy doesn't  
matter much either way.If we've learned one thing from funding so many startups, it's that  
they succeed or fail based on the qualities of the founders. The  
economy has some effect, certainly, but as a predictor of success  
it's rounding error compared to the founders.Which means that what matters is who you are, not when you do it.  
If you're the right sort of person, you'll win even in a bad economy.  
And if you're not, a good economy won't save you. Someone who  
thinks "I better not start a startup now, because the economy is  
so bad" is making the same mistake as the people who thought during  
the Bubble "all I have to do is start a startup, and I'll be rich."So if you want to improve your chances, you should think far more  
about who you can recruit as a cofounder than the state of the  
economy. And if you're worried about threats to the survival of  
your company, don't look for them in the news. Look in the mirror.But for any given team of founders, would it not pay to wait till  
the economy is better before taking the leap? If you're starting  
a restaurant, maybe, but not if you're working on technology.  
Technology progresses more or less independently of the stock market.  
So for any given idea, the payoff for acting fast in a bad economy  
will be higher than for waiting. Microsoft's first product was a  
Basic interpreter for the Altair. That was exactly what the world  
needed in 1975, but if Gates and Allen had decided to wait a few  
years, it would have been too late.Of course, the idea you have now won't be the last you have. There  
are always new ideas. But if you have a specific idea you want to  
act on, act now.That doesn't mean you can ignore the economy. Both customers and investors  
will be feeling pinched. It's not necessarily a problem if customers  
feel pinched: you may even be able to benefit from it, by making  
things that save money.   
Startups often make things cheaper, so in  
that respect they're better positioned to prosper in a recession  
than big companies.Investors are more of a problem. Startups generally need to raise  
some amount of external funding, and investors tend to be less  
willing to invest in bad times. They shouldn't be. Everyone knows  
you're supposed to buy when times are bad and sell when times are  
good. But of course what makes investing so counterintuitive is  
that in equity markets, good times are defined as everyone thinking  
it's time to buy. You have to be a contrarian to be correct, and  
by definition only a minority of investors can be.So just as investors in 1999 were tripping over one another trying  
to buy into lousy startups, investors in 2009 will presumably be  
reluctant to invest even in good ones.You'll have to adapt to this. But that's nothing new: startups  
always have to adapt to the whims of investors. Ask any founder  
in any economy if they'd describe investors as fickle, and watch  
the face they make. Last year you had to be prepared to explain  
how your startup was viral. Next year you'll have to explain how  
it's recession-proof.(Those are both good things to be. The mistake investors make is  
not the criteria they use but that they always tend to focus on one  
to the exclusion of the rest.)Fortunately the way to make a startup recession-proof is to do  
exactly what you should do anyway: run it as cheaply as possible.  
For years I've been telling founders that the surest route to success  
is to be the cockroaches of the corporate world. The immediate  
cause of death in a startup is always running out of money. So the  
cheaper your company is to operate, the harder it is to kill.  
And fortunately it has gotten very cheap to run a startup. A recession  
will if anything make it cheaper still.If nuclear winter really is here, it may be safer to be a cockroach  
even than to keep your job. Customers may drop off individually  
if they can no longer afford you, but you're not going to lose them  
all at once; markets don't "reduce headcount."What if you quit your job to start a startup that fails, and you  
can't find another? That could be a problem if you work in sales or  
marketing. In those fields it can take months to find a new  
job in a bad economy. But hackers seem to be more liquid. Good  
hackers can always get some kind of job. It might not be your dream  
job, but you're not going to starve.Another advantage of bad times is that there's less competition.  
Technology trains leave the station at regular intervals. If   
everyone else is cowering in a corner, you may have a whole car to  
yourself.You're an investor too. As a founder, you're buying stock with  
work: the reason Larry and Sergey are so rich is not so much that  
they've done work worth tens of billions of dollars, but that they  
were the first investors in Google. And like any investor you  
should buy when times are bad.Were you nodding in agreement, thinking "stupid investors" a few  
paragraphs ago when I was talking about how investors are reluctant  
to put money into startups in bad markets, even though that's the  
time they should rationally be most willing to buy? Well, founders  
aren't much better. When times get bad, hackers go to grad school.  
And no doubt that will happen this time too. In fact, what makes  
the preceding paragraph true is that most readers won't believe  
it—at least to the extent of acting on it.So maybe a recession is a good time to start a startup. It's hard  
to say whether advantages like lack of competition outweigh  
disadvantages like reluctant investors. But it doesn't matter much  
either way. It's the people that matter. And for a given set of  
people working on a given technology, the time to act is always  
now.Russian TranslationChinese TranslationJapanese Translation

# A Fundraising Survival Guide

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
August 2008Raising money is the second hardest part of starting a startup.  
The hardest part is making something people want: most startups  
that die, die because they didn't do that. But the second biggest  
cause of death is probably the difficulty of raising money.  
Fundraising is brutal.One reason it's so brutal is simply the brutality of markets. People  
who've spent most of their lives in schools or big companies may  
not have been exposed to that. Professors and bosses usually feel  
some sense of responsibility toward you; if you make a valiant  
effort and fail, they'll cut you a break. Markets are less forgiving.  
Customers don't care how hard you worked, only whether you solved  
their problems.Investors evaluate startups the way customers evaluate products,  
not the way bosses evaluate employees. If you're making a valiant  
effort and failing, maybe they'll invest in your next startup, but  
not this one.But raising money from investors is harder than selling to  
customers, because there are so few of them. There's  
nothing like an efficient market. You're unlikely to have more  
than 10 who are interested; it's difficult to talk to more. So the  
randomness of any one investor's behavior can really affect you.Problem number 3: investors are very random. All investors, including  
us, are by ordinary standards incompetent. We constantly have to  
make decisions about things we don't understand, and more often  
than not we're wrong.And yet a lot is at stake. The amounts invested by different types  
of investors vary from five thousand dollars to fifty million, but  
the amount usually seems large for whatever type of investor it is.  
Investment decisions are big decisions.That combination—making big decisions about things they don't  
understand—tends to make investors very skittish. VCs are notorious  
for leading founders on. Some of the more unscrupulous do it  
deliberately. But even the most well-intentioned investors can  
behave in a way that would seem crazy in everyday life. One day  
they're full of enthusiasm and seem ready to write you a check on  
the spot; the next they won't return your phone calls. They're not  
playing games with you. They just can't make up their minds.  
[1]If that weren't bad enough, these wildly fluctuating nodes are all  
linked together. Startup investors all know one another, and (though  
they hate to admit it) the biggest factor in their opinion of you  
is the opinion of other investors.   
[2]  
Talk about a recipe for  
an unstable system. You get the opposite of the damping that the  
fear/greed balance usually produces in markets. No one is interested  
in a startup that's a "bargain" because everyone else hates it.So the inefficient market you get because there are so few players  
is exacerbated by the fact that they act less than independently.  
The result is a system like some kind of primitive, multi-celled  
sea creature, where you irritate one extremity and the whole thing  
contracts violently.Y Combinator is working to fix this. We're trying to increase the  
number of investors just as we're increasing the number of startups.  
We hope that as the number of both increases we'll get something  
more like an efficient market. As t approaches infinity, Demo Day  
approaches an auction.Unfortunately, t is still very far from infinity. What does a  
startup do now, in the imperfect world we currently inhabit? The  
most important thing is not to let fundraising get you down. Startups  
live or die on morale. If you let the difficulty of raising money  
destroy your morale, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy.  
Bootstrapping (= Consulting)Some would-be founders may by now be thinking, why deal with investors  
at all? If raising money is so painful, why do it?One answer to that is obvious: because you need money to live on.  
It's a fine idea in principle to finance your startup with its own  
revenues, but you can't create instant customers. Whatever you  
make, you have to sell a certain amount to break even. It will  
take time to grow your sales to that point, and it's hard to predict,  
till you try, how long it will take.We could not have bootstrapped Viaweb, for example. We charged  
quite a lot for our software—about $140 per user per month—but  
it was at least a year before our revenues would have covered even  
our paltry costs. We didn't have enough saved to live on for a  
year.If you factor out the "bootstrapped" companies that were actually  
funded by their founders through savings or a day job, the remainder  
either (a) got really lucky, which is hard to do on demand, or (b)  
began life as consulting companies and gradually transformed  
themselves into product companies.Consulting is the only option you can count on. But consulting is  
far from free money. It's not as painful as raising money from  
investors, perhaps, but the pain is spread over a longer period.  
Years, probably. And for many types of startup, that delay could  
be fatal. If you're working on something so unusual that no one  
else is likely to think of it, you can take your time. Joshua  
Schachter gradually built Delicious on the side while working on  
Wall Street. He got away with it because no one else realized it  
was a good idea. But if you were building something as obviously  
necessary as online store software at about the same time as Viaweb,  
and you were working on it on the side while spending most of your  
time on client work, you were not in a good position.Bootstrapping sounds great in principle, but this apparently verdant  
territory is one from which few startups emerge alive. The mere  
fact that bootstrapped startups tend to be famous on that account  
should set off alarm bells. If it worked so well, it would be the  
norm.  
[3]  
Bootstrapping may get easier, because starting a company is getting  
cheaper. But I don't think we'll ever reach the point where most  
startups can do without outside funding. Technology tends to  
get dramatically cheaper, but living expenses don't.The upshot is, you can choose your pain: either the short, sharp  
pain of raising money, or the chronic ache of consulting. For a  
given total amount of pain, raising money is the better choice,  
because new technology is usually more valuable now than later.But although for most startups raising money will be the lesser  
evil, it's still a pretty big evil—so big that it can easily kill  
you. Not merely in the obvious sense that if you fail to raise  
money you might have to shut the company down, but because the  
process of raising money itself can kill you.To survive it you need a set of techniques mostly  
orthogonal to the ones used in convincing investors, just as mountain  
climbers need to know survival techniques that are mostly orthogonal  
to those used in physically getting up and down mountains.  
1. Have low expectations.The reason raising money destroys so many startups' morale is not  
simply that it's hard, but that it's so much harder than they  
expected. What kills you is the disappointment. And the lower  
your expectations, the harder it is to be disappointed.Startup founders tend to be optimistic. This can work well in  
technology, at least some of the time, but it's the wrong way to  
approach raising money. Better to assume investors will always let  
you down. Acquirers too, while we're at it. At YC one of our  
secondary mantras is "Deals fall through." No matter what deal  
you have going on, assume it will fall through. The predictive  
power of this simple rule is amazing.There will be a tendency, as a deal progresses, to start to believe  
it will happen, and then to depend on it happening. You must resist  
this. Tie yourself to the mast. This is what kills you. Deals  
do not have a trajectory like most other human interactions, where  
shared plans solidify linearly over time. Deals often fall through  
at the last moment. Often the other party doesn't really think  
about what they want till the last moment. So you can't use your  
everyday intuitions about shared plans as a guide. When it comes  
to deals, you have to consciously turn them off and become  
pathologically cynical.This is harder to do than it sounds. It's very flattering when  
eminent investors seem interested in funding you. It's easy to  
start to believe that raising money will be quick and straightforward.  
But it hardly ever is.  
2. Keep working on your startup.It sounds obvious to say that you should keep working on your startup  
while raising money. Actually this is hard to do. Most startups  
don't manage to.Raising money has a mysterious capacity to suck up all your attention.  
Even if you only have one meeting a day with investors, somehow  
that one meeting will burn up your whole day. It costs not just  
the time of the actual meeting, but the time getting there and back,  
and the time preparing for it beforehand and thinking about it  
afterward.The best way to survive the distraction of meeting with investors  
is probably to partition the company: to pick one founder to deal  
with investors while the others keep the company going. This works  
better when a startup has 3 founders than 2, and better when the  
leader of the company is not also the lead developer. In the best  
case, the company keeps moving forward at about half speed.That's the best case, though. More often than not the company comes  
to a standstill while raising money. And that is dangerous for so  
many reasons. Raising money always takes longer than you expect.  
What seems like it's going to be a 2 week interruption turns into  
a 4 month interruption. That can be very demoralizing. And worse  
still, it can make you less attractive to investors. They want to  
invest in companies that are dynamic. A company that hasn't done  
anything new in 4 months doesn't seem dynamic, so they start to  
lose interest. Investors rarely grasp this, but much of what  
they're responding to when they lose interest in a startup is the  
damage done by their own indecision.The solution: put the startup first. Fit meetings with investors  
into the spare moments in your development schedule, rather than  
doing development in the spare moments between meetings with  
investors. If you keep the company moving forward—releasing new  
features, increasing traffic, doing deals, getting written   
about—those investor meetings are more likely to be productive. Not just  
because your startup will seem more alive, but also because it will  
be better for your own morale, which is one of the main ways investors  
judge you.  
3. Be conservative.As conditions get worse, the optimal strategy becomes more conservative.  
When things go well you can take risks; when things are bad you  
want to play it safe.I advise approaching fundraising as if it were always going badly.  
The reason is that between your ability to delude yourself and the  
wildly unstable nature of the system you're dealing with, things  
probably either already are or could easily become much worse than  
they seem.What I tell most startups we fund is that if someone reputable  
offers you funding on reasonable terms, take it. There have been  
startups that ignored this advice and got away with it—startups  
that ignored a good offer in the hope of getting a better one, and  
actually did. But in the same position I'd give the same advice  
again. Who knows how many bullets were in the gun they were playing  
Russian roulette with?Corollary: if an investor seems interested, don't just let them  
sit. You can't assume someone interested in investing will stay  
interested. In fact, you can't even tell (they can't even tell)  
if they're really interested till you try to convert that interest  
into money. So if you have hot prospect, either close them now or  
write them off. And unless you already have enough funding, that  
reduces to: close them now.Startups don't win by getting great funding rounds, but by making  
great products. So finish raising money and get  
back to work.  
4. Be flexible.There are two questions VCs ask that you shouldn't answer: "Who  
else are you talking to?" and "How much are you trying to raise?"VCs don't expect you to answer the first question. They ask it just  
in case.   
[4]  
They do seem to expect an answer to the second. But  
I don't think you should just tell them a number. Not as a way to  
play games with them, but because you shouldn't have a fixed  
amount you need to raise.The custom of a startup needing a fixed amount of funding is an  
obsolete one left over from the days when startups were more  
expensive. A company that needed to build a factory or hire 50  
people obviously needed to raise a certain minimum amount. But few  
technology startups are in that position today.We advise startups to tell investors there are several different  
routes they could take depending on how much they raised. As little  
as $50k could pay for food and rent for the founders for a year.  
A couple hundred thousand would let them get office space and hire  
some smart people they know from school. A couple million would  
let them really blow this thing out. The message (and not just the  
message, but the fact) should be: we're going to succeed no matter  
what. Raising more money just lets us do it faster.If you're raising an angel round, the size of the round can even  
change on the fly. In fact, it's just as well to make the round  
small initially, then expand as needed, rather than trying to raise  
a large round and risk losing the investors you already have if you  
can't raise the full amount. You may even want to do a "rolling  
close," where the round has no predetermined size, but instead you  
sell stock to investors one at a time as they say yes. That helps  
break deadlocks, because you can start as soon as the first one  
is ready to buy.   
[5]  
5. Be independent.A startup with a couple founders in their early twenties can have  
expenses so low that they could be profitable on  
as little as $2000 per month. That's negligible as corporate  
revenues go, but the effect on your morale and your bargaining  
position is anything but. At YC we use the phrase "ramen profitable"  
to describe the situation where you're making just enough to pay  
your living expenses. Once you cross into ramen profitable,  
everything changes. You may still need investment to make it big,  
but you don't need it this month.You can't plan when you start a startup how long  
it will take to become profitable. But if you find yourself in a  
position where a little more effort expended on sales would carry  
you over the threshold of ramen profitable, do it.Investors like it when you're ramen profitable. It shows you've  
thought about making money, instead of just working on amusing  
technical problems; it shows you have the discipline to keep your  
expenses low; but above all, it means you don't need them.There is nothing investors like more than a startup that seems like  
it's going to succeed even without them. Investors like it when  
they can help a startup, but they don't like startups that would  
die without that help.At YC we spend a lot of time trying to predict how the startups we've  
funded will do, because we're trying to learn how to pick winners.  
We've now watched the trajectories of so many startups that we're  
getting better at predicting them. And when we're talking  
about startups we think are likely to succeed, what we find ourselves  
saying is things like "Oh, those guys can take care of themselves.  
They'll be fine." Not "those guys are really smart" or  
"those guys are working on a great idea."  
[6]  
When we predict good outcomes for startups, the qualities  
that come up in the supporting arguments are toughness, adaptability,  
determination. Which means to the extent we're correct, those are  
the qualities you need to win.Investors know this, at least unconsciously. The reason they like  
it when you don't need them is not simply that they like what they  
can't have, but because that quality is what makes founders succeed.Sam Altman   
has it. You could parachute him into an island full of  
cannibals and come back in 5 years and he'd be the king. If you're  
Sam Altman, you don't have to be profitable to convey to investors  
that you'll succeed with or without them. (He wasn't, and he did.)  
Not everyone has Sam's deal-making ability. I myself don't. But  
if you don't, you can let the numbers speak for you.  
6. Don't take rejection personally.Getting rejected by investors can make you start to doubt yourself.  
After all, they're more experienced than you. If they think your  
startup is lame, aren't they probably right?Maybe, maybe not. The way to handle rejection is with precision.  
You shouldn't simply ignore rejection. It might mean something.  
But you shouldn't automatically get demoralized either.To understand what rejection means, you have to understand first  
of all how common it is. Statistically, the average VC is a rejection  
machine. David Hornik, a partner at August, told me:  
  
 The numbers for me ended up being something like 500 to 800 plans  
 received and read, somewhere between 50 and 100 initial 1 hour  
 meetings held, about 20 companies that I got interested in, about  
 5 that I got serious about and did a bunch of work, 1 to 2 deals  
 done in a year. So the odds are against you. You  
 may be a great entrepreneur, working on interesting stuff, etc.  
 but it is still incredibly unlikely that you get funded.  
  
This is less true with angels, but VCs reject practically everyone.  
The structure of their business means a partner does at most 2 new  
investments a year, no matter how many good startups approach him.In addition to the odds being terrible, the average investor is,  
as I mentioned, a pretty bad judge of startups. It's harder to  
judge startups than most other things, because great startup ideas  
tend to seem wrong. A good startup idea has to be not just good but  
novel. And to be both good and novel, an idea probably has to seem  
bad to most people, or someone would already be doing it and it  
wouldn't be novel.That makes judging startups harder than most other things one judges.  
You have to be an intellectual contrarian to be a good startup  
investor. That's a problem for VCs, most of whom are not particularly  
imaginative. VCs are mostly money guys, not people who make things.  
[7]  
Angels are better at appreciating novel ideas, because most  
were founders themselves.So when you get a rejection, use the data that's in it, and not what's  
not. If an investor gives you specific reasons for not investing,  
look at your startup and ask if they're right. If they're real  
problems, fix them. But don't just take their word for it. You're  
supposed to be the domain expert; you have to decide.Though a rejection doesn't necessarily tell you anything about your  
startup, it does suggest your pitch could be improved. Figure out  
what's not working and change it. Don't just think "investors are  
stupid." Often they are, but figure out precisely where you lose  
them.Don't let rejections pile up as a depressing, undifferentiated heap.  
Sort them and analyze them, and then instead of thinking "no one  
likes us," you'll know precisely how big a problem you have, and  
what to do about it.  
7. Be able to downshift into consulting (if appropriate).Consulting, as I mentioned, is a dangerous way to finance a startup.  
But it's better than dying. It's a bit like anaerobic respiration:  
not the optimum solution for the long term, but it can save you  
from an immediate threat. If you're having trouble raising money  
from investors at all, it could save you to be able to shift  
toward consulting.This works better for some startups than others. It wouldn't have  
been a natural fit for, say, Google, but if your company was making  
software for building web sites, you could degrade fairly gracefully  
into consulting by building sites for clients with it.So long as you were careful not to get sucked permanently into  
consulting, this could even have advantages. You'd understand your  
users well if you were using the software for them. Plus as a  
consulting company you might be able to get big-name users using  
your software that you wouldn't have gotten as a product company.At Viaweb we were forced to operate like a consulting company  
initially, because we were so desperate for users that we'd offer  
to build merchants' sites for them if they'd sign up.   
But we never charged for such work, because we didn't want them to  
start treating us like actual consultants, and calling us every  
time they wanted something changed on their site. We knew we had  
to stay a product company, because only  
that scales.  
8. Avoid inexperienced investors.Though novice investors seem unthreatening they can be the most  
dangerous sort, because they're so nervous. Especially in  
proportion to the amount they invest. Raising $20,000 from a first-time  
angel investor can be as much work as raising $2 million from  
a VC fund.Their lawyers are generally inexperienced too. But while the  
investors can admit they don't know what they're doing, their lawyers  
can't. One YC startup negotiated terms for a tiny round with  
an angel, only to receive a 70-page agreement from his lawyer. And  
since the lawyer could never admit, in front of his client, that  
he'd screwed up, he instead had to insist on retaining all the  
draconian terms in it, so the deal fell through.Of course, someone has to take money from novice investors, or there  
would never be any experienced ones. But if you do, either (a)  
drive the process yourself, including supplying the   
paperwork, or  
(b) use them only to fill up a larger round led by someone else.  
9. Know where you stand.The most dangerous thing about investors is their indecisiveness.  
The worst case scenario is the long no, the no that comes after  
months of meetings. Rejections from investors are like design  
flaws: inevitable, but much less costly if you discover them early.So while you're talking to investors, constantly look for signs of  
where you stand. How likely are they to offer you a term sheet?  
What do they have to be convinced of first? You shouldn't necessarily  
always be asking these questions outright—that could get   
annoying—but you should always be collecting data about them.Investors tend to resist committing except to the extent you push  
them to. It's in their interest to collect the maximum amount of  
information while making the minimum number of decisions. The best  
way to force them to act is, of course, competing investors. But  
you can also apply some force by focusing the discussion:  
by asking what specific questions they need answered to make  
up their minds, and then answering them. If you get through several  
obstacles and they keep raising new ones, assume that ultimately  
they're going to flake.You have to be disciplined when collecting data about investors'  
intentions. Otherwise their desire to lead you on will combine  
with your own desire to be led on to produce completely inaccurate  
impressions.Use the data to weight your strategy.  
You'll probably be talking to several investors. Focus on the ones  
that are most likely to say yes. The value of a potential investor  
is a combination of how good it would be if they said yes, and how  
likely they are to say it. Put the most weight on the second factor.  
Partly because the most important quality in an investor is simply  
investing. But also because, as I mentioned, the biggest factor  
in investors' opinion of you is other investors' opinion of you.  
If you're talking to several investors and you manage to get one  
over the threshold of saying yes, it will make the others much more  
interested. So you're not sacrificing the lukewarm investors if  
you focus on the hot ones; convincing the hot investors is the best  
way to convince the lukewarm ones.  
FutureI'm hopeful things won't always be so awkward. I hope that as startups  
get cheaper and the number of investors increases, raising money  
will become, if not easy, at least straightforward.In the meantime, the brokenness of the funding process offers a big  
opportunity. Most investors have no idea how dangerous they are.  
They'd be surprised to hear that raising money from them is something  
that has to be treated as a threat to a company's survival. They  
just think they need a little more information to make up their  
minds. They don't get that there are 10 other investors who also  
want a little more information, and that the process of talking to  
them all can bring a startup to a standstill for months.Because investors don't understand the cost of dealing with them,  
they don't realize how much room there is for a potential competitor  
to undercut them. I know from my own experience how much faster  
investors could decide, because we've brought our own time down to  
20 minutes (5 minutes of reading an application plus a 10 minute  
interview plus 5 minutes of discussion). If you were investing  
more money you'd want to take longer, of course. But if we can  
decide in 20 minutes, should it take anyone longer than a couple  
days?Opportunities like this don't sit unexploited forever, even in an  
industry as conservative as venture capital. So  
either existing investors will start to make up their minds faster,  
or new investors will emerge who do.In the meantime founders have to treat raising money as a dangerous  
process. Fortunately, I can fix the biggest danger right here.  
The biggest danger is surprise. It's that startups will underestimate  
the difficulty of raising money—that they'll cruise through all  
the initial steps, but when they turn to raising money they'll find  
it surprisingly hard, get demoralized, and give up. So I'm telling  
you in advance: raising money is hard.Notes[1]  
When investors can't make up their minds, they sometimes  
describe it as if it were a property of the startup. "You're too  
early for us," they sometimes say. But which of them, if they were  
taken back in a time machine to the hour Google was founded, wouldn't  
offer to invest at any valuation the founders chose? An hour old  
is not too early if it's the right startup. What "you're too early"  
really means is "we can't figure out yet whether you'll succeed."  
[2]  
Investors influence one another both directly and indirectly.  
They influence one another directly through the "buzz" that surrounds  
a hot startup. But they also influence one another indirectly  
through the founders. When a lot of investors are interested in  
you, it increases your confidence in a way that makes you much more  
attractive to investors.No VC will admit they're influenced by buzz. Some genuinely aren't.  
But there are few who can say they're not influenced by confidence.[3]  
One VC who read this essay wrote:"We try to avoid companies that got bootstrapped with consulting.   
It creates very bad behaviors/instincts that are hard to erase   
from a company's culture."[4]  
The optimal way to answer the first question is to say that  
it would be improper to name names, while simultaneously implying  
that you're talking to a bunch of other VCs who are all about to  
give you term sheets. If you're the sort of person who understands  
how to do that, go ahead. If not, don't even try. Nothing annoys  
VCs more than clumsy efforts to manipulate them.[5]  
The disadvantage of expanding a round on the fly is that the  
valuation is fixed at the start, so if you get a sudden rush of  
interest, you may have to decide between turning some investors  
away and selling more of the company than you meant to. That's a  
good problem to have, however.[6]  
I wouldn't say that intelligence doesn't matter in startups.  
We're only comparing YC startups, who've already made it over a  
certain threshold.[7]  
But not all are. Though most VCs are suits at heart,  
the most successful ones tend not to be. Oddly enough,  
the best VCs tend to be the least VC-like.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, David Hornik, Jessica Livingston,  
Robert Morris, and Fred Wilson for reading drafts of this.Russian Translation

# The Pooled-Risk Company Management Company

July 2008At this year's startup school, David Heinemeier Hansson gave a  
 talk  
in which he suggested that startup founders  
should do things the old fashioned way. Instead of hoping to get  
rich by building a valuable company and then selling stock in a  
"liquidity event," founders should start companies that make money  
and live off the revenues.Sounds like a good plan. Let's think about the optimal way to do  
this.One disadvantage of living off the revenues of your company is that  
you have to keep running it. And as anyone who runs their own  
business can tell you, that requires your complete attention. You  
can't just start a business and check out once things are going  
well, or they stop going well surprisingly fast.The main economic motives of startup founders seem to be freedom  
and security. They want enough money that (a) they don't have to  
worry about running out of money and (b) they can spend their time  
how they want. Running your own business offers neither. You  
certainly don't have freedom: no boss is so demanding. Nor do you  
have security, because if you stop paying attention to the company,  
its revenues go away, and with them your income.The best case, for most people, would be if you could hire someone  
to manage the company for you once you'd grown it to a certain size.  
Suppose you could find a really good manager. Then you would have  
both freedom and security. You could pay as little attention to  
the business as you wanted, knowing that your manager would keep  
things running smoothly. And that being so, revenues would continue  
to flow in, so you'd have security as well.There will of course be some founders who wouldn't like that idea:  
the ones who like running their company so much that there's nothing  
else they'd rather do. But this group must be small. The way you  
succeed in most businesses is to be fanatically attentive  
to customers' needs. What are the odds that your own desires would  
coincide exactly with the demands of this powerful, external force?Sure, running your own company can be fairly interesting. Viaweb  
was more interesting than any job I'd had before. And since I made  
much more money from it, it offered the highest ratio of income to  
boringness of anything I'd done, by orders of magnitude. But was  
it the most interesting work I could imagine doing? No.Whether the number of founders in the same position is asymptotic  
or merely large, there are certainly a lot of them. For them the  
right approach would be to hand the company over to a professional  
manager eventually, if they could find one who was good enough.\_\_\_\_\_So far so good. But what if your manager was hit by a bus? What  
you really want is a management company to run your company for  
you. Then you don't depend on any one person.If you own rental property, there are companies you can hire to  
manage it for you. Some will do everything, from finding tenants  
to fixing leaks. Of course, running companies is a lot more  
complicated than managing rental property, but let's suppose there  
were management companies that could do it for you. They'd charge  
a lot, but wouldn't it be worth it? I'd sacrifice a large percentage  
of the income for the extra peace of mind.I realize what I'm describing already sounds too good to be true, but I  
can think of a way to make it even more attractive. If  
company management companies existed, there would be an additional  
service they could offer clients: they could let them insure their  
returns by pooling their risk. After all, even a perfect manager can't save a company  
when, as sometimes happens, its whole market dies, just as property  
managers can't save you from the building burning down. But a  
company that managed a large enough number of companies could say  
to all its clients: we'll combine the revenues from all your  
companies, and pay you your proportionate share.If such management companies existed, they'd offer the maximum of  
freedom and security. Someone would run your company for you, and  
you'd be protected even if it happened to die.Let's think about how such a management company might be organized.  
The simplest way would be to have a new kind of stock representing  
the total pool of companies they were managing. When you signed  
up, you'd trade your company's stock for shares of this pool, in  
proportion to an estimate of your company's value that you'd both  
agreed upon. Then you'd automatically get your share of the returns  
of the whole pool.The catch is that because this kind of trade would be hard to undo,  
you couldn't switch management companies. But there's a way they  
could fix that: suppose all the company management companies got  
together and agreed to allow their clients to exchange shares in  
all their pools. Then you could, in effect, simultaneously choose  
all the management companies to run yours for you, in whatever  
proportion you wanted, and change your mind later as often as you  
wanted.If such pooled-risk company management companies existed, signing  
up with one would seem the ideal plan for most people following the  
route David advocated.Good news: they do exist. What I've just  
described is an acquisition by a public company.\_\_\_\_\_Unfortunately, though public acquirers are structurally identical  
to pooled-risk company management companies, they don't think of  
themselves that way. With a property management company, you can  
just walk in whenever you want and say "manage my rental property  
for me" and they'll do it. Whereas acquirers are, as of this  
writing, extremely fickle. Sometimes they're in a buying mood and  
they'll overpay enormously; other times they're not interested.  
They're like property management companies run by madmen. Or more  
precisely, by Benjamin Graham's Mr. Market.So while on average public acquirers behave like pooled-risk company  
managers, you need a window of several years to get average case  
performance. If you wait long enough (five years, say) you're  
likely to hit an up cycle where some acquirer is hot to buy you.  
But you can't choose when it happens.You can't assume investors will carry you for as long as you might  
have to wait. Your company has to make money. Opinions are divided  
about how early to focus on that.   
Joe Kraus says you should try  
charging customers right away. And yet some of the most successful  
startups, including Google, ignored revenue at first and concentrated  
exclusively on development. The answer probably depends on the  
type of company you're starting. I can imagine some where trying  
to make sales would be a good heuristic for product design, and  
others where it would just be a distraction. The test is probably  
whether it helps you to understand your users.You can choose whichever revenue strategy you think is best for the  
type of company you're starting, so long as you're profitable.  
Being profitable ensures you'll get at least the average of the  
acquisition market—in which public companies do behave as pooled-risk  
company management companies.David isn't mistaken in saying you should start a company to live  
off its revenues. The mistake is thinking this is somehow opposed  
to starting a company and selling it. In fact, for most people the  
latter is merely the optimal case of the former.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, Michael  
Mandel, Robert Morris, and Fred Wilson for reading drafts of this.  
Russian Translation

# Cities and Ambition

May 2008  
Great cities attract ambitious people. You can sense it when you  
walk around one. In a hundred subtle ways, the city sends you a  
message: you could do more; you should try harder.The surprising thing is how different these messages can be. New  
York tells you, above all: you should make more money. There are  
other messages too, of course. You should be hipper. You should  
be better looking. But the clearest message is that you should be  
richer.What I like about Boston (or rather Cambridge) is that the message  
there is: you should be smarter. You really should get around to  
reading all those books you've been meaning to.When you ask what message a city sends, you sometimes get surprising  
answers. As much as they respect brains in Silicon Valley, the  
message the Valley sends is: you should be more powerful.That's not quite the same message New York sends. Power matters  
in New York too of course, but New York is pretty impressed by a  
billion dollars even if you merely inherited it. In Silicon Valley  
no one would care except a few real estate agents. What matters  
in Silicon Valley is how much effect you have on the world. The  
reason people there care about Larry and Sergey is not their wealth  
but the fact that they control Google, which affects practically  
everyone.\_\_\_\_\_How much does it matter what message a city sends? Empirically,  
the answer seems to be: a lot. You might think that if you had  
enough strength of mind to do great things, you'd be able to transcend  
your environment. Where you live should make at most a couple  
percent difference. But if you look at the historical evidence,  
it seems to matter more than that. Most people who did great things  
were clumped together in a few places where that sort of thing was  
done at the time.You can see how powerful cities are from something I wrote about  
earlier: the case of the Milanese Leonardo.   
Practically every  
fifteenth century Italian painter you've heard of was from Florence,  
even though Milan was just as big. People in Florence weren't  
genetically different, so you have to assume there was someone born  
in Milan with as much natural ability as Leonardo. What happened  
to him?If even someone with the same natural ability as Leonardo  
couldn't beat the force of environment, do you suppose you can?I don't. I'm fairly stubborn, but I wouldn't try to fight this  
force. I'd rather use it. So I've thought a lot about where to  
live.I'd always imagined Berkeley would be the ideal place — that  
it would basically be Cambridge with good weather. But when I  
finally tried living there a couple years ago, it turned out not  
to be. The message Berkeley sends is: you should live better. Life  
in Berkeley is very civilized. It's probably the place in America  
where someone from Northern Europe would feel most at home. But  
it's not humming with ambition.In retrospect it shouldn't have been surprising that a place so  
pleasant would attract people interested above all in quality of  
life. Cambridge with good weather, it turns out, is not Cambridge.  
The people you find in Cambridge are not there by accident. You  
have to make sacrifices to live there. It's expensive and somewhat  
grubby, and the weather's often bad. So the kind of people you  
find in Cambridge are the kind of people who want to live where the  
smartest people are, even if that means living in an expensive,  
grubby place with bad weather.As of this writing, Cambridge seems to be the intellectual capital  
of the world. I realize that seems a preposterous claim. What  
makes it true is that it's more preposterous to claim about anywhere  
else. American universities currently seem to be the best, judging  
from the flow of ambitious students. And what US city has a stronger  
claim? New York? A fair number of smart people, but diluted by a  
much larger number of neanderthals in suits. The Bay Area has a  
lot of smart people too, but again, diluted; there are two great  
universities, but they're far apart. Harvard and MIT are practically  
adjacent by West Coast standards, and they're surrounded by about  
20 other colleges and universities.  
[1]Cambridge as a result feels like a town whose main industry is  
ideas, while New York's is finance and Silicon Valley's is startups.\_\_\_\_\_When you talk about cities in the sense we are, what you're really  
talking about is collections of people. For a long time cities  
were the only large collections of people, so you could use the two  
ideas interchangeably. But we can see how much things are changing  
from the examples I've mentioned. New York is a classic great city.  
But Cambridge is just part of a city, and Silicon Valley is not  
even that. (San Jose is not, as it sometimes claims, the capital  
of Silicon Valley. It's just 178 square miles at one end of it.)Maybe the Internet will change things further. Maybe one day the  
most important community you belong to will be a virtual one, and  
it won't matter where you live physically. But I wouldn't bet on  
it. The physical world is very high bandwidth, and some of the  
ways cities send you messages are quite subtle.One of the exhilarating things about coming back to Cambridge every  
spring is walking through the streets at dusk, when you can see  
into the houses. When you walk through Palo Alto in the evening,  
you see nothing but the blue glow of TVs. In Cambridge you see  
shelves full of promising-looking books. Palo Alto was probably  
much like Cambridge in 1960, but you'd never guess now that there  
was a university nearby. Now it's just one of the richer neighborhoods  
in Silicon Valley.   
[2]A city speaks to you mostly by accident — in things you see  
through windows, in conversations you overhear. It's not something  
you have to seek out, but something you can't turn off. One of the  
occupational hazards of living in Cambridge is overhearing the  
conversations of people who use interrogative intonation in declarative  
sentences. But on average I'll take Cambridge conversations over  
New York or Silicon Valley ones.A friend who moved to Silicon Valley in the late 90s said the worst  
thing about living there was the low quality of the eavesdropping.  
At the time I thought she was being deliberately eccentric. Sure,  
it can be interesting to eavesdrop on people, but is good quality  
eavesdropping so important that it would affect where you chose to  
live? Now I understand what she meant. The conversations you  
overhear tell you what sort of people you're among.\_\_\_\_\_No matter how determined you are, it's hard not to be influenced  
by the people around you. It's not so much that you do whatever a  
city expects of you, but that you get discouraged when no one around  
you cares about the same things you do.There's an imbalance between encouragement and discouragement like  
that between gaining and losing money. Most people overvalue  
negative amounts of money: they'll work much harder to avoid losing  
a dollar than to gain one. Similarly, although there are plenty of  
people strong enough to resist doing something just because that's  
what one is supposed to do where they happen to be, there are few  
strong enough to keep working on something no one around them cares  
about.Because ambitions are to some extent incompatible and admiration  
is a zero-sum game, each city tends to focus on one type of ambition.  
The reason Cambridge is the intellectual capital is not just that  
there's a concentration of smart people there, but that there's  
nothing else people there care about more. Professors in  
New York and the Bay area are second class citizens — till they  
start hedge funds or startups respectively.This suggests an answer to a question people in New York have  
wondered about since the Bubble: whether New York could grow into  
a startup hub to rival Silicon Valley. One reason that's unlikely  
is that someone starting a startup in New York would feel like a  
second class citizen.   
[3]  
There's already something else people in New York admire more.In the long term, that could be a bad thing for New York. The power  
of an important new technology does eventually convert to money.  
So by caring more about money and less about power than Silicon  
Valley, New York is recognizing the same thing, but slower.  
[4]  
And in fact it has been losing to Silicon Valley at its own game:  
the ratio of New York to California residents in the Forbes 400 has  
decreased from 1.45 (81:56) when the list was first published in  
1982 to .83 (73:88) in 2007.\_\_\_\_\_Not all cities send a message. Only those that are centers for  
some type of ambition do. And it can be hard to tell exactly what  
message a city sends without living there. I understand the messages  
of New York, Cambridge, and Silicon Valley because I've lived for  
several years in each of them. DC and LA seem to send messages  
too, but I haven't spent long enough in either to say for sure what  
they are.The big thing in LA seems to be fame. There's an A List of people  
who are most in demand right now, and what's most admired is to be  
on it, or friends with those who are. Beneath that, the message is  
much like New York's, though perhaps with more emphasis on physical  
attractiveness.In DC the message seems to be that the most important thing is who  
you know. You want to be an insider. In practice this seems to  
work much as in LA. There's an A List and you want to be on it or  
close to those who are. The only difference is how the A List is  
selected. And even that is not that different.At the moment, San Francisco's message seems to be the same as  
Berkeley's: you should live better. But this will change if enough  
startups choose SF over the Valley. During the Bubble that was a  
predictor of failure — a self-indulgent choice, like buying  
expensive office furniture. Even now I'm suspicious when startups  
choose SF. But if enough good ones do, it stops being a self-indulgent  
choice, because the center of gravity of Silicon Valley will shift  
there.I haven't found anything like Cambridge for intellectual ambition.  
Oxford and Cambridge (England) feel like Ithaca or Hanover: the  
message is there, but not as strong.Paris was once a great intellectual center. If you went there in  
1300, it might have sent the message Cambridge does now. But I  
tried living there for a bit last year, and the ambitions of the  
inhabitants are not intellectual ones. The message Paris sends now  
is: do things with style. I liked that, actually. Paris is the  
only city I've lived in where people genuinely cared about art. In  
America only a few rich people buy original art, and even the more  
sophisticated ones rarely get past judging it by the brand name of  
the artist. But looking through windows at dusk in Paris you can  
see that people there actually care what paintings look like.  
Visually, Paris has the best eavesdropping I know.   
[5]There's one more message I've heard from cities: in London you can  
still (barely) hear the message that one should be more aristocratic.  
If you listen for it you can also hear it in Paris, New York, and  
Boston. But this message is everywhere very faint. It would have  
been strong 100 years ago, but now I probably wouldn't have picked  
it up at all if I hadn't deliberately tuned in to that wavelength  
to see if there was any signal left.\_\_\_\_\_So far the complete list of messages I've picked up from cities is:  
wealth, style, hipness, physical attractiveness, fame, political  
power, economic power, intelligence, social class, and quality of  
life.My immediate reaction to this list is that it makes me slightly  
queasy. I'd always considered ambition a good thing, but I realize  
now that was because I'd always implicitly understood it to mean  
ambition in the areas I cared about. When you list everything  
ambitious people are ambitious about, it's not so pretty.On closer examination I see a couple things on the list that are  
surprising in the light of history. For example, physical  
attractiveness wouldn't have been there 100 years ago (though it  
might have been 2400 years ago). It has always mattered for women,  
but in the late twentieth century it seems to have started to matter  
for men as well. I'm not sure why — probably some combination  
of the increasing power of women, the increasing influence of actors  
as models, and the fact that so many people work in offices now:  
you can't show off by wearing clothes too fancy to wear in a factory,  
so you have to show off with your body instead.Hipness is another thing you wouldn't have seen on the list 100  
years ago. Or wouldn't you? What it means is to know what's what.  
So maybe it has simply replaced the component of social class that  
consisted of being "au fait." That could explain why hipness seems  
particularly admired in London: it's version 2 of the traditional  
English delight in obscure codes that only insiders understand.Economic power would have been on the list 100 years ago, but what  
we mean by it is changing. It used to mean the control of vast  
human and material resources. But increasingly it means the ability  
to direct the course of technology, and some of the people in a  
position to do that are not even rich — leaders of important  
open source projects, for example. The Captains of Industry of  
times past had laboratories full of clever people cooking up new  
technologies for them. The new breed are themselves those people.As this force gets more attention, another is dropping off the list:  
social class. I think the two changes are related. Economic power,  
wealth, and social class are just names for the same thing at  
different stages in its life: economic power converts to wealth,  
and wealth to social class. So the focus of admiration is simply  
shifting upstream.\_\_\_\_\_Does anyone who wants to do great work have to live in a great city?  
No; all great cities inspire some sort of ambition, but they aren't  
the only places that do. For some kinds of work, all you need is  
a handful of talented colleagues.What cities provide is an audience, and a funnel for peers. These  
aren't so critical in something like math or physics, where no  
audience matters except your peers, and judging ability is sufficiently  
straightforward that hiring and admissions committees can do it  
reliably. In a field like math or physics all you need is a  
department with the right colleagues in it. It could be anywhere — in  
Los Alamos, New Mexico, for example.It's in fields like the arts or writing or technology that the  
larger environment matters. In these the best practitioners aren't  
conveniently collected in a few top university departments and  
research labs — partly because talent is harder to judge, and  
partly because people pay for these things, so one doesn't need to  
rely on teaching or research funding to support oneself. It's in  
these more chaotic fields that it helps most to be in a great city:  
you need the encouragement of feeling that people around you care  
about the kind of work you do, and since you have to find peers for  
yourself, you need the much larger intake mechanism of a great city.You don't have to live in a great city your whole life to benefit  
from it. The critical years seem to be the early and middle ones  
of your career. Clearly you don't have to grow up in a great city.  
Nor does it seem to matter if you go to college in one. To most  
college students a world of a few thousand people seems big enough.  
Plus in college you don't yet have to face the hardest kind of  
work — discovering new problems to solve.It's when you move on to the next and much harder step that it helps  
most to be in a place where you can find peers and encouragement.  
You seem to be able to leave, if you want, once you've found both.  
The Impressionists show the typical pattern: they were born all  
over France (Pissarro was born in the Carribbean) and died all over  
France, but what defined them were the years they spent together  
in Paris.\_\_\_\_\_Unless you're sure what you want to do and where the leading center  
for it is, your best bet is probably to try living in several  
places when you're young. You can never tell what message a city  
sends till you live there, or even whether it still sends one.  
Often your information will be wrong: I tried living in Florence  
when I was 25, thinking it would be an art center, but it turned  
out I was 450 years too late.Even when a city is still a live center of ambition, you won't know  
for sure whether its message will resonate with you till you hear  
it. When I moved to New York, I was very excited at first. It's  
an exciting place. So it took me quite a while to realize I just  
wasn't like the people there. I kept searching for the Cambridge  
of New York. It turned out it was way, way uptown: an hour uptown  
by air.Some people know at 16 what sort of work they're going to do, but  
in most ambitious kids, ambition seems to precede anything specific  
to be ambitious about. They know they want to do something great.  
They just haven't decided yet whether they're going to be a rock  
star or a brain surgeon. There's nothing wrong with that. But it  
means if you have this most common type of ambition, you'll probably  
have to figure out where to live by trial and error. You'll  
probably have to find the city where you feel at home to know what sort of  
ambition you have.Notes[1]  
This is one of the advantages of not having the universities  
in your country controlled by the government. When governments  
decide how to allocate resources, political deal-making causes  
things to be spread out geographically. No central goverment would  
put its two best universities in the same town, unless it was the  
capital (which would cause other problems). But scholars seem to  
like to cluster together as much as people in any other field, and  
when given the freedom to they derive the same advantages from it.[2]  
There are still a few old professors in Palo Alto, but one by  
one they die and their houses are transformed by developers into  
McMansions and sold to VPs of Bus Dev.[3]  
How many times have you read about startup founders who continued  
to live inexpensively as their companies took off? Who continued  
to dress in jeans and t-shirts, to drive the old car they had in  
grad school, and so on? If you did that in New York, people would  
treat you like shit. If you walk into a fancy restaurant in San  
Francisco wearing a jeans and a t-shirt, they're nice to you; who  
knows who you might be? Not in New York.One sign of a city's potential as a technology center is the number  
of restaurants that still require jackets for men. According to  
Zagat's there are none in San Francisco, LA, Boston, or Seattle,   
4 in DC, 6 in Chicago, 8 in London, 13 in New York, and 20 in Paris.(Zagat's lists the Ritz Carlton Dining Room in SF as requiring jackets  
but I couldn't believe it, so I called to check and in fact they  
don't. Apparently there's only one restaurant left on the entire West  
Coast that still requires jackets: The French Laundry in Napa Valley.)[4]  
Ideas are one step upstream from economic power, so it's  
conceivable that intellectual centers like Cambridge will one day  
have an edge over Silicon Valley like the one the Valley has over  
New York.This seems unlikely at the moment; if anything Boston is falling  
further and further behind. The only reason I even mention the  
possibility is that the path from ideas to startups has recently  
been getting smoother. It's a lot easier now for a couple of hackers  
with no business experience to start a startup than it was 10 years  
ago. If you extrapolate another 20 years, maybe the balance of  
power will start to shift back. I wouldn't bet on it, but I wouldn't  
bet against it either.[5]  
If Paris is where people care most about art, why is New York  
the center of gravity of the art business? Because in the twentieth  
century, art as brand split apart from art as stuff. New York is  
where the richest buyers are, but all they demand from art is brand,  
and since you can base brand on anything with a sufficiently  
identifiable style, you may as well use the local stuff.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Sarah Harlin, Jessica Livingston,  
Jackie McDonough, Robert Morris, and David Sloo for reading drafts  
of this.Italian TranslationPortuguese TranslationChinese TranslationKorean Translation

# 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 2008Procrastination 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 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 ProcrastinationSpanish TranslationArabic TranslationCatalan TranslationRussian TranslationSpanish Translation

# Lies We Tell Kids

May 2008Adults lie constantly to kids. I'm not saying we should stop, but  
I think we should at least examine which lies we tell and why.There may also be a benefit to us. We were all lied to as kids,  
and some of the lies we were told still affect us. So by studying  
the ways adults lie to kids, we may be able to clear our heads of  
lies we were told.I'm using the word "lie" in a very general sense: not just overt  
falsehoods, but also all the more subtle ways we mislead kids.  
Though "lie" has negative connotations, I don't mean to suggest we  
should never do this—just that we should pay attention when  
we do.  
[1]One of the most remarkable things about the way we lie to kids is  
how broad the conspiracy is. All adults know what their culture   
lies to kids about: they're the questions you answer "Ask  
your parents." If a kid asked who won the World Series in 1982  
or what the atomic weight of carbon was, you could just tell him.  
But if a kid asks you "Is there a God?" or "What's a prostitute?"  
you'll probably say "Ask your parents."Since we all agree, kids see few cracks in the view of the world  
presented to them. The biggest disagreements are between parents  
and schools, but even those are small. Schools are careful what  
they say about controversial topics, and if they do contradict what  
parents want their kids to believe, parents either pressure the  
school into keeping   
quiet or move their kids to a new school.The conspiracy is so thorough that most kids who discover it do so  
only by discovering internal contradictions in what they're told.  
It can be traumatic for the ones who wake up during the operation.  
Here's what happened to Einstein:  
  
 Through the reading of popular scientific books I soon reached  
 the conviction that much in the stories of the Bible could not  
 be true. The consequence was a positively fanatic freethinking  
 coupled with the impression that youth is intentionally being  
 deceived by the state through lies: it was a crushing impression.  
 [2]  
  
I remember that feeling. By 15 I was convinced the world was corrupt  
from end to end. That's why movies like The Matrix have such  
resonance. Every kid grows up in a fake world. In a way it would  
be easier if the forces behind it were as clearly differentiated  
as a bunch of evil machines, and one could make a clean break just by  
taking a pill.  
ProtectionIf you ask adults why they lie to kids, the most common reason they  
give is to protect them. And kids do need protecting. The environment  
you want to create for a newborn child will be quite unlike the  
streets of a big city.That seems so obvious it seems wrong to call it a lie. It's certainly  
not a bad lie to tell, to give a baby the impression the world is  
quiet and warm and safe. But this harmless type of lie can turn  
sour if left unexamined.Imagine if you tried to keep someone in as protected an environment  
as a newborn till age 18. To mislead someone so grossly about the  
world would seem not protection but abuse. That's an extreme  
example, of course; when parents do that sort of thing it becomes  
national news. But you see the same problem on a smaller scale in  
the malaise teenagers feel in suburbia.The main purpose of suburbia is to provide a protected environment  
for children to grow up in. And it seems great for 10 year olds.  
I liked living in suburbia when I was 10. I didn't notice how  
sterile it was. My whole world was no bigger than a few friends'  
houses I bicycled to and some woods I ran around in. On a log scale  
I was midway between crib and globe. A suburban street was just  
the right size. But as I grew older, suburbia started to feel  
suffocatingly fake.Life can be pretty good at 10 or 20, but it's often frustrating at  
15. This is too big a problem to solve here, but certainly one  
reason life sucks at 15 is that kids are trapped in a world designed  
for 10 year olds.What do parents hope to protect their children from by raising them  
in suburbia? A friend who moved out of Manhattan said merely that  
her 3 year old daughter "saw too much." Off the top of my head,  
that might include: people who are high or drunk, poverty, madness,  
gruesome medical conditions, sexual behavior of various degrees of  
oddness, and violent anger.I think it's the anger that would worry me most if I had a 3 year  
old. I was 29 when I moved to New York and I was surprised even  
then. I wouldn't want a 3 year old to see some of the disputes I  
saw. It would be too frightening. A lot of the things adults  
conceal from smaller children, they conceal because they'd be  
frightening, not because they want to conceal the existence of such  
things. Misleading the child is just a byproduct.This seems one of the most justifiable types of lying adults do to  
kids. But because the lies are indirect we don't keep a very strict  
accounting of them. Parents know they've concealed the facts about  
sex, and many at some point sit their kids down and explain more.  
But few tell their kids about the differences between the real world  
and the cocoon they grew up in. Combine this with the confidence  
parents try to instill in their kids, and every year you get a new  
crop of 18 year olds who think they know how to run the world.Don't all 18 year olds think they know how to run the world? Actually  
this seems to be a recent innovation, no more than about 100 years old.  
In preindustrial times teenage kids were junior members of the adult  
world and comparatively well aware of their shortcomings. They  
could see they weren't as strong or skillful as the village smith.  
In past times people lied to kids about some things more than we  
do now, but the lies implicit in an artificial, protected environment  
are a recent invention. Like a lot of new inventions, the rich got  
this first. Children of kings and great magnates were the first  
to grow up out of touch with the world. Suburbia means half the  
population can live like kings in that respect.  
Sex (and Drugs)I'd have different worries about raising teenage kids in New York.  
I'd worry less about what they'd see, and more about what they'd  
do. I went to college with a lot of kids who grew up in Manhattan,  
and as a rule they seemed pretty jaded. They seemed to have lost  
their virginity at an average of about 14 and by college had tried  
more drugs than I'd even heard of.The reasons parents don't want their teenage kids having sex are  
complex. There are some obvious dangers: pregnancy and sexually  
transmitted diseases. But those aren't the only reasons parents  
don't want their kids having sex. The average parents of a 14 year  
old girl would hate the idea of her having sex even if there were  
zero risk of pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases.Kids can probably sense they aren't being told the whole story.  
After all, pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases are just as  
much a problem for adults, and they have sex.What really bothers parents about their teenage kids having sex?  
Their dislike of the idea is so visceral it's probably inborn. But  
if it's inborn it should be universal, and there are plenty of  
societies where parents don't mind if their teenage kids have  
sex—indeed, where it's normal for 14 year olds to become  
mothers. So what's going on? There does seem to be a universal  
taboo against sex with prepubescent children. One can imagine  
evolutionary reasons for that. And I think this is the main reason  
parents in industrialized societies dislike teenage kids having  
sex. They still think of them as children, even though biologically  
they're not, so the taboo against child sex still has force.One thing adults conceal about sex they also conceal about drugs:  
that it can cause great pleasure. That's what makes sex and drugs  
so dangerous. The desire for them can cloud one's judgement—which  
is especially frightening when the judgement being clouded is the  
already wretched judgement of a teenage kid.Here parents' desires conflict. Older societies told kids they had  
bad judgement, but modern parents want their children to be confident.  
This may well be a better plan than the old one of putting them in  
their place, but it has the side effect that after having implicitly  
lied to kids about how good their judgement is, we then have to lie  
again about all the things they might get into trouble with if they  
believed us.If parents told their kids the truth about sex and drugs, it would  
be: the reason you should avoid these things is that you have lousy  
judgement. People with twice your experience still get burned by  
them. But this may be one of those cases where the truth wouldn't  
be convincing, because one of the symptoms of bad judgement is  
believing you have good judgement. When you're too weak to lift  
something, you can tell, but when you're making a decision impetuously,  
you're all the more sure of it.  
InnocenceAnother reason parents don't want their kids having sex is that  
they want to keep them innocent. Adults have a certain model of  
how kids are supposed to behave, and it's different from what they  
expect of other adults.One of the most obvious differences is the words kids are allowed  
to use. Most parents use words when talking to other adults that  
they wouldn't want their kids using. They try to hide even the  
existence of these words for as long as they can. And this is  
another of those conspiracies everyone participates in: everyone  
knows you're not supposed to swear in front of kids.I've never heard more different explanations for anything parents  
tell kids than why they shouldn't swear. Every parent I know forbids  
their children to swear, and yet no two of them have the same  
justification. It's clear most start with not wanting kids to  
swear, then make up the reason afterward.So my theory about what's going on is that the function of  
swearwords is to mark the speaker as an adult. There's no difference  
in the meaning of "shit" and "poopoo." So why should one be ok for  
kids to say and one forbidden? The only explanation is: by definition.  
[3]Why does it bother adults so much when kids do things reserved for  
adults? The idea of a foul-mouthed, cynical 10 year old leaning  
against a lamppost with a cigarette hanging out of the corner of  
his mouth is very disconcerting. But why?One reason we want kids to be innocent is that we're programmed to  
like certain kinds of helplessness. I've several times heard mothers  
say they deliberately refrained from correcting their young children's  
mispronunciations because they were so cute. And if you think about  
it, cuteness is helplessness. Toys and cartoon characters meant to  
be cute always have clueless expressions and stubby, ineffectual  
limbs.It's not surprising we'd have an inborn desire to love and protect  
helpless creatures, considering human offspring are so helpless for  
so long. Without the helplessness that makes kids cute, they'd be  
very annoying. They'd merely seem like incompetent adults. But  
there's more to it than that. The reason our hypothetical jaded  
10 year old bothers me so much is not just that he'd be annoying,  
but that he'd have cut off his prospects for growth so early. To  
be jaded you have to think you know how the world works, and any  
theory a 10 year old had about that would probably be a pretty  
narrow one.Innocence is also open-mindedness. We want kids to be innocent so  
they can continue to learn. Paradoxical as it sounds, there are  
some kinds of knowledge that get in the way of other kinds of  
knowledge. If you're going to learn that the world is a brutal  
place full of people trying to take advantage of one another, you're  
better off learning it last. Otherwise you won't bother learning  
much more.Very smart adults often seem unusually innocent, and I don't think  
this is a coincidence. I think they've deliberately avoided learning  
about certain things. Certainly I do. I used to think I wanted  
to know everything. Now I know I don't.  
DeathAfter sex, death is the topic adults lie most conspicuously about  
to kids. Sex I believe they conceal because of deep taboos. But  
why do we conceal death from kids? Probably because small children  
are particularly horrified by it. They want to feel safe, and death  
is the ultimate threat.One of the most spectacular lies our parents told us was about the  
death of our first cat. Over the years, as we asked for more  
details, they were compelled to invent more, so the story grew quite  
elaborate. The cat had died at the vet's office. Of what? Of the  
anaesthesia itself. Why was the cat at the vet's office? To be  
fixed. And why had such a routine operation killed it? It wasn't  
the vet's fault; the cat had a congenitally weak heart; the anaesthesia  
was too much for it; but there was no way anyone could have  
known this in advance. It was not till we were in our twenties  
that the truth came out: my sister, then about three, had accidentally  
stepped on the cat and broken its back.They didn't feel the need to tell us the cat was now happily in cat  
heaven. My parents never claimed that people or animals who died  
had "gone to a better place," or that we'd meet them again. It  
didn't seem to harm us.My grandmother told us an edited version of the death of my  
grandfather. She said they'd been sitting reading one day, and  
when she said something to him, he didn't answer. He seemed to be  
asleep, but when she tried to rouse him, she couldn't. "He was  
gone." Having a heart attack sounded like falling asleep. Later I  
learned it hadn't been so neat, and the heart attack had taken most  
of a day to kill him.Along with such outright lies, there must have been a lot of changing  
the subject when death came up. I can't remember that, of course,  
but I can infer it from the fact that I didn't really grasp I was  
going to die till I was about 19. How could I have missed something  
so obvious for so long? Now that I've seen parents managing the  
subject, I can see how: questions about death are gently but firmly  
turned aside.On this topic, especially, they're met half-way by kids. Kids often  
want to be lied to. They want to believe they're living in a  
comfortable, safe world as much as their parents want them to believe  
it.  
[4]  
IdentitySome parents feel a strong adherence to an ethnic or religious group  
and want their kids to feel it too. This usually requires two  
different kinds of lying: the first is to tell the child that he  
or she is an X, and the second is whatever specific lies Xes  
differentiate themselves by believing.  
[5]Telling a child they have a particular ethnic or religious identity  
is one of the stickiest things you can tell them. Almost anything  
else you tell a kid, they can change their mind about later when  
they start to think for themselves. But if you tell a kid they're  
a member of a certain group, that seems nearly impossible to shake.This despite the fact that it can be one of the most premeditated  
lies parents tell. When parents are of different religions, they'll  
often agree between themselves that their children will be "raised  
as Xes." And it works. The kids obligingly grow up considering  
themselves as Xes, despite the fact that if their parents had chosen  
the other way, they'd have grown up considering themselves as Ys.One reason this works so well is the second kind of lie involved.  
The truth is common property. You can't distinguish your group by  
doing things that are rational, and believing things that are true.  
If you want to set yourself apart from other people, you have to  
do things that are arbitrary, and believe things that are false.  
And after having spent their whole lives doing things that are arbitrary  
and believing things that are false, and being regarded as odd by  
"outsiders" on that account, the cognitive dissonance pushing  
children to regard themselves as Xes must be enormous. If they  
aren't an X, why are they attached to all these arbitrary beliefs  
and customs? If they aren't an X, why do all the non-Xes call them  
one?This form of lie is not without its uses. You can use it to carry  
a payload of beneficial beliefs, and they will also become part of  
the child's identity. You can tell the child that in addition to  
never wearing the color yellow, believing the world was created by  
a giant rabbit, and always snapping their fingers before eating  
fish, Xes are also particularly honest and industrious. Then X  
children will grow up feeling it's part of their identity to be  
honest and industrious.This probably accounts for a lot of the spread of modern religions,  
and explains why their doctrines are a combination of the useful  
and the bizarre. The bizarre half is what makes the religion stick,  
and the useful half is the payload.  
[6]  
AuthorityOne of the least excusable reasons adults lie to kids is to maintain  
power over them. Sometimes these lies are truly sinister, like a  
child molester telling his victims they'll get in trouble if they  
tell anyone what happened to them. Others seem more innocent; it  
depends how badly adults lie to maintain their power, and what they  
use it for.Most adults make some effort to conceal their flaws from children.  
Usually their motives are mixed. For example, a father who has an  
affair generally conceals it from his children. His motive is  
partly that it would worry them, partly that this would introduce  
the topic of sex, and partly (a larger part than he would admit)  
that he doesn't want to tarnish himself in their eyes.If you want to learn what lies are told to kids, read almost any  
book written to teach them about "issues."  
[7]  
Peter Mayle wrote  
one called Why Are We Getting a Divorce? It begins with the three  
most important things to remember about divorce, one of which is:  
  
 You shouldn't put the blame on one parent, because divorce is  
 never only one person's fault.  
 [8]  
  
Really? When a man runs off with his secretary, is it always partly  
his wife's fault? But I can see why Mayle might have said this.  
Maybe it's more important for kids to respect their parents than  
to know the truth about them.But because adults conceal their flaws, and at the same time insist  
on high standards of behavior for kids, a lot of kids grow up feeling  
they fall hopelessly short. They walk around feeling horribly evil  
for having used a swearword, while in fact most of the adults around  
them are doing much worse things.This happens in intellectual as well as moral questions. The more  
confident people are, the more willing they seem to be to answer a  
question "I don't know." Less confident people feel they have to  
have an answer or they'll look bad. My parents were pretty good  
about admitting when they didn't know things, but I must have been  
told a lot of lies of this type by teachers, because I rarely heard  
a teacher say "I don't know" till I got to college. I remember  
because it was so surprising to hear someone say that in front of  
a class.The first hint I had that teachers weren't omniscient came in sixth  
grade, after my father contradicted something I'd learned in school.  
When I protested that the teacher had said the opposite, my father  
replied that the guy had no idea what he was talking about—that  
he was just an elementary school teacher, after all.Just a teacher? The phrase seemed almost grammatically ill-formed.  
Didn't teachers know everything about the subjects they taught?  
And if not, why were they the ones teaching us?The sad fact is, US public school teachers don't generally understand  
the stuff they're teaching very well. There are some sterling  
exceptions, but as a rule people planning to go into teaching rank  
academically near the bottom of the college population. So the  
fact that I still thought at age 11 that teachers were infallible  
shows what a job the system must have done on my brain.  
SchoolWhat kids get taught in school is a complex mix of lies. The most  
excusable are those told to simplify ideas to make them easy to  
learn. The problem is, a lot of propaganda gets slipped into the  
curriculum in the name of simplification.Public school textbooks represent a compromise between what various  
powerful groups want kids to be told. The lies are rarely overt.  
Usually they consist either of omissions or of over-emphasizing  
certain topics at the expense of others. The view of history we  
got in elementary school was a crude hagiography, with at least one  
representative of each powerful group.The famous scientists I remember were Einstein, Marie Curie, and  
George Washington Carver. Einstein was a big deal because his  
work led to the atom bomb. Marie Curie was involved with X-rays.  
But I was mystified about Carver. He seemed to have done stuff  
with peanuts.It's obvious now that he was on the list because he was black (and  
for that matter that Marie Curie was on it because she was a woman),  
but as a kid I was confused for years about him. I wonder if it  
wouldn't have been better just to tell us the truth: that there  
weren't any famous black scientists. Ranking George Washington  
Carver with Einstein misled us not only about science, but about  
the obstacles blacks faced in his time.As subjects got softer, the lies got more frequent. By the time  
you got to politics and recent history, what we were taught was  
pretty much pure propaganda. For example, we were taught to regard  
political leaders as saints—especially the recently martyred  
Kennedy and King. It was astonishing to learn later that they'd  
both been serial womanizers, and that Kennedy was a speed freak to  
boot. (By the time King's plagiarism emerged, I'd lost the ability  
to be surprised by the misdeeds of famous people.)I doubt you could teach kids recent history without teaching them  
lies, because practically everyone who has anything to say about  
it has some kind of spin to put on it. Much recent history consists  
of spin. It would probably be better just to teach them metafacts  
like that.Probably the biggest lie told in schools, though, is that the way  
to succeed is through following "the rules." In fact most such  
rules are just hacks to manage large groups efficiently.  
PeaceOf all the reasons we lie to kids, the most powerful is probably  
the same mundane reason they lie to us.Often when we lie to people it's not part of any conscious strategy,  
but because they'd react violently to the truth. Kids, almost by  
definition, lack self-control. They react violently to things—and  
so they get lied to a lot.   
[9]A few Thanksgivings ago, a friend of mine found himself in a situation  
that perfectly illustrates the complex motives we have when we lie  
to kids. As the roast turkey appeared on the table, his alarmingly  
perceptive 5 year old son suddenly asked if the turkey had wanted  
to die. Foreseeing disaster, my friend and his wife rapidly  
improvised: yes, the turkey had wanted to die, and in fact had lived  
its whole life with the aim of being their Thanksgiving dinner.  
And that (phew) was the end of that.Whenever we lie to kids to protect them, we're usually also lying  
to keep the peace.One consequence of this sort of calming lie is that we grow up  
thinking horrible things are normal. It's hard for us to feel a  
sense of urgency as adults over something we've literally been  
trained not to worry about. When I was about 10 I saw a documentary  
on pollution that put me into a panic. It seemed the planet was  
being irretrievably ruined. I went to my mother afterward to ask  
if this was so. I don't remember what she said, but she made me  
feel better, so I stopped worrying about it.That was probably the best way to handle a frightened 10 year old.  
But we should understand the price. This sort of lie is one of the  
main reasons bad things persist: we're all trained to ignore them.  
DetoxA sprinter in a race almost immediately enters a state called "oxygen  
debt." His body switches to an emergency source of energy that's  
faster than regular aerobic respiration. But this process builds  
up waste products that ultimately require extra oxygen to break  
down, so at the end of the race he has to stop and pant for a while  
to recover.We arrive at adulthood with a kind of truth debt. We were told a  
lot of lies to get us (and our parents) through our childhood. Some  
may have been necessary. Some probably weren't. But we all arrive  
at adulthood with heads full of lies.There's never a point where the adults sit you down and explain all  
the lies they told you. They've forgotten most of them. So if  
you're going to clear these lies out of your head, you're going to  
have to do it yourself.Few do. Most people go through life with bits of packing material  
adhering to their minds and never know it. You probably never can  
completely undo the effects of lies you were told as a kid, but  
it's worth trying. I've found that whenever I've been able to undo  
a lie I was told, a lot of other things fell into place.Fortunately, once you arrive at adulthood you get a valuable new  
resource you can use to figure out what lies you were told. You're  
now one of the liars. You get to watch behind the scenes as adults  
spin the world for the next generation of kids.The first step in clearing your head is to realize how far you are  
from a neutral observer. When I left high school I was, I thought,  
a complete skeptic. I'd realized high school was crap. I thought  
I was ready to question everything I knew. But among the many other  
things I was ignorant of was how much debris there already was in  
my head. It's not enough to consider your mind a blank slate. You  
have to consciously erase it.  
Notes[1]  
One reason I stuck with such a brutally simple word is that  
the lies we tell kids are probably not quite as harmless as we  
think. If you look at what adults told children in the past, it's  
shocking how much they lied to them. Like us, they did it with the  
best intentions. So if we think we're as open as one could reasonably  
be with children, we're probably fooling ourselves. Odds are people  
in 100 years will be as shocked at some of the lies we tell as we  
are at some of the lies people told 100 years ago.I can't predict which these will be, and I don't want to write an  
essay that will seem dumb in 100 years. So instead of using special  
euphemisms for lies that seem excusable according to present fashions,  
I'm just going to call all our lies lies.(I have omitted one type: lies told to play games with kids'  
credulity. These range from "make-believe," which is not really a  
lie because it's told with a wink, to the frightening lies told by  
older siblings. There's not much to say about these: I wouldn't  
want the first type to go away, and wouldn't expect the second type  
to.)[2]  
Calaprice, Alice (ed.), The Quotable Einstein, Princeton  
University Press, 1996.[3]  
If you ask parents why kids shouldn't swear, the less educated  
ones usually reply with some question-begging answer like "it's  
inappropriate," while the more educated ones come up with elaborate  
rationalizations. In fact the less educated parents seem closer  
to the truth.[4]  
As a friend with small children pointed out, it's easy for small  
children to consider themselves immortal, because time seems to  
pass so slowly for them. To a 3 year old, a day feels like a month  
might to an adult. So 80 years sounds to him like 2400 years would  
to us.[5]  
I realize I'm going to get endless grief for classifying religion  
as a type of lie. Usually people skirt that issue with some  
equivocation implying that lies believed for a sufficiently long  
time by sufficiently large numbers of people are immune to the usual  
standards for truth. But because I can't predict which lies future  
generations will consider inexcusable, I can't safely omit any type  
we tell. Yes, it seems unlikely that religion will be out of fashion  
in 100 years, but no more unlikely than it would have seemed to  
someone in 1880 that schoolchildren in 1980 would be taught that  
masturbation was perfectly normal and not to feel guilty about it.[6]  
Unfortunately the payload can consist of bad customs as well  
as good ones. For example, there are certain qualities that some  
groups in America consider "acting white." In fact most of them  
could as accurately be called "acting Japanese." There's nothing  
specifically white about such customs. They're common to all cultures  
with long traditions of living in cities. So it is probably a  
losing bet for a group to consider behaving the opposite way as  
part of its identity.[7]  
In this context, "issues" basically means "things we're going  
to lie to them about." That's why there's a special name for these  
topics.[8]  
Mayle, Peter, Why Are We Getting a Divorce?, Harmony, 1988.[9]  
The ironic thing is, this is also the main reason kids lie to  
adults. If you freak out when people tell you alarming things,  
they won't tell you them. Teenagers don't tell their parents what  
happened that night they were supposed to be staying at a friend's  
house for the same reason parents don't tell 5 year olds the truth  
about the Thanksgiving turkey. They'd freak if they knew.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, Marc Andreessen, Trevor Blackwell,  
Patrick Collison, Jessica Livingston, Jackie McDonough, Robert  
Morris, and David Sloo for reading drafts of this. And since there  
are some controversial ideas here, I should add that none of them  
agreed with everything in it.German TranslationFrench TranslationRussian Translation

# Be Good

April 2008(This essay is derived from a talk at the 2008 Startup School.)About a month after we started Y Combinator we came up with the  
phrase that became our motto: Make something people want. We've  
learned a lot since then, but if I were choosing now that's still  
the one I'd pick.Another thing we tell founders is not to worry too much about the  
business model, at least at first. Not because making money is  
unimportant, but because it's so much easier than building something  
great.A couple weeks ago I realized that if you put those two ideas  
together, you get something surprising. Make something people want.  
Don't worry too much about making money. What you've got is a  
description of a charity.When you get an unexpected result like this, it could either be a  
bug or a new discovery. Either businesses aren't supposed to be  
like charities, and we've proven by reductio ad absurdum that one  
or both of the principles we began with is false. Or we have a new  
idea.I suspect it's the latter, because as soon as this thought occurred  
to me, a whole bunch of other things fell into place.ExamplesFor example, Craigslist. It's not a charity, but they run it like  
one. And they're astoundingly successful. When you scan down the  
list of most popular web sites, the number of employees at Craigslist  
looks like a misprint. Their revenues aren't as high as they could  
be, but most startups would be happy to trade places with them.In Patrick O'Brian's novels, his captains always try to get upwind  
of their opponents. If you're upwind, you decide when and if to  
engage the other ship. Craigslist is effectively upwind of enormous  
revenues. They'd face some challenges if they wanted to make more,  
but not the sort you face when you're tacking upwind, trying to  
force a crappy product on ambivalent users by spending ten times  
as much on sales as on development. [1]I'm not saying startups should aim to end up like Craigslist.  
They're a product of unusual circumstances. But they're a good  
model for the early phases.Google looked a lot like a charity in the beginning. They didn't  
have ads for over a year. At year 1, Google was indistinguishable  
from a nonprofit. If a nonprofit or government organization had  
started a project to index the web, Google at year 1 is the limit  
of what they'd have produced.Back when I was working on spam filters I thought it would be a  
good idea to have a web-based email service with good spam filtering.  
I wasn't thinking of it as a company. I just wanted to keep people  
from getting spammed. But as I thought more about this project, I  
realized it would probably have to be a company. It would cost  
something to run, and it would be a pain to fund with grants and  
donations.That was a surprising realization. Companies often claim to be  
benevolent, but it was surprising to realize there were purely  
benevolent projects that had to be embodied as companies to work.I didn't want to start another company, so I didn't do it. But if  
someone had, they'd probably be quite rich now. There was a window  
of about two years when spam was increasing rapidly but all the big  
email services had terrible filters. If someone had launched a  
new, spam-free mail service, users would have flocked to it.Notice the pattern here? From either direction we get to the same  
spot. If you start from successful startups, you find they often  
behaved like nonprofits. And if you start from ideas for nonprofits,  
you find they'd often make good startups.PowerHow wide is this territory? Would all good nonprofits be good  
companies? Possibly not. What makes Google so valuable is that  
their users have money. If you make people with money love you,  
you can probably get some of it. But could you also base a successful  
startup on behaving like a nonprofit to people who don't have money?  
Could you, for example, grow a successful startup out of curing an  
unfashionable but deadly disease like malaria?I'm not sure, but I suspect that if you pushed this idea, you'd be  
surprised how far it would go. For example, people who apply to Y  
Combinator don't generally have much money, and yet we can profit  
by helping them, because with our help they could make money. Maybe  
the situation is similar with malaria. Maybe an organization that  
helped lift its weight off a country could benefit from the resulting  
growth.I'm not proposing this is a serious idea. I don't know anything  
about malaria. But I've been kicking ideas around long enough to  
know when I come across a powerful one.One way to guess how far an idea extends is to ask yourself at what  
point you'd bet against it. The thought of betting against benevolence  
is alarming in the same way as saying that something is technically  
impossible. You're just asking to be made a fool of, because these  
are such powerful forces. [2]For example, initially I thought maybe this principle only applied  
to Internet startups. Obviously it worked for Google, but what  
about Microsoft? Surely Microsoft isn't benevolent? But when I  
think back to the beginning, they were. Compared to IBM they were  
like Robin Hood. When IBM introduced the PC, they thought they  
were going to make money selling hardware at high prices. But by  
gaining control of the PC standard, Microsoft opened up the market  
to any manufacturer. Hardware prices plummeted, and lots of people  
got to have computers who couldn't otherwise have afforded them.  
It's the sort of thing you'd expect Google to do.Microsoft isn't so benevolent now. Now when one thinks of what  
Microsoft does to users, all the verbs that come to mind begin with  
F. [3] And yet it doesn't seem to pay.  
Their stock price has been flat for years. Back when they were  
Robin Hood, their stock price rose like Google's. Could there be  
a connection?You can see how there would be. When you're small, you can't bully  
customers, so you have to charm them. Whereas when you're big you  
can maltreat them at will, and you tend to, because it's easier  
than satisfying them. You grow big by being nice, but you can stay  
big by being mean.You get away with it till the underlying conditions change, and  
then all your victims escape. So "Don't be evil" may be the most  
valuable thing Paul Buchheit made for Google, because it may turn  
out to be an elixir of corporate youth. I'm sure they find it  
constraining, but think how valuable it will be if it saves them  
from lapsing into the fatal laziness that afflicted Microsoft and  
IBM.The curious thing is, this elixir is freely available to any other  
company. Anyone can adopt "Don't be evil." The catch is that  
people will hold you to it. So I don't think you're going to see  
record labels or tobacco companies using this discovery.MoraleThere's a lot of external evidence that benevolence works. But how  
does it work? One advantage of investing in a large number of  
startups is that you get a lot of data about how they work. From  
what we've seen, being good seems to help startups in three ways:  
it improves their morale, it makes other people want to help them,  
and above all, it helps them be decisive.Morale is tremendously important to a startup—so important  
that morale alone is almost enough to determine success. Startups  
are often described as emotional roller-coasters. One minute you're  
going to take over the world, and the next you're doomed. The  
problem with feeling you're doomed is not just that it makes you  
unhappy, but that it makes you stop working. So the downhills  
of the roller-coaster are more of a self fulfilling prophecy than  
the uphills. If feeling you're going to succeed makes you work  
harder, that probably improves your chances of succeeding, but if  
feeling you're going to fail makes you stop working, that practically  
guarantees you'll fail.Here's where benevolence comes in. If you feel you're really helping  
people, you'll keep working even when it seems like your startup  
is doomed. Most of us have some amount of natural benevolence.  
The mere fact that someone needs you makes you want to help them.  
So if you start the kind of startup where users come back each day,  
you've basically built yourself a giant tamagotchi. You've made  
something you need to take care of.Blogger is a famous example of a startup that went through really  
low lows and survived. At one point they ran out of money and  
everyone left. Evan Williams came in to work the next day, and there  
was no one but him. What kept him going? Partly that users needed  
him. He was hosting thousands of people's blogs. He couldn't just  
let the site die.There are many advantages of launching quickly, but the most important  
may be that once you have users, the tamagotchi effect kicks in.  
Once you have users to take care of, you're forced to figure out  
what will make them happy, and that's actually very valuable  
information.The added confidence that comes from trying to help people can  
also help you with investors. One of the founders of   
Chatterous told   
me recently that he and his cofounder had decided that this service  
was something the world needed, so they were going to keep working  
on it no matter what, even if they had to move back to Canada and live  
in their parents' basements.Once they realized this, they stopped caring so much what investors thought  
about them. They still met with them, but they weren't going to  
die if they didn't get their money. And you know what? The investors  
got a lot more interested. They could sense that the Chatterouses  
were going to do this startup with or without them.If you're really committed and your startup is cheap to run, you  
become very hard to kill. And practically all startups, even the  
most successful, come close to death at some point. So if doing  
good for people gives you a sense of mission that makes you harder  
to kill, that alone more than compensates for whatever you lose by  
not choosing a more selfish project.HelpAnother advantage of being good is that it makes other people want  
to help you. This too seems to be an inborn trait in humans.One of the startups we've funded, Octopart, is currently locked in  
a classic battle of good versus evil. They're a search site for  
industrial components. A lot of people need to search for components,  
and before Octopart there was no good way to do it. That, it turned  
out, was no coincidence.Octopart built the right way to search for components. Users like  
it and they've been growing rapidly. And yet for most of Octopart's  
life, the biggest distributor, Digi-Key, has been trying to force  
them take their prices off the site. Octopart is sending them  
customers for free, and yet Digi-Key is trying to make that traffic  
stop. Why? Because their current business model depends on  
overcharging people who have incomplete information about prices.  
They don't want search to work.The Octoparts are the nicest guys in the world. They dropped out  
of the PhD program in physics at Berkeley to do this. They just  
wanted to fix a problem they encountered in their research. Imagine  
how much time you could save the world's engineers if they could  
do searches online. So when I hear that a big, evil company is  
trying to stop them in order to keep search broken, it makes me  
really want to help them. It makes me spend more time on the Octoparts  
than I do with most of the other startups we've funded. It just  
made me spend several minutes telling you how great they are. Why?  
Because they're good guys and they're trying to help the world.If you're benevolent, people will rally around you: investors,  
customers, other companies, and potential employees. In the long  
term the most important may be the potential employees. I think  
everyone knows now that   
good hackers are much better than mediocre  
ones. If you can attract the best hackers to work for you, as  
Google has, you have a big advantage. And the very best hackers  
tend to be idealistic. They're not desperate for a job. They can  
work wherever they want. So most want to work on things that will  
make the world better.CompassBut the most important advantage of being good is that it acts as  
a compass. One of the hardest parts of doing a startup is that you  
have so many choices. There are just two or three of you, and a  
thousand things you could do. How do you decide?Here's the answer: Do whatever's best for your users. You can hold  
onto this like a rope in a hurricane, and it will save you if  
anything can. Follow it and it will take you through everything  
you need to do.It's even the answer to questions that seem unrelated, like how to  
convince investors to give you money. If you're a good salesman,  
you could try to just talk them into it. But the more reliable  
route is to convince them through your users: if you make something  
users love enough to tell their friends, you grow exponentially,  
and that will convince any investor.Being good is a particularly useful strategy for making decisions  
in complex situations because it's stateless. It's like telling  
the truth. The trouble with lying is that you have to remember  
everything you've said in the past to make sure you don't contradict  
yourself. If you tell the truth you don't have to remember anything,  
and that's a really useful property in domains where things happen  
fast.For example, Y Combinator has now invested in 80 startups, 57 of  
which are still alive. (The rest have died or merged or been  
acquired.) When you're trying to advise 57 startups, it turns out  
you have to have a stateless algorithm. You can't have ulterior  
motives when you have 57 things going on at once, because you can't  
remember them. So our rule is just to do whatever's best for the  
founders. Not because we're particularly benevolent, but because  
it's the only algorithm that works on that scale.When you write something telling people to be good, you seem to be  
claiming to be good yourself. So I want to say explicitly that I  
am not a particularly good person. When I was a kid I was firmly  
in the camp of bad. The way adults used the word good, it seemed  
to be synonymous with quiet, so I grew up very suspicious of it.You know how there are some people whose names come up in conversation  
and everyone says "He's such a great guy?" People never say  
that about me. The best I get is "he means well." I am not claiming  
to be good. At best I speak good as a second language.So I'm not suggesting you be good in the usual sanctimonious way.  
I'm suggesting it because it works. It will work not just as a  
statement of "values," but as a guide to strategy,  
and even a design spec for software. Don't just not be evil. Be  
good.Notes[1] Fifty years ago  
it would have seemed shocking for a public company not to pay  
dividends. Now many tech companies don't. The markets seem to  
have figured out how to value potential dividends. Maybe that isn't  
the last step in this evolution. Maybe markets will eventually get  
comfortable with potential earnings. (VCs already are, and at least  
some of them consistently make money.)I realize this sounds like the stuff one used to hear about the  
"new economy" during the Bubble. Believe me, I was not drinking  
that kool-aid at the time. But I'm convinced there were some   
good  
ideas buried in Bubble thinking. For example, it's ok to focus on  
growth instead of profits—but only if the growth is genuine.  
You can't be buying users; that's a pyramid scheme. But a company  
with rapid, genuine growth is valuable, and eventually markets learn  
how to value valuable things.[2] The idea of starting  
a company with benevolent aims is currently undervalued, because  
the kind of people who currently make that their explicit goal don't  
usually do a very good job.It's one of the standard career paths of trustafarians to start  
some vaguely benevolent business. The problem with most of them  
is that they either have a bogus political agenda or are feebly  
executed. The trustafarians' ancestors didn't get rich by preserving  
their traditional culture; maybe people in Bolivia don't want to  
either. And starting an organic farm, though it's at least  
straightforwardly benevolent, doesn't help people on the scale that  
Google does.Most explicitly benevolent projects don't hold themselves sufficiently  
accountable. They act as if having good intentions were enough to  
guarantee good effects.[3] Users dislike their  
new operating system so much that they're starting petitions to  
save the old one. And the old one was nothing special. The hackers  
within Microsoft must know in their hearts that if the company  
really cared about users they'd just advise them to switch to OSX.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit, Jessica Livingston,  
and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.Russian TranslationGerman Translation

# Why There Aren't More Googles

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
April 2008Umair Haque   
wrote recently that the reason there aren't more Googles is  
that most startups get bought before they can change the world.  
  
 Google, despite serious interest from Microsoft and Yahoo—what  
 must have seemed like lucrative interest at the time—didn't  
 sell out. Google might simply have been nothing but Yahoo's or  
 MSN's search box.Why isn't it? Because Google had a deeply felt sense of purpose:  
 a conviction to change the world for the better.  
  
This has a nice sound to it, but it isn't true.   
Google's founders were willing to sell early on.  
They just wanted more than acquirers were willing to pay.It was the same with Facebook. They would have sold, but Yahoo blew it   
by offering too little.Tip for acquirers: when a startup turns you down, consider raising  
your offer, because there's a good chance the outrageous price they   
want will later seem a bargain.   
[1]From the evidence I've seen so far,  
startups that turn down acquisition offers usually end up doing better.   
Not always, but usually there's a bigger offer coming, or  
perhaps even an IPO.Of course, the reason startups do better when they turn down  
acquisition offers is not necessarily that all such offers undervalue  
startups. More likely the reason is that the kind of founders who  
have the balls to turn down a big offer also tend to be very  
successful. That spirit is exactly what you want in a startup.While I'm sure Larry and Sergey do want to change the world, at  
least now, the reason Google survived to become a big, independent  
company is the same reason Facebook has so far remained independent:  
acquirers underestimated them.Corporate M&A is a strange business in that respect. They consistently  
lose the best deals, because turning down reasonable offers is the  
most reliable test you could invent for whether a startup will make  
it big.VCsSo what's the real reason there aren't more Googles? Curiously  
enough, it's the same reason Google and Facebook have remained  
independent: money guys undervalue the most innovative startups.The reason there aren't more Googles is not that investors encourage  
innovative startups to sell out, but that they won't even fund them.  
I've learned a lot about VCs during the 3 years we've been doing Y  
Combinator, because we often have to work quite closely with them.  
The most surprising thing I've learned is how conservative they  
are. VC firms present an image of boldly encouraging innovation.  
Only a handful actually do, and even they are more conservative in  
reality than you'd guess from reading their sites.I used to think of VCs as piratical: bold but unscrupulous. On  
closer acquaintance they turn out to be more like bureaucrats.  
They're more upstanding than I used to think (the good ones, at  
least), but less bold. Maybe the VC industry has changed. Maybe  
they used to be bolder.   
But I suspect it's the startup world that has  
changed, not them. The low cost of starting a startup means the  
average good bet is a riskier one, but most existing VC firms still  
operate as if they were investing in hardware startups in 1985.Howard Aiken said "Don't worry about people stealing your ideas.  
If your ideas are any good, you'll have to ram them down people's  
throats." I have a similar feeling when I'm trying to convince VCs  
to invest in startups Y Combinator has funded. They're terrified  
of really novel ideas, unless the founders are good enough salesmen  
to compensate.But it's the bold ideas that generate the biggest returns. Any  
really good new idea will seem bad to most people; otherwise someone  
would already be doing it. And  
yet most VCs are driven by consensus, not just within their firms,  
but within the VC community. The biggest factor determining how a  
VC will feel about your startup is how other VCs feel about it. I  
doubt they realize it, but this algorithm guarantees they'll miss  
all the very best ideas. The more people who have to like a new  
idea, the more outliers you lose.Whoever the next Google is, they're probably being told right now  
by VCs to come back when they have more "traction."Why are VCs so conservative? It's probably a combination of factors.  
The large size of their investments makes them conservative.  
Plus they're investing other people's money, which makes  
them worry they'll get in trouble if they do something risky and  
it fails. Plus most of them are money guys rather than technical  
guys, so they don't understand what the startups they're investing  
in do.What's NextThe exciting thing about market economies is that stupidity equals  
opportunity. And so it is in this case. There is a huge, unexploited  
opportunity in startup investing. Y Combinator funds startups at  
the very beginning. VCs will fund them once they're already starting  
to succeed. But between the two there is a substantial gap.There are companies that will give $20k to a startup that has nothing  
more than the founders, and there are companies that will give $2  
million to a startup that's already taking off,  
but there aren't enough investors who will give $200k to a startup  
that seems very promising but still has some things to figure out.  
This territory is occupied mostly by  
individual angel investors—people like Andy Bechtolsheim, who  
gave Google $100k when they seemed promising but still had some  
things to figure out. I like angels, but there just aren't enough  
of them, and investing is for most of them a part time job.And yet as it gets cheaper to start startups, this sparsely occupied  
territory is becoming more and more valuable. Nowadays a lot of  
startups don't want to raise multi-million dollar series A rounds.  
They don't need that much money, and they don't want the hassles  
that come with it. The median startup coming out of Y Combinator  
wants to raise $250-500k. When they go to VC firms they have to  
ask for more because they know VCs aren't interested in such small  
deals.VCs are money managers. They're looking for ways to put large sums  
to work. But the startup world is evolving away from their current  
model.Startups have gotten cheaper. That means they want less money, but  
also that there are more of them. So you can still get large returns  
on large amounts of money; you just have to spread it more broadly.I've tried to explain this to VC firms. Instead of making one $2  
million investment, make five $400k investments. Would that mean  
sitting on too many boards? Don't sit on their boards. Would that  
mean too much due diligence? Do less. If you're investing at a  
tenth the valuation, you only have to be a tenth as sure.It seems obvious. But I've proposed to several VC firms that they  
set aside some money and designate one partner to make more, smaller  
bets, and they react as if I'd proposed the partners all get nose  
rings. It's remarkable how wedded they are to their standard m.o.But there is a big opportunity here, and one way or the other it's  
going to get filled. Either VCs will evolve down into this gap or,  
more likely, new investors will appear to fill it. That will be a  
good thing when it happens, because these new investors will be  
compelled by the structure of the investments they make to be ten  
times bolder than present day VCs. And that will get us a lot more  
Googles. At least, as long as acquirers remain stupid.  
Notes[1]  
Another tip: If you want to get all that value, don't destroy the  
startup after you buy it. Give the founders enough autonomy that  
they can grow the acquisition into what it would have become.Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, David Hornik, Jessica   
Livingston, Robert Morris, and Fred Wilson for reading drafts of this.Russian Translation

# Some Heroes

April 2008There are some topics I save up because they'll be so much fun to  
write about. This is one of them: a list of my heroes.I'm not claiming this is a list of the n most admirable people.  
Who could make such a list, even if they wanted to?Einstein isn't on the list, for example, even though he probably  
deserves to be on any shortlist of admirable people. I once asked  
a physicist friend if Einstein was really as smart as his fame  
implies, and she said that yes, he was. So why isn't he on the  
list? Because I had to ask. This is a list of people who've  
influenced me, not people who would have if I understood their work.My test was to think of someone and ask "is this person my  
hero?" It often returned surprising answers. For example,  
it returned false for Montaigne, who was arguably the inventor of  
the essay. Why? When I thought  
about what it meant to call someone a hero, it meant I'd decide what  
to do by asking what they'd do in the same situation. That's a   
stricter standard than admiration.After I made the list, I looked to see if there was a pattern, and  
there was, a very clear one. Everyone on the list had two qualities:  
they cared almost excessively about their work, and they were  
absolutely honest. By honest I don't mean trustworthy so much as  
that they never pander: they never say or do something because  
that's what the audience wants. They are all fundamentally subversive  
for this reason, though they conceal it to varying degrees.  
Jack LambertI grew up in Pittsburgh in the 1970s. Unless you were there it's  
hard to imagine how that town felt about the Steelers. Locally,  
all the news was bad. The steel industry was dying. But the  
Steelers were the best team in football — and moreover, in a  
way that seemed to reflect the personality of the city. They didn't  
do anything fancy. They just got the job done.Other players were more famous: Terry Bradshaw, Franco Harris, Lynn  
Swann. But they played offense, and you always get more attention  
for that. It seemed to me as a twelve year old football expert  
that the best of them all was   
Jack Lambert. And what made him so  
good was that he was utterly relentless. He didn't just care about  
playing well; he cared almost too much. He seemed to regard it as  
a personal insult when someone from the other team had possession  
of the ball on his side of the line of scrimmage.The suburbs of Pittsburgh in the 1970s were a pretty dull place.  
School was boring. All the adults around were bored with their  
jobs working for big companies. Everything that came to us through  
the mass media was (a) blandly uniform and (b) produced elsewhere.  
Jack Lambert was the exception. He was like nothing else I'd seen.  
Kenneth ClarkKenneth Clark is the best nonfiction writer I know of, on any  
subject. Most people who write about art history don't really like  
art; you can tell from a thousand little signs. But Clark did, and  
not just intellectually, but the way one anticipates a delicious  
dinner.What really makes him stand out, though, is the quality of his  
ideas. His style is deceptively casual, but there is more in   
his books than in a library  
of art monographs. Reading   
The Nude is like a ride in a  
Ferrari. Just as you're getting settled, you're slammed back in  
your seat by the acceleration. Before you can adjust, you're thrown  
sideways as the car screeches into the first turn. His brain throws  
off ideas almost too fast to grasp them. Finally at the end of the  
chapter you come to a halt, with your eyes wide and a big smile on  
your face.Kenneth Clark was a star in his day, thanks to the documentary  
series   
Civilisation. And if you read only one book about  
art history,   
Civilisation is the one I'd recommend. It's  
much better than the drab Sears Catalogs of art that undergraduates  
are forced to buy for Art History 101.  
Larry MihalkoA lot of people have a great teacher at some point in their childhood.  
Larry Mihalko was mine. When I look back it's like there's a line  
drawn between third and fourth grade. After Mr. Mihalko, everything  
was different.Why? First of all, he was intellectually curious. I had a few  
other teachers who were smart, but I wouldn't describe them as  
intellectually curious. In retrospect, he was out of place as an  
elementary school teacher, and I think he knew it. That must have  
been hard for him, but it was wonderful for us, his students. His  
class was a constant adventure. I used to like going to school  
every day.The other thing that made him different was that he liked us. Kids  
are good at telling that. The other teachers were at best benevolently  
indifferent. But Mr. Mihalko seemed like he actually wanted to  
be our friend. On the last day of fourth grade, he got out one of  
the heavy school record players and played James Taylor's "You've  
Got a Friend" to us. Just call out my name, and you know wherever  
I am, I'll come running. He died at 59 of lung cancer. I've never  
cried like I cried at his funeral.  
LeonardoOne of the things I've learned about making things that I didn't  
realize when I was a kid is that much of the best stuff isn't made  
for audiences, but for oneself. You see paintings and drawings in  
museums and imagine they were made for you to look at. Actually a  
lot of the best ones were made as a way of exploring the world, not  
as a way to please other people. The best of these explorations  
are sometimes more pleasing than stuff made explicitly to please.Leonardo did a lot of things. One of his most admirable qualities  
was that he did so many different things that were admirable. What  
people know of him now is his paintings and his more flamboyant  
inventions, like flying machines. That makes him seem like some  
kind of dreamer who sketched artists' conceptions of rocket ships  
on the side. In fact he made a large number of far more practical  
technical discoveries. He was as good an engineer as a painter.His most impressive work, to me, is his   
drawings. They're clearly  
made more as a way of studying the world than producing something  
beautiful. And yet they can hold their own with any work of art  
ever made. No one else, before or since, was that good when no one  
was looking.  
Robert MorrisRobert Morris has a very unusual quality: he's never wrong. It  
might seem this would require you to be omniscient, but actually  
it's surprisingly easy. Don't say anything unless you're fairly  
sure of it. If you're not omniscient, you just don't end up saying  
much.More precisely, the trick is to pay careful attention to how you  
qualify what you say. By using this trick, Robert has, as far as  
I know, managed to be mistaken only once, and that was when he was  
an undergrad. When the Mac came out, he said that little desktop  
computers would never be suitable for real hacking.It's wrong to call it a trick in his case, though. If it were a  
conscious trick, he would have slipped in a moment of excitement.  
With Robert this quality is wired-in. He has an almost superhuman  
integrity. He's not just generally correct, but also correct about  
how correct he is.You'd think it would be such a great thing never to be wrong that  
everyone would do this. It doesn't seem like that much extra work  
to pay as much attention to the error on an idea as to the idea  
itself. And yet practically no one does. I know how hard it is,  
because since meeting Robert I've tried to do in software what he  
seems to do in hardware.  
P. G. WodehousePeople are finally starting to admit that Wodehouse was a great  
writer. If you want to be thought a great novelist in your own  
time, you have to sound intellectual. If what you write is popular,  
or entertaining, or funny, you're ipso facto suspect. That makes  
Wodehouse doubly impressive, because it meant that to write as he  
wanted to, he had to commit to being despised in his own lifetime.Evelyn Waugh called him a great writer, but to most people at the  
time that would have read as a chivalrous or deliberately perverse  
gesture. At the time any random autobiographical novel by a recent  
college grad could count on more respectful treatment from the  
literary establishment.Wodehouse may have begun with simple atoms, but the way he composed  
them into molecules was near faultless. His rhythm in particular.  
It makes me self-conscious to write about it. I can think of only  
two other writers who came near him for style: Evelyn Waugh and  
Nancy Mitford. Those three used the English language like they  
owned it.But Wodehouse has something neither of them did. He's at ease.  
Evelyn Waugh and Nancy Mitford cared what other people thought of  
them: he wanted to seem aristocratic; she was afraid she wasn't  
smart enough. But Wodehouse didn't give a damn what anyone thought  
of him. He wrote exactly what he wanted.  
Alexander CalderCalder's on this list because he makes me happy. Can his work stand  
up to Leonardo's? Probably not. There might not be anything from  
the 20th Century that can. But what was good about Modernism,  
Calder had, and had in a way that he made seem effortless.What was good about Modernism was its freshness. Art became stuffy  
in the nineteenth century. The paintings that were popular at the  
time were mostly the art equivalent of McMansions—big,  
pretentious, and fake. Modernism meant starting over, making things  
with the same earnest motives that children might. The artists who  
benefited most from this were the ones who had preserved a child's  
confidence, like Klee and Calder.Klee was impressive because he could work in so many different  
styles. But between the two I like Calder better, because his work  
seemed happier. Ultimately the point of art is to engage the viewer.  
It's hard to predict what will; often something that seems interesting  
at first will bore you after a month. Calder's   
sculptures never  
get boring. They just sit there quietly radiating optimism, like  
a battery that never runs out. As far as I can tell from books and  
photographs, the happiness of Calder's work is his own happiness  
showing through.  
Jane AustenEveryone admires Jane Austen. Add my name to the list. To me she  
seems the best novelist of all time.I'm interested in how things work. When I read most novels, I pay  
as much attention to the author's choices as to the story. But in  
her novels I can't see the gears at work. Though I'd really like  
to know how she does what she does, I can't figure it out, because  
she's so good that her stories don't seem made up. I feel like I'm  
reading a description of something that actually happened.I used to read a lot of novels when I was younger. I can't read  
most anymore, because they don't have enough information in them.  
Novels seem so impoverished compared to history and biography. But   
reading Austen is like reading  
nonfiction. She writes so well you don't even notice her.  
John McCarthyJohn McCarthy invented Lisp, the field of (or at least the term)  
artificial intelligence, and was an early member of both of the top  
two computer science departments, MIT and Stanford. No one would  
dispute that he's one of the greats, but he's an especial hero to  
me because of   
Lisp.It's hard for us now to understand what a conceptual leap that was  
at the time. Paradoxically, one of the reasons his achievement is  
hard to appreciate is that it was so successful. Practically every  
programming language invented in the last 20 years includes ideas  
from Lisp, and each year the median language gets more Lisplike.In 1958 these ideas were anything but obvious. In 1958 there seem  
to have been two ways of thinking about programming. Some people  
thought of it as math, and proved things about Turing Machines.  
Others thought of it as a way to get things done, and designed  
languages all too influenced by the technology of the day. McCarthy  
alone bridged the gap. He designed a language that was math. But  
designed is not really the word; discovered is more like it.  
The SpitfireAs I was making this list I found myself thinking of people like  
Douglas Bader   
and   
R.J. Mitchell  
 and   
Jeffrey Quill and I realized  
that though all of them had done many things in their lives, there  
was one factor above all that connected them: the Spitfire.This is supposed to be a list of heroes. How can a machine be on  
it? Because that machine was not just a machine. It was a lens  
of heroes. Extraordinary devotion went into it, and extraordinary  
courage came out.It's a cliche to call World War II a contest between good and evil,  
but between fighter designs, it really was. The Spitfire's original  
nemesis, the ME 109, was a brutally practical plane. It was a  
killing machine. The Spitfire was optimism embodied. And not just  
in its beautiful lines: it was at the edge of what could be  
manufactured. But taking the high road worked. In the air, beauty  
had the edge, just.  
Steve JobsPeople alive when Kennedy was killed usually remember exactly where  
they were when they heard about it. I remember exactly where I was  
when a friend asked if I'd heard Steve Jobs had cancer. It was  
like the floor dropped out. A few seconds later she told me that  
it was a rare operable type, and that he'd be ok. But those seconds  
seemed long.I wasn't sure whether to include Jobs on this list. A lot of people  
at Apple seem to be afraid of him, which is a bad sign. But he  
compels admiration.There's no name for what Steve Jobs is, because there hasn't been  
anyone quite like him before. He doesn't design Apple's products  
himself. Historically the closest analogy to what he does are the  
great Renaissance patrons of the arts. As the CEO of a company,  
that makes him unique.Most CEOs delegate   
taste to a subordinate.  
The   
design paradox  
 means they're choosing more or less at random. But Steve  
Jobs actually has taste himself — such good taste that he's shown  
the world how much more important taste is than they realized.  
Isaac NewtonNewton has a strange role in my pantheon of heroes: he's the one I  
reproach myself with. He worked on big things, at least for part  
of his life. It's so easy to get distracted working on small stuff.  
The questions you're answering are pleasantly familiar. You get  
immediate rewards — in fact, you get bigger rewards in your  
time if you work on matters of passing importance. But I'm  
uncomfortably aware that this is the route to well-deserved obscurity.To do really great things, you have to seek out questions people  
didn't even realize were questions. There have probably been other  
people who did this as well as Newton, for their time, but Newton  
is my model of this kind of thought. I can just begin to understand  
what it must have felt like for him.You only get one life. Why not do something huge? The phrase "paradigm  
shift" is overused now, but Kuhn was onto something. And you know  
more are out there, separated from us by what will later seem a  
surprisingly thin wall of laziness and stupidity. If we work like  
Newton.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and Jackie McDonough for reading drafts of this.Japanese Translation

# How to Disagree

March 2008The web is turning writing into a conversation. Twenty years ago,  
writers wrote and readers read. The web lets readers respond, and  
increasingly they do—in comment threads, on forums, and in their  
own blog posts.Many who respond to something disagree with it. That's to be  
expected. Agreeing tends to motivate people less than disagreeing.  
And when you agree there's less to say. You could expand on something  
the author said, but he has probably already explored the  
most interesting implications. When you disagree you're entering  
territory he may not have explored.The result is there's a lot more disagreeing going on, especially  
measured by the word. That doesn't mean people are getting angrier.  
The structural change in the way we communicate is enough to account  
for it. But though it's not anger that's driving the increase in  
disagreement, there's a danger that the increase in disagreement  
will make people angrier. Particularly online, where it's easy to  
say things you'd never say face to face.If we're all going to be disagreeing more, we should be careful to  
do it well. What does it mean to disagree well? Most readers can  
tell the difference between mere name-calling and a carefully  
reasoned refutation, but I think it would help to put names on the  
intermediate stages. So here's an attempt at a disagreement  
hierarchy:  
DH0. Name-calling.This is the lowest form of disagreement, and probably also the most  
common. We've all seen comments like this:  
  
 u r a fag!!!!!!!!!!  
  
But it's important to realize that more articulate name-calling has  
just as little weight. A comment like  
  
 The author is a self-important dilettante.  
  
is really nothing more than a pretentious version of "u r a fag."  
DH1. Ad Hominem.An ad hominem attack is not quite as weak as mere name-calling. It  
might actually carry some weight. For example, if a senator wrote  
an article saying senators' salaries should be increased, one could  
respond:  
  
 Of course he would say that. He's a senator.  
  
This wouldn't refute the author's argument, but it may at least be  
relevant to the case. It's still a very weak form of disagreement,  
though. If there's something wrong with the senator's argument,  
you should say what it is; and if there isn't, what difference does  
it make that he's a senator?Saying that an author lacks the authority to write about a topic  
is a variant of ad hominem—and a particularly useless sort, because  
good ideas often come from outsiders. The question is whether the  
author is correct or not. If his lack of authority caused him to  
make mistakes, point those out. And if it didn't, it's not a  
problem.  
DH2. Responding to Tone.The next level up we start to see responses to the writing, rather  
than the writer. The lowest form of these is to disagree with the  
author's tone. E.g.  
  
 I can't believe the author dismisses intelligent design in such  
 a cavalier fashion.  
  
Though better than attacking the author, this is still a weak form  
of disagreement. It matters much more whether the author is wrong  
or right than what his tone is. Especially since tone is so hard  
to judge. Someone who has a chip on their shoulder about some topic  
might be offended by a tone that to other readers seemed neutral.So if the worst thing you can say about something is to criticize  
its tone, you're not saying much. Is the author flippant, but  
correct? Better that than grave and wrong. And if the author is  
incorrect somewhere, say where.DH3. Contradiction.In this stage we finally get responses to what was said, rather  
than how or by whom. The lowest form of response to an argument  
is simply to state the opposing case, with little or no supporting  
evidence.This is often combined with DH2 statements, as in:  
  
 I can't believe the author dismisses intelligent design in such  
 a cavalier fashion. Intelligent design is a legitimate scientific  
 theory.  
  
Contradiction can sometimes have some weight. Sometimes merely  
seeing the opposing case stated explicitly is enough to see that  
it's right. But usually evidence will help.DH4. Counterargument.At level 4 we reach the first form of convincing disagreement:  
counterargument. Forms up to this point can usually be ignored as  
proving nothing. Counterargument might prove something. The problem  
is, it's hard to say exactly what.Counterargument is contradiction plus reasoning and/or evidence.  
When aimed squarely at the original argument, it can be convincing.  
But unfortunately it's common for counterarguments to be aimed at  
something slightly different. More often than not, two people  
arguing passionately about something are actually arguing about two  
different things. Sometimes they even agree with one another, but  
are so caught up in their squabble they don't realize it.There could be a legitimate reason for arguing against something  
slightly different from what the original author said: when you  
feel they missed the heart of the matter. But when you do that,  
you should say explicitly you're doing it.DH5. Refutation.The most convincing form of disagreement is refutation. It's also  
the rarest, because it's the most work. Indeed, the disagreement  
hierarchy forms a kind of pyramid, in the sense that the higher you  
go the fewer instances you find.To refute someone you probably have to quote them. You have to  
find a "smoking gun," a passage in whatever you disagree with that  
you feel is mistaken, and then explain why it's mistaken. If you  
can't find an actual quote to disagree with, you may be arguing  
with a straw man.While refutation generally entails quoting, quoting doesn't necessarily  
imply refutation. Some writers quote parts of things they disagree  
with to give the appearance of legitimate refutation, then follow  
with a response as low as DH3 or even DH0.DH6. Refuting the Central Point.The force of a refutation depends on what you refute. The most  
powerful form of disagreement is to refute someone's central point.Even as high as DH5 we still sometimes see deliberate dishonesty,  
as when someone picks out minor points of an argument and refutes  
those. Sometimes the spirit in which this is done makes it more  
of a sophisticated form of ad hominem than actual refutation. For  
example, correcting someone's grammar, or harping on minor mistakes  
in names or numbers. Unless the opposing argument actually depends  
on such things, the only purpose of correcting them is to  
discredit one's opponent.Truly refuting something requires one to refute its central point,  
or at least one of them. And that means one has to commit explicitly  
to what the central point is. So a truly effective refutation would  
look like:  
  
 The author's main point seems to be x. As he says:  
  
 <quotation>  
  
 But this is wrong for the following reasons...  
  
The quotation you point out as mistaken need not be the actual  
statement of the author's main point. It's enough to refute something  
it depends upon.  
What It MeansNow we have a way of classifying forms of disagreement. What good  
is it? One thing the disagreement hierarchy doesn't give us is  
a way of picking a winner. DH levels merely describe the form of  
a statement, not whether it's correct. A DH6 response could still  
be completely mistaken.But while DH levels don't set a lower bound on the convincingness  
of a reply, they do set an upper bound. A DH6 response might be  
unconvincing, but a DH2 or lower response is always unconvincing.The most obvious advantage of classifying the forms of disagreement  
is that it will help people to evaluate what they read. In particular,  
it will help them to see through intellectually dishonest arguments.  
An eloquent speaker or writer can give the impression of vanquishing  
an opponent merely by using forceful words. In fact that is probably  
the defining quality of a demagogue. By giving names to the different  
forms of disagreement, we give critical readers a pin for popping  
such balloons.Such labels may help writers too. Most intellectual dishonesty is  
unintentional. Someone arguing against the tone of something he  
disagrees with may believe he's really saying something. Zooming  
out and seeing his current position on the disagreement hierarchy  
may inspire him to try moving up to counterargument or refutation.But the greatest benefit of disagreeing well is not just that it  
will make conversations better, but that it will make the people  
who have them happier. If you study conversations, you find there  
is a lot more meanness down in DH1 than up in DH6. You don't have  
to be mean when you have a real point to make. In fact, you don't  
want to. If you have something real to say, being mean just gets  
in the way.If moving up the disagreement hierarchy makes people less mean,  
that will make most of them happier. Most people don't really enjoy  
being mean; they do it because they can't help it.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell and Jessica Livingston for reading  
drafts of this.Related:What You Can't SayThe Age of the EssayItalian TranslationRussian TranslationSwedish TranslationSpanish TranslationGerman TranslationFrench TranslationArabic TranslationFinnish TranslationItalian TranslationTurkish Translation

# You Weren't Meant to Have a Boss

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
March 2008, rev. June 2008Technology tends to separate normal from natural. Our bodies  
weren't designed to eat the foods that people in rich countries eat, or  
to get so little exercise.   
There may be a similar problem with the way we work:   
a normal job may be as bad for us intellectually as white flour  
or sugar is for us physically.I began to suspect this after spending several years working   
with startup founders. I've now worked with over 200 of them, and I've  
noticed a definite difference between programmers working on their  
own startups and those working for large organizations.  
I wouldn't say founders seem happier, necessarily;  
starting a startup can be very stressful. Maybe the best way to put  
it is to say that they're happier in the sense that your body is  
happier during a long run than sitting on a sofa eating  
doughnuts.Though they're statistically abnormal, startup founders seem to be  
working in a way that's more natural for humans.I was in Africa last year and saw a lot of animals in the wild that  
I'd only seen in zoos before. It was remarkable how different they  
seemed. Particularly lions. Lions in the wild seem about ten times  
more alive. They're like different animals. I suspect that working  
for oneself feels better to humans in much the same way that living  
in the wild must feel better to a wide-ranging predator like a lion.  
Life in a zoo is easier, but it isn't the life they were designed  
for.  
TreesWhat's so unnatural about working for a big company? The root of  
the problem is that humans weren't meant to work in such large  
groups.Another thing you notice when you see animals in the wild is that  
each species thrives in groups of a certain size. A herd of impalas  
might have 100 adults; baboons maybe 20; lions rarely 10. Humans  
also seem designed to work in groups, and what I've read about  
hunter-gatherers accords with research on organizations and my own  
experience to suggest roughly what the ideal size is: groups of 8  
work well; by 20 they're getting hard to manage; and a group of 50  
is really unwieldy.  
[1]  
Whatever the upper limit is, we are clearly not meant to work in  
groups of several hundred. And yet—for reasons having more  
to do with technology than human nature—a great many people  
work for companies with hundreds or thousands of employees.Companies know groups that large wouldn't work, so they divide  
themselves into units small enough to work together. But to  
coordinate these they have to introduce something new: bosses.These smaller groups are always arranged in a tree structure. Your  
boss is the point where your group attaches to the tree. But when  
you use this trick for dividing a large group into smaller ones,  
something strange happens that I've never heard anyone mention  
explicitly. In the group one level up from yours, your boss  
represents your entire group. A group of 10 managers is not merely  
a group of 10 people working together in the usual way. It's really  
a group of groups. Which means for a group of 10 managers to work  
together as if they were simply a group of 10 individuals, the group  
working for each manager would have to work as if they were a single  
person—the workers and manager would each share only one  
person's worth of freedom between them.In practice a group of people are never able to act as if they were  
one person. But in a large organization divided into groups in  
this way, the pressure is always in that direction. Each group  
tries its best to work as if it were the small group of individuals  
that humans were designed to work in. That was the point of creating  
it. And when you propagate that constraint, the result is that  
each person gets freedom of action in inverse proportion to the  
size of the entire tree.  
[2]Anyone who's worked for a large organization has felt this. You  
can feel the difference between working for a company with 100  
employees and one with 10,000, even if your group has only 10 people.  
Corn SyrupA group of 10 people within a large organization is a kind of fake  
tribe. The number of people you interact with is about right. But  
something is missing: individual initiative. Tribes of hunter-gatherers  
have much more freedom. The leaders have a little more power than other  
members of the tribe, but they don't generally tell them what to  
do and when the way a boss can.It's not your boss's fault. The real problem is that in the group  
above you in the hierarchy, your entire group is one virtual person.  
Your boss is just the way that constraint is imparted to you.So working in a group of 10 people within a large organization feels  
both right and wrong at the same time. On the surface it feels  
like the kind of group you're meant to work in, but something major  
is missing. A job at a big company is like high fructose corn  
syrup: it has some of the qualities of things you're meant to like,  
but is disastrously lacking in others.Indeed, food is an excellent metaphor to explain what's wrong with  
the usual sort of job.For example, working for a big company is the default thing to do,  
at least for programmers. How bad could it be? Well, food shows  
that pretty clearly. If you were dropped at a random point in  
America today, nearly all the food around you would be bad for you.  
Humans were not designed to eat white flour, refined sugar, high  
fructose corn syrup, and hydrogenated vegetable oil. And yet if  
you analyzed the contents of the average grocery store you'd probably  
find these four ingredients accounted for most of the calories.  
"Normal" food is terribly bad for you. The only people who eat  
what humans were actually designed to eat are a few Birkenstock-wearing  
weirdos in Berkeley.If "normal" food is so bad for us, why is it so common? There are  
two main reasons. One is that it has more immediate appeal. You  
may feel lousy an hour after eating that pizza, but eating the first  
couple bites feels great. The other is economies of scale.  
Producing junk food scales; producing fresh vegetables doesn't.  
Which means (a) junk food can be very cheap, and (b) it's worth  
spending a lot to market it.If people have to choose between something that's cheap, heavily  
marketed, and appealing in the short term, and something that's  
expensive, obscure, and appealing in the long term, which do you  
think most will choose?It's the same with work. The average MIT graduate wants to work  
at Google or Microsoft, because it's a recognized brand, it's safe,  
and they'll get paid a good salary right away. It's the job  
equivalent of the pizza they had for lunch. The drawbacks will  
only become apparent later, and then only in a vague sense of  
malaise.And founders and early employees of startups, meanwhile, are like  
the Birkenstock-wearing weirdos of Berkeley: though a tiny minority  
of the population, they're the ones living as humans are meant to.  
In an artificial world, only extremists live naturally.  
ProgrammersThe restrictiveness of big company jobs is particularly hard on  
programmers, because the essence of programming is to build new  
things. Sales people make much the same pitches every day; support  
people answer much the same questions; but once you've written a  
piece of code you don't need to write it again. So a programmer  
working as programmers are meant to is always making new things.  
And when you're part of an organization whose structure gives each  
person freedom in inverse proportion to the size of the tree, you're  
going to face resistance when you do something new.This seems an inevitable consequence of bigness. It's true even  
in the smartest companies. I was talking recently to a founder who  
considered starting a startup right out of college, but went to  
work for Google instead because he thought he'd learn more there.  
He didn't learn as much as he expected. Programmers learn by doing,  
and most of the things he wanted to do, he couldn't—sometimes  
because the company wouldn't let him, but often because the company's  
code wouldn't let him. Between the drag of legacy code, the overhead  
of doing development in such a large organization, and the restrictions  
imposed by interfaces owned by other groups, he could only try a  
fraction of the things he would have liked to. He said he has  
learned much more in his own startup, despite the fact that he has  
to do all the company's errands as well as programming, because at  
least when he's programming he can do whatever he wants.An obstacle downstream propagates upstream. If you're not allowed  
to implement new ideas, you stop having them. And vice versa: when  
you can do whatever you want, you have more ideas about what to do.  
So working for yourself makes your brain more powerful in the same  
way a low-restriction exhaust system makes an engine more powerful.Working for yourself doesn't have to mean starting a startup, of  
course. But a programmer deciding between a regular job at a big  
company and their own startup is probably going to learn more doing  
the startup.You can adjust the amount of freedom you get by scaling the size  
of company you work for. If you start the company, you'll have the  
most freedom. If you become one of the first 10 employees you'll  
have almost as much freedom as the founders. Even a company with  
100 people will feel different from one with 1000.Working for a small company doesn't ensure freedom. The tree  
structure of large organizations sets an upper bound on freedom,  
not a lower bound. The head of a small company may still choose  
to be a tyrant. The point is that a large organization is compelled  
by its structure to be one.  
ConsequencesThat has real consequences for both organizations and individuals.  
One is that companies will inevitably slow down as they grow larger,  
no matter how hard they try to keep their startup mojo. It's a  
consequence of the tree structure that every large organization is  
forced to adopt.Or rather, a large organization could only avoid slowing down if  
they avoided tree structure. And since human nature limits the  
size of group that can work together, the only way I can imagine  
for larger groups to avoid tree structure would be to have no  
structure: to have each group actually be independent, and to work  
together the way components of a market economy do.That might be worth exploring. I suspect there are already some  
highly partitionable businesses that lean this way. But I don't  
know any technology companies that have done it.There is one thing companies can do short of structuring themselves  
as sponges: they can stay small. If I'm right, then it really  
pays to keep a company as small as it can be at every stage.  
Particularly a technology company. Which means it's doubly important  
to hire the best people. Mediocre hires hurt you twice: they get  
less done, but they also make you big, because you need more of  
them to solve a given problem.For individuals the upshot is the same: aim small. It will always  
suck to work for large organizations, and the larger the organization,  
the more it will suck.In an essay I wrote a couple years ago   
I advised graduating seniors  
to work for a couple years for another company before starting their  
own. I'd modify that now. Work for another company if you want  
to, but only for a small one, and if you want to start your own  
startup, go ahead.The reason I suggested college graduates not start startups immediately  
was that I felt most would fail. And they will. But ambitious  
programmers are better off doing their own thing and failing than  
going to work at a big company. Certainly they'll learn more. They  
might even be better off financially. A lot of people in their  
early twenties get into debt, because their expenses grow even  
faster than the salary that seemed so high when they left school.  
At least if you start a startup and fail your net worth will be  
zero rather than negative.   
[3]We've now funded so many different types of founders that we have  
enough data to see patterns, and there seems to be no benefit from  
working for a big company. The people who've worked for a few years  
do seem better than the ones straight out of college, but only  
because they're that much older.The people who come to us from big companies often seem kind of  
conservative. It's hard to say how much is because big companies  
made them that way, and how much is the natural conservatism that  
made them work for the big companies in the first place. But  
certainly a large part of it is learned. I know because I've seen  
it burn off.Having seen that happen so many times is one of the things that  
convinces me that working for oneself, or at least for a small  
group, is the natural way for programmers to live. Founders arriving  
at Y Combinator often have the downtrodden air of refugees. Three  
months later they're transformed: they have so much more   
confidence  
that they seem as if they've grown several inches taller.   
[4]  
Strange as this sounds, they seem both more worried and happier at the same  
time. Which is exactly how I'd describe the way lions seem in the  
wild.Watching employees get transformed into founders makes it clear  
that the difference between the two is due mostly to environment—and  
in particular that the environment in big companies is toxic to  
programmers. In the first couple weeks of working on their own  
startup they seem to come to life, because finally they're working  
the way people are meant to.Notes[1]  
When I talk about humans being meant or designed to live a  
certain way, I mean by evolution.[2]  
It's not only the leaves who suffer. The constraint propagates  
up as well as down. So managers are constrained too; instead of  
just doing things, they have to act through subordinates.[3]  
Do not finance your startup with credit cards. Financing a  
startup with debt is usually a stupid move, and credit card debt  
stupidest of all. Credit card debt is a bad idea, period. It is  
a trap set by evil companies for the desperate and the foolish.[4]  
The founders we fund used to be younger (initially we encouraged  
undergrads to apply), and the first couple times I saw this I used  
to wonder if they were actually getting physically taller.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Ross Boucher, Aaron Iba, Abby  
Kirigin, Ivan Kirigin, Jessica Livingston, and Robert Morris for  
reading drafts of this.French TranslationRussian Translation

# A New Venture Animal

March 2008, rev May 2013(This essay grew out of something I wrote for myself to figure  
out what we do. Even though Y Combinator is now 3 years old, we're still  
trying to understand its implications.)  
I was annoyed recently to read a description of Y Combinator that  
said "Y Combinator does seed funding for startups." What was  
especially annoying about it was that I wrote it. This doesn't  
really convey what we do. And the reason it's inaccurate is that,  
paradoxically, funding very early stage startups is not mainly about  
funding.Saying YC does seed funding for startups is a description in terms  
of earlier models. It's like calling a car a horseless carriage.When you scale animals you can't just keep everything in proportion.  
For example, volume grows as the cube of linear dimension, but  
surface area only as the square. So as animals get bigger they  
have trouble radiating heat. That's why mice and rabbits are furry  
and elephants and hippos aren't. You can't make a mouse by scaling  
down an elephant.YC represents a new, smaller kind of animal—so much smaller  
that all the rules are different.Before us, most companies in the startup funding business were  
venture capital funds. VCs generally fund later stage companies  
than we do. And they supply so much money that, even though the  
other things they do may be very valuable, it's not that inaccurate  
to regard VCs as sources of money. Good VCs are "smart money," but  
they're still money.All good investors supply a combination of money and help. But  
these scale differently, just as volume and surface area do. Late  
stage investors supply huge amounts of money and  
comparatively little help: when a company about to go public gets  
a mezzanine round of $50 million, the deal tends to be almost  
entirely about money. As you move earlier in the venture  
funding process, the ratio of help to money increases, because  
earlier stage companies have different needs. Early stage companies  
need less money because they're smaller and cheaper to run, but  
they need more help because life is so precarious for them. So  
when VCs do a series A round for, say, $2 million, they generally  
expect to offer a significant amount of help along with the money.Y Combinator occupies the earliest end of the spectrum. We're at  
least one and generally two steps before VC funding. (Though some  
startups go straight from YC to VC, the most common trajectory is  
to do an angel round first.) And what happens at Y Combinator is  
as different from what happens in a series A round as a series A  
round is from a mezzanine financing.At our end, money is almost a negligible factor. The startup usually  
consists of just the founders. Their living expenses are the  
company's main expense, and since most founders are under 30, their  
living expenses are low. But at this early stage companies need a  
lot of help. Practically every question is still unanswered. Some  
companies we've funded have been working on their software for a  
year or more, but others haven't decided what to work on, or even  
who the founders should be.When PR people and journalists recount the histories of startups  
after they've become big, they always underestimate how uncertain  
things were at first. They're not being deliberately misleading.  
When you look at a company like Google, it's hard to imagine they  
could once have been small and helpless. Sure, at one point they  
were a just a couple guys in a garage—but even then their  
greatness was assured, and all they had to do was roll forward along  
the railroad tracks of destiny.Far from it. A lot of startups with just as promising beginnings  
end up failing. Google has such momentum now that it would be hard  
for anyone to stop them. But all it would have taken in the beginning  
would have been for two Google employees to focus on the wrong  
things for six months, and the company could have died.We know, because we've been there, just how vulnerable startups are  
in the earliest phases. Curiously enough, that's why founders tend  
to get so rich from them. Reward is always proportionate to risk,  
and very early stage startups are insanely risky.What we really do at Y Combinator is get startups launched straight.  
One of many metaphors you could use for YC is a steam catapult on  
an aircraft carrier. We get startups airborne. Barely airborne,  
but enough that they can accelerate fast.When you're launching planes they have to be set up properly or  
you're just launching projectiles. They have to be pointed straight  
down the deck; the wings have to be trimmed properly; the engines  
have to be at full power; the pilot has to be ready. These are the  
kind of problems we deal with. After we fund startups we work  
closely with them for three months—so closely in fact that  
we insist they move to where we are. And what we do in those three  
months is make sure everything is set up for launch. If there are  
tensions between cofounders we help sort them out. We get all the  
paperwork set up properly so there are no nasty surprises later.  
If the founders aren't sure what to focus on first, we try to figure  
that out. If there is some obstacle right in front of them, we  
either try to remove it, or shift the startup sideways. The goal  
is to get every distraction out of the way so the founders can use  
that time to build (or finish building) something impressive. And  
then near the end of the three months we push the button on the  
steam catapult in the form of Demo Day, where the current group of  
startups present to pretty much every investor in Silicon Valley.Launching companies isn't identical with launching products. Though  
we do spend a lot of time on launch strategies for products, there  
are some things that take too long to build for a startup to launch  
them before raising their next round of funding. Several of the  
most promising startups we've funded haven't launched their products  
yet, but are definitely launched as companies.In the earliest stage, startups not only have more questions to  
answer, but they tend to be different kinds of questions. In later  
stage startups the questions are about deals, or hiring, or  
organization. In the earliest phase they tend to be about technology  
and design. What do you make? That's the first problem to solve.  
That's why our motto is "Make something people want." This is  
always a good thing for companies to do, but it's even more important  
early on, because it sets the bounds for every other question. Who  
you hire, how much money you raise, how you market yourself—they  
all depend on what you're making.Because the early problems are so much about technology and design,  
you probably need to be hackers to do what we do. While some VCs  
have technical backgrounds, I don't know any who still write code.  
Their expertise is mostly in business—as it should be, because  
that's the kind of expertise you need in the phase between series  
A and (if you're lucky) IPO.We're so different from VCs that we're really a different kind of  
animal. Can we claim founders are better off as a result of this  
new type of venture firm? I'm pretty sure the answer is yes, because  
YC is an improved version of what happened to our startup, and our  
case was not atypical. We started Viaweb with $10,000 in seed money  
from our friend Julian. He was a lawyer and arranged all our  
paperwork, so we could just code. We spent three months building  
a version 1, which we then presented to investors to raise more  
money. Sounds familiar, doesn't it? But YC improves on that  
significantly. Julian knew a lot about law and business, but his  
advice ended there; he was not a startup guy. So we made some basic  
mistakes early on. And when we presented to investors, we presented  
to only 2, because that was all we knew. If we'd had our later  
selves to encourage and advise us, and Demo Day to present at, we  
would have been in much better shape. We probably could have raised  
money at 3 to 5 times the valuation we did.If we take 7% of a company we fund, the founders only have to do  
7.5% better in their next round of funding  
to end up net ahead. We certainly manage that.So who is our 7% coming out of? If the founders end up net ahead  
it's not coming out of them. So is it coming out of later stage  
investors? Well, they do end up paying more. But I think they pay  
more because the company is actually more valuable. And later stage  
investors have no problem with that. The returns of a VC fund  
depend on the quality of the companies they invest in, not how  
cheaply they can buy stock in them.If what we do is useful, why wasn't anyone doing it before? There  
are two answers to that. One is that people were doing it before,  
just haphazardly on a smaller scale. Before us, seed funding came  
primarily from individual angel investors. Larry and Sergey, for  
example, got their seed funding from Andy Bechtolsheim, one of the  
founders of Sun. And because he was a startup guy he probably gave  
them useful advice. But raising money from angel investors is a  
hit or miss thing. It's a sideline for most of them, so they only  
do a handful of deals a year and they don't spend a lot of time on  
the startups they invest in. And they're hard to reach, because  
they don't want random startups pestering them with business plans.  
The Google guys were lucky because they knew someone who knew  
Bechtolsheim. It generally takes a personal introduction with  
angels.The other reason no one was doing quite what we do is that till  
recently it was a lot more expensive to start a startup. You'll  
notice we haven't funded any biotech startups. That's still  
expensive. But advancing technology has made web startups so cheap  
that you really can get a company airborne for $15,000. If you  
understand how to operate a steam catapult, at least.So in effect what's happened is that a new ecological niche has  
opened up, and Y Combinator is the new kind of animal that has moved  
into it. We're not a replacement for venture capital funds. We  
occupy a new, adjacent niche. And conditions in our niche are  
really quite different. It's not just that the problems we face  
are different; the whole structure of the business is different.  
VCs are playing a zero-sum game. They're all competing for a slice  
of a fixed amount of "deal flow," and that explains a lot of their  
behavior. Whereas our m.o. is to create new deal flow, by encouraging  
hackers who would have gotten jobs to start their own startups  
instead. We compete more with employers than VCs.It's not surprising something like this would happen. Most fields  
become more specialized—more articulated—as they develop,  
and startups are certainly an area in which there has been a lot  
of development over the past couple decades. The venture business  
in its present form is only about forty years old. It stands to  
reason it would evolve.And it's natural that the new niche would at first be described,  
even by its inhabitants, in terms of the old one. But really Y  
Combinator is not in the startup funding business. Really we're  
more of a small, furry steam catapult.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and Robert Morris  
for reading drafts of this.  
Comment on this essay.

# Trolls

February 2008A user on Hacker News recently posted a  
comment  
that set me thinking:  
  
 Something about hacker culture that never really set well with  
 me was this  the nastiness. ... I just don't understand why people  
 troll like they do.  
  
I've thought a lot over the last couple years about the problem of  
trolls. It's an old one, as old as forums, but  
we're still just learning what the causes are and how to address  
them.There are two senses of the word "troll." In the original sense  
it meant someone, usually an outsider, who deliberately stirred up  
fights in a forum by saying controversial things.  
[1]  
For example,  
someone who didn't use a certain programming language might go to  
a forum for users of that language and make disparaging remarks  
about it, then sit back and watch as people rose to the bait. This  
sort of trolling was in the nature of a practical joke, like letting  
a bat loose in a room full of people.The definition then spread to people who behaved like assholes in  
forums, whether intentionally or not. Now when people talk about  
trolls they usually mean this broader sense of the word. Though  
in a sense this is historically inaccurate, it is in other ways  
more accurate, because when someone is being an asshole it's usually  
uncertain even in their own mind how much is deliberate.  
That is arguably one of the defining qualities of an asshole.I think trolling in the broader sense has four causes. The most  
important is distance. People will say things in anonymous forums  
that they'd never dare say to someone's face, just as they'll do  
things in cars that they'd never do as pedestrians  like tailgate  
people, or honk at them, or cut them off.Trolling tends to be particularly bad in forums related to computers,  
and I think that's due to the kind of people you find there. Most  
of them (myself included) are more comfortable dealing with abstract  
ideas than with people. Hackers can be abrupt even in person. Put  
them on an anonymous forum, and the problem gets worse.The third cause of trolling is incompetence. If you disagree with  
something, it's easier to say "you suck" than to figure out and  
explain exactly what you disagree with. You're also safe that way  
from refutation. In this respect trolling is a lot like graffiti.  
Graffiti happens at the intersection of ambition and incompetence:  
people want to make their mark on the world, but have no other way  
to do it than literally making a mark on the world.  
[2]The final contributing factor is the culture of the forum. Trolls  
are like children (many are children) in that they're capable of  
a wide range of behavior depending on what they think will be  
tolerated. In a place where rudeness isn't tolerated, most can be  
polite. But vice versa as well.There's a sort of Gresham's Law of trolls: trolls are willing to  
use a forum with a lot of thoughtful people in it, but thoughtful  
people aren't willing to use a forum with a lot of trolls in it.  
Which means that once trolling takes hold, it tends to become the  
dominant culture. That had already happened to Slashdot and Digg by  
the time I paid attention to comment threads there, but I watched  
it happen to Reddit.News.YC is, among other things, an experiment to see if this fate  
can be avoided. The sites's guidelines  
explicitly ask people not to say things they wouldn't say face to  
face. If someone starts being rude, other users will step in and  
tell them to stop. And when people seem to be deliberately trolling,  
we ban them ruthlessly.Technical tweaks may also help. On Reddit, votes on your comments  
don't affect your karma score, but they do on News.YC. And it does  
seem to influence people when they can see their reputation in the  
eyes of their peers drain away after making an asshole remark.  
Often users have second thoughts and delete such comments.One might worry this would prevent people from expressing controversial  
ideas, but empirically that doesn't seem to be what happens. When  
people say something substantial that gets modded down, they  
stubbornly leave it up. What people delete are wisecracks, because  
they have less invested in them.So far the experiment seems to be working. The level of conversation  
on News.YC is as high as on any forum I've seen. But we still only  
have about 8,000 uniques a day. The conversations on Reddit were  
good when it was that small. The challenge is whether we can keep  
things this way.I'm optimistic we will. We're not depending just on technical  
tricks. The core users of News.YC are mostly refugees from other  
sites that were overrun by trolls. They feel about trolls roughly  
the way refugees from Cuba or Eastern Europe feel about dictatorships.  
So there are a lot of people working to keep this from happening  
again.  
Notes[1]  
I mean forum in the general sense of a place to exchange views.  
The original Internet forums were not web sites but Usenet newsgroups.[2]  
I'm talking here about everyday tagging. Some graffiti is  
quite impressive (anything becomes art if you do it well enough)  
but the median tag is just visual spam.Russian Translation

# Six Principles for Making New Things

February 2008The fiery reaction to the release of Arc had  
an unexpected consequence: it made me realize I had a design  
philosophy. The main complaint of the more articulate critics was  
that Arc seemed so flimsy. After years of working on it, all I had  
to show for myself were a few thousand lines of macros? Why hadn't  
I worked on more substantial problems?As I was mulling over these remarks it struck me how familiar they  
seemed. This was exactly the kind of thing people said at first  
about Viaweb, and Y Combinator, and most of my essays.When we launched Viaweb, it seemed laughable to VCs and e-commerce  
"experts." We were just a couple guys in an apartment,  
which did not seem cool in 1995 the way it does now. And the thing  
we'd built, as far as they could tell, wasn't even software.  
Software, to them, equalled big, honking Windows apps. Since Viaweb  
was the first web-based app   
they'd seen, it seemed to be nothing  
more than a website. They were even more contemptuous when they  
discovered that Viaweb didn't process credit card transactions (we  
didn't for the whole first year). Transaction processing seemed  
to them what e-commerce was all about. It sounded serious and  
difficult.And yet, mysteriously, Viaweb ended up crushing all its competitors.The initial reaction to   
Y Combinator was almost identical. It  
seemed laughably lightweight. Startup funding meant series A rounds:  
millions of dollars given to a small number of startups founded by  
people with established credentials after months of serious,  
businesslike meetings, on terms described in a document a foot  
thick. Y Combinator seemed inconsequential. It's too early to say  
yet whether Y Combinator will turn out like Viaweb, but judging  
from the number of imitations, a lot of people seem to think we're  
on to something.I can't measure whether my essays are successful, except in page  
views, but the reaction to them is at least different from when I  
started. At first the default reaction of the Slashdot trolls was  
(translated into articulate terms): "Who is this guy and what  
authority does he have to write about these topics? I haven't read  
the essay, but there's no way anything so short and written in such  
an informal style could have anything useful to say about such and  
such topic, when people with degrees in the subject have already  
written many thick books about it." Now there's a new generation  
of trolls on a new generation of sites, but they have at least  
started to omit the initial "Who is this guy?"Now people are saying the same things about Arc that they said at  
first about Viaweb and Y Combinator and most of my essays. Why the  
pattern? The answer, I realized, is that my m.o. for all four has  
been the same.Here it is: I like to find (a) simple solutions (b) to overlooked  
problems (c) that actually need to be solved, and (d) deliver them  
as informally as possible, (e) starting with a very crude version  
1, then (f) iterating rapidly.When I first laid out these principles explicitly, I noticed something  
striking: this is practically a recipe for generating a contemptuous  
initial reaction. Though simple solutions are better, they don't  
seem as impressive as complex ones. Overlooked problems are by  
definition problems that most people think don't matter. Delivering  
solutions in an informal way means that instead of judging something  
by the way it's presented, people have to actually understand it,  
which is more work. And starting with a crude version 1 means your  
initial effort is always small and incomplete.I'd noticed, of course, that people never seemed to grasp new ideas  
at first. I thought it was just because most people were stupid.  
Now I see there's more to it than that. Like a  
contrarian investment fund, someone following this strategy will  
almost always be doing things that seem wrong to the average person.As with contrarian investment strategies, that's exactly the point.  
This technique is successful (in the long term) because it gives you  
all the advantages other people forgo by trying to seem legit. If  
you work on overlooked problems, you're more likely to discover new  
things, because you have less competition. If you deliver solutions  
informally, you (a) save all the effort you would have had to expend  
to make them look impressive, and (b) avoid the danger of fooling  
yourself as well as your audience. And if you release a crude  
version 1 then iterate, your solution can benefit from the imagination  
of nature, which, as Feynman pointed out, is more powerful than  
your own.In the case of Viaweb, the simple solution was to make the software  
run on the server. The overlooked problem was to generate web sites  
automatically; in 1995, online stores were all made by hand by human  
designers, but we knew this wouldn't scale. The part that actually  
mattered was graphic design, not transaction processing.  
The informal delivery mechanism was me, showing up in jeans and a  
t-shirt at some retailer's office. And the crude version 1 was,  
if I remember correctly, less than 10,000 lines of code when we  
launched.The power of this technique extends beyond startups and programming  
languages and essays. It probably extends to any kind of creative  
work. Certainly it can be used in painting: this is exactly   
what Cezanne and Klee did.At Y Combinator we bet money on it, in the sense that we encourage  
the startups we fund to work this way. There are always new ideas  
right under your nose. So look for simple things that other people  
have overlooked—things people will later claim were   
"obvious"—especially when they've been led astray by obsolete   
conventions,  
or by trying to do things that are superficially impressive. Figure  
out what the real problem is, and make sure you solve that. Don't  
worry about trying to look corporate; the product is what wins in  
the long term. And launch as soon as you can, so you start learning  
from users what you should have been making.Reddit is a classic example of   
this approach. When Reddit first  
launched, it seemed like there was nothing to it. To the graphically  
unsophisticated its deliberately minimal design seemed like no  
design at all. But Reddit solved the real problem, which was to  
tell people what was new and otherwise stay out of the way. As a  
result it became massively successful. Now that conventional ideas  
have caught up with it, it seems obvious. People look at Reddit  
and think the founders were lucky. Like all such things, it was  
harder than it looked. The Reddits pushed so hard against the  
current that they reversed it; now it looks like they're merely  
floating downstream.So when you look at something like Reddit and think "I wish I could  
think of an idea like that," remember: ideas like that are all  
around you. But you ignore them because they look wrong.

# Why to Move to a Startup Hub

October 2007After the last   
talk I gave, one of the organizers   
got up on the  
stage to deliver an impromptu rebuttal. That never happened before.  
I only heard the first few sentences, but that was enough to tell  
what I said that upset him: that startups would do better if they  
moved to Silicon Valley.This conference was in London, and most of the audience seemed to  
be from the UK. So saying startups should move to Silicon Valley  
seemed like a nationalistic remark: an obnoxious American telling  
them that if they wanted to do things right they should all just  
move to America.Actually I'm less American than I seem. I didn't say so, but I'm  
British by birth. And just as Jews are ex officio allowed to tell  
Jewish jokes, I don't feel like I have to bother being diplomatic  
with a British audience.The idea that startups would do better to move to Silicon Valley  
is not even a nationalistic one.  
[1]  
It's the same thing I say to  
startups in the US. Y Combinator alternates between coasts every  
6 months. Every other funding cycle is in Boston. And even though  
Boston is the second biggest startup hub in the US (and the world),  
we tell the startups from those cycles that their best bet is to  
move to Silicon Valley. If that's true of Boston, it's even more  
true of every other city.This is about cities, not countries.And I think I can prove I'm right. You can easily reduce the  
opposing argument ad what most people would agree was absurdum.  
Few would be willing to claim that it doesn't matter at all where  
a startup is—that a startup operating out of a small agricultural  
town wouldn't benefit from moving to a startup hub. Most people  
could see how it might be helpful to be in a place where there was  
infrastructure for startups, accumulated knowledge about how to  
make them work, and other people trying to do it. And yet whatever  
argument you use to prove that startups don't need to move from  
London to Silicon Valley could equally well be used to prove startups  
don't need to move from smaller towns to London.The difference between cities is a matter of degree. And if, as  
nearly everyone who knows agrees, startups are better off in Silicon  
Valley than Boston, then they're better off in Silicon Valley than  
everywhere else too.I realize I might seem to have a vested interest in this conclusion,  
because startups that move to the US might do it through Y Combinator.  
But the American startups we've funded will attest that I say the  
same thing to them.I'm not claiming of course that every startup has to go to Silicon  
Valley to succeed. Just that all other things being equal, the  
more of a startup hub a place is, the better startups will do there.  
But other considerations can outweigh the advantages of moving.  
I'm not saying founders with families should uproot them to move  
halfway around the world; that might be too much of a distraction.Immigration difficulties might be another reason to stay put.  
Dealing with immigration problems is like raising money: for some  
reason it seems to consume all your attention. A startup can't  
afford much of that. One Canadian startup we funded spent about 6  
months working on moving to the US. Eventually they just gave up,  
because they couldn't afford to take so much time away from working  
on their software.(If another country wanted to establish a rival to Silicon Valley,  
the single best thing they could do might be to create a special  
visa for startup founders. US immigration policy is one of Silicon   
Valley's biggest weaknesses.)If your startup is connected to a specific industry, you may be  
better off in one of its centers. A startup doing something related  
to entertainment might want to be in New York or LA.And finally, if a good investor has committed to fund  
you if you stay where you are, you should probably stay. Finding  
investors is hard. You generally shouldn't pass up a definite  
funding offer to move.  
[2]In fact, the quality of the investors may be the main advantage of  
startup hubs. Silicon Valley investors are noticeably more aggressive  
than Boston ones. Over and over, I've seen startups we've funded  
snatched by west coast investors out from under the noses of Boston  
investors who saw them first but acted too slowly. At this year's  
Boston Demo Day, I told the audience that this happened every year,  
so if they saw a startup they liked, they should make them an offer.  
And yet within a month it had happened again: an aggressive west  
coast VC who had met the founder of a YC-funded startup a week  
before beat out a Boston VC who had known him for years. By the  
time the Boston VC grasped what was happening, the deal was already  
gone.Boston investors will admit they're more conservative. Some want  
to believe this comes from the city's prudent Yankee character.  
But Occam's razor suggests the truth is less flattering. Boston  
investors are probably more conservative than Silicon Valley investors  
for the same reason Chicago investors are more conservative than  
Boston ones. They don't understand startups as well.West coast investors aren't bolder because they're irresponsible  
cowboys, or because the good weather makes them optimistic. They're  
bolder because they know what they're doing. They're the skiers  
who ski on the diamond slopes. Boldness is the essence of venture  
investing. The way you get big returns is not by trying to avoid  
losses, but by trying to ensure you get some of the big hits. And  
the big hits often look risky at first.Like Facebook. Facebook was started in Boston. Boston VCs had the  
first shot at them. But they said no, so Facebook moved to Silicon  
Valley and raised money there. The partner who turned them down  
now says that "may turn out to have been a mistake."Empirically, boldness wins. If the aggressive ways of west coast  
investors are going to come back to bite them, it has been a long  
time coming. Silicon Valley has been pulling ahead of Boston since  
the 1970s. If there was going to be a comeuppance for the west  
coast investors, the bursting of the Bubble would have been it.  
But since then the west coast has just pulled further ahead.West coast investors are confident enough of their judgement to act  
boldly; east coast investors, not so much; but anyone who thinks  
east coast investors act that way out of prudence should see the  
frantic reactions of an east coast VC in the process of losing a  
deal to a west coast one.In addition to the concentration that comes from specialization,  
startup hubs are also markets. And markets are usually centralized.  
Even now, when traders could be anywhere, they cluster in a few  
cities. It's hard to say exactly what it is about face to face  
contact that makes deals happen, but whatever it is, it hasn't yet  
been duplicated by technology.Walk down University Ave at the right time, and you might overhear  
five different people talking on the phone about deals. In fact,  
this is part of the reason Y Combinator is in Boston half the time:  
it's hard to stand that year round. But though it can sometimes  
be annoying to be surrounded by people who only think about one  
thing, it's the place to be if that one thing is what you're trying  
to do.I was talking recently to someone who works on search at Google.  
He knew a lot of people at Yahoo, so he was in a good position to  
compare the two companies. I asked him why Google was better at  
search. He said it wasn't anything specific Google did, but simply  
that they understood search so much better.And that's why startups thrive in startup hubs like Silicon Valley.  
Startups are a very specialized business, as specialized as diamond  
cutting. And in startup hubs they understand it.  
Notes[1]  
The nationalistic idea is the converse: that startups should  
stay in a certain city because of the country it's in. If you  
really have a "one world" viewpoint, deciding to move from London  
to Silicon Valley is no different from deciding to move from Chicago  
to Silicon Valley.[2]  
An investor who merely seems like he will fund you, however,  
you can ignore. Seeming like they will fund you one day is the way  
investors say No.Thanks to Sam Altman, Jessica Livingston, Harjeet Taggar, and Kulveer  
Taggar for reading drafts of this.  
Comment on this essay.Japanese Translation

# The Future of Web Startups

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2007(This essay is derived from a keynote at FOWA in October 2007.)There's something interesting happening right now. Startups are  
undergoing the same transformation that technology does when it becomes  
cheaper.It's a pattern we see over and over in technology. Initially  
there's some device that's very expensive and made  
in small quantities. Then someone discovers how to make them cheaply;   
many more get built; and as a result they can be used in new ways.Computers are a familiar example. When I was a kid, computers were  
big, expensive machines built one at a time. Now they're a commodity.  
Now we can stick computers in everything.This pattern is very old. Most of the turning  
points in economic history are instances of it. It happened to  
steel in the 1850s, and to power in the 1780s.  
It happened to cloth manufacture in the thirteenth century, generating  
the wealth that later brought about the Renaissance. Agriculture  
itself was an instance of this pattern.Now as well as being produced by startups, this pattern  
is happening to startups. It's so cheap to start web startups  
that orders of magnitudes more will be started. If the pattern  
holds true, that should cause dramatic changes.1. Lots of StartupsSo my first prediction about the future of web startups is pretty  
straightforward: there will be a lot of them. When starting a  
startup was expensive, you had to get the permission of investors  
to do it. Now the only threshold is courage.Even that threshold is getting lower, as people watch others take  
the plunge and survive. In the last batch of startups we funded,  
we had several founders who said they'd thought of applying before,  
but weren't sure and got jobs instead. It was only after hearing  
reports of friends who'd done it that they decided to try it  
themselves.Starting a startup is hard, but having a 9 to 5 job is hard too,  
and in some ways a worse kind of hard. In a startup you have lots  
of worries, but you don't have that feeling that your life is flying  
by like you do in a big company. Plus in a startup you could make  
much more money.As word spreads that startups work, the number may grow  
to a point that would now seem surprising.We now think of it as normal to have a job at a company, but this  
is the thinnest of historical veneers. Just two or three  
lifetimes ago, most people in what are now called industrialized  
countries lived by farming. So while it may seem surprising to  
propose that large numbers of people will change the way they make  
a living, it would be more surprising if they didn't.2. StandardizationWhen technology makes something dramatically cheaper, standardization  
always follows. When you make things in large volumes you tend  
to standardize everything that doesn't need to change.At Y Combinator we still only have four people, so we try to  
standardize everything. We could hire employees, but we want to be  
forced to figure out how to scale investing.We often tell startups to release a minimal version one quickly,   
then let the needs of the users determine what to do  
next. In essense, let the market design the product. We've  
done the same thing ourselves. We think of the techniques we're  
developing for dealing with large numbers of startups as like  
software. Sometimes it literally is software, like   
Hacker News and  
our application system.One of the most important things we've been working on standardizing  
are investment terms. Till now investment terms have been  
individually negotiated.  
This is a problem for founders, because it makes raising money  
take longer and cost more in legal fees. So as well as using the  
same paperwork for every deal we do, we've commissioned generic  
angel paperwork that all the startups we fund can use for future  
rounds.Some investors will still want to cook up their own deal terms.  
Series A rounds, where you raise a million dollars or more, will  
be custom deals for the forseeable future. But I think angel rounds  
will start to be done mostly with standardized agreements. An angel  
who wants to insert a bunch of complicated terms into the agreement  
is probably not one you want anyway.3. New Attitude to AcquisitionAnother thing I see starting to get standardized is acquisitions.  
As the volume of startups increases, big companies will start to  
develop standardized procedures that make acquisitions little  
more work than hiring someone.Google is the leader here, as in so many areas of technology. They  
buy a lot of startups— more than most people realize, because they  
only announce a fraction of them. And being Google, they're  
figuring out how to do it efficiently.One problem they've solved is how to think about acquisitions. For  
most companies, acquisitions still carry some stigma of inadequacy.  
Companies do them because they have to, but there's usually some  
feeling they shouldn't have to—that their own programmers should  
be able to build everything they need.Google's example should cure the rest of the world of this idea.  
Google has by far the best programmers of any public technology  
company. If they don't have a problem doing acquisitions, the  
others should have even less problem. However many Google does,  
Microsoft should do ten times as many.One reason Google doesn't have a problem with acquisitions  
is that they know first-hand the quality of the people they can get  
that way. Larry and Sergey only started Google after making the  
rounds of the search engines trying to sell their idea and finding  
no takers. They've been the guys coming in to visit the big  
company, so they know who might be sitting across that conference  
table from them.4. Riskier Strategies are PossibleRisk is always proportionate to reward. The way to get really big  
returns is to do things that seem crazy, like starting a new search  
engine in 1998, or turning down a billion dollar acquisition offer.This has traditionally been a problem in venture funding. Founders  
and investors have different attitudes to risk. Knowing that risk  
is on average proportionate to reward, investors like risky strategies,  
while founders, who don't have a big enough sample size to care  
what's true on average, tend to be more conservative.If startups are easy to start, this conflict goes away, because  
founders can start them younger, when it's rational to take more  
risk, and can start more startups total in their careers. When  
founders can do lots of startups, they can start to look at the  
world in the same portfolio-optimizing way as investors. And that  
means the overall amount of wealth created can be greater, because  
strategies can be riskier.5. Younger, Nerdier FoundersIf startups become a cheap commodity, more people will be able to  
have them, just as more people could have computers once microprocessors  
made them cheap. And in particular, younger and more technical  
founders will be able to start startups than could before.Back when it cost a lot to start a startup, you had to convince  
investors to let you do it. And that required very different skills  
from actually doing the startup. If investors were perfect judges,  
the two would require exactly the same skills. But unfortunately  
most investors are terrible judges. I know because I see behind  
the scenes what an enormous amount of work it takes to raise money,  
and the amount of selling required in an industry is always inversely  
proportional to the judgement of the buyers.Fortunately, if startups get cheaper to start, there's another way  
to convince investors. Instead of going to venture capitalists  
with a business plan and trying to convince them to fund it, you  
can get a product launched on a few tens of thousands of dollars  
of seed money from us or your uncle, and approach them with a  
working company instead of a plan for one. Then instead of  
having to seem smooth and confident, you can just point them to  
Alexa.This way of convincing investors is better suited to hackers, who  
often went into technology in part because they felt uncomfortable  
with the amount of fakeness required in other fields.6. Startup Hubs Will PersistIt might seem that if startups get cheap to start, it will mean the  
end of startup hubs like Silicon Valley. If all you need to start  
a startup is rent money, you should be able to do it anywhere.This is kind of true and kind of false. It's true that you can now  
start a startup anywhere. But you have to do more with a  
startup than just start it. You have to make it succeed. And that  
is more likely to happen in a startup hub.I've thought a lot about this question, and it seems to me the  
increasing cheapness of web startups will if anything increase the  
importance of startup hubs. The value of startup hubs, like centers  
for any kind of business, lies in something very old-fashioned:  
face to face meetings. No technology in the immediate future will  
replace walking down University Ave and running into a friend who  
tells you how to fix a bug that's been bothering you all weekend,  
or visiting a friend's startup down the street and ending up in a  
conversation with one of their investors.The question of whether to be in a startup hub is like the question  
of whether to take outside investment. The question is not whether  
you need it, but whether it brings any advantage at all.  
Because anything that brings an advantage will give your competitors  
an advantage over you if they do it and you don't. So if you hear  
someone saying "we don't need to be in Silicon Valley," that use  
of the word "need" is a sign they're not even thinking about the  
question right.And while startup hubs are as powerful magnets as ever, the increasing  
cheapness of starting a startup means the particles they're attracting  
are getting lighter. A startup now can be just a pair of 22 year  
old guys. A company like that can move much more easily than one  
with 10 people, half of whom have kids.We know because we make people move for Y Combinator, and it doesn't  
seem to be a problem. The advantage of being able to work together  
face to face for three months outweighs the inconvenience of moving.  
Ask anyone who's done it.The mobility of seed-stage startups means that seed funding is a  
national business. One of the most common emails we get is from  
people asking if we can help them set up a local clone of Y Combinator.  
But this just wouldn't work. Seed funding isn't regional, just as  
big research universities aren't.Is seed funding not merely national, but international? Interesting  
question. There are signs it may be. We've had an ongoing  
stream of founders from outside the US, and they tend to do  
particularly well, because they're all people who were so determined  
to succeed that they were willing to move to another country to do  
it.The more mobile startups get, the harder it would be to start new   
silicon valleys. If startups are mobile, the best local talent   
will go to the real Silicon Valley,  
and all they'll get at the local one will be the people who didn't  
have the energy to move.This is not a nationalistic idea, incidentally. It's cities that  
compete, not countries. Atlanta is just as hosed as Munich.7. Better Judgement NeededIf the number of startups increases dramatically, then the people  
whose job is to judge them are going to have to get better at  
it. I'm thinking particularly of investors and acquirers. We now  
get on the order of 1000 applications a year. What are we going  
to do if we get 10,000?That's actually an alarming idea. But we'll figure out some kind  
of answer. We'll have to. It will probably involve writing some  
software, but fortunately we can do that.Acquirers will also have to get better at picking winners.   
They generally do better than investors, because they pick  
later, when there's more performance to measure. But even at the  
most advanced acquirers, identifying companies to  
buy is extremely ad hoc, and completing the acquisition often  
involves a great deal of unneccessary friction.I think acquirers may eventually have chief acquisition officers  
who will both identify good acquisitions and make the deals happen.  
At the moment those two functions are separate. Promising new  
startups are often discovered by developers. If someone powerful  
enough wants to buy them, the deal is handed over to corp dev guys  
to negotiate. It would be better if both were combined in  
one group, headed by someone with a technical background and some  
vision of what they wanted to accomplish. Maybe in the future big  
companies will have both a VP of Engineering responsible for  
technology developed in-house, and a CAO responsible for bringing  
technology in from outside.At the moment, there is no one within big companies who gets in  
trouble when they buy a startup for $200 million that they could  
have bought earlier for $20 million. There should start to be  
someone who gets in trouble for that.8. College Will ChangeIf the best hackers start their own companies after college  
instead of getting jobs, that will change what happens in college.  
Most of these changes will be for the better. I think the experience  
of college is warped in a bad way by the expectation that afterward  
you'll be judged by potential employers.One change will be in the meaning of "after  
college," which will switch from when one graduates from college  
to when one leaves it. If you're starting your own company, why  
do you need a degree? We don't encourage people to start startups  
during college, but the best founders are certainly  
capable of it. Some of the most successful companies we've funded  
were started by undergrads.I grew up in a time where college degrees seemed really important,  
so I'm alarmed to be saying things like this, but there's nothing  
magical about a degree. There's nothing that magically changes  
after you take that last exam. The importance of degrees is due  
solely to the administrative needs of large organizations. These  
can certainly affect your life—it's hard to get into grad  
school, or to get a work visa in the US, without an undergraduate  
degree—but tests like this will matter less and  
less.As well as mattering less whether students get degrees, it will  
also start to matter less where they go to college. In a startup  
you're judged by users, and they don't care where you went to  
college. So in a world of startups, elite universities will play  
less of a role as gatekeepers. In the US it's a national scandal  
how easily children of rich parents game college admissions.  
But the way this problem ultimately gets solved may not be by  
reforming the universities but by going around them. We in the  
technology world are used to that sort of solution: you don't beat  
the incumbents; you redefine the problem to make them irrelevant.The greatest value of universities is not the brand name or perhaps  
even the classes so much as the people you meet. If  
it becomes common to start a startup after college, students may start  
trying to maximize this. Instead of focusing on getting  
internships at companies they want to work for, they may start  
to focus on working with other students they want as cofounders.What students do in their classes will change too. Instead of  
trying to get good grades to impress future employers, students  
will try to learn things. We're talking about some pretty dramatic  
changes here.9. Lots of CompetitorsIf it gets easier to start a startup, it's easier for competitors too.   
That doesn't erase the advantage of  
increased cheapness, however. You're not all playing a zero-sum  
game. There's not some fixed number of startups that can succeed,  
regardless of how many are started.In fact, I don't think there's any limit to the number of startups  
that could succeed. Startups succeed by creating wealth, which is  
the satisfaction of people's desires. And people's desires seem  
to be effectively infinite, at least in the short term.What the increasing number of startups does mean is that you won't  
be able to sit on a good idea. Other people have your idea, and  
they'll be increasingly likely to do something about it.10. Faster AdvancesThere's a good side to that, at least for consumers of  
technology. If people get right to work implementing ideas instead  
of sitting on them, technology will evolve faster.Some kinds of innovations happen a company at a time, like the  
punctuated equilibrium model of evolution. There are some kinds  
of ideas that are so threatening that it's hard for big companies  
even to think of them. Look at what a hard time Microsoft is  
having discovering web apps. They're like a character in a movie  
that everyone in the audience can see something bad is about to  
happen to, but who can't see it himself. The big innovations  
that happen a company at a time will obviously happen faster if  
the rate of new companies increases.But in fact there will be a double speed increase. People won't  
wait as long to act on new ideas, but also those ideas will  
increasingly be developed within startups rather than big companies.  
Which means technology will evolve faster per company as well.Big companies are just not a good place to make things happen fast.  
I talked recently to a founder whose startup had been acquired by  
a big company. He was a precise sort of guy, so he'd measured their  
productivity before and after. He counted lines of code, which can  
be a dubious measure, but in this case was meaningful because it  
was the same group of programmers. He found they were one thirteenth  
as productive after the acquisition.The company that bought them was not a particularly stupid one.  
I think what he was measuring was mostly the cost of bigness. I  
experienced this myself, and his number sounds about right. There's  
something about big companies that just sucks the energy out of  
you.Imagine what all that energy could do if it were put to use. There  
is an enormous latent capacity in the world's hackers that most  
people don't even realize is there. That's the main reason we do  
Y Combinator: to let loose all this energy by making it easy for  
hackers to start their own startups.A Series of TubesThe process of starting startups is currently like the plumbing in  
an old house. The pipes are narrow and twisty, and there are leaks  
in every joint. In the future this mess will gradually be replaced  
by a single, huge pipe. The water will still have to get from A  
to B, but it will get there faster and without the risk of spraying  
out through some random leak.This will change a lot of things for the better. In a big, straight  
pipe like that, the force of being measured by one's performance  
will propagate back through the whole system. Performance is always  
the ultimate test, but there are so many kinks in the plumbing now  
that most people are insulated from it most of the time. So you  
end up with a world in which high school students think they need  
to get good grades to get into elite colleges, and college students  
think they need to get good grades to impress employers, within  
which the employees waste most of their time in political battles,  
and from which consumers have to buy anyway because there are so  
few choices. Imagine if that sequence became a big, straight pipe.  
Then the effects of being measured by performance would propagate  
all the way back to high school, flushing out all the arbitrary  
stuff people are measured by now. That is the future of web startups.Thanks to Brian Oberkirch and Simon Willison for inviting me to   
speak, and the crew at Carson Systems for making everything run smoothly.Japanese Translation

# How to Do Philosophy

September 2007In high school I decided I was going to study philosophy in college.  
I had several motives, some more honorable than others. One of the  
less honorable was to shock people. College was regarded as job  
training where I grew up, so studying philosophy seemed an impressively  
impractical thing to do. Sort of like slashing holes in your clothes  
or putting a safety pin through your ear, which were other forms  
of impressive impracticality then just coming into fashion.But I had some more honest motives as well. I thought studying  
philosophy would be a shortcut straight to wisdom. All the people  
majoring in other things would just end up with a bunch of domain  
knowledge. I would be learning what was really what.I'd tried to read a few philosophy books. Not recent ones; you  
wouldn't find those in our high school library. But I tried to  
read Plato and Aristotle. I doubt I believed I understood them,  
but they sounded like they were talking about something important.  
I assumed I'd learn what in college.The summer before senior year I took some college classes. I learned  
a lot in the calculus class, but I didn't learn much in Philosophy  
101. And yet my plan to study philosophy remained intact. It was  
my fault I hadn't learned anything. I hadn't read the books we  
were assigned carefully enough. I'd give Berkeley's Principles  
of Human Knowledge another shot in college. Anything so admired  
and so difficult to read must have something in it, if one could  
only figure out what.Twenty-six years later, I still don't understand Berkeley. I have  
a nice edition of his collected works. Will I ever read it? Seems  
unlikely.The difference between then and now is that now I understand why  
Berkeley is probably not worth trying to understand. I think I see  
now what went wrong with philosophy, and how we might fix it.WordsI did end up being a philosophy major for most of college. It  
didn't work out as I'd hoped. I didn't learn any magical truths  
compared to which everything else was mere domain knowledge. But  
I do at least know now why I didn't. Philosophy doesn't really  
have a subject matter in the way math or history or most other  
university subjects do. There is no core of knowledge one must  
master. The closest you come to that is a knowledge of what various  
individual philosophers have said about different topics over the  
years. Few were sufficiently correct that people have forgotten  
who discovered what they discovered.Formal logic has some subject matter. I took several classes in  
logic. I don't know if I learned anything from them.  
[1]  
It does seem to me very important to be able to flip ideas around in  
one's head: to see when two ideas don't fully cover the space of  
possibilities, or when one idea is the same as another but with a  
couple things changed. But did studying logic teach me the importance  
of thinking this way, or make me any better at it? I don't know.There are things I know I learned from studying philosophy. The  
most dramatic I learned immediately, in the first semester of  
freshman year, in a class taught by Sydney Shoemaker. I learned  
that I don't exist. I am (and you are) a collection of cells that  
lurches around driven by various forces, and calls itself I. But  
there's no central, indivisible thing that your identity goes with.  
You could conceivably lose half your brain and live. Which means  
your brain could conceivably be split into two halves and each  
transplanted into different bodies. Imagine waking up after such  
an operation. You have to imagine being two people.The real lesson here is that the concepts we use in everyday life  
are fuzzy, and break down if pushed too hard. Even a concept as  
dear to us as I. It took me a while to grasp this, but when I  
did it was fairly sudden, like someone in the nineteenth century  
grasping evolution and realizing the story of creation they'd been  
told as a child was all wrong.   
[2]  
Outside of math there's a limit  
to how far you can push words; in fact, it would not be a bad  
definition of math to call it the study of terms that have precise  
meanings. Everyday words are inherently imprecise. They work well  
enough in everyday life that you don't notice. Words seem to work,  
just as Newtonian physics seems to. But you can always make them  
break if you push them far enough.I would say that this has been, unfortunately for philosophy, the  
central fact of philosophy. Most philosophical debates are not  
merely afflicted by but driven by confusions over words. Do we  
have free will? Depends what you mean by "free." Do abstract ideas  
exist? Depends what you mean by "exist."Wittgenstein is popularly credited with the idea that most philosophical  
controversies are due to confusions over language. I'm not sure  
how much credit to give him. I suspect a lot of people realized  
this, but reacted simply by not studying philosophy, rather than  
becoming philosophy professors.How did things get this way? Can something people have spent  
thousands of years studying really be a waste of time? Those are  
interesting questions. In fact, some of the most interesting  
questions you can ask about philosophy. The most valuable way to  
approach the current philosophical tradition may be neither to get  
lost in pointless speculations like Berkeley, nor to shut them down  
like Wittgenstein, but to study it as an example of reason gone  
wrong.HistoryWestern philosophy really begins with Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle.  
What we know of their predecessors comes from fragments and references  
in later works; their doctrines could be described as speculative  
cosmology that occasionally strays into analysis. Presumably they  
were driven by whatever makes people in every other society invent  
cosmologies.  
[3]With Socrates, Plato, and particularly Aristotle, this tradition  
turned a corner. There started to be a lot more analysis. I suspect  
Plato and Aristotle were encouraged in this by progress in math.  
Mathematicians had by then shown that you could figure things out  
in a much more conclusive way than by making up fine sounding stories  
about them.   
[4]People talk so much about abstractions now that we don't realize  
what a leap it must have been when they first started to. It was  
presumably many thousands of years between when people first started  
describing things as hot or cold and when someone asked "what is  
heat?" No doubt it was a very gradual process. We don't know if  
Plato or Aristotle were the first to ask any of the questions they  
did. But their works are the oldest we have that do this on a large  
scale, and there is a freshness (not to say naivete) about them  
that suggests some of the questions they asked were new to them,  
at least.Aristotle in particular reminds me of the phenomenon that happens  
when people discover something new, and are so excited by it that  
they race through a huge percentage of the newly discovered territory  
in one lifetime. If so, that's evidence of how new this kind of  
thinking was.   
[5]This is all to explain how Plato and Aristotle can be very impressive  
and yet naive and mistaken. It was impressive even to ask the  
questions they did. That doesn't mean they always came up with  
good answers. It's not considered insulting to say that ancient  
Greek mathematicians were naive in some respects, or at least lacked  
some concepts that would have made their lives easier. So I hope  
people will not be too offended if I propose that ancient philosophers  
were similarly naive. In particular, they don't seem to have fully  
grasped what I earlier called the central fact of philosophy: that  
words break if you push them too far."Much to the surprise of the builders of the first digital computers,"  
Rod Brooks wrote, "programs written for them usually did not work."  
[6]  
Something similar happened when people first started trying  
to talk about abstractions. Much to their surprise, they didn't  
arrive at answers they agreed upon. In fact, they rarely seemed  
to arrive at answers at all.They were in effect arguing about artifacts induced by sampling at  
too low a resolution.The proof of how useless some of their answers turned out to be is  
how little effect they have. No one after reading Aristotle's  
Metaphysics does anything differently as a result.  
[7]Surely I'm not claiming that ideas have to have practical applications  
to be interesting? No, they may not have to. Hardy's boast that  
number theory had no use whatsoever wouldn't disqualify it. But  
he turned out to be mistaken. In fact, it's suspiciously hard to  
find a field of math that truly has no practical use. And Aristotle's  
explanation of the ultimate goal of philosophy in Book A of the  
Metaphysics implies that philosophy should be useful too.Theoretical KnowledgeAristotle's goal was to find the most general of general principles.  
The examples he gives are convincing: an ordinary worker builds  
things a certain way out of habit; a master craftsman can do more  
because he grasps the underlying principles. The trend is clear:  
the more general the knowledge, the more admirable it is. But then  
he makes a mistake—possibly the most important mistake in the  
history of philosophy. He has noticed that theoretical knowledge  
is often acquired for its own sake, out of curiosity, rather than  
for any practical need. So he proposes there are two kinds of  
theoretical knowledge: some that's useful in practical matters and  
some that isn't. Since people interested in the latter are interested  
in it for its own sake, it must be more noble. So he sets as his  
goal in the Metaphysics the exploration of knowledge that has no  
practical use. Which means no alarms go off when he takes on grand  
but vaguely understood questions and ends up getting lost in a sea  
of words.His mistake was to confuse motive and result. Certainly, people  
who want a deep understanding of something are often driven by  
curiosity rather than any practical need. But that doesn't mean  
what they end up learning is useless. It's very valuable in practice  
to have a deep understanding of what you're doing; even if you're  
never called on to solve advanced problems, you can see shortcuts  
in the solution of simple ones, and your knowledge won't break down  
in edge cases, as it would if you were relying on formulas you  
didn't understand. Knowledge is power. That's what makes theoretical  
knowledge prestigious. It's also what causes smart people to be  
curious about certain things and not others; our DNA is not so  
disinterested as we might think.So while ideas don't have to have immediate practical applications  
to be interesting, the kinds of things we find interesting will  
surprisingly often turn out to have practical applications.The reason Aristotle didn't get anywhere in the Metaphysics was  
partly that he set off with contradictory aims: to explore the most  
abstract ideas, guided by the assumption that they were useless.  
He was like an explorer looking for a territory to the north of  
him, starting with the assumption that it was located to the south.And since his work became the map used by generations of future  
explorers, he sent them off in the wrong direction as well.   
[8]  
Perhaps worst of all, he protected them from both the criticism of  
outsiders and the promptings of their own inner compass by establishing  
the principle that the most noble sort of theoretical knowledge had  
to be useless.The Metaphysics is mostly a failed experiment. A few ideas from  
it turned out to be worth keeping; the bulk of it has had no effect  
at all. The Metaphysics is among the least read of all famous  
books. It's not hard to understand the way Newton's Principia  
is, but the way a garbled message is.Arguably it's an interesting failed experiment. But unfortunately  
that was not the conclusion Aristotle's successors derived from  
works like the Metaphysics.   
[9]  
Soon after, the western world  
fell on intellectual hard times. Instead of version 1s to be  
superseded, the works of Plato and Aristotle became revered texts  
to be mastered and discussed. And so things remained for a shockingly  
long time. It was not till around 1600 (in Europe, where the center  
of gravity had shifted by then) that one found people confident  
enough to treat Aristotle's work as a catalog of mistakes. And  
even then they rarely said so outright.If it seems surprising that the gap was so long, consider how little  
progress there was in math between Hellenistic times and the  
Renaissance.In the intervening years an unfortunate idea took hold: that it  
was not only acceptable to produce works like the Metaphysics,  
but that it was a particularly prestigious line of work, done by a  
class of people called philosophers. No one thought to go back and  
debug Aristotle's motivating argument. And so instead of correcting  
the problem Aristotle discovered by falling into it—that you can  
easily get lost if you talk too loosely about very abstract ideas—they   
continued to fall into it.The SingularityCuriously, however, the works they produced continued to attract  
new readers. Traditional philosophy occupies a kind of singularity  
in this respect. If you write in an unclear way about big ideas,  
you produce something that seems tantalizingly attractive to  
inexperienced but intellectually ambitious students. Till one knows  
better, it's hard to distinguish something that's hard to understand  
because the writer was unclear in his own mind from something like  
a mathematical proof that's hard to understand because the ideas  
it represents are hard to understand. To someone who hasn't learned  
the difference, traditional philosophy seems extremely attractive:  
as hard (and therefore impressive) as math, yet broader in scope.  
That was what lured me in as a high school student.This singularity is even more singular in having its own defense  
built in. When things are hard to understand, people who suspect  
they're nonsense generally keep quiet. There's no way to prove a  
text is meaningless. The closest you can get is to show that the  
official judges of some class of texts can't distinguish them from  
placebos.   
[10]And so instead of denouncing philosophy, most people who suspected  
it was a waste of time just studied other things. That alone is  
fairly damning evidence, considering philosophy's claims. It's  
supposed to be about the ultimate truths. Surely all smart people  
would be interested in it, if it delivered on that promise.Because philosophy's flaws turned away the sort of people who might  
have corrected them, they tended to be self-perpetuating. Bertrand  
Russell wrote in a letter in 1912:  
  
 Hitherto the people attracted to philosophy have been mostly those  
 who loved the big generalizations, which were all wrong, so that  
 few people with exact minds have taken up the subject.  
[11]  
  
His response was to launch Wittgenstein at it, with dramatic results.I think Wittgenstein deserves to be famous not for the discovery  
that most previous philosophy was a waste of time, which judging  
from the circumstantial evidence must have been made by every smart  
person who studied a little philosophy and declined to pursue it  
further, but for how he acted in response.  
[12]  
Instead of quietly  
switching to another field, he made a fuss, from inside. He was  
Gorbachev.The field of philosophy is still shaken from the fright Wittgenstein  
gave it.   
[13]  
Later in life he spent a lot of time talking about  
how words worked. Since that seems to be allowed, that's what a  
lot of philosophers do now. Meanwhile, sensing a vacuum in the  
metaphysical speculation department, the people who used to do  
literary criticism have been edging Kantward, under new names like  
"literary theory," "critical theory," and when they're feeling  
ambitious, plain "theory." The writing is the familiar word salad:  
  
 Gender is not like some of the other grammatical modes which  
 express precisely a mode of conception without any reality that  
 corresponds to the conceptual mode, and consequently do not express  
 precisely something in reality by which the intellect could be  
 moved to conceive a thing the way it does, even where that motive  
 is not something in the thing as such.  
 [14]  
  
The singularity I've described is not going away. There's a market  
for writing that sounds impressive and can't be disproven. There  
will always be both supply and demand. So if one group abandons  
this territory, there will always be others ready to occupy it.A ProposalWe may be able to do better. Here's an intriguing possibility.  
Perhaps we should do what Aristotle meant to do, instead of what  
he did. The goal he announces in the Metaphysics seems one worth  
pursuing: to discover the most general truths. That sounds good.  
But instead of trying to discover them because they're useless,  
let's try to discover them because they're useful.I propose we try again, but that we use that heretofore despised  
criterion, applicability, as a guide to keep us from wondering  
off into a swamp of abstractions. Instead of trying to answer the  
question:  
  
 What are the most general truths?  
  
let's try to answer the question  
  
 Of all the useful things we can say, which are the most general?  
  
The test of utility I propose is whether we cause people who read  
what we've written to do anything differently afterward. Knowing  
we have to give definite (if implicit) advice will keep us from  
straying beyond the resolution of the words we're using.The goal is the same as Aristotle's; we just approach it from a  
different direction.As an example of a useful, general idea, consider that of the  
controlled experiment. There's an idea that has turned out to be  
widely applicable. Some might say it's part of science, but it's  
not part of any specific science; it's literally meta-physics (in  
our sense of "meta"). The idea of evolution is another. It turns  
out to have quite broad applications—for example, in genetic  
algorithms and even product design. Frankfurt's distinction between  
lying and bullshitting seems a promising recent example.  
[15]These seem to me what philosophy should look like: quite general  
observations that would cause someone who understood them to do  
something differently.Such observations will necessarily be about things that are imprecisely  
defined. Once you start using words with precise meanings, you're  
doing math. So starting from utility won't entirely solve the  
problem I described above—it won't flush out the metaphysical  
singularity. But it should help. It gives people with good  
intentions a new roadmap into abstraction. And they may thereby  
produce things that make the writing of the people with bad intentions  
look bad by comparison.One drawback of this approach is that it won't produce the sort of  
writing that gets you tenure. And not just because it's not currently  
the fashion. In order to get tenure in any field you must not  
arrive at conclusions that members of tenure committees can disagree  
with. In practice there are two kinds of solutions to this problem.  
In math and the sciences, you can prove what you're saying, or at  
any rate adjust your conclusions so you're not claiming anything  
false ("6 of 8 subjects had lower blood pressure after the treatment").  
In the humanities you can either avoid drawing any definite conclusions  
(e.g. conclude that an issue is a complex one), or draw conclusions  
so narrow that no one cares enough to disagree with you.The kind of philosophy I'm advocating won't be able to take either  
of these routes. At best you'll be able to achieve the essayist's  
standard of proof, not the mathematician's or the experimentalist's.  
And yet you won't be able to meet the usefulness test without  
implying definite and fairly broadly applicable conclusions. Worse  
still, the usefulness test will tend to produce results that annoy  
people: there's no use in telling people things they already believe,  
and people are often upset to be told things they don't.Here's the exciting thing, though. Anyone can do this. Getting  
to general plus useful by starting with useful and cranking up the  
generality may be unsuitable for junior professors trying to get  
tenure, but it's better for everyone else, including professors who  
already have it. This side of the mountain is a nice gradual slope.  
You can start by writing things that are useful but very specific,  
and then gradually make them more general. Joe's has good burritos.  
What makes a good burrito? What makes good food? What makes  
anything good? You can take as long as you want. You don't have  
to get all the way to the top of the mountain. You don't have to  
tell anyone you're doing philosophy.If it seems like a daunting task to do philosophy, here's an  
encouraging thought. The field is a lot younger than it seems.  
Though the first philosophers in the western tradition lived about  
2500 years ago, it would be misleading to say the field is 2500  
years old, because for most of that time the leading practitioners  
weren't doing much more than writing commentaries on Plato or  
Aristotle while watching over their shoulders for the next invading  
army. In the times when they weren't, philosophy was hopelessly  
intermingled with religion. It didn't shake itself free till a  
couple hundred years ago, and even then was afflicted by the  
structural problems I've described above. If I say this, some will  
say it's a ridiculously overbroad and uncharitable generalization,  
and others will say it's old news, but here goes: judging from their  
works, most philosophers up to the present have been wasting their  
time. So in a sense the field is still at the first step.   
[16]That sounds a preposterous claim to make. It won't seem so  
preposterous in 10,000 years. Civilization always seems old, because  
it's always the oldest it's ever been. The only way to say whether  
something is really old or not is by looking at structural evidence,  
and structurally philosophy is young; it's still reeling from the  
unexpected breakdown of words.Philosophy is as young now as math was in 1500. There is a lot  
more to discover.Notes  
[1]  
In practice formal logic is not much use, because despite  
some progress in the last 150 years we're still only able to formalize  
a small percentage of statements. We may never do that much better,  
for the same reason 1980s-style "knowledge representation" could  
never have worked; many statements may have no representation more  
concise than a huge, analog brain state.[2]  
It was harder for Darwin's contemporaries to grasp this than  
we can easily imagine. The story of creation in the Bible is not  
just a Judeo-Christian concept; it's roughly what everyone must  
have believed since before people were people. The hard part of  
grasping evolution was to realize that species weren't, as they  
seem to be, unchanging, but had instead evolved from different,  
simpler organisms over unimaginably long periods of time.Now we don't have to make that leap. No one in an industrialized  
country encounters the idea of evolution for the first time as an  
adult. Everyone's taught about it as a child, either as truth or  
heresy.[3]  
Greek philosophers before Plato wrote in verse. This must  
have affected what they said. If you try to write about the nature  
of the world in verse, it inevitably turns into incantation. Prose  
lets you be more precise, and more tentative.[4]  
Philosophy is like math's  
ne'er-do-well brother. It was born when Plato and Aristotle looked  
at the works of their predecessors and said in effect "why can't  
you be more like your brother?" Russell was still saying the same  
thing 2300 years later.Math is the precise half of the most abstract ideas, and philosophy  
the imprecise half. It's probably inevitable that philosophy will  
suffer by comparison, because there's no lower bound to its precision.  
Bad math is merely boring, whereas bad philosophy is nonsense. And  
yet there are some good ideas in the imprecise half.[5]  
Aristotle's best work was in logic and zoology, both of which  
he can be said to have invented. But the most dramatic departure  
from his predecessors was a new, much more analytical style of  
thinking. He was arguably the first scientist.[6]  
Brooks, Rodney, Programming in Common Lisp, Wiley, 1985, p.  
94.[7]  
Some would say we depend on Aristotle more than we realize,  
because his ideas were one of the ingredients in our common culture.  
Certainly a lot of the words we use have a connection with Aristotle,  
but it seems a bit much to suggest that we wouldn't have the concept  
of the essence of something or the distinction between matter and  
form if Aristotle hadn't written about them.One way to see how much we really depend on Aristotle would be to  
diff European culture with Chinese: what ideas did European culture  
have in 1800 that Chinese culture didn't, in virtue of Aristotle's  
contribution?[8]  
The meaning of the word "philosophy" has changed over time.  
In ancient times it covered a broad range of topics, comparable in  
scope to our "scholarship" (though without the methodological  
implications). Even as late as Newton's time it included what we  
now call "science." But core of the subject today is still what  
seemed to Aristotle the core: the attempt to discover the most  
general truths.Aristotle didn't call this "metaphysics." That name got assigned  
to it because the books we now call the Metaphysics came after  
(meta = after) the Physics in the standard edition of Aristotle's  
works compiled by Andronicus of Rhodes three centuries later. What  
we call "metaphysics" Aristotle called "first philosophy."[9]  
Some of Aristotle's immediate successors may have realized  
this, but it's hard to say because most of their works are lost.[10]  
Sokal, Alan, "Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative  
Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity," Social Text 46/47, pp. 217-252.Abstract-sounding nonsense seems to be most attractive when it's  
aligned with some axe the audience already has to grind. If this  
is so we should find it's most popular with groups that are (or  
feel) weak. The powerful don't need its reassurance.[11]  
Letter to Ottoline Morrell, December 1912. Quoted in:Monk, Ray, Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius, Penguin, 1991,  
p. 75.[12]  
A preliminary result, that all metaphysics between Aristotle  
and 1783 had been a waste of time, is due to I. Kant.[13]  
Wittgenstein asserted a sort of mastery to which the inhabitants  
of early 20th century Cambridge seem to have been peculiarly  
vulnerable—perhaps partly because so many had been raised religious  
and then stopped believing, so had a vacant space in their heads  
for someone to tell them what to do (others chose Marx or Cardinal  
Newman), and partly because a quiet, earnest place like Cambridge  
in that era had no natural immunity to messianic figures, just as  
European politics then had no natural immunity to dictators.[14]  
This is actually from the Ordinatio of Duns Scotus (ca.  
1300), with "number" replaced by "gender." Plus ca change.Wolter, Allan (trans), Duns Scotus: Philosophical Writings, Nelson,  
1963, p. 92.[15]  
Frankfurt, Harry, On Bullshit, Princeton University Press,  
2005.[16]  
Some introductions to philosophy now take the line that  
philosophy is worth studying as a process rather than for any  
particular truths you'll learn. The philosophers whose works they  
cover would be rolling in their graves at that. They hoped they  
were doing more than serving as examples of how to argue: they hoped  
they were getting results. Most were wrong, but it doesn't seem  
an impossible hope.This argument seems to me like someone in 1500 looking at the lack  
of results achieved by alchemy and saying its value was as a process.  
No, they were going about it wrong. It turns out it is possible  
to transmute lead into gold (though not economically at current  
energy prices), but the route to that knowledge was to  
backtrack and try another approach.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit, Jessica Livingston,   
Robert Morris, Mark Nitzberg, and Peter Norvig for reading drafts of this.French Translation

# News from the Front

September 2007A few weeks ago I had a thought so heretical that it really surprised  
me. It may not matter all that much where you go to college.For me, as for a lot of middle class kids, getting into a good  
college was more or less the meaning of life when I was growing up.  
What was I? A student. To do that well meant to get good grades.  
Why did one have to get good grades? To get into a good college.  
And why did one want to do that? There seemed to be several reasons:  
you'd learn more, get better jobs, make more money. But it didn't  
matter exactly what the benefits would be. College was a bottleneck  
through which all your future prospects passed; everything would  
be better if you went to a better college.A few weeks ago I realized that somewhere along the line I had  
stopped believing that.What first set me thinking about this was the new trend of worrying  
obsessively about what   
kindergarten  
your kids go to. It seemed to  
me this couldn't possibly matter. Either it won't help your kid  
get into Harvard, or if it does, getting into Harvard won't mean  
much anymore. And then I thought: how much does it mean even now?It turns out I have a lot of data about that. My three partners  
and I run a seed stage investment firm called   
Y Combinator. We  
invest when the company is just a couple guys and an idea. The  
idea doesn't matter much; it will change anyway. Most of our  
decision is based on the founders. The average founder is three  
years out of college. Many have just graduated; a few are still  
in school. So we're in much the same position as a graduate program,  
or a company hiring people right out of college. Except our choices  
are immediately and visibly tested. There are two possible outcomes  
for a startup: success or failure—and usually you know within a  
year which it will be.The test applied to a startup is among the purest of real world  
tests. A startup succeeds or fails depending almost entirely on  
the efforts of the founders. Success is decided by the market: you  
only succeed if users like what you've built. And users don't care  
where you went to college.As well as having precisely measurable results, we have a lot of  
them. Instead of doing a small number of large deals like a  
traditional venture capital fund, we do a large number of small  
ones. We currently fund about 40 companies a year, selected from  
about 900 applications representing a total of about 2000 people.   
[1]Between the volume of people we judge and the rapid, unequivocal  
test that's applied to our choices, Y Combinator has been an  
unprecedented opportunity for learning how to pick winners. One  
of the most surprising things we've learned is how little it matters  
where people went to college.I thought I'd already been cured of caring about that. There's  
nothing like going to grad school at Harvard to cure you of any  
illusions you might have about the average Harvard undergrad. And  
yet Y Combinator showed us we were still overestimating people who'd  
been to elite colleges. We'd interview people from MIT or Harvard  
or Stanford and sometimes find ourselves thinking: they must be  
smarter than they seem. It took us a few iterations to learn to  
trust our senses.Practically everyone thinks that someone who went to MIT or Harvard  
or Stanford must be smart. Even people who hate you for it believe  
it.But when you think about what it means to have gone to an elite  
college, how could this be true? We're talking about a decision  
made by admissions officers—basically, HR people—based on a  
cursory examination of a huge pile of depressingly similar applications  
submitted by seventeen year olds. And what do they have to go on?  
An easily gamed standardized test; a short essay telling you what  
the kid thinks you want to hear; an interview with a random alum;  
a high school record that's largely an index of obedience. Who  
would rely on such a test?And yet a lot of companies do. A lot of companies are very much  
influenced by where applicants went to college. How could they be?  
I think I know the answer to that.There used to be a saying in the corporate world: "No one ever got  
fired for buying IBM." You no longer hear this about IBM specifically,  
but the idea is very much alive; there is a whole category of  
"enterprise" software companies that exist to take advantage of it.  
People buying technology for large organizations don't care if they  
pay a fortune for mediocre software. It's not their money. They  
just want to buy from a supplier who seems safe—a company with  
an established name, confident salesmen, impressive offices, and  
software that conforms to all the current fashions. Not necessarily  
a company that will deliver so much as one that, if they do let you  
down, will still seem to have been a prudent choice. So companies  
have evolved to fill that niche.A recruiter at a big company is in much the same position as someone  
buying technology for one. If someone went to Stanford and is not  
obviously insane, they're probably a safe bet. And a safe bet is  
enough. No one ever measures recruiters by the later performance  
of people they turn down.   
[2]I'm not saying, of course, that elite colleges have evolved to prey  
upon the weaknesses of large organizations the way enterprise  
software companies have. But they work as if they had. In addition  
to the power of the brand name, graduates of elite colleges have  
two critical qualities that plug right into the way large organizations  
work. They're good at doing what they're asked, since that's what  
it takes to please the adults who judge you at seventeen. And  
having been to an elite college makes them more confident.Back in the days when people might spend their whole career at one  
big company, these qualities must have been very valuable. Graduates  
of elite colleges would have been capable, yet amenable to authority.  
And since individual performance is so hard to measure in large  
organizations, their own confidence would have been the starting  
point for their reputation.Things are very different in the new world of startups. We couldn't  
save someone from the market's judgement even if we wanted to. And  
being charming and confident counts for nothing with users. All  
users care about is whether you make something they like. If you  
don't, you're dead.Knowing that test is coming makes us work a lot harder to get the  
right answers than anyone would if they were merely hiring people.  
We can't afford to have any illusions about the predictors of  
success. And what we've found is that the variation between schools  
is so much smaller than the variation between individuals that it's  
negligible by comparison. We can learn more about someone in the  
first minute of talking to them than by knowing where they went to  
school.It seems obvious when you put it that way. Look at the individual,  
not where they went to college. But that's a weaker statement than  
the idea I began with, that it doesn't matter much where a given  
individual goes to college. Don't you learn things at the best  
schools that you wouldn't learn at lesser places?Apparently not. Obviously you can't prove this in the case of a  
single individual, but you can tell from aggregate evidence: you  
can't, without asking them, distinguish people who went to one  
school from those who went to another three times as far down the  
US News list.   
[3]  
Try it and see.How can this be? Because how much you learn in college depends a  
lot more on you than the college. A determined party animal can  
get through the best school without learning anything. And someone  
with a real thirst for knowledge will be able to find a few smart  
people to learn from at a school that isn't prestigious at all.  
The other students are the biggest advantage of going to an elite  
college; you learn more from them than the professors. But  
you should be able to reproduce this at most colleges if you make  
a conscious effort to find smart friends. At  
most colleges you can find at least a handful of other smart students,  
and most people have only a handful of close friends in college  
anyway.   
[4]  
The odds of finding smart professors are even better.  
The curve for faculty is a lot flatter than for students, especially  
in math and the hard sciences; you have to go pretty far down the  
list of colleges before you stop finding smart professors in the  
math department.So it's not surprising that we've found the relative prestige of  
different colleges useless in judging individuals. There's a lot  
of randomness in how colleges select people, and what they learn  
there depends much more on them than the college. Between these  
two sources of variation, the college someone went to doesn't mean  
a lot. It is to some degree a predictor of ability, but so weak  
that we regard it mainly as a source of error and try consciously  
to ignore it.I doubt what we've discovered is an anomaly specific to startups.  
Probably people have always overestimated the importance of where  
one goes to college. We're just finally able to measure it.The unfortunate thing is not just that people are judged by such a  
superficial test, but that so many judge themselves by it. A lot  
of people, probably the majority of people in America, have  
some amount of insecurity about where, or whether, they went to  
college. The tragedy of the situation is that by far the greatest  
liability of not having gone to the college you'd have liked is  
your own feeling that you're thereby lacking something. Colleges  
are a bit like exclusive clubs in this respect. There is only one  
real advantage to being a member of most exclusive clubs: you know  
you wouldn't be missing much if you weren't. When you're excluded,  
you can only imagine the advantages of being an insider. But  
invariably they're larger in your imagination than in real life.So it is with colleges. Colleges differ, but they're nothing like  
the stamp of destiny so many imagine them to be. People aren't  
what some admissions officer decides about them at seventeen.  
They're what they make themselves.Indeed, the great advantage of not caring where people went to  
college is not just that you can stop judging them (and yourself)  
by superficial measures, but that you can focus instead on what  
really matters. What matters is what you make of yourself.   
I think that's what we  
should tell kids. Their job isn't to get good grades so they can  
get into a good college, but to learn and do. And not just because  
that's more rewarding than worldly success. That will increasingly  
be the route to worldly success.  
Notes[1]   
Is what we measure worth measuring? I think so. You can get  
rich simply by being energetic and unscrupulous, but getting rich  
from a technology startup takes some amount of brains. It is just  
the kind of work the upper middle class values; it has about the  
same intellectual component as being a doctor.[2]   
Actually, someone did, once. Mitch Kapor's wife Freada was  
in charge of HR at Lotus in the early years. (As he is at pains  
to point out, they did not become romantically involved till  
afterward.) At one point they worried Lotus was losing its startup  
edge and turning into a big company. So as an experiment she sent  
their recruiters the resumes of the first 40 employees, with  
identifying details changed. These were the people who had made  
Lotus into the star it was. Not one got an interview.[3]   
The US News list? Surely no one trusts that. Even if the  
statistics they consider are useful, how do they decide on the  
relative weights? The reason the US News list is meaningful is  
precisely because they are so intellectually dishonest in that  
respect. There is no external source they can use to calibrate the  
weighting of the statistics they use; if there were, we could just  
use that instead. What they must do is adjust the weights till the  
top schools are the usual suspects in about the right order. So  
in effect what the US News list tells us is what the editors think  
the top schools are, which is probably not far from the conventional  
wisdom on the matter. The amusing thing is, because some schools  
work hard to game the system, the editors will have to keep tweaking  
their algorithm to get the rankings they want.[4]   
Possible doesn't mean easy, of course. A smart student at a party school  
will inevitably be something of an outcast, just as he or  
she would be in most high schools.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Sarah Harlin, Jessica Livingston, Jackie  
McDonough, Peter Norvig, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of  
this.French Translation

# How Not to Die

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
August 2007(This is a talk I gave at the last   
Y Combinator dinner of the summer.   
Usually we don't have a speaker at the last dinner; it's more of  
a party. But it seemed worth spoiling the atmosphere if I could  
save some of the startups from  
preventable deaths. So at the last minute I cooked up this rather  
grim talk. I didn't mean this as an essay; I wrote it down  
because I only had two hours before dinner and think fastest while  
writing.)  
A couple days ago I told a reporter that we expected about a third  
of the companies we funded to succeed. Actually I was being  
conservative. I'm hoping it might be as much as a half. Wouldn't  
it be amazing if we could achieve a 50% success rate?Another way of saying that is that half of you are going to die. Phrased  
that way, it doesn't sound good at all. In fact, it's kind of weird  
when you think about it, because our definition of success is that  
the founders get rich. If half the startups we fund succeed, then  
half of you are going to get rich and the other half are going to  
get nothing.If you can just avoid dying, you get rich. That sounds like a joke,  
but it's actually a pretty good description of what happens in a  
typical startup. It certainly describes what happened in Viaweb.  
We avoided dying till we got rich.It was really close, too. When we were visiting Yahoo to talk about  
being acquired, we had to interrupt everything and borrow one of  
their conference rooms to talk down an investor who was about to  
back out of a new funding round we needed to stay alive. So even  
in the middle of getting rich we were fighting off the grim reaper.You may have heard that quote about luck consisting of opportunity  
meeting preparation. You've now done the preparation. The work  
you've done so far has, in effect, put you in a position to get  
lucky: you can now get rich by not letting your company die. That's  
more than most people have. So let's talk about how not to die.We've done this five times now, and we've seen a bunch of startups  
die. About 10 of them so far. We don't know exactly what happens  
when they die, because they generally don't die loudly and heroically.  
Mostly they crawl off somewhere and die.For us the main indication of impending doom is when we don't hear  
from you. When we haven't heard from, or about, a startup for a  
couple months, that's a bad sign. If we send them an email asking  
what's up, and they don't reply, that's a really bad sign. So far  
that is a 100% accurate predictor of death.Whereas if a startup regularly does new deals and releases and  
either sends us mail or shows up at YC events, they're probably  
going to live.I realize this will sound naive, but maybe the linkage works in  
both directions. Maybe if you can arrange that we keep hearing  
from you, you won't die.That may not be so naive as it sounds. You've probably noticed  
that having dinners every Tuesday with us and the other founders  
causes you to get more done than you would otherwise, because every  
dinner is a mini Demo Day. Every dinner is a kind of a deadline.  
So the mere constraint of staying in regular contact with us will  
push you to make things happen, because otherwise you'll be embarrassed  
to tell us that you haven't done anything new since the last time  
we talked.If this works, it would be an amazing hack. It would be pretty  
cool if merely by staying in regular contact with us you could get  
rich. It sounds crazy, but there's a good chance that would work.A variant is to stay in touch with other YC-funded startups. There  
is now a whole neighborhood of them in San Francisco. If you move  
there, the peer pressure that made you work harder all summer will  
continue to operate.When startups die, the official cause of death is always either  
running out of money or a critical founder bailing. Often the two  
occur simultaneously. But I think the underlying cause is usually  
that they've become demoralized. You rarely hear of a startup  
that's working around the clock doing deals and pumping out new  
features, and dies because they can't pay their bills and their ISP  
unplugs their server.Startups rarely die in mid keystroke. So keep typing!If so many startups get demoralized and fail when merely by hanging  
on they could get rich, you have to assume that running a startup  
can be demoralizing. That is certainly true. I've been there, and  
that's why I've never done another startup. The low points in a  
startup are just unbelievably low. I bet even Google had moments  
where things seemed hopeless.Knowing that should help. If you know it's going to feel terrible  
sometimes, then when it feels terrible you won't think "ouch, this  
feels terrible, I give up." It feels that way for everyone. And  
if you just hang on, things will probably get better. The metaphor  
people use to describe the way a startup feels is at least a roller  
coaster and not drowning. You don't just sink and sink; there are  
ups after the downs.Another feeling that seems alarming but is in fact normal in a  
startup is the feeling that what you're doing isn't working. The  
reason you can expect to feel this is that what you do probably  
won't work. Startups almost never get it right the first time.  
Much more commonly you launch something, and no one cares. Don't  
assume when this happens that you've failed. That's normal for  
startups. But don't sit around doing nothing. Iterate.I like Paul Buchheit's suggestion of trying to make something that  
at least someone really loves. As long as you've made something  
that a few users are ecstatic about, you're on the right track. It  
will be good for your morale to have even a handful of users who  
really love you, and startups run on morale. But also it  
will tell you what to focus on. What is it about you that they  
love? Can you do more of that? Where can you find more people who  
love that sort of thing? As long as you have some core of users  
who love you, all you have to do is expand it. It may take a while,  
but as long as you keep plugging away, you'll win in the end. Both  
Blogger and Delicious did that. Both took years to succeed. But  
both began with a core of fanatically devoted users, and all Evan  
and Joshua had to do was grow that core incrementally.   
Wufoo is  
on the same trajectory now.So when you release something and it seems like no one cares, look  
more closely. Are there zero users who really love you, or is there  
at least some little group that does? It's quite possible there  
will be zero. In that case, tweak your product and try again.  
Every one of you is working on a space that contains at least one  
winning permutation somewhere in it. If you just keep trying,  
you'll find it.Let me mention some things not to do. The number one thing not to  
do is other things. If you find yourself saying a sentence that  
ends with "but we're going to keep working on the startup," you are  
in big trouble. Bob's going to grad school, but we're going to  
keep working on the startup. We're moving back to Minnesota, but  
we're going to keep working on the startup. We're taking on some  
consulting projects, but we're going to keep working on the startup.  
You may as well just translate these to "we're giving up on the  
startup, but we're not willing to admit that to ourselves," because  
that's what it means most of the time. A startup is so hard that  
working on it can't be preceded by "but."In particular, don't go to graduate school, and don't start other  
projects. Distraction is fatal to startups. Going to (or back to)  
school is a huge predictor of death because in addition to the  
distraction it gives you something to say you're doing. If you're  
only doing a startup, then if the startup fails, you fail. If  
you're in grad school and your startup fails, you can say later "Oh  
yeah, we had this startup on the side when I was in grad school,  
but it didn't go anywhere."You can't use euphemisms like "didn't go anywhere" for something  
that's your only occupation. People won't let you.One of the most interesting things we've discovered from working  
on Y Combinator is that founders are more motivated by the fear of  
looking bad than by the hope of getting millions of dollars. So  
if you want to get millions of dollars, put yourself in a position  
where failure will be public and humiliating.When we first met the founders of   
Octopart, they seemed very smart,  
but not a great bet to succeed, because they didn't seem especially  
committed. One of the two founders was still in grad school. It  
was the usual story: he'd drop out if it looked like the startup  
was taking off. Since then he has not only dropped out of grad  
school, but appeared full length in   
Newsweek   
with the word "Billionaire"  
printed across his chest. He just cannot fail now. Everyone he  
knows has seen that picture. Girls who dissed him in high school  
have seen it. His mom probably has it on the fridge. It would be  
unthinkably humiliating to fail now. At this point he is committed  
to fight to the death.I wish every startup we funded could appear in a Newsweek article  
describing them as the next generation of billionaires, because  
then none of them would be able to give up. The success rate would  
be 90%. I'm not kidding.When we first knew the Octoparts they were lighthearted, cheery  
guys. Now when we talk to them they seem grimly determined. The  
electronic parts distributors are trying to squash them to keep  
their monopoly pricing. (If it strikes you as odd that people still  
order electronic parts out of thick paper catalogs in 2007, there's  
a reason for that. The distributors want to prevent the transparency  
that comes from having prices online.) I feel kind of bad that  
we've transformed these guys from lighthearted to grimly determined.  
But that comes with the territory. If a startup succeeds, you get  
millions of dollars, and you don't get that kind of money just by  
asking for it. You have to assume it takes some amount of pain.And however tough things get for the Octoparts, I predict they'll  
succeed. They may have to morph themselves into something totally  
different, but they won't just crawl off and die. They're smart;  
they're working in a promising field; and they just cannot give up.All of you guys already have the first two. You're all smart and  
working on promising ideas. Whether you end up among the living  
or the dead comes down to the third ingredient, not giving up.So I'll tell you now: bad shit is coming. It always is in a startup.  
The odds of getting from launch to liquidity without some kind of  
disaster happening are one in a thousand. So don't get demoralized.  
When the disaster strikes, just say to yourself, ok, this was what  
Paul was talking about. What did he say to do? Oh, yeah. Don't  
give up.Japanese TranslationArabic Translation

# Holding a Program in One's Head

August 2007A good programmer working intensively on his own code can hold it  
in his mind the way a mathematician holds a problem he's working  
on. Mathematicians don't answer questions by working them out on  
paper the way schoolchildren are taught to. They do more in their  
heads: they try to understand a problem space well enough that they  
can walk around it the way you can walk around the memory of the  
house you grew up in. At its best programming is the same. You  
hold the whole program in your head, and you can manipulate it at  
will.That's particularly valuable at the start of a project, because  
initially the most important thing is to be able to change what  
you're doing. Not just to solve the problem in a different way,  
but to change the problem you're solving.Your code is your understanding of the problem you're exploring.  
So it's only when you have your code in your head that you really  
understand the problem.It's not easy to get a program into your head. If you leave a  
project for a few months, it can take days to really understand it  
again when you return to it. Even when you're actively working on  
a program it can take half an hour to load into your head when you  
start work each day. And that's in the best case. Ordinary  
programmers working in typical office conditions never enter this  
mode. Or to put it more dramatically, ordinary programmers working  
in typical office conditions never really understand the problems  
they're solving.Even the best programmers don't always have the whole program they're  
working on loaded into their heads. But there are things you can  
do to help:  
 Avoid distractions. Distractions are bad for many types of work,  
 but especially bad for programming, because programmers tend to  
 operate at the limit of the detail they can handle.The danger of a distraction depends not on how long it is, but  
 on how much it scrambles your brain. A programmer can leave the  
 office and go and get a sandwich without losing the code in his  
 head. But the wrong kind of interruption can wipe your brain  
 in 30 seconds.Oddly enough, scheduled distractions may be worse than unscheduled  
 ones. If you know you have a meeting in an hour, you don't even  
 start working on something hard. Work in long stretches. Since there's a fixed cost each time  
 you start working on a program, it's more efficient to work in  
 a few long sessions than many short ones. There will of course  
 come a point where you get stupid because you're tired. This  
 varies from person to person. I've heard of people hacking for  
 36 hours straight, but the most I've ever been able to manage  
 is about 18, and I work best in chunks of no more than 12.The optimum is not the limit you can physically endure. There's  
 an advantage as well as a cost of breaking up a project. Sometimes  
 when you return to a problem after a rest, you find your unconscious  
 mind has left an answer waiting for you. Use succinct languages. More   
 powerful programming languages  
 make programs shorter. And programmers seem to think of programs  
 at least partially in the language they're using to write them.  
 The more succinct the language, the shorter the program, and the  
 easier it is to load and keep in your head.You can magnify the effect of a powerful language by using a  
 style called bottom-up programming, where you write programs in  
 multiple layers, the lower ones acting as programming languages  
 for those above. If you do this right, you only have to keep  
 the topmost layer in your head. Keep rewriting your program. Rewriting a program often yields  
 a cleaner design. But it would have advantages even if it didn't:  
 you have to understand a program completely to rewrite it, so  
 there is no better way to get one loaded into your head. Write rereadable code. All programmers know it's good to write  
 readable code. But you yourself are the most important reader.  
 Especially in the beginning; a prototype is a conversation with  
 yourself. And when writing for yourself you have different  
 priorities. If you're writing for other people, you may not  
 want to make code too dense. Some parts of a program may be  
 easiest to read if you spread things out, like an introductory   
 textbook. Whereas if you're writing code to make it easy to reload   
 into your head, it may be best to go for brevity. Work in small groups. When you manipulate a program in your  
 head, your vision tends to stop at the edge of the code you own.  
 Other parts you don't understand as well, and more importantly,  
 can't take liberties with. So the smaller the number of  
 programmers, the more completely a project can mutate. If there's  
 just one programmer, as there often is at first, you can do  
 all-encompassing redesigns. Don't have multiple people editing the same piece of code. You  
 never understand other people's code as well as your own. No  
 matter how thoroughly you've read it, you've only read it, not  
 written it. So if a piece of code is written by multiple authors,  
 none of them understand it as well as a single author would.And of course you can't safely redesign something other people  
 are working on. It's not just that you'd have to ask permission.  
 You don't even let yourself think of such things. Redesigning  
 code with several authors is like changing laws; redesigning  
 code you alone control is like seeing the other interpretation  
 of an ambiguous image.If you want to put several people to work on a project, divide  
 it into components and give each to one person. Start small. A program gets easier to hold in your head as you  
 become familiar with it. You can start to treat parts as black  
 boxes once you feel confident you've fully explored them. But  
 when you first start working on a project, you're forced to see  
 everything. If you start with too big a problem, you may never  
 quite be able to encompass it. So if you need to write a big,  
 complex program, the best way to begin may not be to write a  
 spec for it, but to write a prototype that solves a subset of  
 the problem. Whatever the advantages of planning, they're often  
 outweighed by the advantages of being able to keep a program in  
 your head.  
  
It's striking how often programmers manage to hit all eight points  
by accident. Someone has an idea for a new project, but because  
it's not officially sanctioned, he has to do it in off hours—which  
turn out to be more productive because there are no distractions.  
Driven by his enthusiasm for the new project he works on it for  
many hours at a stretch. Because it's initially just an  
experiment, instead of a "production" language he uses a mere  
"scripting" language—which is in fact far more powerful. He  
completely rewrites the program several times; that wouldn't be  
justifiable for an official project, but this is a labor of love  
and he wants it to be perfect. And since no one is going to see  
it except him, he omits any comments except the note-to-self variety.  
He works in a small group perforce, because he either hasn't told  
anyone else about the idea yet, or it seems so unpromising that no  
one else is allowed to work on it. Even if there is a group, they  
couldn't have multiple people editing the same code, because it  
changes too fast for that to be possible. And the project starts  
small because the idea is small at first; he just has some cool  
hack he wants to try out.Even more striking are the number of officially sanctioned projects  
that manage to do all eight things wrong. In fact, if you look at  
the way software gets written in most organizations, it's almost  
as if they were deliberately trying to do things wrong. In a sense,  
they are. One of the defining qualities of organizations since  
there have been such a thing is to treat individuals as interchangeable  
parts. This works well for more parallelizable tasks, like fighting  
wars. For most of history a well-drilled army of professional  
soldiers could be counted on to beat an army of individual warriors,  
no matter how valorous. But having ideas is not very parallelizable.  
And that's what programs are: ideas.It's not merely true that organizations dislike the idea of depending  
on individual genius, it's a tautology. It's part of the definition  
of an organization not to. Of our current concept of an organization,  
at least.Maybe we could define a new kind of organization that combined the  
efforts of individuals without requiring them to be interchangeable.  
Arguably a market is such a form of organization, though it may be  
more accurate to describe a market as a degenerate case—as what  
you get by default when organization isn't possible.Probably the best we'll do is some kind of hack, like making the  
programming parts of an organization work differently from the rest.  
Perhaps the optimal solution is for big companies not even to try  
to develop ideas in house, but simply to   
buy them. But regardless  
of what the solution turns out to be, the first step is to realize  
there's a problem. There is a contradiction in the very phrase  
"software company." The two words are pulling in opposite directions.  
Any good programmer in a large organization is going to be at odds  
with it, because organizations are designed to prevent what  
programmers strive for.Good programmers manage to get a lot done anyway.   
But often it  
requires practically an act of rebellion against the organizations  
that employ them. Perhaps it will help if more people understand that the way  
programmers behave is driven by the demands of the work they do.  
It's not because they're irresponsible that they work in long binges  
during which they blow off all other obligations, plunge straight into  
programming instead of writing specs first, and rewrite code that  
already works. It's not because they're unfriendly that they prefer  
to work alone, or growl at people who pop their head in the door  
to say hello. This apparently random collection of annoying habits  
has a single explanation: the power of holding a program in one's  
head.Whether or not understanding this can help large organizations, it  
can certainly help their competitors. The weakest point in big  
companies is that they don't let individual programmers do great  
work. So if you're a little startup, this is the place to attack  
them. Take on the kind of problems that have to be solved in one  
big brain.  
Thanks to Sam Altman, David Greenspan, Aaron Iba, Jessica Livingston,  
Robert Morris, Peter Norvig, Lisa Randall, Emmett Shear, Sergei Tsarev,  
and Stephen Wolfram for reading drafts of this.Japanese TranslationSimplified Chinese TranslationPortuguese TranslationBulgarian TranslationRussian Translation

# Stuff

July 2007I have too much stuff. Most people in America do. In fact, the  
poorer people are, the more stuff they seem to have. Hardly anyone  
is so poor that they can't afford a front yard full of old cars.It wasn't always this way. Stuff used to be rare and valuable.  
You can still see evidence of that if you look for it. For example,  
in my house in Cambridge, which was built in 1876, the bedrooms  
don't have closets. In those days people's stuff fit in a chest  
of drawers. Even as recently as a few decades ago there was a lot  
less stuff. When I look back at photos from the 1970s, I'm surprised  
how empty houses look. As a kid I had what I thought was a huge  
fleet of toy cars, but they'd be dwarfed by the number of toys my  
nephews have. All together my Matchboxes and Corgis took up about  
a third of the surface of my bed. In my nephews' rooms the bed is  
the only clear space.Stuff has gotten a lot cheaper, but our attitudes toward it haven't  
changed correspondingly. We overvalue stuff.That was a big problem  
for me when I had no money. I felt poor, and stuff seemed valuable,  
so almost instinctively I accumulated it. Friends would leave  
something behind when they moved, or I'd see something as I was  
walking down the street on trash night (beware of anything you find  
yourself describing as "perfectly good"), or I'd find something in  
almost new condition for a tenth its retail price at a garage sale.  
And pow, more stuff.In fact these free or nearly free things weren't bargains, because  
they were worth even less than they cost. Most of the stuff I  
accumulated was worthless, because I didn't need it.What I didn't understand was that the value of some new acquisition  
wasn't the difference between its retail price and what I paid for  
it. It was the value I derived from it. Stuff is an extremely  
illiquid asset. Unless you have some plan for selling that valuable  
thing you got so cheaply, what difference does it make what it's  
"worth?" The only way you're ever going to extract any value from  
it is to use it. And if you don't have any immediate use for it,  
you probably never will.Companies that sell stuff have spent huge sums training us to think  
stuff is still valuable. But it would be closer to the truth to  
treat stuff as worthless.In fact, worse than worthless, because once you've accumulated a  
certain amount of stuff, it starts to own you rather than the other  
way around. I know of one couple who couldn't retire to the town  
they preferred because they couldn't afford a place there big enough  
for all their stuff. Their house isn't theirs; it's their stuff's.And unless you're extremely organized, a house full of stuff can  
be very depressing. A cluttered room saps one's spirits. One  
reason, obviously, is that there's less room for people in a room  
full of stuff. But there's more going on than that. I think humans  
constantly scan their environment to build a mental model of what's  
around them. And the harder a scene is to parse, the less energy  
you have left for conscious thoughts. A cluttered room is literally  
exhausting.(This could explain why clutter doesn't seem to bother kids as much  
as adults. Kids are less perceptive. They build a coarser model  
of their surroundings, and this consumes less energy.)I first realized the worthlessness of stuff when I lived in Italy  
for a year. All I took with me was one large backpack of stuff.  
The rest of my stuff I left in my landlady's attic back in the US.  
And you know what? All I missed were some of the books. By the  
end of the year I couldn't even remember what else I had stored in  
that attic.And yet when I got back I didn't discard so much as a box of it.  
Throw away a perfectly good rotary telephone? I might need that  
one day.The really painful thing to recall is not just that I accumulated  
all this useless stuff, but that I often spent money I desperately  
needed on stuff that I didn't.Why would I do that? Because the people whose job is to sell you  
stuff are really, really good at it. The average 25 year old is  
no match for companies that have spent years figuring out how to  
get you to spend money on stuff. They make the experience of buying  
stuff so pleasant that "shopping" becomes a leisure activity.How do you protect yourself from these people? It can't be easy.  
I'm a fairly skeptical person, and their tricks worked on me well  
into my thirties. But one thing that might work is to ask yourself,  
before buying something, "is this going to make my life noticeably  
better?"A friend of mine cured herself of a clothes buying habit by asking  
herself before she bought anything "Am I going to wear this all the  
time?" If she couldn't convince herself that something she was  
thinking of buying would become one of those few things she wore  
all the time, she wouldn't buy it. I think that would work for any  
kind of purchase. Before you buy anything, ask yourself: will this  
be something I use constantly? Or is it just something nice? Or  
worse still, a mere bargain?The worst stuff in this respect may be stuff you don't use much  
because it's too good. Nothing owns you like fragile stuff. For  
example, the "good china" so many households have, and whose defining  
quality is not so much that it's fun to use, but that one must be  
especially careful not to break it.Another way to resist acquiring stuff is to think of the overall  
cost of owning it. The purchase price is just the beginning. You're  
going to have to think about that thing for years—perhaps for  
the rest of your life. Every thing you own takes energy away from  
you. Some give more than they take. Those are the only things  
worth having.I've now stopped accumulating stuff. Except books—but books are  
different. Books are more like a fluid than individual objects.  
It's not especially inconvenient to own several thousand books,  
whereas if you owned several thousand random possessions you'd be  
a local celebrity. But except for books, I now actively avoid  
stuff. If I want to spend money on some kind of treat, I'll take  
services over   
goods any day.I'm not claiming this is because I've achieved some kind of zenlike  
detachment from material things. I'm talking about something more  
mundane. A historical change has taken place, and I've now realized  
it. Stuff used to be valuable, and now it's not.In industrialized countries the same thing happened with food in  
the middle of the twentieth century. As food got cheaper (or we  
got richer; they're indistinguishable), eating too much started to  
be a bigger danger than eating too little. We've now reached that  
point with stuff. For most people, rich or poor, stuff has become  
a burden.The good news is, if you're carrying a burden without knowing it,  
your life could be better than you realize. Imagine walking around  
for years with five pound ankle weights, then suddenly having them  
removed.  
Spanish TranslationRussian TranslationItalian TranslationPolish TranslationTurkish TranslationFrench TranslationSlovak TranslationRomanian TranslationGerman Translation

# The Equity Equation

July 2007An investor wants to give you money for a certain percentage of  
your startup. Should you take it? You're about to hire your first  
employee. How much stock should you give him?These are some of the hardest questions founders face. And yet  
both have the same answer:1/(1 - n)Whenever you're trading stock in your company for anything, whether  
it's money or an employee or a deal with another company, the test  
for whether to do it is the same. You should give up n% of your  
company if what you trade it for improves your average outcome  
enough that the (100 - n)% you have left is worth more than the  
whole company was before.For example, if an investor wants to buy half your company, how  
much does that investment have to improve your average outcome for  
you to break even? Obviously it has to double: if you trade half  
your company for something that more than doubles the company's  
average outcome, you're net ahead. You have half as big a share  
of something worth more than twice as much.In the general case, if n is the fraction of the company you're  
giving up, the deal is a good one if it makes the company worth  
more than 1/(1 - n).For example, suppose Y Combinator offers to fund you in return for  
7% of your company. In this case, n is .07 and 1/(1 - n) is 1.075.  
So you should take the deal if you believe we can improve your  
average outcome by more than 7.5%. If we improve your outcome by  
10%, you're net ahead, because the remaining .93 you hold is worth  
.93 x 1.1 = 1.023.  
[1]One of the things the equity equation shows us is that, financially  
at least, taking money from a top VC firm can be a really good deal.  
Greg Mcadoo from Sequoia recently said at a YC dinner that when  
Sequoia invests alone they like to take about 30% of a company.  
1/.7 = 1.43, meaning that deal is worth taking if they can improve  
your outcome by more than 43%. For the average startup, that would  
be an extraordinary bargain. It would improve the average startup's  
prospects by more than 43% just to be able to say they were funded  
by Sequoia, even if they never actually got the money.The reason Sequoia is such a good deal is that the percentage of  
the company they take is artificially low. They don't even try to  
get market price for their investment; they limit their holdings  
to leave the founders enough stock to feel the company is still  
theirs.The catch is that Sequoia gets about 6000 business plans a year and  
funds about 20 of them, so the odds of getting this great deal are  
1 in 300. The companies that make it through are not average startups.Of course, there are other factors to consider in a VC deal. It's  
never just a straight trade of money for stock. But if it were,  
taking money from a top firm would generally be a bargain.You can use the same formula when giving stock to employees, but  
it works in the other direction. If i is the average outcome for  
the company with the addition of some new person, then they're worth  
n such that i = 1/(1 - n). Which means n = (i - 1)/i.For example, suppose you're just two founders and you want to hire  
an additional hacker who's so good you feel he'll increase the  
average outcome of the whole company by 20%. n = (1.2 - 1)/1.2 =  
.167. So you'll break even if you trade 16.7% of the company  
for him.That doesn't mean 16.7% is the right amount of stock to give him.  
Stock is not the only cost of hiring someone: there's usually salary  
and overhead as well. And if the company merely breaks even on the  
deal, there's no reason to do it.I think to translate salary and overhead into stock you should  
multiply the annual rate by about 1.5. Most startups grow fast or  
die; if you die you don't have to pay the guy, and if you grow fast  
you'll be paying next year's salary out of next year's valuation,  
which should be 3x this year's. If your valuation grows 3x a year,  
the total cost in stock of a new hire's salary and overhead is 1.5  
years' cost at the present valuation. [2]How much of an additional margin should the company need as the  
"activation energy" for the deal? Since this is in effect the  
company's profit on a hire, the market will determine that: if  
you're a hot opportunity, you can charge more.Let's run through an example. Suppose the company wants to make a  
"profit" of 50% on the new hire mentioned above. So subtract a  
third from 16.7% and we have 11.1% as his "retail" price. Suppose  
further that he's going to cost $60k a year in salary and overhead,  
x 1.5 = $90k total. If the company's valuation is $2 million, $90k  
is 4.5%. 11.1% - 4.5% = an offer of 6.6%.Incidentally, notice how important it is for early employees to  
take little salary. It comes right out of stock that could otherwise  
be given to them.Obviously there is a great deal of play in these numbers. I'm not  
claiming that stock grants can now be reduced to a formula. Ultimately  
you always have to guess. But at least know what you're guessing.  
If you choose a number based on your gut feel, or a table of typical  
grant sizes supplied by a VC firm, understand what those are estimates  
of.And more generally, when you make any decision involving equity,  
run it through 1/(1 - n) to see if it makes sense. You should  
always feel richer after trading equity. If the trade didn't  
increase the value of your remaining shares enough to put you net  
ahead, you wouldn't have (or shouldn't have) done it.Notes[1] This is why we  
can't believe anyone would think Y Combinator was a bad deal. Does  
anyone really think we're so useless that in three months we can't  
improve a startup's prospects by 7.5%?  
[2] The obvious choice  
for your present valuation is the post-money valuation of your last  
funding round. This probably undervalues the company, though,  
because (a) unless your last round just happened, the company is  
presumably worth more, and (b) the valuation of an early funding  
round usually reflects some other contribution by the investors.Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit,   
Hutch Fishman, David Hornik, Paul Kedrosky, Jessica Livingston, Gary Sabot, and   
Joshua Schachter for reading drafts of this.

# An Alternative Theory of Unions

May 2007People who worry about the increasing gap between rich and poor  
generally look back on the mid twentieth century as a golden age.  
In those days we had a large number of high-paying union manufacturing  
jobs that boosted the median income. I wouldn't quite call the  
high-paying union job a myth, but I think people who dwell on it  
are reading too much into it.Oddly enough, it was working with startups that made me realize  
where the high-paying union job came from. In a rapidly growing  
market, you don't worry too much about efficiency. It's more  
important to grow fast. If there's some mundane problem getting  
in your way, and there's a simple solution that's somewhat expensive,  
just take it and get on with more important things. EBay didn't  
win by paying less for servers than their competitors.Difficult though it may be to imagine now, manufacturing was a  
growth industry in the mid twentieth century. This was an era when  
small firms making everything from cars to candy were getting  
consolidated into a new kind of corporation with national reach and  
huge economies of scale. You had to grow fast or die. Workers  
were for these companies what servers are for an Internet startup.  
A reliable supply was more important than low cost.If you looked in the head of a 1950s auto executive, the attitude  
must have been: sure, give 'em whatever they ask for, so long as  
the new model isn't delayed.In other words, those workers were not paid what their work was  
worth. Circumstances being what they were, companies would have  
been stupid to insist on paying them so little.If you want a less controversial example of this phenomenon, ask  
anyone who worked as a consultant building web sites during the  
Internet Bubble. In the late nineties you could get paid huge sums  
of money for building the most trivial things. And yet does anyone  
who was there have any expectation those days will ever return? I  
doubt it. Surely everyone realizes that was just a temporary  
aberration.The era of labor unions seems to have been the same kind of aberration,   
just spread  
over a longer period, and mixed together with a lot of ideology  
that prevents people from viewing it with as cold an eye as they  
would something like consulting during the Bubble.Basically, unions were just Razorfish.People who think the labor movement was the creation of heroic union  
organizers have a problem to explain: why are unions shrinking now?  
The best they can do is fall back on the default explanation of  
people living in fallen civilizations. Our ancestors were giants.  
The workers of the early twentieth century must have had a moral  
courage that's lacking today.In fact there's a simpler explanation. The early twentieth century  
was just a fast-growing startup overpaying for infrastructure. And  
we in the present are not a fallen people, who have abandoned  
whatever mysterious high-minded principles produced the high-paying  
union job. We simply live in a time when the fast-growing companies  
overspend on different things.

# The Hacker's Guide to Investors

April 2007(This essay is derived from a keynote talk at the 2007 ASES Summit  
at Stanford.)The world of investors is a foreign one to most hackers—partly  
because investors are so unlike hackers, and partly because they  
tend to operate in secret. I've been dealing with this world for  
many years, both as a founder and an investor, and I still don't  
fully understand it.In this essay I'm going to list some of the more surprising things  
I've learned about investors. Some I only learned in the past year.Teaching hackers how to deal with investors is probably the second  
most important thing we do at Y Combinator. The most important  
thing for a startup is to make something good. But everyone knows  
that's important. The dangerous thing about investors is that  
hackers don't know how little they know about this strange world.1. The investors are what make a startup hub.About a year ago I tried to figure out what you'd need to reproduce  
Silicon Valley. I decided the   
critical ingredients were rich people  
and nerds—investors and founders. People are all you need to  
make technology, and all the other people will move.If I had to narrow that down, I'd say investors are the limiting  
factor. Not because they contribute more to the startup, but simply  
because they're least willing to move. They're rich. They're not  
going to move to Albuquerque just because there are some smart  
hackers there they could invest in. Whereas hackers will move to  
the Bay Area to find investors.2. Angel investors are the most critical.There are several types of investors. The two main categories are  
angels and VCs: VCs invest other people's money, and angels invest  
their own.Though they're less well known, the angel investors are probably  
the more critical ingredient in creating a silicon valley. Most  
companies that VCs invest in would never have made it that far if angels  
hadn't invested first. VCs say between half and three quarters of  
companies that raise series A rounds have taken some outside  
investment already.  
[1]Angels are willing to fund riskier projects than VCs. They also  
give valuable advice, because (unlike VCs) many have been startup  
founders themselves.Google's story shows the key role angels play. A lot of people know  
Google raised money from Kleiner and Sequoia. What most don't realize  
is how late. That VC round was a series B round; the premoney  
valuation was $75 million. Google was already a successful company  
at that point. Really, Google was funded with angel money.It may seem odd that the canonical Silicon Valley startup was funded  
by angels, but this is not so surprising. Risk is always proportionate  
to reward. So the most successful startup of all is likely to have  
seemed an extremely risky bet at first, and that is exactly the  
kind VCs won't touch.Where do angel investors come from? From other startups. So startup  
hubs like Silicon Valley benefit from something like the marketplace  
effect, but shifted in time: startups are there because startups  
were there.3. Angels don't like publicity.If angels are so important, why do we hear more about VCs? Because  
VCs like publicity. They need to market themselves to the investors  
who are their "customers"—the endowments and pension funds and  
rich families whose money they invest—and also to founders who  
might come to them for funding.Angels don't need to market themselves to investors because they  
invest their own money. Nor do they want to market themselves to  
founders: they don't want random people pestering them with business  
plans. Actually, neither do VCs. Both angels and VCs get deals  
almost exclusively through personal introductions.   
[2]The reason VCs want a strong brand is not to draw in more business  
plans over the transom, but so they win deals when competing  
against other VCs. Whereas angels are rarely in direct competition,  
because (a) they do fewer deals, (b) they're happy to split them,  
and (c) they invest at a point where the stream is broader.4. Most investors, especially VCs, are not like founders.Some angels are, or were, hackers. But most VCs are a different  
type of people: they're dealmakers.If you're a hacker, here's a thought experiment you can run to  
understand why there are basically no hacker VCs: How would you  
like a job where you never got to make anything, but instead spent  
all your time listening to other people pitch (mostly terrible)  
projects, deciding whether to fund them, and sitting on their boards  
if you did? That would not be fun for most hackers. Hackers like  
to make things. This would be like being an administrator.Because most VCs are a different species of people from  
founders, it's hard to know what they're thinking. If you're a  
hacker, the last time you had to deal with these guys was in high  
school. Maybe in college you walked past their fraternity on your  
way to the lab. But don't underestimate them. They're as expert  
in their world as you are in yours. What they're good at is reading  
people, and making deals work to their advantage. Think twice  
before you try to beat them at that.5. Most investors are momentum investors.Because most investors are dealmakers rather than technology people,  
they generally don't understand what you're doing. I knew as a  
founder that most VCs didn't get technology. I also knew some made  
a lot of money. And yet it never occurred to me till recently to  
put those two ideas together and ask "How can VCs make money by  
investing in stuff they don't understand?"The answer is that they're like momentum investors. You can (or  
could once) make a lot of money by noticing sudden changes in stock  
prices. When a stock jumps upward, you buy, and when it suddenly  
drops, you sell. In effect you're insider trading, without knowing  
what you know. You just know someone knows something, and that's  
making the stock move.This is how most venture investors operate. They don't try to look  
at something and predict whether it will take off. They win by  
noticing that something is taking off a little sooner than everyone  
else. That generates almost as good returns as actually being able  
to pick winners. They may have to pay a little more than they would  
if they got in at the very beginning, but only a little.Investors always say what they really care about is the team.  
Actually what they care most about is your traffic, then what other  
investors think, then the team. If you don't yet have any traffic,  
they fall back on number 2, what other investors think. And this,  
as you can imagine, produces wild oscillations in the "stock price"  
of a startup. One week everyone wants you, and they're begging not  
to be cut out of the deal. But all it takes is for one big investor  
to cool on you, and the next week no one will return your phone  
calls. We regularly have startups go from hot to cold or cold to  
hot in a matter of days, and literally nothing has changed.There are two ways to deal with this phenomenon. If you're feeling  
really confident, you can try to ride it. You can start by asking  
a comparatively lowly VC for a small amount of money, and then after  
generating interest there, ask more prestigious VCs for larger  
amounts, stirring up a crescendo of buzz, and then "sell" at the  
top. This is extremely risky, and takes months even if you succeed.  
I wouldn't try it myself. My advice is to err on the side of safety:  
when someone offers you a decent deal, just take it and get on with  
building the company. Startups win or lose based on the quality  
of their product, not the quality of their funding deals.6. Most investors are looking for big hits.Venture investors like companies that could go public. That's where  
the big returns are. They know the odds of any individual startup  
going public are small, but they want to invest in those that at  
least have a chance of going public.Currently the way VCs seem to operate is to invest in a bunch of  
companies, most of which fail, and one of which is Google. Those  
few big wins compensate for losses on their other investments. What this  
means is that most VCs will only invest in you if you're a potential  
Google. They don't care about companies that are a safe bet to be  
acquired for $20 million. There needs to be a chance, however  
small, of the company becoming really big.Angels are different in this respect. They're happy to invest in  
a company where the most likely outcome is a $20 million acquisition  
if they can do it at a low enough valuation. But of course they  
like companies that could go public too. So having an ambitious  
long-term plan pleases everyone.If you take VC money, you have to mean it, because the structure  
of VC deals prevents early acquisitions. If you take VC money,  
they won't let you sell early.7. VCs want to invest large amounts.The fact that they're running investment funds makes VCs want to  
invest large amounts. A typical VC fund is now hundreds of millions  
of dollars. If $400 million has to be invested by 10 partners,  
they have to invest $40 million each. VCs usually sit on the boards  
of companies they fund. If the average deal size was $1 million,  
each partner would have to sit on 40 boards, which would not be  
fun. So they prefer bigger deals, where they can put a lot of money  
to work at once.VCs don't regard you as a bargain if you don't need a lot of money.  
That may even make you less attractive, because it means their  
investment creates less of a barrier to entry for competitors.Angels are in a different position because they're investing their  
own money. They're happy to invest small amounts—sometimes as  
little as $20,000—as long as the potential returns look good  
enough. So if you're doing something inexpensive, go to angels.8. Valuations are fiction.VCs admit that valuations are an artifact. They decide how much  
money you need and how much of the company they want, and those two  
constraints yield a valuation.Valuations increase as the size of the investment does. A company  
that an angel is willing to put $50,000 into at a valuation of a  
million can't take $6 million from VCs at that valuation. That  
would leave the founders less than a seventh of the company between  
them (since the option pool would also come out of that seventh).  
Most VCs wouldn't want that, which is why you never hear of deals  
where a VC invests $6 million at a premoney valuation of $1 million.If valuations change depending on the amount invested, that shows  
how far they are from reflecting any kind of value of the company.Since valuations are made up, founders shouldn't care too much about  
them. That's not the part to focus on. In fact, a high valuation  
can be a bad thing. If you take funding at a premoney valuation  
of $10 million, you won't be selling the company for 20. You'll  
have to sell for over 50 for the VCs to get even a 5x return, which  
is low to them. More likely they'll want you to hold out for 100.  
But needing to get a high price decreases the chance of getting  
bought at all; many companies can buy you for $10 million, but only  
a handful for 100. And since a startup is like a pass/fail course  
for the founders, what you want to optimize is your chance of a  
good outcome, not the percentage of the company you keep.So why do founders chase high valuations? They're tricked by  
misplaced ambition. They feel they've achieved more if they get a  
higher valuation. They usually know other founders, and if they  
get a higher valuation they can say "mine is bigger than yours."  
But funding is not the real test. The real test is the final outcome  
for the founder, and getting too high a valuation may just make a  
good outcome less likely.The one advantage of a high valuation is that you get less dilution.  
But there is another less sexy way to achieve that: just take less  
money.9. Investors look for founders like the current stars.Ten years ago investors were looking for the next Bill Gates. This  
was a mistake, because Microsoft was a very anomalous startup. They  
started almost as a contract programming operation, and the reason  
they became huge was that IBM happened to drop the PC standard in  
their lap.Now all the VCs are looking for the next Larry and Sergey. This  
is a good trend, because Larry and Sergey are closer to the ideal  
startup founders.Historically investors thought it was important for a founder to  
be an expert in business. So they were willing to fund teams of  
MBAs who planned to use the money to pay programmers to build their  
product for them. This is like funding Steve Ballmer in the hope  
that the programmer he'll hire is Bill Gates—kind of backward,  
as the events of the Bubble showed. Now most VCs know they should  
be funding technical guys. This is more pronounced among the very  
top funds; the lamer ones still want to fund MBAs.If you're a hacker, it's good news that investors are looking for  
Larry and Sergey. The bad news is, the only investors who can do  
it right are the ones who knew them when they were a  
couple of CS grad students, not the confident media stars they are  
today. What investors still don't get is how clueless and tentative  
great founders can seem at the very beginning.10. The contribution of investors tends to be underestimated.Investors do more for startups than give them money. They're helpful  
in doing deals and arranging introductions, and some of the smarter  
ones, particularly angels, can give good advice about the product.In fact, I'd say what separates the great investors from the mediocre  
ones is the quality of their advice. Most investors give advice,  
but the top ones give good advice.Whatever help investors give a startup tends to be underestimated.  
It's to everyone's advantage to let the world think the founders  
thought of everything. The goal of the investors is for the company  
to become valuable, and the company seems more valuable if it seems  
like all the good ideas came from within.This trend is compounded by the obsession that the press has with  
founders. In a company founded by two people, 10% of the ideas  
might come from the first guy they hire. Arguably they've done a  
bad job of hiring otherwise. And yet this guy will be almost  
entirely overlooked by the press.I say this as a founder: the contribution of founders is always  
overestimated. The danger here is that new founders, looking at  
existing founders, will think that they're supermen that one couldn't  
possibly equal oneself. Actually they have a hundred different  
types of support people just offscreen making the whole show possible.  
[3]11. VCs are afraid of looking bad.I've been very surprised to discover how timid most VCs are. They  
seem to be afraid of looking bad to their partners, and perhaps  
also to the limited partners—the people whose money they invest.You can measure this fear in how much less risk VCs are willing to  
take. You can tell they won't make investments for their fund that  
they might be willing to make themselves as angels. Though it's  
not quite accurate to say that VCs are less willing to take risks.  
They're less willing to do things that might look bad. That's not  
the same thing.For example, most VCs would be very reluctant to invest in a startup  
founded by a pair of 18 year old hackers, no matter how brilliant,  
because if the startup failed their partners could turn on them and  
say "What, you invested $x million of our money in a pair of 18  
year olds?" Whereas if a VC invested in a startup founded by  
three former banking executives in their 40s who planned to outsource  
their product development—which to my mind is actually a lot  
riskier than investing in a pair of really smart 18 year olds—he  
couldn't be faulted, if it failed, for making such an apparently  
prudent investment.As a friend of mine said, "Most VCs can't do anything that would  
sound bad to the kind of doofuses who run pension funds." Angels  
can take greater risks because they don't have to answer to anyone.12. Being turned down by investors doesn't mean much.Some founders are quite dejected when they get turned down by  
investors. They shouldn't take it so much to heart. To start with,  
investors are often wrong. It's hard to think of a successful  
startup that wasn't turned down by investors at some point. Lots  
of VCs rejected Google. So obviously the reaction of investors is  
not a very meaningful test.Investors will often reject you for what seem to be superficial  
reasons. I read of one VC who   
turned  
down a startup simply because  
they'd given away so many little bits of stock that the deal required  
too many signatures to close.   
[4]  
The reason investors can get away  
with this is that they see so many deals. It doesn't matter if  
they underestimate you because of some surface imperfection, because  
the next best deal will be almost as good.   
Imagine picking out  
apples at a grocery store. You grab one with a little bruise.  
Maybe it's just a surface bruise, but why even bother checking when  
there are so many other unbruised apples to choose from?Investors would be the first to admit they're often wrong. So when  
you get rejected by investors, don't think "we suck," but instead  
ask "do we suck?" Rejection is a question, not an answer.13. Investors are emotional.I've been surprised to discover how emotional investors can be.  
You'd expect them to be cold and calculating, or at least businesslike,  
but often they're not. I'm not sure if it's their position of power  
that makes them this way, or the large sums of money involved, but  
investment negotiations can easily turn personal. If you offend  
investors, they'll leave in a huff.A while ago an eminent VC firm offered a series A round to a startup  
we'd seed funded. Then they heard a rival VC firm was also interested.  
They were so afraid that they'd be rejected in favor of this other  
firm that they gave the startup what's known as an "exploding  
termsheet." They had, I think, 24 hours to say yes or no, or the  
deal was off. Exploding termsheets are a somewhat dubious device,  
but not uncommon. What surprised me was their reaction when I  
called to talk about it. I asked if they'd still be interested in  
the startup if the rival VC didn't end up making an offer, and they  
said no. What rational basis could they have had for saying that?  
If they thought the startup was worth investing in, what difference  
should it make what some other VC thought? Surely it was their  
duty to their limited partners simply to invest in the best  
opportunities they found; they should be delighted if the other VC  
said no, because it would mean they'd overlooked a good opportunity.  
But of course there was no rational basis for their decision. They  
just couldn't stand the idea of taking this rival firm's rejects.In this case the exploding termsheet was not (or not only) a tactic  
to pressure the startup. It was more like the high school trick  
of breaking up with someone before they can break up with you. In  
an earlier essay I said that VCs were a lot like high school girls.  
A few VCs have joked about that characterization, but none have  
disputed it.14. The negotiation never stops till the closing.Most deals, for investment or acquisition, happen in two phases.  
There's an initial phase of negotiation about the big questions.  
If this succeeds you get a termsheet, so called because it outlines  
the key terms of a deal. A termsheet is not legally binding,  
but it is a definite step. It's supposed to mean that a  
deal is going to happen, once the lawyers work out all the details.  
In theory these details are minor ones; by definition all the  
important points are supposed to be covered in the termsheet.Inexperience and wishful thinking combine to make founders feel  
that when they have a termsheet, they have a deal. They want there  
to be a deal; everyone acts like they have a deal; so there must  
be a deal. But there isn't and may not be for several months. A  
lot can change for a startup in several months. It's not uncommon  
for investors and acquirers to get buyer's remorse. So you have  
to keep pushing, keep selling, all the way to the close. Otherwise  
all the "minor" details left unspecified in the termsheet will be  
interpreted to your disadvantage. The other side may even break  
the deal; if they do that, they'll usually seize on some technicality  
or claim you misled them, rather than admitting they changed their  
minds.It can be hard to keep the pressure on an investor or acquirer all  
the way to the closing, because the most effective pressure is  
competition from other investors or acquirers, and these tend to  
drop away when you get a termsheet. You should try to stay as close  
friends as you can with these rivals, but the most important thing  
is just to keep up the momentum in your startup. The investors or  
acquirers chose you because you seemed hot. Keep doing whatever  
made you seem hot. Keep releasing new features; keep getting new  
users; keep getting mentioned in the press and in blogs.15. Investors like to co-invest.I've been surprised how willing investors are to split deals. You  
might think that if they found a good deal they'd want it all to  
themselves, but they seem positively eager to syndicate. This is  
understandable with angels; they invest on a smaller scale and don't  
like to have too much money tied up in any one deal. But VCs also  
share deals a lot. Why?Partly I think this is an artifact of the rule I quoted earlier:  
after traffic, VCs care most what other VCs think. A deal that has  
multiple VCs interested in it is more likely to close, so of deals  
that close, more will have multiple investors.There is one rational reason to want multiple VCs in a deal: Any  
investor who co-invests with you is one less investor who could  
fund a competitor. Apparently Kleiner and Sequoia didn't like  
splitting the Google deal, but it did at least have the advantage,  
from each one's point of view, that there probably wouldn't be a  
competitor funded by the other. Splitting deals thus has similar  
advantages to confusing paternity.But I think the main reason VCs like splitting deals is the fear  
of looking bad. If another firm shares the deal, then in the event  
of failure it will seem to have been a prudent choice—a consensus  
decision, rather than just the whim of an individual partner.16. Investors collude.Investing is not covered by antitrust law. At least, it better not  
be, because investors regularly do things that would be illegal  
otherwise. I know personally of cases where one investor has talked  
another out of making a competitive offer, using the promise of  
sharing future deals.In principle investors are all competing for the same deals, but  
the spirit of cooperation is stronger than the spirit of competition.  
The reason, again, is that there are so many deals. Though a  
professional investor may have a closer relationship with a founder  
he invests in than with other investors, his relationship with the  
founder is only going to last a couple years, whereas his relationship  
with other firms will last his whole career. There isn't so much  
at stake in his interactions with other investors, but there will  
be a lot of them. Professional investors are constantly trading  
little favors.Another reason investors stick together is to preserve the power  
of investors as a whole. So you will not, as of this writing, be  
able to get investors into an auction for your series A round.  
They'd rather lose the deal than establish a precedent of VCs  
competitively bidding against one another. An efficient startup  
funding market may be coming in the distant future; things tend to  
move in that direction; but it's certainly not here now.  
17. Large-scale investors care about their portfolio, not any  
individual company.The reason startups work so well is that everyone with power also  
has equity. The only way any of them can succeed is if they all  
do. This makes everyone naturally pull in the same direction,  
subject to differences of opinion about tactics.The problem is, larger scale investors don't have exactly the same  
motivation. Close, but not identical. They don't need any given  
startup to succeed, like founders do, just their portfolio as a  
whole to. So in borderline cases the rational thing for them to  
do is to sacrifice unpromising startups.Large-scale investors tend to put startups in three categories:  
successes, failures, and the "living dead"—companies that are  
plugging along but don't seem likely in the immediate future to get  
bought or go public. To the founders, "living dead" sounds harsh.  
These companies may be far from failures by ordinary standards. But  
they might as well be from a venture investor's point of view, and  
they suck up just as much time and attention as the successes. So  
if such a company has two possible strategies, a conservative one  
that's slightly more likely to work in the end, or a risky one that  
within a short time will either yield a giant success or kill the  
company, VCs will push for the kill-or-cure option. To them the  
company is already a write-off. Better to have resolution, one way  
or the other, as soon as possible.If a startup gets into real trouble, instead of trying to save it  
VCs may just sell it at a low price to another of their portfolio  
companies. Philip Greenspun said in Founders at Work that Ars Digita's VCs did this to them.18. Investors have different risk profiles from founders.Most people would rather a 100% chance of $1 million than a 20%  
chance of $10 million. Investors are rich enough to be rational  
and prefer the latter. So they'll always tend to encourage founders  
to keep rolling the dice. If a company is doing well, investors  
will want founders to turn down most acquisition offers. And indeed,  
most startups that turn down acquisition offers ultimately do better.  
But it's still hair-raising for the founders, because they might  
end up with nothing. When someone's offering to buy you for a price  
at which your stock is worth $5 million, saying no is equivalent  
to having $5 million and betting it all on one spin of the roulette  
wheel.Investors will tell you the company is worth more. And they may  
be right. But that doesn't mean it's wrong to sell. Any financial  
advisor who put all his client's assets in the stock of a single,  
private company would probably lose his license for it.More and more, investors are letting founders cash out partially.  
That should correct the problem. Most founders have such low standards  
that they'll feel rich with a sum that doesn't seem huge to investors.  
But this custom is spreading too slowly, because VCs are afraid of  
seeming irresponsible. No one wants to be the first VC to give  
someone fuck-you money and then actually get told "fuck you." But  
until this does start to happen, we know VCs are being too conservative.19. Investors vary greatly.Back when I was a founder I used to think all VCs were the same.  
And in fact they do all look   
the same. They're all what hackers  
call "suits." But since I've been dealing with VCs more I've learned  
that some suits are smarter than others.They're also in a business where winners tend to keep winning and  
losers to keep losing. When a VC firm has been successful in the  
past, everyone wants funding from them, so they get the pick of all  
the new deals. The self-reinforcing nature of the venture funding  
market means that the top ten firms live in a completely different  
world from, say, the hundredth. As well as being smarter, they  
tend to be calmer and more upstanding; they don't need to do iffy  
things to get an edge, and don't want to because they have more  
brand to protect.There are only two kinds of VCs you want to take money from, if you  
have the luxury of choosing: the "top tier" VCs, meaning about the  
top 20 or so firms, plus a few new ones that are not among the top  
20 only because they haven't been around long enough.It's particularly important to raise money from a top firm if you're  
a hacker, because they're more confident. That means they're less  
likely to stick you with a business guy as CEO, like VCs used to  
do in the 90s. If you seem smart and want to do it, they'll let  
you run the company.20. Investors don't realize how much it costs to raise money from  
them.Raising money is a huge time suck at just the point where startups  
can least afford it. It's not unusual for it to take five or six  
months to close a funding round. Six weeks is fast. And raising  
money is not just something you can leave running as a background  
process. When you're raising money, it's inevitably the main focus  
of the company. Which means building the product isn't.Suppose a Y Combinator company starts talking to VCs after demo  
day, and is successful in raising money from them, closing the deal  
after a comparatively short 8 weeks. Since demo day occurs after  
10 weeks, the company is now 18 weeks old. Raising money, rather  
than working on the product, has been the company's main focus for  
44% of its existence. And mind you, this an example where things  
turned out well.When a startup does return to working on the product after a funding  
round finally closes, it's as if they were returning to work after  
a months-long illness. They've lost most of their momentum.Investors have no idea how much they damage the companies they  
invest in by taking so long to do it. But companies do. So there  
is a big opportunity here for a new kind of venture fund that invests  
smaller amounts at lower valuations, but promises to either close  
or say no very quickly. If there were such a firm, I'd recommend  
it to startups in preference to any other, no matter how prestigious.  
Startups live on speed and momentum.21. Investors don't like to say no.The reason funding deals take so long to close is mainly that  
investors can't make up their minds. VCs are not big companies;  
they can do a deal in 24 hours if they need to. But they usually  
let the initial meetings stretch out over a couple weeks. The  
reason is the selection algorithm I mentioned earlier. Most don't  
try to predict whether a startup will win, but to notice quickly  
that it already is winning. They care what the market thinks of  
you and what other VCs think of you, and they can't judge those  
just from meeting you.Because they're investing in things that (a) change fast and (b)  
they don't understand, a lot of investors will reject you in a way  
that can later be claimed not to have been a rejection. Unless you  
know this world, you may not even realize you've been rejected.  
Here's a VC saying no:  
  
 We're really excited about your project, and we want to keep in  
 close touch as you develop it further.  
  
Translated into more straightforward language, this means: We're  
not investing in you, but we may change our minds if it looks like  
you're taking off. Sometimes they're more candid and say explicitly  
that they need to "see some traction." They'll invest in you if  
you start to get lots of users. But so would any VC. So all they're  
saying is that you're still at square 1.Here's a test for deciding whether a VC's response was yes or no.  
Look down at your hands. Are you holding a termsheet?22. You need investors.Some founders say "Who needs investors?" Empirically the answer  
seems to be: everyone who wants to succeed. Practically every  
successful startup takes outside investment at some point.Why? What the people who think they don't need investors forget is  
that they will have competitors. The question is not whether you  
need outside investment, but whether it could help you at all.  
If the answer is yes, and you don't take investment, then competitors  
who do will have an advantage over you. And in the startup world  
a little advantage can expand into a lot.Mike Moritz famously said that he invested in Yahoo because he  
thought they had a few weeks' lead over their competitors. That  
may not have mattered quite so much as he thought, because Google  
came along three years later and kicked Yahoo's ass. But there is  
something in what he said. Sometimes a small lead can grow into  
the yes half of a binary choice.Maybe as it gets cheaper to start a startup, it will start to be  
possible to succeed in a competitive market without outside funding.   
There are certainly  
costs to raising money. But as of this writing the empirical  
evidence says it's a net win.23. Investors like it when you don't need them.A lot of founders approach investors as if they needed their  
permission to start a company—as if it were like getting into  
college. But you don't need investors to start most companies;  
they just make it easier.And in fact, investors greatly prefer it if you don't need them.  
What excites them, both consciously and unconsciously, is the sort  
of startup that approaches them saying "the train's leaving the  
station; are you in or out?" not the one saying "please can we have  
some money to start a company?"Most investors are "bottoms" in the sense that the startups they  
like most are those that are rough with them. When Google stuck  
Kleiner and Sequoia with a $75 million premoney valuation, their  
reaction was probably "Ouch! That feels so good." And they were  
right, weren't they? That deal probably made them more than any  
other they've done.The thing is, VCs are pretty good at reading people. So don't try  
to act tough with them unless you really are the next Google, or  
they'll see through you in a second. Instead of acting tough, what  
most startups should do is simply always have a backup plan. Always  
have some alternative plan for getting started if any given investor  
says no. Having one is the best insurance against needing one.So you shouldn't start a startup that's expensive to start, because  
then you'll be at the mercy of investors. If you ultimately want  
to do something that will cost a lot, start by doing a cheaper  
subset of it, and expand your ambitions when and if you raise more  
money.Apparently the most likely animals to be left alive after a nuclear  
war are cockroaches, because they're so hard to kill. That's what  
you want to be as a startup, initially. Instead of a beautiful  
but fragile flower that needs to have its stem in a plastic tube  
to support itself, better to be small, ugly, and indestructible.Notes[1]  
I may be underestimating VCs. They may play some behind the scenes   
role in IPOs, which you ultimately need if you want to create a silicon   
valley.[2]  
A few VCs have an email address you can send your business  
plan to, but the number of startups that get funded this way is  
basically zero. You should always get a personal introduction—and   
to a partner, not an associate.[3]  
Several people have told us that the most valuable thing about   
startup school   
was that they got to see famous startup founders and realized  
they were just ordinary guys. Though we're happy to provide this  
service, this is not generally the way we pitch startup school to  
potential speakers.[4]  
Actually this sounds to me like a VC who got buyer's remorse,  
then used a technicality to get out of the deal. But it's telling  
that it even seemed a plausible excuse.Thanks to Sam Altman, Paul Buchheit, Hutch Fishman, and Robert   
Morris for reading drafts of  
this, and to Kenneth King of ASES for inviting me to speak.  
Comment on this essay.

# Two Kinds of Judgement

April 2007There are two different ways people judge you. Sometimes judging  
you correctly is the end goal. But there's a second much more  
common type of judgement where it isn't. We tend to regard all  
judgements of us as the first type. We'd probably be happier if  
we realized which are and which aren't.The first type of judgement, the type where judging you is the end  
goal, include court cases, grades in classes, and most competitions.  
Such judgements can of course be mistaken, but because the goal is  
to judge you correctly, there's usually some kind of appeals process.  
If you feel you've been misjudged, you can protest that you've been  
treated unfairly.Nearly all the judgements made on children are of this type, so we  
get into the habit early in life of thinking that all judgements  
are.But in fact there is a second much larger class of judgements where  
judging you is only a means to something else. These include college  
admissions, hiring and investment decisions, and of course the  
judgements made in dating. This kind of judgement is not really  
about you.Put yourself in the position of someone selecting players for a  
national team. Suppose for the sake of simplicity that this is a  
game with no positions, and that you have to select 20 players.  
There will be a few stars who clearly should make the team, and  
many players who clearly shouldn't. The only place your judgement  
makes a difference is in the borderline cases. Suppose you screw  
up and underestimate the 20th best player, causing him not to make  
the team, and his place to be taken by the 21st best. You've still  
picked a good team. If the players have the usual distribution of  
ability, the 21st best player will be only slightly worse than the  
20th best. Probably the difference between them will be less than  
the measurement error.The 20th best player may feel he has been misjudged. But your goal  
here wasn't to provide a service estimating people's ability. It  
was to pick a team, and if the difference between the 20th and 21st  
best players is less than the measurement error, you've still done  
that optimally.It's a false analogy even to use the word unfair to describe this  
kind of misjudgement. It's not aimed at producing a correct estimate  
of any given individual, but at selecting a reasonably optimal set.One thing that leads us astray here is that the selector seems to  
be in a position of power. That makes him seem like a judge. If  
you regard someone judging you as a customer instead of a judge,  
the expectation of fairness goes away. The author of a good novel  
wouldn't complain that readers were unfair for preferring a  
potboiler with a racy cover. Stupid, perhaps, but not unfair.Our early training and our self-centeredness combine to make us  
believe that every judgement of us is about us. In fact most aren't.  
This is a rare case where being less self-centered will make people  
more confident. Once you realize how little most people judging  
you care about judging you accurately—once you realize that because  
of the normal distribution of most applicant pools, it matters least  
to judge accurately in precisely the cases where judgement has the  
most effect—you won't take rejection so personally.And curiously enough, taking rejection less personally may help you  
to get rejected less often. If you think someone judging you will  
work hard to judge you correctly, you can afford to be passive.  
But the more you realize that most judgements are greatly influenced  
by random, extraneous factors—that most people judging you are  
more like a fickle novel buyer than a wise and perceptive   
magistrate—the more you realize you can do things to influence the  
outcome.One good place to apply this principle is in college applications.  
Most high school students applying to college do it with the usual  
child's mix of inferiority and self-centeredness: inferiority in  
that they assume that admissions committees must be all-seeing;  
self-centeredness in that they assume admissions committees care  
enough about them to dig down into their application and figure out  
whether they're good or not. These combine to make applicants  
passive in applying and hurt when they're rejected. If college  
applicants realized how quick and impersonal most selection processes  
are, they'd make more effort to sell themselves, and take the outcome  
less personally.Spanish TranslationRussian TranslationArabic Translation

# Microsoft is Dead

April 2007A few days ago I suddenly realized Microsoft was dead. I was talking  
to a young startup founder about how Google was different from  
Yahoo. I said that Yahoo had been warped from the start by  
their fear of Microsoft. That was why they'd positioned themselves  
as a "media company" instead of a technology company. Then I looked  
at his face and realized he didn't understand. It was as if I'd  
told him how much girls liked Barry Manilow in the mid  
80s. Barry who?Microsoft? He didn't say anything, but I could tell he didn't quite  
believe anyone would be frightened of them.Microsoft cast  
a shadow over the software world for almost 20 years  
starting in the late 80s.  
I can remember when it was IBM before them. I mostly ignored this  
shadow. I never used Microsoft software, so it only affected me  
indirectly—for example, in the spam I got from botnets. And  
because I wasn't paying attention, I didn't notice when the shadow  
disappeared.But it's gone now. I can sense that. No one is even afraid of  
Microsoft anymore. They still make a lot of money—so does IBM,  
for that matter. But they're not dangerous.When did Microsoft die, and of what? I know they seemed dangerous  
as late as 2001, because I wrote an essay then   
about how they were  
less dangerous than they seemed. I'd guess they were dead by 2005.  
I know when we started Y Combinator we didn't worry about Microsoft  
as competition for the startups we funded. In fact, we've never  
even invited them to the demo days we organize for startups to  
present to investors. We invite Yahoo and Google and some other  
Internet companies, but we've never bothered to invite Microsoft.  
Nor has anyone there ever even sent us an email. They're in a  
different world.What killed them? Four things, I think, all of them occurring  
simultaneously in the mid 2000s.The most obvious is Google. There can only be one big man in town,  
and they're clearly it. Google is the most dangerous company  
now by far, in both the good and bad senses of the word. Microsoft  
can at best limp along afterward.When did Google take the lead? There will be a tendency to push  
it back to their IPO in August 2004, but they weren't setting the  
terms of the debate then. I'd say they took the lead in  
2005. Gmail was one of the things that put them over the edge.  
Gmail showed they could do more than search.Gmail also showed how much you could do with web-based software,  
if you took advantage of what later came to be called "Ajax." And  
that was the second cause of Microsoft's death: everyone can see the  
desktop is over. It now seems inevitable that applications will  
live on the web—not just email, but everything, right up to  
Photoshop. Even Microsoft sees that now.Ironically, Microsoft unintentionally helped create Ajax. The x  
in Ajax is from the XMLHttpRequest object, which lets the browser  
communicate with the server in the background while displaying a page.  
(Originally the only way to communicate with the server was to   
ask for a new page.) XMLHttpRequest was created by Microsoft in the late 90s  
because they needed it for Outlook. What they didn't realize was  
that it would be useful to a lot of other people too—in fact, to  
anyone who wanted to make web apps work like desktop ones.The other critical component of Ajax is Javascript, the programming  
language that runs in the browser. Microsoft saw the danger of  
Javascript and tried to keep it broken for as long as they could.  
[1]   
But eventually the open source world won, by producing  
Javascript libraries that grew over the brokenness of Explorer  
the way a tree grows over barbed wire.The third cause of Microsoft's death was broadband Internet. Anyone  
who cares can have fast Internet access  
now. And the bigger the pipe to the server, the less you need the  
desktop.The last nail in the coffin came, of all places, from Apple.   
Thanks to OS X, Apple has come back from the dead in a way  
that is extremely rare in technology.  
[2]  
Their victory is so complete that I'm now surprised when I come across  
a computer running Windows. Nearly all the people we fund at Y  
Combinator use Apple laptops. It was the same in the audience at   
startup  
school. All the computer people use Macs or Linux now. Windows is for  
grandmas, like Macs used to be in the 90s. So not only does the  
desktop no longer matter, no one who cares about computers uses  
Microsoft's anyway.And of course Apple has Microsoft on the run in music  
too, with TV and phones on the way.I'm glad Microsoft is dead. They were like Nero or   
Commodus—evil  
in the way only inherited power can make you. Because remember,  
the Microsoft monopoly didn't begin with Microsoft. They got it  
from IBM. The software business was overhung by a  
monopoly from about the mid-1950s to about 2005. For practically  
its whole existence, that is. One of the reasons "Web 2.0" has  
such an air of euphoria about it is the feeling, conscious or not,  
that this era of monopoly may finally be over.Of course, as a hacker I can't help thinking about how something  
broken could be fixed. Is there some way Microsoft could come back?  
In principle, yes. To see how, envision two things: (a) the amount  
of cash Microsoft now has on hand, and (b) Larry and Sergey making  
the rounds of all the search engines ten years ago trying to sell  
the idea for Google for a million dollars, and being turned down  
by everyone.The surprising fact is, brilliant hackers—dangerously brilliant  
hackers—can be had very cheaply, by the standards of a  
company as rich as Microsoft. They can't   
hire smart people anymore,  
but they could buy as many as they wanted for only an order of magnitude   
more. So if they wanted to be a contender  
again, this is how they could do it:  
  
 Buy all the good "Web 2.0" startups. They could get substantially  
 all of them for less than they'd have to pay for Facebook. Put them all in a building in Silicon Valley, surrounded by  
 lead shielding to protect them from any contact with Redmond.  
  
I feel safe suggesting this, because they'd never do it. Microsoft's  
biggest weakness is that they still don't realize how much they  
suck. They still think they can write software in house. Maybe they  
can, by the standards of the desktop world. But that world ended  
a few years ago.I already know what the reaction to this essay will be. Half the  
readers will say that Microsoft is still an enormously profitable  
company, and that I should be more  
careful about drawing conclusions based on what a few people think  
in our insular little "Web 2.0" bubble. The other half, the younger  
half, will complain that this is old news.See also: Microsoft is Dead: the Cliffs NotesNotes[1]  
It doesn't take a conscious effort to make software incompatible.  
All you have to do is not work too hard at fixing bugs—which, if  
you're a big company, you produce in copious quantities. The  
situation is analogous to the writing of "literary  
theorists." Most don't try to be obscure; they just don't make an  
effort to be clear. It wouldn't pay.[2]  
In part because Steve Jobs got pushed out by John Sculley in  
a way that's rare among technology companies. If Apple's board  
hadn't made that blunder, they wouldn't have had to bounce back.Portuguese TranslationSimplified Chinese TranslationKorean Translation

# Why to Not Not Start a Startup

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
March 2007(This essay is derived from talks at the 2007   
Startup School and the Berkeley CSUA.)We've now been doing Y Combinator long enough to have some data  
about success rates. Our first batch, in the summer of 2005, had  
eight startups in it. Of those eight, it now looks as if at least  
four succeeded. Three have been acquired:   
Reddit was a merger of  
two, Reddit and Infogami, and a third was acquired that we can't  
talk about yet. Another from that batch was   
Loopt, which is doing  
so well they could probably be acquired in about ten minutes if  
they wanted to.So about half the founders from that first summer, less than two  
years ago, are now rich, at least by their standards. (One thing  
you learn when you get rich is that there are many degrees of it.)I'm not ready to predict our success rate will stay as high as 50%.  
That first batch could have been an anomaly. But we should be able  
to do better than the oft-quoted (and probably made  
up) standard figure of 10%. I'd feel safe aiming at 25%.Even the founders who fail don't seem to have such a bad time. Of  
those first eight startups, three are now probably dead. In two  
cases the founders just went on to do other things at the end of  
the summer. I don't think they were traumatized by the experience.  
The closest to a traumatic failure was Kiko, whose founders kept  
working on their startup for a whole year before being squashed by  
Google Calendar. But they ended up happy. They sold their software  
on eBay for a quarter of a million dollars. After they paid back  
their angel investors, they had about a year's salary each.   
[1]  
Then they immediately went on to start a new and much more exciting  
startup, Justin.TV.So here is an even more striking statistic: 0% of that first batch  
had a terrible experience. They had ups and downs, like every  
startup, but I don't think any would have traded it for a job in a  
cubicle. And that statistic is probably not an anomaly. Whatever  
our long-term success rate ends up being, I think the rate of people  
who wish they'd gotten a regular job will stay close to 0%.The big mystery to me is: why don't more people start startups? If  
nearly everyone who does it prefers it to a regular job, and a  
significant percentage get rich, why doesn't everyone want to do  
this? A lot of people think we get thousands of applications for  
each funding cycle. In fact we usually only get several hundred.  
Why don't more people apply? And while it must seem to anyone  
watching this world that startups are popping up like crazy, the  
number is small compared to the number of people with the necessary  
skills. The great majority of programmers still go straight from  
college to cubicle, and stay there.It seems like people are not acting in their own interest. What's  
going on? Well, I can answer that. Because of Y Combinator's  
position at the very start of the venture funding process, we're  
probably the world's leading experts on the psychology of people  
who aren't sure if they want to start a company.There's nothing wrong with being unsure. If you're a hacker thinking  
about starting a startup and hesitating before taking the leap,  
you're part of a grand tradition. Larry and Sergey seem to have  
felt the same before they started Google, and so did Jerry and Filo  
before they started Yahoo. In fact, I'd guess the most successful  
startups are the ones started by uncertain hackers rather than  
gung-ho business guys.We have some evidence to support this. Several of the most successful  
startups we've funded told us later that they only decided to apply  
at the last moment. Some decided only hours before the deadline.The way to deal with uncertainty is to analyze it into components.  
Most people who are reluctant to do something have about eight  
different reasons mixed together in their heads, and don't know  
themselves which are biggest. Some will be justified and some  
bogus, but unless you know the relative proportion of each, you  
don't know whether your overall uncertainty is mostly justified or  
mostly bogus.So I'm going to list all the components of people's reluctance to  
start startups, and explain which are real. Then would-be founders  
can use this as a checklist to examine their own feelings.I admit my goal is to increase your self-confidence. But there are  
two things different here from the usual confidence-building exercise.  
One is that I'm motivated to be honest. Most people in the  
confidence-building business have already achieved their goal when  
you buy the book or pay to attend the seminar where they tell you  
how great you are. Whereas if I encourage people to start startups  
who shouldn't, I make my own life worse. If I encourage too many  
people to apply to Y Combinator, it just means more work for me,  
because I have to read all the applications.The other thing that's going to be different is my approach. Instead  
of being positive, I'm going to be negative. Instead of telling  
you "come on, you can do it" I'm going to consider all the reasons  
you aren't doing it, and show why most (but not all) should be  
ignored. We'll start with the one everyone's born with.1. Too youngA lot of people think they're too young to start a startup. Many  
are right. The median age worldwide is about 27, so probably a  
third of the population can truthfully say they're too young.What's too young? One of our goals with Y Combinator was to discover  
the lower bound on the age of startup founders. It always seemed  
to us that investors were too conservative here—that they wanted  
to fund professors, when really they should be funding grad students  
or even undergrads.The main thing we've discovered from pushing the edge of this  
envelope is not where the edge is, but how fuzzy it is. The outer  
limit may be as low as 16. We don't look beyond 18 because people  
younger than that can't legally enter into contracts. But the most  
successful founder we've funded so far, Sam Altman, was 19 at the  
time.Sam Altman, however, is an outlying data point. When he was 19,  
he seemed like he had a 40 year old inside him. There are other  
19 year olds who are 12 inside.There's a reason we have a distinct word "adult" for people over a  
certain age. There is a threshold you cross. It's conventionally  
fixed at 21, but different people cross it at greatly varying ages.  
You're old enough to start a startup if you've crossed this threshold,  
whatever your age.How do you tell? There are a couple tests adults use. I realized  
these tests existed after meeting Sam Altman, actually. I noticed  
that I felt like I was talking to someone much older. Afterward I  
wondered, what am I even measuring? What made him seem older?One test adults use is whether you still have the kid flake reflex.  
When you're a little kid and you're asked to do something hard, you  
can cry and say "I can't do it" and the adults will probably let  
you off. As a kid there's a magic button you can press by saying  
"I'm just a kid" that will get you out of most difficult situations.  
Whereas adults, by definition, are not allowed to flake. They still  
do, of course, but when they do they're ruthlessly pruned.The other way to tell an adult is by how they react to a challenge.  
Someone who's not yet an adult will tend to respond to a challenge  
from an adult in a way that acknowledges their dominance. If an  
adult says "that's a stupid idea," a kid will either crawl away  
with his tail between his legs, or rebel. But rebelling presumes  
inferiority as much as submission. The adult response to  
"that's a stupid idea," is simply to look the other person in the  
eye and say "Really? Why do you think so?"There are a lot of adults who still react childishly to challenges,  
of course. What you don't often find are kids who react to challenges  
like adults. When you do, you've found an adult, whatever their  
age.2. Too inexperiencedI once wrote that startup founders should be at least 23, and that  
people should work for another company for a few years before  
starting their own. I no longer believe that, and what changed my  
mind is the example of the startups we've funded.I still think 23 is a better age than 21. But the best way to get  
experience if you're 21 is to start a startup. So, paradoxically,  
if you're too inexperienced to start a startup, what you should do  
is start one. That's a way more efficient cure for inexperience  
than a normal job. In fact, getting a normal job may actually make  
you less able to start a startup, by turning you into a tame animal  
who thinks he needs an office to work in and a product manager to  
tell him what software to write.What really convinced me of this was the Kikos. They started a  
startup right out of college. Their inexperience caused them to  
make a lot of mistakes. But by the time we funded their second  
startup, a year later, they had become extremely formidable. They  
were certainly not tame animals. And there is no way they'd have  
grown so much if they'd spent that year working at Microsoft, or  
even Google. They'd still have been diffident junior programmers.So now I'd advise people to go ahead and start startups right out  
of college. There's no better time to take risks than when you're  
young. Sure, you'll probably fail. But even failure will get you  
to the ultimate goal faster than getting a job.It worries me a bit to be saying this, because in effect we're  
advising people to educate themselves by failing at our expense,  
but it's the truth.3. Not determined enoughYou need a lot of determination to succeed as a startup founder.  
It's probably the single best predictor of success.Some people may not be determined enough to make it. It's  
hard for me to say for sure, because I'm so determined that I can't  
imagine what's going on in the heads of people who aren't. But I  
know they exist.Most hackers probably underestimate their determination. I've seen  
a lot become visibly more determined as they get used to running a   
startup. I can think of  
several we've funded who would have been delighted at first to be  
bought for $2 million, but are now set on world domination.How can you tell if you're determined enough, when Larry and Sergey  
themselves were unsure at first about starting a company? I'm  
guessing here, but I'd say the test is whether you're sufficiently  
driven to work on your own projects. Though they may have been  
unsure whether they wanted to start a company, it doesn't seem as  
if Larry and Sergey were meek little research assistants, obediently  
doing their advisors' bidding. They started projects of their own.  
4. Not smart enoughYou may need to be moderately smart to succeed as a startup founder.  
But if you're worried about this, you're probably mistaken. If  
you're smart enough to worry that you might not be smart enough to  
start a startup, you probably are.And in any case, starting a startup just doesn't require that much  
intelligence. Some startups do. You have to be good at math to  
write Mathematica. But most companies do more mundane stuff where  
the decisive factor is effort, not brains. Silicon Valley can warp  
your perspective on this, because there's a cult of smartness here.  
People who aren't smart at least try to act that way. But if you  
think it takes a lot of intelligence to get rich, try spending a  
couple days in some of the fancier bits of New York or LA.If you don't think you're smart enough to start a startup doing  
something technically difficult, just write enterprise software.  
Enterprise software companies aren't technology companies, they're  
sales companies, and sales depends mostly on effort.5. Know nothing about businessThis is another variable whose coefficient should be zero. You  
don't need to know anything about business to start a startup. The  
initial focus should be the product. All you need to know in this  
phase is how to build things people want. If you succeed, you'll  
have to think about how to make money from it. But this is so easy  
you can pick it up on the fly.I get a fair amount of flak for telling founders just to make  
something great and not worry too much about making money. And yet  
all the empirical evidence points that way: pretty much 100% of  
startups that make something popular manage to make money from it.  
And acquirers tell me privately that revenue is not what they buy  
startups for, but their strategic value. Which means, because they  
made something people want. Acquirers know the rule holds for them  
too: if users love you, you can always make money from that somehow,  
and if they don't, the cleverest business model in the world won't  
save you.So why do so many people argue with me? I think one reason is that  
they hate the idea that a bunch of twenty year olds could get rich  
from building something cool that doesn't make any money. They  
just don't want that to be possible. But how possible it is doesn't  
depend on how much they want it to be.For a while it annoyed me to hear myself described as some kind of  
irresponsible pied piper, leading impressionable young hackers down  
the road to ruin. But now I realize this kind of controversy is a  
sign of a good idea.The most valuable truths are the ones most people don't believe.  
They're like undervalued stocks. If you start with them, you'll  
have the whole field to yourself. So when you find an idea you  
know is good but most people disagree with, you should not  
merely ignore their objections, but push aggressively in that  
direction. In this case, that means you should seek out ideas that  
would be popular but seem hard to make money from.We'll bet a seed round you can't make something popular that we  
can't figure out how to make money from.6. No cofounderNot having a cofounder is a real problem. A startup is too much  
for one person to bear. And though we differ from other investors  
on a lot of questions, we all agree on this. All investors, without  
exception, are more likely to fund you with a cofounder than without.We've funded two single founders, but in both cases we suggested  
their first priority should be to find a cofounder. Both did. But  
we'd have preferred them to have cofounders before they applied.  
It's not super hard to get a cofounder for a project that's just  
been funded, and we'd rather have cofounders committed enough to  
sign up for something super hard.If you don't have a cofounder, what should you do? Get one. It's  
more important than anything else. If there's no one where you  
live who wants to start a startup with you, move where there are  
people who do. If no one wants to work with you on your current  
idea, switch to an idea people want to work on.If you're still in school, you're surrounded by potential cofounders.  
A few years out it gets harder to find them. Not only do you have  
a smaller pool to draw from, but most already have jobs, and perhaps  
even families to support. So if you had friends in college you  
used to scheme about startups with, stay in touch with them as well  
as you can. That may help keep the dream alive.It's possible you could meet a cofounder through something like a  
user's group or a conference. But I wouldn't be too optimistic.  
You need to work with someone to know whether you want them as a  
cofounder.   
[2]The real lesson to draw from this is not how to find a cofounder,  
but that you should start startups when you're young and there are  
lots of them around.7. No ideaIn a sense, it's not a problem if you don't have a good idea, because  
most startups change their idea anyway. In the average Y Combinator  
startup, I'd guess 70% of the idea is new at the end of the  
first three months. Sometimes it's 100%.In fact, we're so sure the founders are more important than the  
initial idea that we're going to try something new this funding  
cycle. We're going to let people apply with no idea at all. If you  
want, you can answer the question on the application form that asks  
what you're going to do with "We have no idea." If you seem really  
good we'll accept you anyway. We're confident we can sit down with  
you and cook up some promising project.Really this just codifies what we do already. We put little weight  
on the idea. We ask mainly out of politeness. The kind of question  
on the application form that we really care about is the one where  
we ask what cool things you've made. If what you've made is version  
one of a promising startup, so much the better, but the main thing  
we care about is whether you're good at making things. Being lead  
developer of a popular open source project counts almost as much.That solves the problem if you get funded by Y Combinator. What  
about in the general case? Because in another sense, it is a problem  
if you don't have an idea. If you start a startup with no idea,  
what do you do next?So here's the brief recipe for getting startup ideas. Find something  
that's missing in your own life, and supply that need—no matter  
how specific to you it seems. Steve Wozniak built himself a computer;  
who knew so many other people would want them? A need that's narrow  
but genuine is a better starting point than one that's broad but  
hypothetical. So even if the problem is simply that you don't have  
a date on Saturday night, if you can think of a way to fix that by  
writing software, you're onto something, because a lot of other  
people have the same problem.8. No room for more startupsA lot of people look at the ever-increasing number of startups and  
think "this can't continue." Implicit in their thinking is a  
fallacy: that there is some limit on the number of startups there  
could be. But this is false. No one claims there's any limit on  
the number of people who can work for salary at 1000-person companies.  
Why should there be any limit on the number who can work for equity  
at 5-person companies?   
[3]Nearly everyone who works is satisfying some kind of need. Breaking  
up companies into smaller units doesn't make those needs go away.  
Existing needs would probably get satisfied more efficiently by a  
network of startups than by a few giant, hierarchical organizations,  
but I don't think that would mean less opportunity, because satisfying  
current needs would lead to more. Certainly this tends to be the  
case in individuals. Nor is there anything wrong with that. We  
take for granted things that medieval kings would have considered  
effeminate luxuries, like whole buildings heated to spring temperatures  
year round. And if things go well, our descendants will take for  
granted things we would consider shockingly luxurious. There is  
no absolute standard for material wealth. Health care is a component  
of it, and that alone is a black hole. For the foreseeable future,  
people will want ever more material wealth, so there is no limit  
to the amount of work available for companies, and for startups in  
particular.Usually the limited-room fallacy is not expressed directly. Usually  
it's implicit in statements like "there are only so many startups  
Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo can buy." Maybe, though the list of  
acquirers is a lot longer than that. And whatever you think of  
other acquirers, Google is not stupid. The reason big companies  
buy startups is that they've created something valuable. And why  
should there be any limit to the number of valuable startups companies  
can acquire, any more than there is a limit to the amount of wealth  
individual people want? Maybe there would be practical limits on  
the number of startups any one acquirer could assimilate, but if  
there is value to be had, in the form of upside that founders are  
willing to forgo in return for an immediate payment, acquirers will  
evolve to consume it. Markets are pretty smart that way.9. Family to supportThis one is real. I wouldn't advise anyone with a family to start  
a startup. I'm not saying it's a bad idea, just that I don't want  
to take responsibility for advising it. I'm willing to take  
responsibility for telling 22 year olds to start startups. So what  
if they fail? They'll learn a lot, and that job at Microsoft will  
still be waiting for them if they need it. But I'm not prepared  
to cross moms.What you can do, if you have a family and want to start a startup,  
is start a consulting business you can then gradually turn into a  
product business. Empirically the chances of pulling that off seem  
very small. You're never going to produce Google this way. But at  
least you'll never be without an income.Another way to decrease the risk is to join an existing startup  
instead of starting your own. Being one of the first employees of  
a startup is a lot like being a founder, in both the good ways and  
the bad. You'll be roughly 1/n^2 founder, where n is your employee  
number.As with the question of cofounders, the real lesson here is to start  
startups when you're young.10. Independently wealthyThis is my excuse for not starting a startup. Startups are stressful.  
Why do it if you don't need the money? For every "serial entrepreneur,"  
there are probably twenty sane ones who think "Start another  
company? Are you crazy?"I've come close to starting new startups a couple times, but I  
always pull back because I don't want four years of my life to be  
consumed by random schleps. I know this business well enough to  
know you can't do it half-heartedly. What makes a good startup  
founder so dangerous is his willingness to endure infinite schleps.There is a bit of a problem with retirement, though. Like a lot  
of people, I like to work. And one of the many weird little problems  
you discover when you get rich is that a lot of the interesting  
people you'd like to work with are not rich. They need to work at  
something that pays the bills. Which means if you want to have  
them as colleagues, you have to work at something that pays the  
bills too, even though you don't need to. I think this is what  
drives a lot of serial entrepreneurs, actually.That's why I love working on Y Combinator so much. It's an excuse  
to work on something interesting with people I like.11. Not ready for commitmentThis was my reason for not starting a startup for most of my twenties.  
Like a lot of people that age, I valued freedom most of all. I was  
reluctant to do anything that required a commitment of more than a  
few months. Nor would I have wanted to do anything that completely  
took over my life the way a startup does. And that's fine. If you  
want to spend your time travelling around, or playing in a band,  
or whatever, that's a perfectly legitimate reason not to start a  
company.If you start a startup that succeeds, it's going to consume at least  
three or four years. (If it fails, you'll be done a lot quicker.)  
So you shouldn't do it if you're not ready for commitments on that  
scale. Be aware, though, that if you get a regular job, you'll  
probably end up working there for as long as a startup would take,  
and you'll find you have much less spare time than you might expect.  
So if you're ready to clip on that ID badge and go to that orientation  
session, you may also be ready to start that startup.12. Need for structureI'm told there are people who need structure in their lives. This  
seems to be a nice way of saying they need someone to tell them  
what to do. I believe such people exist. There's plenty of empirical  
evidence: armies, religious cults, and so on. They may even be the  
majority.If you're one of these people, you probably shouldn't start a  
startup. In fact, you probably shouldn't even go to work for one.  
In a good startup, you don't get told what to do very much. There  
may be one person whose job title is CEO, but till the company has  
about twelve people no one should be telling anyone what to do.  
That's too inefficient. Each person should just do what they need  
to without anyone telling them.If that sounds like a recipe for chaos, think about a soccer team.  
Eleven people manage to work together in quite complicated ways,  
and yet only in occasional emergencies does anyone tell anyone else  
what to do. A reporter once asked David Beckham if there were any  
language problems at Real Madrid, since the players were from about  
eight different countries. He said it was never an issue, because  
everyone was so good they never had to talk. They all just did the  
right thing.How do you tell if you're independent-minded enough to start a  
startup? If you'd bristle at the suggestion that you aren't, then  
you probably are.13. Fear of uncertaintyPerhaps some people are deterred from starting startups because  
they don't like the uncertainty. If you go to work for Microsoft,  
you can predict fairly accurately what the next few years will be  
like—all too accurately, in fact. If you start a startup, anything  
might happen.Well, if you're troubled by uncertainty, I can solve that problem  
for you: if you start a startup, it will probably fail. Seriously,   
though, this is not a bad way to think  
about the whole experience. Hope for the best, but expect the  
worst. In the worst case, it will at least be interesting. In the  
best case you might get rich.No one will blame you if the startup tanks, so long as you made a  
serious effort. There may once have been a time when employers  
would regard that as a mark against you, but they wouldn't now. I  
asked managers at big companies, and they all said they'd prefer  
to hire someone who'd tried to start a startup and failed over  
someone who'd spent the same time working at a big company.Nor will investors hold it against you, as long as you didn't fail  
out of laziness or incurable stupidity. I'm told there's a lot  
of stigma attached to failing in other places—in Europe, for  
example. Not here. In America, companies, like practically  
everything else, are disposable.14. Don't realize what you're avoidingOne reason people who've been out in the world for a year or two  
make better founders than people straight from college is that they  
know what they're avoiding. If their startup fails, they'll have  
to get a job, and they know how much jobs suck.If you've had summer jobs in college, you may think you know what  
jobs are like, but you probably don't. Summer jobs at technology  
companies are not real jobs. If you get a summer job as a waiter,  
that's a real job. Then you have to carry your weight. But software  
companies don't hire students for the summer as a source of cheap  
labor. They do it in the hope of recruiting them when they graduate.  
So while they're happy if you produce, they don't expect you to.That will change if you get a real job after you graduate. Then  
you'll have to earn your keep. And since most of what big companies  
do is boring, you're going to have to work on boring stuff. Easy,  
compared to college, but boring. At first it may seem cool to get  
paid for doing easy stuff, after paying to do hard stuff in college.  
But that wears off after a few months. Eventually it gets demoralizing  
to work on dumb stuff, even if it's easy and you get paid a lot.And that's not the worst of it. The thing that really sucks about  
having a regular job is the expectation that you're supposed to be  
there at certain times. Even Google is afflicted with this,  
apparently. And what this means, as everyone who's had a regular  
job can tell you, is that there are going to be times when you have  
absolutely no desire to work on anything, and you're going to have  
to go to work anyway and sit in front of your screen and pretend  
to. To someone who likes work, as most good hackers do, this is  
torture.In a startup, you skip all that. There's no concept of office hours  
in most startups. Work and life just get mixed together. But the  
good thing about that is that no one minds if you have a life at  
work. In a startup you can do whatever you want most of the time.  
If you're a founder, what you want to do most of the time is work.  
But you never have to pretend to.If you took a nap in your office in a big company, it would seem  
unprofessional. But if you're starting a startup and you fall  
asleep in the middle of the day, your cofounders will just assume  
you were tired.15. Parents want you to be a doctorA significant number of would-be startup founders are probably  
dissuaded from doing it by their parents. I'm not going to say you  
shouldn't listen to them. Families are entitled to their own  
traditions, and who am I to argue with them? But I will give you  
a couple reasons why a safe career might not be what your parents  
really want for you.One is that parents tend to be more conservative for their kids  
than they would be for themselves. This is actually a rational  
response to their situation. Parents end up sharing more of their  
kids' ill fortune than good fortune. Most parents don't mind this;  
it's part of the job; but it does tend to make them excessively  
conservative. And erring on the side of conservatism is still  
erring. In almost everything, reward is proportionate to risk. So  
by protecting their kids from risk, parents are, without realizing  
it, also protecting them from rewards. If they saw that, they'd  
want you to take more risks.The other reason parents may be mistaken is that, like generals,  
they're always fighting the last war. If they want you to be a  
doctor, odds are it's not just because they want you to help the  
sick, but also because it's a prestigious and lucrative career.  
[4]  
But not so lucrative or prestigious as it was when their  
opinions were formed. When I was a kid in the seventies, a doctor  
was the thing to be. There was a sort of golden triangle involving  
doctors, Mercedes 450SLs, and tennis. All three vertices now seem  
pretty dated.The parents who want you to be a doctor may simply not realize how  
much things have changed. Would they be that unhappy if you were  
Steve Jobs instead? So I think the way to deal with your parents'  
opinions about what you should do is to treat them like feature  
requests. Even if your only goal is to please them, the way to do  
that is not simply to give them what they ask for. Instead think  
about why they're asking for something, and see if there's a better  
way to give them what they need.16. A job is the defaultThis leads us to the last and probably most powerful reason people  
get regular jobs: it's the default thing to do. Defaults are  
enormously powerful, precisely because they operate without any  
conscious choice.To almost everyone except criminals, it seems an axiom that if you  
need money, you should get a job. Actually this tradition is not  
much more than a hundred years old. Before that, the default way  
to make a living was by farming. It's a bad plan to treat something  
only a hundred years old as an axiom. By historical standards,  
that's something that's changing pretty rapidly.We may be seeing another such change right now. I've read a lot  
of economic history, and I understand the startup world pretty well,  
and it now seems to me fairly likely that we're seeing the beginning  
of a change like the one from farming to manufacturing.And you know what? If you'd been around when that change began  
(around 1000 in Europe) it would have seemed to nearly everyone  
that running off to the city to make your fortune was a crazy thing  
to do. Though serfs were in principle forbidden to leave their  
manors, it can't have been that hard to run away to a city. There  
were no guards patrolling the perimeter of the village. What  
prevented most serfs from leaving was that it seemed insanely risky.  
Leave one's plot of land? Leave the people you'd spent your whole  
life with, to live in a giant city of three or four thousand complete  
strangers? How would you live? How would you get food, if you  
didn't grow it?Frightening as it seemed to them, it's now the default with us to  
live by our wits. So if it seems risky to you to start a startup,  
think how risky it once seemed to your ancestors to live as we do  
now. Oddly enough, the people who know this best are the very ones  
trying to get you to stick to the old model. How can Larry and  
Sergey say you should come work as their employee, when they didn't  
get jobs themselves?Now we look back on medieval peasants and wonder how they stood it.  
How grim it must have been to till the same fields your whole life  
with no hope of anything better, under the thumb of lords and priests  
you had to give all your surplus to and acknowledge as your masters.  
I wouldn't be surprised if one day people look back on what we  
consider a normal job in the same way. How grim it would be to  
commute every day to a cubicle in some soulless office complex, and  
be told what to do by someone you had to acknowledge as a boss—someone   
who could call you into their office and say "take a seat,"  
and you'd sit! Imagine having to ask permission to release  
software to users. Imagine being sad on Sunday afternoons because  
the weekend was almost over, and tomorrow you'd have to get up and  
go to work. How did they stand it?It's exciting to think we may be on the cusp of another shift like  
the one from farming to manufacturing. That's why I care about  
startups. Startups aren't interesting just because they're a way  
to make a lot of money. I couldn't care less about other ways to  
do that, like speculating in securities. At most those are interesting  
the way puzzles are. There's more going on with startups. They  
may represent one of those rare, historic shifts in the way   
wealth is created.That's ultimately what drives us to work on Y Combinator. We want  
to make money, if only so we don't have to stop doing it, but that's  
not the main goal. There have only been a handful of these great  
economic shifts in human history. It would be an amazing hack to  
make one happen faster.  
Notes[1]  
The only people who lost were us. The angels had convertible  
debt, so they had first claim on the proceeds of the auction. Y  
Combinator only got 38 cents on the dollar.[2]  
The best kind of organization for that might be an open source  
project, but those don't involve a lot of face to face meetings.  
Maybe it would be worth starting one that did.[3]  
There need to be some number of big companies to acquire the  
startups, so the number of big companies couldn't decrease to zero.[4]  
Thought experiment: If doctors did the same work, but as  
impoverished outcasts, which parents would still want their kids  
to be doctors?Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and Robert  
Morris for reading drafts of this, to the founders of Zenter  
for letting me use their web-based PowerPoint killer even though   
it isn't launched yet, and to Ming-Hay Luk  
of the Berkeley CSUA for inviting me to speak.  
Comment on this essay.Russian TranslationJapanese TranslationKorean Translation

# Is It Worth Being Wise?

February 2007A few days ago I finally figured out something I've wondered about  
for 25 years: the relationship between wisdom and intelligence.  
Anyone can see they're not the same by the number of people who are  
smart, but not very wise. And yet intelligence and wisdom do seem  
related. How?What is wisdom? I'd say it's knowing what to do in a lot of  
situations. I'm not trying to make a deep point here about the  
true nature of wisdom, just to figure out how we use the word. A  
wise person is someone who usually knows the right thing to do.And yet isn't being smart also knowing what to do in certain  
situations? For example, knowing what to do when the teacher tells  
your elementary school class to add all the numbers from 1 to 100?  
[1]Some say wisdom and intelligence apply to different types of  
problems—wisdom to human problems and intelligence to abstract  
ones. But that isn't true. Some wisdom has nothing to do with  
people: for example, the wisdom of the engineer who knows certain  
structures are less prone to failure than others. And certainly  
smart people can find clever solutions to human problems as well  
as abstract ones.   
[2]Another popular explanation is that wisdom comes from experience  
while intelligence is innate. But people are not simply wise in  
proportion to how much experience they have. Other things must  
contribute to wisdom besides experience, and some may be innate: a  
reflective disposition, for example.Neither of the conventional explanations of the difference between  
wisdom and intelligence stands up to scrutiny. So what is the  
difference? If we look at how people use the words "wise" and  
"smart," what they seem to mean is different shapes of performance.Curve"Wise" and "smart" are both ways of saying someone knows what to  
do. The difference is that "wise" means one has a high average  
outcome across all situations, and "smart" means one does spectacularly  
well in a few. That is, if you had a graph in which the x axis  
represented situations and the y axis the outcome, the graph of the  
wise person would be high overall, and the graph of the smart person  
would have high peaks.The distinction is similar to the rule that one should judge talent  
at its best and character at its worst. Except you judge intelligence  
at its best, and wisdom by its average. That's how the two are  
related: they're the two different senses in which the same curve  
can be high.So a wise person knows what to do in most situations, while a smart  
person knows what to do in situations where few others could. We  
need to add one more qualification: we should ignore cases where  
someone knows what to do because they have inside information.   
[3]  
But aside from that, I don't think we can get much more specific  
without starting to be mistaken.Nor do we need to. Simple as it is, this explanation predicts, or  
at least accords with, both of the conventional stories about the  
distinction between wisdom and intelligence. Human problems are  
the most common type, so being good at solving those is key in  
achieving a high average outcome. And it seems natural that a  
high average outcome depends mostly on experience, but that dramatic  
peaks can only be achieved by people with certain rare, innate  
qualities; nearly anyone can learn to be a good swimmer, but to be  
an Olympic swimmer you need a certain body type.This explanation also suggests why wisdom is such an elusive concept:  
there's no such thing. "Wise" means something—that one is  
on average good at making the right choice. But giving the name  
"wisdom" to the supposed quality that enables one to do that doesn't  
mean such a thing exists. To the extent "wisdom" means anything,  
it refers to a grab-bag of qualities as various as self-discipline,  
experience, and empathy.   
[4]Likewise, though "intelligent" means something, we're asking for  
trouble if we insist on looking for a single thing called "intelligence."  
And whatever its components, they're not all innate. We use the  
word "intelligent" as an indication of ability: a smart person can  
grasp things few others could. It does seem likely there's some  
inborn predisposition to intelligence (and wisdom too), but this  
predisposition is not itself intelligence.One reason we tend to think of intelligence as inborn is that people  
trying to measure it have concentrated on the aspects of it that  
are most measurable. A quality that's inborn will obviously be  
more convenient to work with than one that's influenced by experience,  
and thus might vary in the course of a study. The problem comes  
when we drag the word "intelligence" over onto what they're measuring.  
If they're measuring something inborn, they can't be measuring  
intelligence. Three year olds aren't smart. When we describe one  
as smart, it's shorthand for "smarter than other three year olds."SplitPerhaps it's a technicality to point out that a predisposition to  
intelligence is not the same as intelligence. But it's an important  
technicality, because it reminds us that we can become smarter,  
just as we can become wiser.The alarming thing is that we may have to choose between the two.If wisdom and intelligence are the average and peaks of the same  
curve, then they converge as the number of points on the curve  
decreases. If there's just one point, they're identical: the average  
and maximum are the same. But as the number of points increases,  
wisdom and intelligence diverge. And historically the number of  
points on the curve seems to have been increasing: our ability is  
tested in an ever wider range of situations.In the time of Confucius and Socrates, people seem to have regarded  
wisdom, learning, and intelligence as more closely related than we  
do. Distinguishing between "wise" and "smart" is a modern habit.  
[5]  
And the reason we do is that they've been diverging. As knowledge  
gets more specialized, there are more points on the curve, and the  
distinction between the spikes and the average becomes sharper,  
like a digital image rendered with more pixels.One consequence is that some old recipes may have become obsolete.  
At the very least we have to go back and figure out if they were  
really recipes for wisdom or intelligence. But the really striking  
change, as intelligence and wisdom drift apart, is that we may have  
to decide which we prefer. We may not be able to optimize for both  
simultaneously.Society seems to have voted for intelligence. We no longer admire  
the sage—not the way people did two thousand years ago. Now  
we admire the genius. Because in fact the distinction we began  
with has a rather brutal converse: just as you can be smart without  
being very wise, you can be wise without being very smart. That  
doesn't sound especially admirable. That gets you James Bond, who  
knows what to do in a lot of situations, but has to rely on Q for  
the ones involving math.Intelligence and wisdom are obviously not mutually exclusive. In  
fact, a high average may help support high peaks. But there are  
reasons to believe that at some point you have to choose between  
them. One is the example of very smart people, who are so often  
unwise that in popular culture this now seems to be regarded as the  
rule rather than the exception. Perhaps the absent-minded professor  
is wise in his way, or wiser than he seems, but he's not wise in  
the way Confucius or Socrates wanted people to be.   
[6]NewFor both Confucius and Socrates, wisdom, virtue, and happiness were  
necessarily related. The wise man was someone who knew what the  
right choice was and always made it; to be the right choice, it had  
to be morally right; he was therefore always happy, knowing he'd  
done the best he could. I can't think of many ancient philosophers  
who would have disagreed with that, so far as it goes."The superior man is always happy; the small man sad," said Confucius.  
[7]Whereas a few years ago I read an interview with a mathematician  
who said that most nights he went to bed discontented, feeling he  
hadn't made enough progress.   
[8]  
The Chinese and Greek words we  
translate as "happy" didn't mean exactly what we do by it, but  
there's enough overlap that this remark contradicts them.Is the mathematician a small man because he's discontented? No;  
he's just doing a kind of work that wasn't very common in Confucius's  
day.Human knowledge seems to grow fractally. Time after time, something  
that seemed a small and uninteresting area—experimental error,  
even—turns out, when examined up close, to have as much in  
it as all knowledge up to that point. Several of the fractal buds  
that have exploded since ancient times involve inventing and  
discovering new things. Math, for example, used to be something a  
handful of people did part-time. Now it's the career of thousands.  
And in work that involves making new things, some old rules don't  
apply.Recently I've spent some time advising people, and there I find the  
ancient rule still works: try to understand the situation as well  
as you can, give the best advice you can based on your experience,  
and then don't worry about it, knowing you did all you could. But  
I don't have anything like this serenity when I'm writing an essay.  
Then I'm worried. What if I run out of ideas? And when I'm writing,  
four nights out of five I go to bed discontented, feeling I didn't  
get enough done.Advising people and writing are fundamentally different types of  
work. When people come to you with a problem and you have to figure  
out the right thing to do, you don't (usually) have to invent  
anything. You just weigh the alternatives and try to judge which  
is the prudent choice. But prudence can't tell me what sentence  
to write next. The search space is too big.Someone like a judge or a military officer can in much of his work  
be guided by duty, but duty is no guide in making things. Makers  
depend on something more precarious: inspiration. And like most  
people who lead a precarious existence, they tend to be worried,  
not contented. In that respect they're more like the small man of  
Confucius's day, always one bad harvest (or ruler) away from  
starvation. Except instead of being at the mercy of weather and  
officials, they're at the mercy of their own imagination.LimitsTo me it was a relief just to realize it might be ok to be discontented.  
The idea that a successful person should be happy has thousands of  
years of momentum behind it. If I was any good, why didn't I have  
the easy confidence winners are supposed to have? But that, I now  
believe, is like a runner asking "If I'm such a good athlete, why  
do I feel so tired?" Good runners still get tired; they just get  
tired at higher speeds.People whose work is to invent or discover things are in the same  
position as the runner. There's no way for them to do the best  
they can, because there's no limit to what they could do. The  
closest you can come is to compare yourself to other people. But  
the better you do, the less this matters. An undergrad who gets  
something published feels like a star. But for someone at the top  
of the field, what's the test of doing well? Runners can at least  
compare themselves to others doing exactly the same thing; if you  
win an Olympic gold medal, you can be fairly content, even if you  
think you could have run a bit faster. But what is a novelist to  
do?Whereas if you're doing the kind of work in which problems are  
presented to you and you have to choose between several alternatives,  
there's an upper bound on your performance: choosing the best every  
time. In ancient societies, nearly all work seems to have been of  
this type. The peasant had to decide whether a garment was worth  
mending, and the king whether or not to invade his neighbor, but  
neither was expected to invent anything. In principle they could  
have; the king could have invented firearms, then invaded his  
neighbor. But in practice innovations were so rare that they weren't  
expected of you, any more than goalkeepers are expected to score  
goals.   
[9]  
In practice, it seemed as if there was a correct decision  
in every situation, and if you made it you'd done your job perfectly,  
just as a goalkeeper who prevents the other team from scoring is  
considered to have played a perfect game.In this world, wisdom seemed paramount.   
[10]  
Even now, most people  
do work in which problems are put before them and they have to  
choose the best alternative. But as knowledge has grown more  
specialized, there are more and more types of work in which people  
have to make up new things, and in which performance is therefore  
unbounded. Intelligence has become increasingly important relative  
to wisdom because there is more room for spikes.RecipesAnother sign we may have to choose between intelligence and wisdom  
is how different their recipes are. Wisdom seems to come largely  
from curing childish qualities, and intelligence largely from  
cultivating them.Recipes for wisdom, particularly ancient ones, tend to have a  
remedial character. To achieve wisdom one must cut away all the  
debris that fills one's head on emergence from childhood, leaving  
only the important stuff. Both self-control and experience have  
this effect: to eliminate the random biases that come from your own  
nature and from the circumstances of your upbringing respectively.  
That's not all wisdom is, but it's a large part of it. Much of  
what's in the sage's head is also in the head of every twelve year  
old. The difference is that in the head of the twelve year old  
it's mixed together with a lot of random junk.The path to intelligence seems to be through working on hard problems.  
You develop intelligence as you might develop muscles, through  
exercise. But there can't be too much compulsion here. No amount  
of discipline can replace genuine curiosity. So cultivating  
intelligence seems to be a matter of identifying some bias in one's  
character—some tendency to be interested in certain types of  
things—and nurturing it. Instead of obliterating your  
idiosyncrasies in an effort to make yourself a neutral vessel for  
the truth, you select one and try to grow it from a seedling into  
a tree.The wise are all much alike in their wisdom, but very smart people  
tend to be smart in distinctive ways.Most of our educational traditions aim at wisdom. So perhaps one  
reason schools work badly is that they're trying to make intelligence  
using recipes for wisdom. Most recipes for wisdom have an element  
of subjection. At the very least, you're supposed to do what the  
teacher says. The more extreme recipes aim to break down your  
individuality the way basic training does. But that's not the route  
to intelligence. Whereas wisdom comes through humility, it may  
actually help, in cultivating intelligence, to have a mistakenly  
high opinion of your abilities, because that encourages you to keep  
working. Ideally till you realize how mistaken you were.(The reason it's hard to learn new skills late in life is not just  
that one's brain is less malleable. Another probably even worse  
obstacle is that one has higher standards.)I realize we're on dangerous ground here. I'm not proposing the  
primary goal of education should be to increase students' "self-esteem."  
That just breeds laziness. And in any case, it doesn't really fool  
the kids, not the smart ones. They can tell at a young age that a  
contest where everyone wins is a fraud.A teacher has to walk a narrow path: you want to encourage kids to  
come up with things on their own, but you can't simply applaud  
everything they produce. You have to be a good audience: appreciative,  
but not too easily impressed. And that's a lot of work. You have  
to have a good enough grasp of kids' capacities at different ages  
to know when to be surprised.That's the opposite of traditional recipes for education. Traditionally  
the student is the audience, not the teacher; the student's job is  
not to invent, but to absorb some prescribed body of material. (The  
use of the term "recitation" for sections in some colleges is a  
fossil of this.) The problem with these old traditions is that  
they're too much influenced by recipes for wisdom.DifferentI deliberately gave this essay a provocative title; of course it's  
worth being wise. But I think it's important to understand the  
relationship between intelligence and wisdom, and particularly what  
seems to be the growing gap between them. That way we can avoid  
applying rules and standards to intelligence that are really meant  
for wisdom. These two senses of "knowing what to do" are more  
different than most people realize. The path to wisdom is through  
discipline, and the path to intelligence through carefully selected  
self-indulgence. Wisdom is universal, and intelligence idiosyncratic.  
And while wisdom yields calmness, intelligence much of the time  
leads to discontentment.That's particularly worth remembering. A physicist friend recently  
told me half his department was on Prozac. Perhaps if we acknowledge  
that some amount of frustration is inevitable in certain kinds  
of work, we can mitigate its effects. Perhaps we can box it up and  
put it away some of the time, instead of letting it flow together  
with everyday sadness to produce what seems an alarmingly large  
pool. At the very least, we can avoid being discontented about  
being discontented.If you feel exhausted, it's not necessarily because there's something  
wrong with you. Maybe you're just running fast.Notes[1]  
Gauss was supposedly asked this when he was 10. Instead of  
laboriously adding together the numbers like the other students,  
he saw that they consisted of 50 pairs that each summed to 101 (100  
+ 1, 99 + 2, etc), and that he could just multiply 101 by 50 to get  
the answer, 5050.[2]  
A variant is that intelligence is the ability to solve problems,  
and wisdom the judgement to know how to use those solutions. But  
while this is certainly an important relationship between wisdom  
and intelligence, it's not the distinction between them. Wisdom  
is useful in solving problems too, and intelligence can help in  
deciding what to do with the solutions.[3]  
In judging both intelligence and wisdom we have to factor out  
some knowledge. People who know the combination of a safe will be  
better at opening it than people who don't, but no one would say  
that was a test of intelligence or wisdom.But knowledge overlaps with wisdom and probably also intelligence.  
A knowledge of human nature is certainly part of wisdom. So where  
do we draw the line?Perhaps the solution is to discount knowledge that at some point  
has a sharp drop in utility. For example, understanding French  
will help you in a large number of situations, but its value drops  
sharply as soon as no one else involved knows French. Whereas the  
value of understanding vanity would decline more gradually.The knowledge whose utility drops sharply is the kind that has  
little relation to other knowledge. This includes mere conventions,  
like languages and safe combinations, and also what we'd call  
"random" facts, like movie stars' birthdays, or how to distinguish  
1956 from 1957 Studebakers.[4]  
People seeking some single thing called "wisdom" have been  
fooled by grammar. Wisdom is just knowing the right thing to do,  
and there are a hundred and one different qualities that help in  
that. Some, like selflessness, might come from meditating in an  
empty room, and others, like a knowledge of human nature, might  
come from going to drunken parties.Perhaps realizing this will help dispel the cloud of semi-sacred  
mystery that surrounds wisdom in so many people's eyes. The mystery  
comes mostly from looking for something that doesn't exist. And  
the reason there have historically been so many different schools  
of thought about how to achieve wisdom is that they've focused on  
different components of it.When I use the word "wisdom" in this essay, I mean no more than  
whatever collection of qualities helps people make the right choice  
in a wide variety of situations.[5]  
Even in English, our sense of the word "intelligence" is  
surprisingly recent. Predecessors like "understanding" seem to  
have had a broader meaning.[6]  
There is of course some uncertainty about how closely the remarks  
attributed to Confucius and Socrates resemble their actual opinions.  
I'm using these names as we use the name "Homer," to mean the  
hypothetical people who said the things attributed to them.[7]  
Analects VII:36, Fung trans.Some translators use "calm" instead of "happy." One source of  
difficulty here is that present-day English speakers have a different  
idea of happiness from many older societies. Every language probably  
has a word meaning "how one feels when things are going well," but  
different cultures react differently when things go well. We react  
like children, with smiles and laughter. But in a more reserved  
society, or in one where life was tougher, the reaction might be a  
quiet contentment.[8]  
It may have been Andrew Wiles, but I'm not sure. If anyone  
remembers such an interview, I'd appreciate hearing from you.[9]  
Confucius claimed proudly that he had never invented  
anything—that he had simply passed on an accurate account of  
ancient traditions. [Analects VII:1] It's hard for us now to  
appreciate how important a duty it must have been in preliterate  
societies to remember and pass on the group's accumulated knowledge.  
Even in Confucius's time it still seems to have been the first duty  
of the scholar.[10]  
The bias toward wisdom in ancient philosophy may be exaggerated  
by the fact that, in both Greece and China, many of the first  
philosophers (including Confucius and Plato) saw themselves as  
teachers of administrators, and so thought disproportionately about  
such matters. The few people who did invent things, like storytellers,  
must have seemed an outlying data point that could be ignored.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Sarah Harlin, Jessica Livingston,  
and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.Polish TranslationFrench TranslationRussian TranslationRussian Translation

# Learning from Founders

January 2007(Foreword to Jessica Livingston's   
Founders at Work.)Apparently sprinters reach their highest speed right out of the  
blocks, and spend the rest of the race slowing down. The winners  
slow down the least. It's that way with most startups too. The  
earliest phase is usually the most productive. That's when they  
have the really big ideas. Imagine what Apple was like when 100%  
of its employees were either Steve Jobs or Steve Wozniak.The striking thing about this phase is that it's completely different  
from most people's idea of what business is like. If you looked  
in people's heads (or stock photo collections) for images representing  
"business," you'd get images of people dressed up in suits, groups  
sitting around conference tables looking serious, Powerpoint  
presentations, people producing thick reports for one another to  
read. Early stage startups are the exact opposite of this. And  
yet they're probably the most productive part of the whole economy.Why the disconnect? I think there's a general principle at work  
here: the less energy people expend on performance, the more they  
expend on appearances to compensate. More often than not the energy  
they expend on seeming impressive makes their actual performance  
worse. A few years ago I read an article in which a car magazine  
modified the "sports" model of some production car to get the fastest  
possible standing quarter mile. You know how they did it? They  
cut off all the crap the manufacturer had bolted onto the car to  
make it look fast.Business is broken the same way that car was. The effort that goes  
into looking productive is not merely wasted, but actually makes  
organizations less productive. Suits, for example. Suits do not  
help people to think better. I bet most executives at big companies  
do their best thinking when they wake up on Sunday morning and go  
downstairs in their bathrobe to make a cup of coffee. That's when  
you have ideas. Just imagine what a company would be like if people  
could think that well at work. People do in startups, at least  
some of the time. (Half the time you're in a panic because your  
servers are on fire, but the other half you're thinking as deeply  
as most people only get to sitting alone on a Sunday morning.)Ditto for most of the other differences between startups and what  
passes for productivity in big companies. And yet conventional  
ideas of professionalism have such an iron grip on our minds that  
even startup founders are affected by them. In our startup, when  
outsiders came to visit we tried hard to seem "professional." We'd  
clean up our offices, wear better clothes, try to arrange that a  
lot of people were there during conventional office hours. In fact,  
programming didn't get done by well-dressed people at clean desks  
during office hours. It got done by badly dressed people (I was  
notorious for programmming wearing just a towel) in offices strewn  
with junk at 2 in the morning. But no visitor would understand  
that. Not even investors, who are supposed to be able to recognize  
real productivity when they see it. Even we were affected by the  
conventional wisdom. We thought of ourselves as impostors, succeeding  
despite being totally unprofessional. It was as if we'd created a  
Formula 1 car but felt sheepish because it didn't look like a car  
was supposed to look.In the car world, there are at least some people who know that a  
high performance car looks like a Formula 1 racecar, not a sedan  
with giant rims and a fake spoiler bolted to the trunk. Why not  
in business? Probably because startups are so small. The really  
dramatic growth happens when a startup only has three or four people,  
so only three or four people see that, whereas tens of thousands  
see business as it's practiced by Boeing or Philip Morris.This book can help fix that problem, by showing everyone what, till  
now, only a handful people got to see: what happens in the first  
year of a startup. This is what real productivity looks like. This  
is the Formula 1 racecar. It looks weird, but it goes fast.Of course, big companies won't be able to do everything these  
startups do. In big companies there's always going to be more  
politics, and less scope for individual decisions. But seeing what  
startups are really like will at least show other organizations  
what to aim for. The time may soon be coming when instead of  
startups trying to seem more corporate, corporations will try to  
seem more like startups. That would be a good thing.  
Japanese  
Translation  
Founders at WorkThere can't be more than a couple thousand  
people who know first-hand what happens in the first month of a  
successful startup. Jessica Livingston got them to tell us.   
So despite the interview format, this is  
really a how-to book. It is probably the single most valuable   
book a startup founder could read.

# How Art Can Be Good

December 2006I grew up believing that taste is just a matter of personal preference.  
Each person has things they like, but no one's preferences are any  
better than anyone else's. There is no such thing as good taste.Like a lot of things I grew up believing, this turns out to be  
false, and I'm going to try to explain why.One problem with saying there's no such thing as good taste is that  
it also means there's no such thing as good art. If there were  
good art, then people who liked it would have better taste than  
people who didn't. So if you discard taste, you also have to discard  
the idea of art being good, and artists being good at making it.It was pulling on that thread that unravelled my childhood faith  
in relativism. When you're trying to make things, taste becomes a  
practical matter. You have to decide what to do next. Would it  
make the painting better if I changed that part? If there's no  
such thing as better, it doesn't matter what you do. In fact, it  
doesn't matter if you paint at all. You could just go out and buy  
a ready-made blank canvas. If there's no such thing as good, that  
would be just as great an achievement as the ceiling of the Sistine  
Chapel. Less laborious, certainly, but if you can achieve the same  
level of performance with less effort, surely that's more impressive,  
not less.Yet that doesn't seem quite right, does it?AudienceI think the key to this puzzle is to remember that art has an  
audience. Art has a purpose, which is to interest its audience.  
Good art (like good anything) is art that achieves its purpose  
particularly well. The meaning of "interest" can vary. Some works  
of art are meant to shock, and others to please; some are meant to  
jump out at you, and others to sit quietly in the background. But  
all art has to work on an audience, and—here's the critical   
point—members of the audience share things in common.For example, nearly all humans find human faces engaging. It seems  
to be wired into us. Babies can recognize faces practically from  
birth. In fact, faces seem to have co-evolved with our interest  
in them; the face is the body's billboard. So all other things  
being equal, a painting with faces in it will interest people more  
than one without.   
[1]One reason it's easy to believe that taste is merely personal  
preference is that, if it isn't, how do you pick out the people  
with better taste? There are billions of people, each with their  
own opinion; on what grounds can you prefer one to another?  
[2]But if audiences have a lot in common, you're not in a position of  
having to choose one out of a random set of individual biases,  
because the set isn't random. All humans find faces   
engaging—practically by definition: face recognition is   
in our DNA. And so  
having a notion of good art, in the sense of art that does its job  
well, doesn't require you to pick out a few individuals and label  
their opinions as correct. No matter who you pick, they'll find  
faces engaging.Of course, space aliens probably wouldn't find human faces engaging.  
But there might be other things they shared in common with us. The  
most likely source of examples is math. I expect space aliens would  
agree with us most of the time about which of two proofs was better.  
Erdos thought so. He called a maximally elegant proof one out of  
God's book, and presumably God's book is universal.  
[3]Once you start talking about audiences, you don't have to argue  
simply that there are or aren't standards of taste. Instead tastes  
are a series of concentric rings, like ripples in a pond. There  
are some things that will appeal to you and your friends, others  
that will appeal to most people your age, others that will appeal  
to most humans, and perhaps others that would appeal to most sentient  
beings (whatever that means).The picture is slightly more complicated than that, because in the  
middle of the pond there are overlapping sets of ripples. For  
example, there might be things that appealed particularly to men,  
or to people from a certain culture.If good art is art that interests its audience, then when you talk  
about art being good, you also have to say for what audience. So  
is it meaningless to talk about art simply being good or bad? No,  
because one audience is the set of all possible humans. I think  
that's the audience people are implicitly talking about when they  
say a work of art is good: they mean it would engage any human.  
[4]And that is a meaningful test, because although, like any everyday  
concept, "human" is fuzzy around the edges, there are a lot of  
things practically all humans have in common. In addition to our  
interest in faces, there's something special about primary colors  
for nearly all of us, because it's an artifact of the way our eyes  
work. Most humans will also find images of 3D objects engaging,  
because that also seems to be built into our visual perception.  
[5]  
And beneath that there's edge-finding, which makes images  
with definite shapes more engaging than mere blur.Humans have a lot more in common than this, of course. My goal is  
not to compile a complete list, just to show that there's some solid  
ground here. People's preferences aren't random. So an artist  
working on a painting and trying to decide whether to change some  
part of it doesn't have to think "Why bother? I might as well flip  
a coin." Instead he can ask "What would make the painting more  
interesting to people?" And the reason you can't equal Michelangelo  
by going out and buying a blank canvas is that the ceiling of the  
Sistine Chapel is more interesting to people.A lot of philosophers have had a hard time believing it was possible  
for there to be objective standards for art. It seemed obvious that  
beauty, for example, was something that happened in the head of the observer,  
not something that was a property of objects. It was thus   
"subjective" rather than "objective." But in fact if you narrow the  
definition of beauty to something that works a certain way on  
humans, and you observe how much humans have in common, it turns out  
to be a property of objects after all. You don't  
have to choose between something being a property of the   
subject or the object if subjects all react similarly.  
Being good art is thus a property of objects as much as, say, being  
toxic to humans is: it's good art if it consistently affects humans   
in a certain way.  
ErrorSo could we figure out what the best art is by taking a vote? After  
all, if appealing to humans is the test, we should be able to just  
ask them, right?Well, not quite. For products of nature that might work. I'd be  
willing to eat the apple the world's population had voted most  
delicious, and I'd probably be willing to visit the beach they voted  
most beautiful, but having to look at the painting they voted the  
best would be a crapshoot.Man-made stuff is different. For one thing, artists, unlike apple  
trees, often deliberately try to trick us. Some tricks are quite  
subtle. For example, any work of art sets expectations by its level  
of finish. You don't expect photographic accuracy in something  
that looks like a quick sketch. So one widely used trick, especially  
among illustrators, is to intentionally make a painting or drawing  
look like it was done faster than it was. The average person looks  
at it and thinks: how amazingly skillful. It's like saying something  
clever in a conversation as if you'd thought of it on the spur of  
the moment, when in fact you'd worked it out the day before.Another much less subtle influence is brand. If you go to see the  
Mona Lisa, you'll probably be disappointed, because it's hidden  
behind a thick glass wall and surrounded by a frenzied crowd taking  
pictures of themselves in front of it. At best you can see it the  
way you see a friend across the room at a crowded party. The Louvre  
might as well replace it with copy; no one would be able to tell.  
And yet the Mona Lisa is a small, dark painting. If you found  
people who'd never seen an image of it and sent them to a museum  
in which it was hanging among other paintings with a tag labelling  
it as a portrait by an unknown fifteenth century artist, most would  
walk by without giving it a second look.For the average person, brand dominates all other factors in the  
judgement of art. Seeing a painting they recognize from reproductions  
is so overwhelming that their response to it as a painting is drowned  
out.And then of course there are the tricks people play on themselves.  
Most adults looking at art worry that if they don't like what they're  
supposed to, they'll be thought uncultured. This doesn't just  
affect what they claim to like; they actually make themselves like  
things they're supposed to.That's why you can't just take a vote. Though appeal to people is  
a meaningful test, in practice you can't measure it, just as you  
can't find north using a compass with a magnet sitting next to it.  
There are sources of error so powerful that if you take a vote, all  
you're measuring is the error.We can, however, approach our goal from another direction, by using  
ourselves as guinea pigs. You're human. If you want to know what  
the basic human reaction to a piece of art would be, you can at  
least approach that by getting rid of the sources of error in your  
own judgements.For example, while anyone's reaction to a famous painting will be  
warped at first by its fame, there are ways to decrease its effects.  
One is to come back to the painting over and over. After a few  
days the fame wears off, and you can start to see it as a painting.  
Another is to stand close. A painting familiar from reproductions  
looks more familiar from ten feet away; close in you see details  
that get lost in reproductions, and which you're therefore seeing  
for the first time.There are two main kinds of error that get in the way of seeing a  
work of art: biases you bring from your own circumstances, and  
tricks played by the artist. Tricks are straightforward to correct  
for. Merely being aware of them usually prevents them from working.  
For example, when I was ten I used to be very impressed by airbrushed  
lettering that looked like shiny metal. But once you study how  
it's done, you see that it's a pretty cheesy trick—one of the  
sort that relies on pushing a few visual buttons really hard to  
temporarily overwhelm the viewer. It's like trying to convince  
someone by shouting at them.The way not to be vulnerable to tricks is to explicitly seek out  
and catalog them. When you notice a whiff of dishonesty coming  
from some kind of art, stop and figure out what's going on. When  
someone is obviously pandering to an audience that's easily fooled,  
whether it's someone making shiny stuff to impress ten year olds,  
or someone making conspicuously avant-garde stuff to impress would-be  
intellectuals, learn how they do it. Once you've seen enough  
examples of specific types of tricks, you start to become a connoisseur  
of trickery in general, just as professional magicians are.What counts as a trick? Roughly, it's something done with contempt  
for the audience. For example, the guys designing Ferraris in the  
1950s were probably designing cars that they themselves admired.  
Whereas I suspect over at General Motors the marketing people are  
telling the designers, "Most people who buy SUVs do it to seem  
manly, not to drive off-road. So don't worry about the suspension;  
just make that sucker as big and tough-looking as you can."   
[6]I think with some effort you can make yourself nearly immune to  
tricks. It's harder to escape the influence of your own circumstances,  
but you can at least move in that direction. The way to do it is  
to travel widely, in both time and space. If you go and see all  
the different kinds of things people like in other cultures, and  
learn about all the different things people have liked in the past,  
you'll probably find it changes what you like. I doubt you could  
ever make yourself into a completely universal person, if only  
because you can only travel in one direction in time. But if you  
find a work of art that would appeal equally to your friends, to  
people in Nepal, and to the ancient Greeks, you're probably onto  
something.My main point here is not how to have good taste, but that there  
can even be such a thing. And I think I've shown that. There is  
such a thing as good art. It's art that interests its human audience,  
and since humans have a lot in common, what interests them is not  
random. Since there's such a thing as good art, there's  
also such a thing as good taste, which is the ability to recognize  
it.If we were talking about the taste of apples, I'd agree that taste  
is just personal preference. Some people like certain kinds of  
apples and others like other kinds, but how can you say that one  
is right and the other wrong?   
[7]The thing is, art isn't apples. Art is man-made. It comes with a  
lot of cultural baggage, and in addition the people who make it  
often try to trick us. Most people's judgement of art is dominated  
by these extraneous factors; they're like someone trying to judge  
the taste of apples in a dish made of equal parts apples and jalapeno  
peppers. All they're tasting is the peppers. So it turns out you  
can pick out some people and say that they have better taste than  
others: they're the ones who actually taste art like apples.Or to put it more prosaically, they're the people who (a) are hard  
to trick, and (b) don't just like whatever they grew up with. If  
you could find people who'd eliminated all such influences on their  
judgement, you'd probably still see variation in what they liked.  
But because humans have so much in common, you'd also find they  
agreed on a lot. They'd nearly all prefer the ceiling of the Sistine  
Chapel to a blank canvas.Making ItI wrote this essay because I was tired of hearing "taste is subjective"  
and wanted to kill it once and for all. Anyone who makes things  
knows intuitively that's not true. When you're trying to make art,  
the temptation to be lazy is as great as in any other kind of work.  
Of course it matters to do a good job. And yet you can see how  
great a hold "taste is subjective" has even in the art world by how  
nervous it makes people to talk about art being good or bad. Those  
whose jobs require them to judge art, like curators, mostly resort  
to euphemisms like "significant" or "important" or (getting dangerously  
close) "realized."   
[8]I don't have any illusions that being able to talk about art being  
good or bad will cause the people who talk about it to have anything  
more useful to say. Indeed, one of the reasons "taste is subjective"  
found such a receptive audience is that, historically, the things  
people have said about good taste have generally been such nonsense.It's not for the people who talk about art that I want to free the  
idea of good art, but for those who   
make it. Right now, ambitious  
kids going to art school run smack into a brick wall. They arrive  
hoping one day to be as good as the famous artists they've seen in  
books, and the first thing they learn is that the concept of good  
has been retired. Instead everyone is just supposed to explore  
their own personal vision.   
[9]When I was in art school, we were looking one day at a slide of  
some great fifteenth century painting, and one of the students asked  
"Why don't artists paint like that now?" The room suddenly got  
quiet. Though rarely asked out loud, this question lurks uncomfortably  
in the back of every art student's mind. It was as if someone had  
brought up the topic of lung cancer in a meeting within Philip  
Morris."Well," the professor replied, "we're interested in different  
questions now." He was a pretty nice guy, but at the time I couldn't  
help wishing I could send him back to fifteenth century Florence  
to explain in person to Leonardo & Co. how we had moved beyond their  
early, limited concept of art. Just imagine that conversation.In fact, one of the reasons artists in fifteenth century Florence made  
such great things was that they believed you could make great things.  
[10]  
They were intensely competitive and were always trying to outdo  
one another, like mathematicians or physicists today—maybe like  
anyone who has ever done anything really well.The idea that you could make great things was not just a useful  
illusion. They were actually right. So the most important consequence  
of realizing there can be good art is that it frees artists to try  
to make it. To the ambitious kids arriving at art school this year  
hoping one day to make great things, I say: don't believe it when  
they tell you this is a naive and outdated ambition. There is such  
a thing as good art, and if you try to make it, there are people  
who will notice.Notes[1]  
This is not to say, of course, that good paintings must  
have faces in them, just that everyone's visual piano has that key  
on it. There are situations in which you want to avoid faces,  
precisely because they attract so much attention. But you can see  
how universally faces work by their prevalence in  
advertising.[2]  
The other reason it's easy to believe is that it makes people  
feel good. To a kid, this idea is crack. In every other respect  
they're constantly being told that they have a lot to learn. But  
in this they're perfect. Their opinion carries the same weight as  
any adult's. You should probably question anything you believed  
as a kid that you'd want to believe this much.[3]  
It's conceivable that the elegance of proofs is quantifiable,  
in the sense that there may be some formal measure that turns out  
to coincide with mathematicians' judgements. Perhaps it would be  
worth trying to make a formal language for proofs in which those  
considered more elegant consistently came out shorter (perhaps after  
being macroexpanded or compiled).[4]  
Maybe it would be possible to make art that would appeal to  
space aliens, but I'm not going to get into that because (a) it's  
too hard to answer, and (b) I'm satisfied if I can establish that  
good art is a meaningful idea for human audiences.[5]  
If early abstract paintings seem more interesting than later  
ones, it may be because the first abstract painters were trained  
to paint from life, and their hands thus tended to make the kind  
of gestures you use in representing physical things. In effect  
they were saying "scaramara" instead of "uebfgbsb."[6]  
It's a bit more complicated, because sometimes artists  
unconsciously use tricks by imitating art that does.[7]  
I phrased this in terms of the taste of apples because if  
people can see the apples, they can be fooled. When I was a kid  
most apples were a variety called Red Delicious that had been bred  
to look appealing in stores, but which didn't taste very good.[8]  
To be fair, curators are in a difficult position. If they're  
dealing with recent art, they have to include things in shows that  
they think are bad. That's because the test for what gets included  
in shows is basically the market price, and for recent art that is  
largely determined by successful businessmen and their wives. So  
it's not always intellectual dishonesty that makes curators and  
dealers use neutral-sounding language.[9]  
What happens in practice is that everyone gets really good at  
talking about art. As the art itself gets more random, the effort  
that would have gone into the work goes instead into the intellectual  
sounding theory behind it. "My work represents an exploration of  
gender and sexuality in an urban context," etc. Different people  
win at that game.[10]  
There were several other reasons, including that Florence was  
then the richest and most sophisticated city in the world, and that  
they lived in a time before photography had (a) killed portraiture  
as a source of income and (b) made brand the dominant factor in the  
sale of art.Incidentally, I'm not saying that good art = fifteenth century  
European art. I'm not saying we should make what they made, but  
that we should work like they worked. There are fields now in which  
many people work with the same energy and honesty that fifteenth  
century artists did, but art is not one of them.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and Robert Morris   
for reading drafts of this, and to Paul Watson for permission to   
use the image at the top.Japanese TranslationSimplified Chinese Translation

# The 18 Mistakes That Kill Startups

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2006In the Q & A period after a recent talk, someone asked what made  
startups fail. After standing there gaping for a few seconds I  
realized this was kind of a trick question. It's equivalent to  
asking how to make a startup succeed — if you avoid every cause of  
failure, you succeed — and that's too big a question to answer on  
the fly.Afterwards I realized it could be helpful to look at the problem  
from this direction. If you have a list of all the things you  
shouldn't do, you can turn that into a recipe for succeeding just  
by negating. And this form of list may be more useful in practice.  
It's easier to catch yourself doing something you shouldn't than  
always to remember to do something you should.  
[1]In a sense there's just one mistake that kills startups: not making  
something users want. If you make something users want, you'll  
probably be fine, whatever else you do or don't do. And if you  
don't make something users want, then you're dead, whatever else  
you do or don't do. So really this is a list of 18 things that  
cause startups not to make something users want. Nearly all failure  
funnels through that.1. Single FounderHave you ever noticed how few successful startups were founded by  
just one person? Even companies you think of as having one founder,  
like Oracle, usually turn out to have more. It seems unlikely this  
is a coincidence.What's wrong with having one founder? To start with, it's a vote  
of no confidence. It probably means the founder couldn't talk any  
of his friends into starting the company with him. That's pretty  
alarming, because his friends are the ones who know him best.But even if the founder's friends were all wrong and the company  
is a good bet, he's still at a disadvantage. Starting a startup  
is too hard for one person. Even if you could do all the work  
yourself, you need colleagues to brainstorm with, to talk you out  
of stupid decisions, and to cheer you up when things go wrong.The last one might be the most important. The low points in a  
startup are so low that few could bear them alone. When you have  
multiple founders, esprit de corps binds them together in a way  
that seems to violate conservation laws. Each thinks "I can't let  
my friends down." This is one of the most powerful forces in human  
nature, and it's missing when there's just one founder.2. Bad LocationStartups prosper in some places and not others. Silicon Valley  
dominates, then Boston, then Seattle, Austin, Denver, and New York. After  
that there's not much. Even in New York the number of startups per  
capita is probably a 20th of what it is in Silicon Valley. In towns  
like Houston and Chicago and Detroit it's too small to measure.Why is the falloff so sharp? Probably for the same reason it is  
in other industries. What's the sixth largest fashion center in  
the US? The sixth largest center for oil, or finance, or publishing?  
Whatever they are they're probably so far from the top that it would  
be misleading even to call them centers.It's an interesting question why cities   
become startup hubs, but  
the reason startups prosper in them is probably the same as it is  
for any industry: that's where the experts are. Standards are  
higher; people are more sympathetic to what you're doing; the kind  
of people you want to hire want to live there; supporting industries  
are there; the people you run into in chance meetings are in the  
same business. Who knows exactly how these factors combine to boost  
startups in Silicon Valley and squish them in Detroit, but it's  
clear they do from the number of startups per capita in each.3. Marginal NicheMost of the groups that apply to Y Combinator suffer from a common  
problem: choosing a small, obscure niche in the hope of avoiding  
competition.If you watch little kids playing sports, you notice that below a  
certain age they're afraid of the ball. When the ball comes near  
them their instinct is to avoid it. I didn't make a lot of catches  
as an eight year old outfielder, because whenever a fly ball came  
my way, I used to close my eyes and hold my glove up more for  
protection than in the hope of catching it.Choosing a marginal project is the startup equivalent of my eight  
year old strategy for dealing with fly balls. If you make anything  
good, you're going to have competitors, so you may as well face  
that. You can only avoid competition by avoiding good ideas.I think this shrinking from big problems is mostly unconscious.  
It's not that people think of grand ideas but decide to pursue  
smaller ones because they seem safer. Your unconscious won't even  
let you think of grand ideas. So the solution may be to think about  
ideas without involving yourself. What would be a great idea for  
someone else to do as a startup?4. Derivative IdeaMany of the applications we get are imitations of some existing  
company. That's one source of ideas, but not the best. If you  
look at the origins of successful startups, few were started in  
imitation of some other startup. Where did they get their ideas?  
Usually from some specific, unsolved problem the founders identified.Our startup made software for making online stores. When we started  
it, there wasn't any; the few sites you could order from were  
hand-made at great expense by web consultants. We knew that if  
online shopping ever took off, these sites would have to be generated  
by software, so we wrote some. Pretty straightforward.It seems like the best problems to solve are ones that affect you  
personally. Apple happened because Steve Wozniak wanted a computer,  
Google because Larry and Sergey couldn't find stuff online, Hotmail  
because Sabeer Bhatia and Jack Smith couldn't exchange email at  
work.So instead of copying the Facebook, with some variation that the  
Facebook rightly ignored, look for ideas from the other direction.  
Instead of starting from companies and working back to the problems  
they solved, look for problems and imagine the company that might  
solve them.   
[2]  
What do people complain about? What do you wish there was?5. ObstinacyIn some fields the way to succeed is to have a vision of what you  
want to achieve, and to hold true to it no matter what setbacks you  
encounter. Starting startups is not one of them. The stick-to-your-vision  
approach works for something like winning an Olympic gold medal,  
where the problem is well-defined. Startups are more like science,  
where you need to follow the trail wherever it leads.So don't get too attached to your original plan, because it's  
probably wrong. Most successful startups end up doing something  
different than they originally intended — often so different that  
it doesn't even seem like the same company. You have to be prepared  
to see the better idea when it arrives. And the hardest part of  
that is often discarding your old idea.But openness to new ideas has to be tuned just right. Switching  
to a new idea every week will be equally fatal. Is there some kind  
of external test you can use? One is to ask whether the ideas  
represent some kind of progression. If in each new idea you're  
able to re-use most of what you built for the previous ones, then  
you're probably in a process that converges. Whereas if you keep  
restarting from scratch, that's a bad sign.Fortunately there's someone you can ask for advice: your users. If  
you're thinking about turning in some new direction and your users  
seem excited about it, it's probably a good bet.6. Hiring Bad ProgrammersI forgot to include this in the early versions of the list,  
because nearly all the founders I know are programmers. This is  
not a serious problem for them. They might accidentally hire someone  
bad, but it's not going to kill the company. In a pinch they can  
do whatever's required themselves.But when I think about what killed most of the startups in the  
e-commerce business back in the 90s, it was bad programmers. A lot  
of those companies were started by business guys who thought the  
way startups worked was that you had some clever idea and then hired  
programmers to implement it. That's actually much harder than it  
sounds — almost impossibly hard in fact — because business guys  
can't tell which are the good programmers. They don't even get a  
shot at the best ones, because no one really good wants a job  
implementing the vision of a business guy.In practice what happens is that the business guys choose people  
they think are good programmers (it says here on his resume that  
he's a Microsoft Certified Developer) but who aren't. Then they're  
mystified to find that their startup lumbers along like a World War  
II bomber while their competitors scream past like jet fighters.  
This kind of startup is in the same position as a big company,  
but without the advantages.So how do you pick good programmers if you're not a programmer? I  
don't think there's an answer. I was about to say you'd have to  
find a good programmer to help you hire people. But if you can't  
recognize good programmers, how would you even do that?7. Choosing the Wrong PlatformA related problem (since it tends to be done by bad programmers)  
is choosing the wrong platform. For example, I think a lot of  
startups during the Bubble killed themselves by deciding to build  
server-based applications on Windows. Hotmail was still running  
on FreeBSD for years after Microsoft bought it, presumably because  
Windows couldn't handle the load. If Hotmail's founders  
had chosen to use Windows, they would have been swamped.PayPal only just dodged this bullet. After they merged with X.com,  
the new CEO wanted to switch to Windows — even after PayPal cofounder  
Max Levchin showed that their software scaled only 1% as well on  
Windows as Unix. Fortunately for PayPal they switched CEOs instead.Platform is a vague word. It could mean an operating system, or a  
programming language, or a "framework" built on top of a programming  
language. It implies something that both supports and limits, like  
the foundation of a house.The scary thing about platforms is that there are always some that  
seem to outsiders to be fine, responsible choices and yet, like  
Windows in the 90s, will destroy you if you choose them. Java  
applets were probably the most spectacular example. This was  
supposed to be the new way of delivering applications. Presumably  
it killed just about 100% of the startups who believed that.How do you pick the right platforms? The usual way is to hire good  
programmers and let them choose. But there is a trick you could  
use if you're not a programmer: visit a top computer science  
department and see what they use in research projects.8. Slowness in LaunchingCompanies of all sizes have a hard time getting software done. It's  
intrinsic to the medium; software is always 85% done. It takes an  
effort of will to push through this and get something released to  
users.  
[3]Startups make all kinds of excuses for delaying their launch. Most  
are equivalent to the ones people use for procrastinating in everyday  
life. There's something that needs to happen first. Maybe. But  
if the software were 100% finished and ready to launch at the push  
of a button, would they still be waiting?One reason to launch quickly is that it forces you to actually  
finish some quantum of work. Nothing is truly finished till it's  
released; you can see that from the rush of work that's always  
involved in releasing anything, no matter how finished you thought  
it was. The other reason you need to launch is that it's only by  
bouncing your idea off users that you fully understand it.Several distinct problems manifest themselves as delays in launching:  
working too slowly; not truly understanding the problem; fear of  
having to deal with users; fear of being judged; working on too  
many different things; excessive perfectionism. Fortunately you  
can combat all of them by the simple expedient of forcing yourself  
to launch something fairly quickly.9. Launching Too EarlyLaunching too slowly has probably killed a hundred times more  
startups than launching too fast, but it is possible to launch too  
fast. The danger here is that you ruin your reputation. You launch  
something, the early adopters try it out, and if it's no good they  
may never come back.So what's the minimum you need to launch? We suggest startups think  
about what they plan to do, identify a core that's both (a) useful  
on its own and (b) something that can be incrementally expanded  
into the whole project, and then get that done as soon as possible.This is the same approach I (and many other programmers) use for  
writing software. Think about the overall goal, then start by  
writing the smallest subset of it that does anything useful. If  
it's a subset, you'll have to write it anyway, so in the worst case  
you won't be wasting your time. But more likely you'll find that  
implementing a working subset is both good for morale and helps you  
see more clearly what the rest should do.The early adopters you need to impress are fairly tolerant. They  
don't expect a newly launched product to do everything; it just has  
to do something.10. Having No Specific User in MindYou can't build things users like without understanding them. I  
mentioned earlier that the most successful startups seem to have  
begun by trying to solve a problem their founders had. Perhaps  
there's a rule here: perhaps you create wealth in proportion to how  
well you understand the problem you're solving, and the problems  
you understand best are your own.   
[4]That's just a theory. What's not a theory is the converse: if  
you're trying to solve problems you don't understand, you're hosed.And yet a surprising number of founders seem willing to  
assume that someone, they're not sure exactly who, will want what  
they're building. Do the founders want it? No, they're not the  
target market. Who is? Teenagers. People interested in local  
events (that one is a perennial tarpit). Or "business" users. What  
business users? Gas stations? Movie studios? Defense contractors?You can of course build something for users other than yourself.  
We did. But you should realize you're stepping into dangerous  
territory. You're flying on instruments, in effect, so you should  
(a) consciously shift gears, instead of assuming you can rely on  
your intuitions as you ordinarily would, and (b) look at the  
instruments.In this case the instruments are the users. When designing for  
other people you have to be empirical. You can no longer guess  
what will work; you have to find users and measure their responses.  
So if you're going to make something for teenagers or "business"  
users or some other group that doesn't include you, you have to be  
able to talk some specific ones into using what you're making. If  
you can't, you're on the wrong track.11. Raising Too Little MoneyMost successful startups take funding at some point. Like having  
more than one founder, it seems a good bet statistically. How much  
should you take, though?Startup funding is measured in time. Every startup that isn't  
profitable (meaning nearly all of them, initially) has a certain  
amount of time left before the money runs out and they have to stop.  
This is sometimes referred to as runway, as in "How much runway do  
you have left?" It's a good metaphor because it reminds you that  
when the money runs out you're going to be airborne or dead.Too little money means not enough to get airborne. What airborne  
means depends on the situation. Usually you have to advance to a  
visibly higher level: if all you have is an idea, a working prototype;  
if you have a prototype, launching; if you're launched, significant  
growth. It depends on investors, because until you're profitable  
that's who you have to convince.So if you take money from investors, you have to take enough to get  
to the next step, whatever that is.  
[5]  
Fortunately you have some  
control over both how much you spend and what the next step is. We  
advise startups to set both low, initially: spend practically  
nothing, and make your initial goal simply to build a solid prototype.  
This gives you maximum flexibility.12. Spending Too MuchIt's hard to distinguish spending too much from raising too little.  
If you run out of money, you could say either was the cause. The  
only way to decide which to call it is by comparison with other  
startups. If you raised five million and ran out of money, you  
probably spent too much.Burning through too much money is not as common as it used to be.  
Founders seem to have learned that lesson. Plus it keeps getting  
cheaper to start a startup. So as of this writing few startups  
spend too much. None of the ones we've funded have. (And not just  
because we make small investments; many have gone on to raise further  
rounds.)The classic way to burn through cash is by hiring a lot of people.  
This bites you twice: in addition to increasing your costs, it slows  
you down—so money that's getting consumed faster has to last  
longer. Most hackers understand why that happens; Fred Brooks  
explained it in The Mythical Man-Month.We have three general suggestions about hiring: (a) don't do it if  
you can avoid it, (b) pay people with equity rather than salary,  
not just to save money, but because you want the kind of people who  
are committed enough to prefer that, and (c) only hire people who  
are either going to write code or go out and get users, because  
those are the only things you need at first.13. Raising Too Much MoneyIt's obvious how too little money could kill you, but is there such  
a thing as having too much?Yes and no. The problem is not so much the money itself as what  
comes with it. As one VC who spoke at Y Combinator said, "Once you  
take several million dollars of my money, the clock is ticking."  
If VCs fund you, they're not going to let you just put the money  
in the bank and keep operating as two guys living on ramen. They  
want that money to go to work.   
[6]  
At the very least you'll move  
into proper office space and hire more people. That will change  
the atmosphere, and not entirely for the better. Now most of your  
people will be employees rather than founders. They won't be as  
committed; they'll need to be told what to do; they'll start to  
engage in office politics.When you raise a lot of money, your company moves to the suburbs  
and has kids.Perhaps more dangerously, once you take a lot of money it gets  
harder to change direction. Suppose your initial plan was to sell  
something to companies. After taking VC money you hire a sales  
force to do that. What happens now if you realize you should be  
making this for consumers instead of businesses? That's a completely  
different kind of selling. What happens, in practice, is that you  
don't realize that. The more people you have, the more you stay  
pointed in the same direction.Another drawback of large investments is the time they take. The  
time required to raise money grows with the amount.  
[7]  
When the  
amount rises into the millions, investors get very cautious. VCs  
never quite say yes or no; they just engage you in an apparently  
endless conversation. Raising VC scale investments is thus a huge  
time sink — more work, probably, than the startup itself. And you  
don't want to be spending all your time talking to investors while  
your competitors are spending theirs building things.We advise founders who go on to seek VC money to take the first  
reasonable deal they get. If you get an offer from a reputable  
firm at a reasonable valuation with no unusually onerous terms,  
just take it and get on with building the company.  
[8]  
Who cares  
if you could get a 30% better deal elsewhere? Economically, startups  
are an all-or-nothing game. Bargain-hunting among investors is a  
waste of time.14. Poor Investor ManagementAs a founder, you have to manage your investors. You shouldn't  
ignore them, because they may have useful insights. But neither  
should you let them run the company. That's supposed to be your  
job. If investors had sufficient vision to run the companies  
they fund, why didn't they start them?Pissing off investors by ignoring them is probably less dangerous  
than caving in to them. In our startup, we erred on the ignoring  
side. A lot of our energy got drained  
away in disputes with investors instead of going into the product.  
But this was less costly than giving in, which would probably have  
destroyed the company. If the founders know what they're doing,  
it's better to have half their attention focused on the product  
than the full attention of investors who don't.How hard you have to work on managing investors usually depends on  
how much money you've taken. When you raise VC-scale money, the  
investors get a great deal of control. If they have a board majority,  
they're literally your bosses. In the more common case, where  
founders and investors are equally represented and the deciding  
vote is cast by neutral outside directors, all the investors have  
to do is convince the outside directors and they control the company.If things go well, this shouldn't matter. So long as you seem to  
be advancing rapidly, most investors will leave you alone. But  
things don't always go smoothly in startups. Investors have made  
trouble even for the most successful companies. One of the most  
famous examples is Apple, whose board made a nearly fatal blunder  
in firing Steve Jobs. Apparently even Google got a lot of grief  
from their investors early on.15. Sacrificing Users to (Supposed) ProfitWhen I said at the beginning that if you make something users want,  
you'll be fine, you may have noticed I didn't mention anything about  
having the right business model. That's not because making money  
is unimportant. I'm not suggesting that founders start companies  
with no chance of making money in the hope of unloading them before  
they tank. The reason we tell founders not to worry about the  
business model initially is that making something people want is  
so much harder.I don't know why it's so hard to make something people want. It  
seems like it should be straightforward. But you can tell it must  
be hard by how few startups do it.Because making something people want is so much harder than making  
money from it, you should leave business models for later, just as  
you'd leave some trivial but messy feature for version 2. In version  
1, solve the core problem. And the core problem in a startup is  
how to create wealth   
(= how much people want something x the number  
who want it), not how to convert that wealth into money.The companies that win are the ones that put users first. Google,  
for example. They made search work, then worried about how to make  
money from it. And yet some startup founders still think it's  
irresponsible not to focus on the business model from the beginning.  
They're often encouraged in this by investors whose experience comes  
from less malleable industries.It is irresponsible not to think about business models. It's  
just ten times more irresponsible not to think about the product.16. Not Wanting to Get Your Hands DirtyNearly all programmers would rather spend their time writing code  
and have someone else handle the messy business of extracting money  
from it. And not just the lazy ones. Larry and Sergey apparently  
felt this way too at first. After developing their new search  
algorithm, the first thing they tried was to get some other company  
to buy it.Start a company? Yech. Most hackers would rather just have ideas.  
But as Larry and Sergey found, there's not much of a market for  
ideas. No one trusts an idea till you embody it in a product and  
use that to grow a user base. Then they'll pay big time.Maybe this will change, but I doubt it will change much. There's  
nothing like users for convincing acquirers. It's not just that  
the risk is decreased. The acquirers are human, and they have a  
hard time paying a bunch of young guys millions of dollars just for  
being clever. When the idea is embodied in a company with a lot  
of users, they can tell themselves they're buying the users rather  
than the cleverness, and this is easier for them to swallow.  
[9]If you're going to attract users, you'll probably have to get up  
from your computer and go find some. It's unpleasant work, but if  
you can make yourself do it you have a much greater chance of  
succeeding. In the first batch of startups we funded, in the summer  
of 2005, most of the founders spent all their time building their  
applications. But there was one who was away half the time talking  
to executives at cell phone companies, trying to arrange deals.  
Can you imagine anything more painful for a hacker?  
[10]  
But it  
paid off, because this startup seems the most successful of that  
group by an order of magnitude.If you want to start a startup, you have to face the fact that you  
can't just hack. At least one hacker will have to spend some of  
the time doing business stuff.17. Fights Between FoundersFights between founders are surprisingly common. About 20% of the  
startups we've funded have had a founder leave. It happens so often  
that we've reversed our attitude to vesting. We still don't require  
it, but now we advise founders to vest so there will be an orderly  
way for people to quit.A founder leaving doesn't necessarily kill a startup, though. Plenty  
of successful startups have had that happen.   
[11]  
Fortunately it's  
usually the least committed founder who leaves. If there are three  
founders and one who was lukewarm leaves, big deal. If you have  
two and one leaves, or a guy with critical technical skills leaves,  
that's more of a problem. But even that is survivable. Blogger  
got down to one person, and they bounced back.Most of the disputes I've seen between founders could have been  
avoided if they'd been more careful about who they started a company  
with. Most disputes are not due to the situation but the people.  
Which means they're inevitable. And most founders who've been  
burned by such disputes probably had misgivings, which they suppressed,  
when they started the company. Don't suppress misgivings. It's  
much easier to fix problems before the company is started than  
after. So don't include your housemate in your startup because  
he'd feel left out otherwise. Don't start a company with someone  
you dislike because they have some skill you need and you worry you  
won't find anyone else. The people are the most important ingredient  
in a startup, so don't compromise there.18. A Half-Hearted EffortThe failed startups you hear most about are the spectacular  
flameouts. Those are actually the elite of failures. The most  
common type is not the one that makes spectacular mistakes, but the  
one that doesn't do much of anything — the one we never even hear  
about, because it was some project a couple guys started on the  
side while working on their day jobs, but which never got anywhere  
and was gradually abandoned.Statistically, if you want to avoid failure, it would seem like the  
most important thing is to quit your day job. Most founders of  
failed startups don't quit their day jobs, and most founders of  
successful ones do. If startup failure were a disease, the CDC  
would be issuing bulletins warning people to avoid day jobs.Does that mean you should quit your day job? Not necessarily. I'm  
guessing here, but I'd guess that many of these would-be founders  
may not have the kind of determination it takes to start a company,  
and that in the back of their minds, they know it. The reason they  
don't invest more time in their startup is that they know it's a  
bad investment.  
[12]I'd also guess there's some band of people who could have succeeded  
if they'd taken the leap and done it full-time, but didn't. I have  
no idea how wide this band is, but if the winner/borderline/hopeless  
progression has the sort of distribution you'd expect, the number  
of people who could have made it, if they'd quit their day job, is  
probably an order of magnitude larger than the number who do make  
it.  
[13]If that's true, most startups that could succeed fail because the  
founders don't devote their whole efforts to them. That certainly  
accords with what I see out in the world. Most startups fail because  
they don't make something people want, and the reason most don't  
is that they don't try hard enough.In other words, starting startups is just like everything else.  
The biggest mistake you can make is not to try hard enough. To the  
extent there's a secret to success, it's not to be in denial about  
that.  
Notes[1]  
This is not a complete list of the causes of failure,  
just those you can control. There are also several you can't,  
notably ineptitude and bad luck.[2]  
Ironically, one variant of the Facebook that might work is a  
facebook exclusively for college students.[3]  
Steve Jobs tried to motivate people by saying "Real artists  
ship." This is a fine sentence, but unfortunately not true. Many  
famous works of art are unfinished. It's true in fields that have  
hard deadlines, like architecture and filmmaking, but even there  
people tend to be tweaking stuff till it's yanked out of their  
hands.[4]  
There's probably also a second factor: startup founders tend  
to be at the leading edge of technology, so problems they face are  
probably especially valuable.[5]  
You should take more than you think you'll need, maybe 50% to  
100% more, because software takes longer to write and deals longer  
to close than you expect.[6]  
Since people sometimes call us VCs, I should add that we're  
not. VCs invest large amounts of other people's money. We invest  
small amounts of our own, like angel investors.[7]  
Not linearly of course, or it would take forever to raise five  
million dollars. In practice it just feels like it takes forever.Though if you include the cases where VCs don't invest, it would  
literally take forever in the median case. And maybe we should,  
because the danger of chasing large investments is not just that  
they take a long time. That's the best case. The real danger  
is that you'll expend a lot of time and get nothing.[8]  
Some VCs will offer you an artificially low valuation to see  
if you have the balls to ask for more. It's lame that VCs play  
such games, but some do. If you're dealing with one of those you  
should push back on the valuation a bit.[9]  
Suppose YouTube's founders had gone to Google in 2005 and told  
them "Google Video is badly designed. Give us $10 million and we'll  
tell you all the mistakes you made." They would have gotten  
the royal raspberry. Eighteen months later Google paid $1.6 billion  
for the same lesson, partly because they could then tell themselves  
that they were buying a phenomenon, or a community, or some vague  
thing like that.I don't mean to be hard on Google. They did better than their  
competitors, who may have now missed the video boat entirely.[10]  
Yes, actually: dealing with the government. But phone companies  
are up there.[11]  
Many more than most people realize, because companies don't advertise  
this. Did you know Apple originally had three founders?[12]  
I'm not dissing these people. I don't have the determination  
myself. I've twice come close to starting startups since Viaweb,  
and both times I bailed because I realized that without the spur  
of poverty I just wasn't willing to endure the stress of a startup.[13]  
So how do you know whether you're in the category of people  
who should quit their day job, or the presumably larger one who  
shouldn't? I got to the point of saying that this was hard to judge  
for yourself and that you should seek outside advice, before realizing  
that that's what we do. We think of ourselves as investors, but  
viewed from the other direction Y Combinator is a service for  
advising people whether or not to quit their day job. We could be  
mistaken, and no doubt often are, but we do at least bet money on  
our conclusions.Thanks to Sam Altman, Jessica Livingston, Greg McAdoo, and Robert Morris   
for reading drafts of this.  
Japanese TranslationSpanish TranslationRomanian TranslationChinese TranslationArabic Translation

# A Student's Guide to Startups

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2006(This essay is derived from a talk at MIT.)Till recently graduating seniors had two choices: get a job or go  
to grad school. I think there will increasingly be a third option:  
to start your own startup. But how common will that be?I'm sure the default will always be to get a job, but starting a  
startup could well become as popular as grad school. In the late  
90s my professor friends used to complain that they couldn't get  
grad students, because all the undergrads were going to work for  
startups. I wouldn't be surprised if that situation returns, but  
with one difference: this time they'll be starting their own  
instead of going to work for other people's.The most ambitious students will at this point be asking: Why wait  
till you graduate? Why not start a startup while you're in college?  
In fact, why go to college at all? Why not start a startup instead?A year and a half ago I gave a talk   
where I said that the average age of the founders of  
Yahoo, Google, and Microsoft was 24, and that if grad students could  
start startups, why not undergrads? I'm glad I phrased that as a  
question, because now I can pretend it wasn't merely a rhetorical  
one. At the time I couldn't imagine why there should be any lower  
limit for the age of startup founders. Graduation is a bureaucratic  
change, not a biological one. And certainly there are undergrads  
as competent technically as most grad students. So why shouldn't  
undergrads be able to start startups as well as grad students?I now realize that something does change at graduation: you lose a  
huge excuse for failing. Regardless of how complex your life is,  
you'll find that everyone else, including your family and friends,  
will discard all the low bits and regard you as having a single  
occupation at any given time. If you're in college and have a  
summer job writing software, you still read as a student. Whereas  
if you graduate and get a job programming, you'll be instantly  
regarded by everyone as a programmer.The problem with starting a startup while you're still in school  
is that there's a built-in escape hatch. If you start a startup  
in the summer between your junior and senior year, it reads to  
everyone as a summer job.  
So if it goes nowhere, big deal; you return to school in the  
fall with all the other seniors; no one regards you as a failure,  
because your occupation is student, and you didn't fail at that.  
Whereas if you start a startup just one year later, after you  
graduate, as long as you're not accepted to grad school in the fall  
the startup reads to everyone as your occupation. You're  
now a startup founder, so you have to do well at that.For nearly everyone, the opinion of one's peers is the most powerful  
motivator of all—more powerful even than the nominal goal of most  
startup founders, getting rich.   
[1]  
About a month into each funding  
cycle we have an event called Prototype Day where each startup  
presents to the others what they've got so far. You might think  
they wouldn't need any more motivation. They're working on their  
cool new idea; they have funding for the immediate future; and  
they're playing a game with only two outcomes: wealth or failure.  
You'd think that would be motivation enough. And yet the prospect  
of a demo pushes most of them into a  
rush of activity.Even if you start a startup explicitly to get rich, the money you  
might get seems pretty theoretical most of the time. What drives  
you day to day is not wanting to look bad.You probably can't change that. Even if you could, I don't think  
you'd want to; someone who really, truly doesn't care what his peers  
think of him is probably a psychopath. So the best you can do is  
consider this force like a wind, and set up your boat accordingly.  
If you know your peers are going to push you in some direction,  
choose good peers, and position yourself so they push you in a  
direction you like.Graduation changes the prevailing winds, and those make a difference.  
Starting a startup is so hard  
that it's a close call even for the ones that succeed. However  
high a startup may be flying now, it probably has a few leaves stuck  
in the landing gear from those trees it barely cleared at the end  
of the runway. In such a close game, the smallest increase in the  
forces against you can be enough to flick you over the edge into  
failure.When we first started Y Combinator   
we encouraged people to start  
startups while they were still in college. That's partly because  
Y Combinator began as a kind of summer program. We've kept the  
program shape—all of us having dinner together once a week turns  
out to be a good idea—but we've decided now  
that the party line should be to tell people to wait till they  
graduate.Does that mean you can't start a startup in college? Not at all.  
Sam Altman, the co-founder of Loopt,  
had just finished his sophomore year when we funded them, and Loopt  
is probably the most promising of all the startups we've funded so  
far. But Sam Altman is a very unusual guy. Within about three  
minutes of meeting him, I remember thinking "Ah, so this is what  
Bill Gates must have been like when he was 19."If it can work to start a startup during college, why do  
we tell people not to? For the same reason that the probably  
apocryphal violinist, whenever he was asked to judge someone's  
playing, would always say they didn't have enough talent to make  
it as a pro. Succeeding as a musician takes determination as well  
as talent, so this answer works out to be the right advice for  
everyone. The ones who are uncertain believe it and give up, and  
the ones who are sufficiently determined think "screw that, I'll  
succeed anyway."So our official policy now is only to fund undergrads we can't talk  
out of it. And frankly, if you're not certain, you should wait.  
It's not as if all the opportunities to start companies are going  
to be gone if you don't do it now. Maybe the window will close on  
some idea you're working on, but that won't be the last idea you'll  
have. For every idea that times out, new ones become feasible.  
Historically the opportunities to start startups have only increased  
with time.In that case, you might ask, why not wait longer? Why not go work  
for a while, or go to grad school, and then start a startup? And  
indeed, that might be a good idea. If I had to pick the sweet spot  
for startup founders, based on who we're most excited to see  
applications from, I'd say it's probably the mid-twenties. Why?  
What advantages does someone in their mid-twenties have over someone  
who's 21? And why isn't it older? What can 25 year olds do that  
32 year olds can't? Those turn out to be questions worth examining.PlusIf you start a startup soon after college, you'll be a young founder  
by present standards, so you should know what the relative advantages  
of young founders are. They're not what you might think. As a  
young founder your strengths are: stamina, poverty, rootlessness,  
colleagues, and ignorance.The importance of stamina shouldn't be surprising. If you've heard  
anything about startups you've probably heard about the long hours.  
As far as I can tell these are universal. I can't think of any  
successful startups whose founders worked 9 to 5. And it's  
particularly necessary for younger founders to work long hours  
because they're probably not as efficient as they'll be later.Your second advantage, poverty, might not sound like an advantage,  
but it is a huge one. Poverty implies you can live cheaply,  
and this is critically important for startups. Nearly every startup  
that fails, fails by running out of money. It's a little misleading  
to put it this way, because there's usually some other underlying  
cause. But regardless of the source of your problems, a low burn  
rate gives you more opportunity to recover from them. And since  
most startups make all kinds of mistakes at first, room to recover  
from mistakes is a valuable thing to have.Most startups end up doing something different than they planned.  
The way the successful ones find something that works is by trying  
things that don't. So the worst thing you can do in a startup is  
to have a rigid, pre-ordained plan and then start spending a lot  
of money to implement it. Better to operate cheaply and give your  
ideas time to evolve.Recent grads can live on practically nothing, and this gives you  
an edge over older founders, because the main cost in software  
startups is people. The guys with kids and mortgages are at a  
real disadvantage. This is one reason I'd bet on the 25 year old  
over the 32 year old. The 32 year old probably is a better programmer,  
but probably also has a much more expensive life. Whereas a 25  
year old has some work experience (more on that later) but can live  
as cheaply as an undergrad.Robert Morris and I were 29 and 30 respectively when we started  
Viaweb, but fortunately we still lived like 23 year olds. We both had  
roughly zero assets. I would have loved to have a mortgage,  
since that would have meant I had a house. But in retrospect  
having nothing turned out to be convenient. I wasn't tied down and  
I was used to living cheaply.Even more important than living cheaply, though, is thinking cheaply.  
One reason the Apple II was so popular was that it was cheap. The  
computer itself was cheap, and it used cheap, off-the-shelf peripherals  
like a cassette tape recorder for data storage and a TV as a monitor.  
And you know why? Because Woz designed this computer for himself,  
and he couldn't afford anything more.We benefitted from the same phenomenon. Our prices were  
daringly low for the time. The top level of service was  
$300 a month, which was an order of magnitude below the norm. In  
retrospect this was a smart move, but we didn't do it because we  
were smart. $300 a month seemed like a lot of money to us. Like  
Apple, we created something inexpensive, and therefore popular,  
simply because we were poor.A lot of startups have that form: someone comes along and makes  
something for a tenth or a hundredth of what it used to cost, and  
the existing players can't follow because they don't even want to  
think about a world in which that's possible. Traditional long  
distance carriers, for example, didn't even want to think about  
VoIP. (It was coming, all the same.) Being poor helps in this  
game, because your own personal bias points in the same direction  
technology evolves in.The advantages of rootlessness are similar to those of poverty.  
When you're young you're more mobile—not just because you don't  
have a house or much stuff, but also because you're less likely to  
have serious relationships. This turns out to be important, because  
a lot of startups involve someone moving.The founders of Kiko, for example, are now en route to the Bay Area  
to start their next startup. It's a better place for what they  
want to do. And it was easy for them to decide to go, because  
neither as far as I know has a serious girlfriend, and everything  
they own will fit in one car—or more precisely, will either fit  
in one car or is crappy enough that they don't mind leaving it  
behind.They at least were in Boston. What if they'd been in Nebraska,  
like Evan Williams was at their age? Someone wrote recently that  
the drawback of Y Combinator was that you had to move to participate.  
It couldn't be any other way. The kind of conversations we have  
with founders, we have to have in person. We fund a dozen startups  
at a time, and we can't be in a dozen places at once. But even if  
we could somehow magically save people from moving, we wouldn't.  
We wouldn't be doing founders a favor by letting them stay in  
Nebraska. Places that aren't   
startup hubs are toxic to startups.  
You can tell that from indirect evidence. You can tell how hard  
it must be to start a startup in Houston or Chicago or Miami from  
the microscopically small number, per capita, that succeed   
there. I don't know exactly what's suppressing all the startups in these  
towns—probably a hundred subtle little things—but something  
must be.  
[2]Maybe this will change. Maybe the increasing cheapness of startups  
will mean they'll be able to survive anywhere, instead of only in  
the most hospitable environments. Maybe 37signals is the pattern  
for the future. But maybe not. Historically there have always  
been certain towns that were centers for certain industries, and  
if you weren't in one of them you were at a disadvantage. So my  
guess is that 37signals is an anomaly. We're looking at a pattern  
much older than "Web 2.0" here.Perhaps the reason more startups per capita happen in the Bay Area  
than Miami is simply that there are more founder-type people there.  
Successful startups are almost never started by one person. Usually  
they begin with a conversation in which someone mentions that  
something would be a good idea for a company, and his friend says,  
"Yeah, that is a good idea, let's try it." If you're missing that  
second person who says "let's try it," the startup never happens.  
And that is another area where undergrads have an edge. They're  
surrounded by people willing to say that. At a good college you're  
concentrated together with a lot of other ambitious and technically  
minded people—probably more concentrated than you'll ever be  
again. If your nucleus spits out a neutron, there's a good chance  
it will hit another nucleus.The number one question people ask us at Y Combinator is: Where can  
I find a co-founder? That's the biggest problem for someone starting  
a startup at 30. When they were in school they knew a lot of good  
co-founders, but by 30 they've either lost touch with them or these  
people are tied down by jobs they don't want to leave.Viaweb was an anomaly in this respect too. Though we were comparatively  
old, we weren't tied down by impressive jobs. I was trying to be  
an artist, which is not very constraining, and Robert, though 29,  
was still in grad school due to a little interruption in his academic  
career back in 1988. So arguably the Worm made Viaweb possible.  
Otherwise Robert would have been a junior professor at that age,  
and he wouldn't have had time to work on crazy speculative projects  
with me.Most of the questions people ask Y Combinator we have some kind of  
answer for, but not the co-founder question. There is no good  
answer. Co-founders really should be people you already know. And  
by far the best place to meet them is school. You have a large  
sample of smart people; you get to compare how they all perform on  
identical tasks; and everyone's life is pretty fluid. A lot of  
startups grow out of schools for this reason. Google, Yahoo, and  
Microsoft, among others, were all founded by people who met in  
school. (In Microsoft's case, it was high school.)Many students feel they should wait and get a little more experience  
before they start a company. All other things being equal, they  
should. But all other things are not quite as equal as they look.  
Most students don't realize how rich they are in the scarcest  
ingredient in startups, co-founders. If you wait too long, you may  
find that your friends are now involved in some project they don't  
want to abandon. The better they are, the more likely this is to  
happen.One way to mitigate this problem might be to actively plan your  
startup while you're getting those n years of experience. Sure,  
go off and get jobs or go to grad school or whatever, but get  
together regularly to scheme, so the idea of starting a startup  
stays alive in everyone's brain. I don't know if this works, but  
it can't hurt to try.It would be helpful just to realize what an advantage you have as  
students. Some of your classmates are probably going to be successful  
startup founders; at a great technical university, that is a near  
certainty. So which ones? If I were you I'd look for the people  
who are not just smart, but incurable   
builders.   
Look  
for the people who keep starting projects, and finish at least some  
of them. That's what we look for. Above all else, above academic  
credentials and even the idea you apply with, we look for people  
who build things.The other place co-founders meet is at work. Fewer do than at  
school, but there are things you can do to improve the odds. The  
most important, obviously, is to work somewhere that has a lot of  
smart, young people. Another is to work for a company located in  
a startup hub. It will be easier to talk a co-worker into quitting  
with you in a place where startups are happening all around you.You might also want to look at the employment agreement you sign  
when you get hired. Most will say that any ideas you think of while  
you're employed by the company belong to them. In practice it's  
hard for anyone to prove what ideas you had when, so the line gets  
drawn at code. If you're going to start a startup, don't write any  
of the code while you're still employed. Or at least discard any  
code you wrote while still employed and start over. It's not so  
much that your employer will find out and sue you. It won't come  
to that; investors or acquirers or (if you're so lucky) underwriters  
will nail you first. Between t = 0 and when you buy that yacht,  
someone is going to ask if any of your code legally belongs  
to anyone else, and you need to be able to say no.  
[3]The most overreaching employee agreement I've seen so far is Amazon's.  
In addition to the usual clauses about owning your ideas, you also  
can't be a founder of a startup that has another founder who worked  
at Amazon—even if you didn't know them or even work there at the  
same time. I suspect they'd have a hard time enforcing this, but  
it's a bad sign they even try. There are plenty of other places  
to work; you may as well choose one that keeps more of your options  
open.Speaking of cool places to work, there is of course Google. But I  
notice something slightly frightening about Google: zero startups  
come out of there. In that respect it's a black hole. People seem  
to like working at Google too much to leave. So if you hope to start  
a startup one day, the evidence so far suggests you shouldn't work  
there.I realize this seems odd advice. If they make your life so good  
that you don't want to leave, why not work there? Because, in  
effect, you're probably getting a local maximum. You need a certain  
activation energy to start a startup. So an employer who's fairly  
pleasant to work for can lull you into staying indefinitely, even  
if it would be a net win for you to leave.  
[4]The best place to work, if you want to start a startup, is probably  
a startup. In addition to being the right sort of experience, one  
way or another it will be over quickly. You'll either end up rich,  
in which case problem solved, or the startup will get bought, in  
which case it it will start to suck to work there and it will be  
easy to leave, or most likely, the thing will blow up and you'll  
be free again.Your final advantage, ignorance, may not sound very useful. I  
deliberately used a controversial word for it; you might equally  
call it innocence. But it seems to be a powerful force. My Y  
Combinator co-founder Jessica Livingston is just about to publish  
a book of interviews  
with startup founders, and I noticed a remarkable pattern in them.  
One after another said that if they'd known how hard it would be,  
they would have been too intimidated to start.Ignorance can be useful when it's a counterweight to other forms  
of stupidity. It's useful in starting startups because you're  
capable of more than you realize. Starting startups is harder than  
you expect, but you're also capable of more than you expect, so  
they balance out.Most people look at a company like Apple and think, how could I  
ever make such a thing? Apple is an institution, and I'm just a  
person. But every institution was at one point just a handful of  
people in a room deciding to start something. Institutions are  
made up, and made up by people no different from you.I'm not saying everyone could start a startup. I'm sure most people  
couldn't; I don't know much about the population at large. When  
you get to groups I know well, like hackers, I can say more precisely.  
At the top schools, I'd guess as many as a quarter of the CS majors  
could make it as startup founders if they wanted.That "if they wanted" is an important qualification—so important  
that it's almost cheating to append it like that—because once you  
get over a certain threshold of intelligence, which most CS majors  
at top schools are past, the deciding factor in whether you succeed  
as a founder is how much you want to. You don't have to be that  
smart. If you're not a genius, just start a startup in some unsexy  
field where you'll have less competition, like software for human  
resources departments. I picked that example at random, but I feel  
safe in predicting that whatever they have now, it wouldn't take  
genius to do better. There are a lot of people out there working  
on boring stuff who are desperately in need of better software, so  
however short you think you fall of Larry and Sergey, you can ratchet  
down the coolness of the idea far enough to compensate.As well as preventing you from being intimidated, ignorance can  
sometimes help you discover new ideas. Steve Wozniak  
put this very strongly:  
  
 All the best things that I did at Apple came from (a) not having  
 money and (b) not having done it before, ever. Every single thing  
 that we came out with that was really great, I'd never once done  
 that thing in my life.  
  
When you know nothing, you have to reinvent stuff for yourself, and  
if you're smart your reinventions may be better than what preceded  
them. This is especially true in fields where the rules change.  
All our ideas about software were developed in a time when processors  
were slow, and memories and disks were tiny. Who knows what obsolete  
assumptions are embedded in the conventional wisdom? And the way  
these assumptions are going to get fixed is not by explicitly  
deallocating them, but by something more akin to garbage collection.  
Someone ignorant but smart will come along and reinvent everything,  
and in the process simply fail to reproduce certain existing ideas.MinusSo much for the advantages of young founders. What about the  
disadvantages? I'm going to start with what goes wrong and try to  
trace it back to the root causes.What goes wrong with young founders is that they build stuff that  
looks like class projects. It was only recently that we figured  
this out ourselves. We noticed a lot of similarities between the  
startups that seemed to be falling behind, but we couldn't figure  
out how to put it into words. Then finally we realized what it  
was: they were building class projects.But what does that really mean? What's wrong with class projects?  
What's the difference between a class project and a real startup?  
If we could answer that question it would be useful not just to  
would-be startup founders but to students in general, because we'd  
be a long way toward explaining the mystery of the so-called real  
world.There seem to be two big things missing in class projects: (1) an  
iterative definition of a real problem and (2) intensity.The first is probably unavoidable. Class projects will inevitably  
solve fake problems. For one thing, real problems are rare and  
valuable. If a professor wanted to have students solve real problems,  
he'd face the same paradox as someone trying to give an example of  
whatever "paradigm" might succeed the Standard Model of physics.  
There may well be something that does, but if you could think of  
an example you'd be entitled to the Nobel Prize. Similarly, good  
new problems are not to be had for the asking.In technology the difficulty is compounded by the fact that real  
startups tend to discover the problem they're solving by a process  
of evolution. Someone has an idea for something; they build it;  
and in doing so (and probably only by doing so) they realize  
the problem they should be solving is another one. Even if the  
professor let you change your project description on the fly, there  
isn't time enough to do that in a college class, or a market to  
supply evolutionary pressures. So class  
projects are mostly about implementation, which is the least  
of your problems in a startup.It's not just that in a startup you work on the idea as well as  
implementation. The very implementation is different. Its main  
purpose is to refine the idea. Often the only value of most of the  
stuff you build in the first six months is that it proves your  
initial idea was mistaken. And that's extremely valuable. If  
you're free of a misconception that everyone else still shares,  
you're in a powerful position. But you're not thinking that way  
about a class project. Proving your initial plan was mistaken would  
just get you a bad grade. Instead of building stuff to throw away,  
you tend to want every line of code to go toward that final goal  
of showing you did a lot of work.That leads to our second difference: the way class projects are  
measured. Professors will tend to judge you by the distance between  
the starting point and where you are now. If someone has achieved  
a lot, they should get a good grade. But customers will judge you  
from the other direction: the distance remaining between where you  
are now and the features they need. The market doesn't give a shit  
how hard you worked. Users just want your software to do what they  
need, and you get a zero otherwise. That is one of the most  
distinctive differences between school and the real world: there  
is no reward for putting in a good effort. In fact, the whole  
concept of a "good effort" is a fake idea adults invented to encourage  
kids. It is not found in nature.Such lies seem to be helpful to kids. But unfortunately when you  
graduate they don't give you a list of all the lies they told you  
during your education. You have to get them beaten out of you by  
contact with the real world. And this is why so many jobs want  
work experience. I couldn't understand that when I was in college.  
I knew how to program. In fact, I could tell I knew how to program  
better than most people doing it for a living. So what was this  
mysterious "work experience" and why did I need it?Now I know what it is, and part of the confusion is grammatical.  
Describing it as "work experience" implies it's like experience  
operating a certain kind of machine, or using a certain programming  
language. But really what work experience refers to is not some  
specific expertise, but the elimination of certain habits left over  
from childhood.One of the defining qualities of kids is that they flake. When  
you're a kid and you face some hard test, you can cry and say "I  
can't" and they won't make you do it. Of course, no one can make  
you do anything in the grownup world either. What they do instead  
is fire you. And when motivated by that  
you find you can do a lot more than you realized. So one of the  
things employers expect from someone with "work experience" is the  
elimination of the flake reflex—the ability to get things done,  
with no excuses.The other thing you get from work experience is an understanding  
of what work is, and in particular, how intrinsically horrible it  
is. Fundamentally the equation is a brutal one: you have to spend  
most of your waking hours doing stuff someone else wants, or starve.  
There are a few places where the work is so interesting that this  
is concealed, because what other people want done happens to coincide  
with what you want to work on. But you only have to imagine what  
would happen if they diverged to see the underlying reality.It's not so much that adults lie to kids about this as never explain  
it. They never explain what the deal is with money. You know from  
an early age that you'll have some sort of job, because everyone  
asks what you're going to "be" when you grow up. What they  
don't tell you is that as a kid you're sitting on the shoulders of  
someone else who's treading water, and that starting working means  
you get thrown into the water on your own, and have to start treading  
water yourself or sink. "Being" something is incidental; the  
immediate problem is not to drown.The relationship between work and money tends to dawn on you only  
gradually. At least it did for me. One's first thought tends to  
be simply "This sucks. I'm in debt. Plus I have to get up on monday  
and go to work." Gradually you realize that these two things are  
as tightly connected as only a market can make them.So the most important advantage 24 year old founders have over 20  
year old founders is that they know what they're trying to avoid.  
To the average undergrad the idea of getting rich translates into  
buying Ferraris, or being admired. To someone who has learned from  
experience about the relationship between money and work, it  
translates to something way more important: it means you get to opt  
out of the brutal equation that governs the lives of 99.9% of people.  
Getting rich means you can stop treading water.Someone who gets this will work much harder at making a startup  
succeed—with the proverbial energy of a drowning man, in fact.  
But understanding the relationship between money and work also  
changes the way you work. You don't get money just for working,  
but for doing things other people want. Someone who's figured that  
out will automatically focus more on the user. And that cures the  
other half of the class-project syndrome. After you've been working  
for a while, you yourself tend to measure what you've done the same  
way the market does.Of course, you don't have to spend years working to learn this  
stuff. If you're sufficiently perceptive you can grasp these things  
while you're still in school. Sam Altman did. He must have, because  
Loopt is no class project. And as his example suggests, this can  
be valuable knowledge. At a minimum, if you get this stuff, you  
already have most of what you gain from the "work experience"  
employers consider so desirable. But of course if you really get  
it, you can use this information in a way that's more valuable to  
you than that.NowSo suppose you think you might start a startup at some point, either  
when you graduate or a few years after. What should you do now?  
For both jobs and grad school, there are ways to prepare while  
you're in college. If you want to get a job when you graduate, you  
should get summer jobs at places you'd like to work. If you want  
to go to grad school, it will help to work on research projects as  
an undergrad. What's the equivalent for startups? How do you keep  
your options maximally open?One thing you can do while you're still in school is to learn how  
startups work. Unfortunately that's not easy. Few if any colleges  
have classes about startups. There may be business school classes  
on entrepreneurship, as they call it over there, but these are  
likely to be a waste of time. Business schools like to talk about  
startups, but philosophically they're at the opposite end of the  
spectrum. Most books on startups also seem to be useless. I've  
looked at a few and none get it right. Books in most fields are  
written by people who know the subject from experience, but for  
startups there's a unique problem: by definition the founders of  
successful startups don't need to write books to make money. As a  
result most books on the subject end up being written by people who  
don't understand it.So I'd be skeptical of classes and books. The way to learn about  
startups is by watching them in action, preferably by working at  
one. How do you do that as an undergrad? Probably by sneaking in  
through the back door. Just hang around a lot and gradually start  
doing things for them. Most startups are (or should be) very  
cautious about hiring. Every hire increases the burn rate, and bad  
hires early on are hard to recover from. However, startups usually  
have a fairly informal atmosphere, and there's always a lot that  
needs to be done. If you just start doing stuff for them, many  
will be too busy to shoo you away. You can thus gradually work  
your way into their confidence, and maybe turn it into an official  
job later, or not, whichever you prefer. This won't work for all  
startups, but it would work for most I've known.Number two, make the most of the great advantage of school: the  
wealth of co-founders. Look at the people around you and ask  
yourself which you'd like to work with. When you apply that test,  
you may find you get surprising results. You may find you'd prefer  
the quiet guy you've mostly ignored to someone who seems impressive  
but has an attitude to match. I'm not suggesting you suck up to  
people you don't really like because you think one day they'll be  
successful. Exactly the opposite, in fact: you should only start  
a startup with someone you like, because a startup will put your  
friendship through a stress test. I'm just saying you should think  
about who you really admire and hang out with them, instead of  
whoever circumstances throw you together with.Another thing you can do is learn skills that will be useful to you  
in a startup. These may be different from the skills you'd learn  
to get a job. For example, thinking about getting a job will make  
you want to learn programming languages you think employers want,  
like Java and C++. Whereas if you start a startup, you get to pick  
the language, so you have to think about which will actually let  
you get the most done. If you use that test you might end up  
learning Ruby or Python instead.  
But the most important skill for a startup founder isn't a programming  
technique. It's a knack for understanding users and figuring out  
how to give them what they want. I know I repeat this, but that's  
because it's so important. And it's a skill you can learn, though  
perhaps habit might be a better word. Get into the habit of thinking  
of software as having users. What do those users want? What would  
make them say wow?This is particularly valuable for undergrads, because the concept  
of users is missing from most college programming classes. The way  
you get taught programming in college would be like teaching writing  
as grammar, without mentioning that its purpose is to communicate  
something to an audience. Fortunately an audience for software is  
now only an http request away. So in addition to the programming  
you do for your classes, why not build some kind of website people  
will find useful? At the very least it will teach you how to write  
software with users. In the best case, it might not just be  
preparation for a startup, but the startup itself, like it was for  
Yahoo and Google.Notes[1]  
Even the desire to protect one's children seems weaker, judging  
from things people have historically done to their kids  
rather than risk their community's disapproval. (I assume we still  
do things that will be regarded in the future as barbaric, but  
historical abuses are easier for us to see.)[2]  
Worrying that Y Combinator makes founders move for 3 months  
also suggests one underestimates how hard it is to start a startup.  
You're going to have to put up with much greater inconveniences than  
that.[3]  
Most employee agreements  
say that any idea relating to the company's present or potential  
future business belongs to them. Often as not the second clause could  
include any possible startup, and anyone doing due diligence for an   
investor or acquirer will assume the worst.To be safe either (a) don't use code written while you  
were still employed in your previous job, or (b) get your employer to  
renounce, in writing, any claim to the code you write for your side   
project. Many will consent to (b) rather than  
lose a prized employee. The downside is that you'll have to tell them  
exactly what your project does.[4]  
Geshke and Warnock only founded Adobe because Xerox ignored  
them. If Xerox had used what they built, they would probably   
never have left PARC.Thanks to Jessica Livingston and Robert Morris for reading  
drafts of this, and to Jeff Arnold and the SIPB for inviting me to  
speak.  
  
Comment on this essay.Chinese TranslationArabic Translation

# How to Present to Investors

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
August 2006, rev. April 2007, September 2010In a few days it will be Demo Day, when the startups we funded  
this summer present to investors. Y Combinator funds startups twice  
a year, in January and June. Ten weeks later we invite all the  
investors we know to hear them present what they've built so far.Ten weeks is not much time. The average startup probably doesn't  
have much to show for itself after ten weeks. But the average  
startup fails. When you look at the ones that went on to do great  
things, you find a lot that began with someone pounding out a  
prototype in a week or two of nonstop work. Startups are a  
counterexample to the rule that haste makes waste.(Too much money seems to be as bad for startups as too much time,  
so we don't give them much money either.)A week before Demo Day, we have a dress rehearsal called Rehearsal Day.  
At other Y Combinator events we allow outside guests, but not at  
Rehearsal Day. No one except the other founders gets to see the rehearsals.The presentations on Rehearsal Day are often pretty rough. But this is  
to be expected. We try to pick founders who are good at building  
things, not ones who are slick presenters. Some of the founders  
are just out of college, or even still in it, and have never spoken  
to a group of people they didn't already know.So we concentrate on the basics. On Demo Day each startup will  
only get ten minutes, so we encourage them to focus on just two  
goals: (a) explain what you're doing, and (b) explain why users  
will want it.That might sound easy, but it's not when the speakers have no  
experience presenting, and they're explaining technical matters to  
an audience that's mostly non-technical.This situation is constantly repeated when startups present to  
investors: people who are bad at explaining, talking to people who  
are bad at understanding. Practically every successful startup,  
including stars like Google, presented at some point to investors  
who didn't get it and turned them down. Was it because the founders  
were bad at presenting, or because the investors were obtuse? It's  
probably always some of both.At the most recent Rehearsal Day, we four Y Combinator partners found  
ourselves saying a lot of the same things we said at the last two.  
So at dinner afterward we collected all our tips about presenting  
to investors. Most startups face similar challenges, so we hope  
these will be useful to a wider audience.  
1. Explain what you're doing.Investors' main question when judging a very early startup is whether  
you've made a compelling product. Before they can judge whether  
you've built a good x, they have to understand what kind of x you've  
built. They will get very frustrated if instead of telling them  
what you do, you make them sit through some kind of preamble.Say what you're doing as soon as possible, preferably in the first  
sentence. "We're Jeff and Bob and we've built an easy to use web-based  
database. Now we'll show it to you and explain why people need  
this."If you're a great public speaker you may be able to violate this  
rule. Last year one founder spent the whole first half of his talk  
on a fascinating analysis of the limits of the conventional desktop  
metaphor. He got away with it, but unless you're a captivating  
speaker, which most hackers aren't, it's better to play it safe.2. Get rapidly to demo.This section is now obsolete for YC founders presenting  
at Demo Day, because Demo Day presentations are now so short  
that they rarely include much if any demo. They seem to work  
just as well without, however, which makes me think I was  
wrong to emphasize demos so much before.A demo explains what you've made more effectively than any verbal  
description. The only thing worth talking about first is the problem  
you're trying to solve and why it's important. But don't spend  
more than a tenth of your time on that. Then demo.When you demo, don't run through a catalog of features. Instead  
start with the problem you're solving, and then show how your product  
solves it. Show features in an order driven by some kind of purpose,  
rather than the order in which they happen to appear on the screen.If you're demoing something web-based, assume that the network  
connection will mysteriously die 30 seconds into your presentation,  
and come prepared with a copy of the server software running on  
your laptop.3. Better a narrow description than a vague one.One reason founders resist describing their projects concisely is  
that, at this early stage, there are all kinds of possibilities.  
The most concise descriptions seem misleadingly narrow. So for  
example a group that has built an easy web-based database might  
resist calling their applicaton that, because it could be so much  
more. In fact, it could be anything...The problem is, as you approach (in the calculus sense) a description  
of something that could be anything, the content of your description  
approaches zero. If you describe your web-based database as "a  
system to allow people to collaboratively leverage the value of  
information," it will go in one investor ear and out the other.  
They'll just discard that sentence as meaningless boilerplate, and  
hope, with increasing impatience, that in the next sentence you'll  
actually explain what you've made.Your primary goal is not to describe everything your system might  
one day become, but simply to convince investors you're worth talking  
to further. So approach this like an algorithm that gets the right  
answer by successive approximations. Begin with a description  
that's gripping but perhaps overly narrow, then flesh it out to the  
extent you can. It's the same principle as incremental development:  
start with a simple prototype, then add features, but at every point  
have working code. In this case, "working code" means a working  
description in the investor's head.4. Don't talk and drive.Have one person talk while another uses the computer. If the same  
person does both, they'll inevitably mumble downwards at the computer  
screen instead of talking clearly at the audience.As long as you're standing near the audience and looking at them,  
politeness (and habit) compel them to pay attention to you. Once  
you stop looking at them to fuss with something on your computer,  
their minds drift off to the errands they have to run later.5. Don't talk about secondary matters at length.If you only have a few minutes, spend them explaining what your  
product does and why it's great. Second order issues like competitors  
or resumes should be single slides you go through quickly at the  
end. If you have impressive resumes, just flash them on the screen  
for 15 seconds and say a few words. For competitors, list the top  
3 and explain in one sentence each what they lack  
that you have. And put this kind of thing at the end, after you've  
made it clear what you've built.6. Don't get too deeply into business models.It's good to talk about how you plan to make money, but mainly  
because it shows you care about that and have thought about it.  
Don't go into detail about your business model, because (a) that's  
not what smart investors care about in a brief presentation, and  
(b) any business model you have at this point is probably wrong  
anyway.Recently a VC who came to speak at Y Combinator talked about a  
company he just invested in. He said their business model was wrong  
and would probably change three times before they got it right.  
The founders were experienced guys who'd done startups before and  
who'd just succeeded in getting millions from one of the top VC  
firms, and even their business model was crap. (And yet he invested  
anyway, because he expected it to be crap at this stage.)If you're solving an important problem, you're going to sound a lot  
smarter talking about that than the business model. The business  
model is just a bunch of guesses, and guesses about stuff that's  
probably not your area of expertise. So don't spend your precious  
few minutes talking about crap when you could be talking about  
solid, interesting things you know a lot about: the problem you're  
solving and what you've built so far.As well as being a bad use of time, if your business model seems  
spectacularly wrong, that will push the stuff you want investors  
to remember out of their heads. They'll just remember you as the  
company with the boneheaded plan for making money, rather than the  
company that solved that important problem.7. Talk slowly and clearly at the audience.Everyone at Rehearsal Day could see the difference between the people  
who'd been out in the world for a while and had presented to groups,  
and those who hadn't.You need to use a completely different voice and manner talking to  
a roomful of people than you would in conversation. Everyday life  
gives you no practice in this. If you can't already do it, the  
best solution is to treat it as a consciously artificial trick,  
like juggling.However, that doesn't mean you should talk like some kind of  
announcer. Audiences tune that out. What you need to do is talk  
in this artificial way, and yet make it seem conversational. (Writing  
is the same. Good writing is an elaborate effort to seem spontaneous.)If you want to write out your whole presentation beforehand and  
memorize it, that's ok. That has worked for some groups in the  
past. But make sure to write something that sounds like spontaneous,  
informal speech, and deliver it that way too.Err on the side of speaking slowly. At Rehearsal Day, one of the founders  
mentioned a rule actors use: if you feel you're speaking too slowly,  
you're speaking at about the right speed.8. Have one person talk.Startups often want to show that all the founders are equal partners.  
This is a good instinct; investors dislike unbalanced teams. But  
trying to show it by partitioning the presentation is going too  
far. It's distracting. You can demonstrate your respect  
for one another in more subtle ways. For example, when one of the  
groups presented at Demo Day, the more extroverted of the two  
founders did most of the talking, but he described his co-founder  
as the best hacker he'd ever met, and you could tell he meant it.Pick the one or at most two best speakers, and have them do most  
of the talking.Exception: If one of the founders is an expert in some specific  
technical field, it can be good for them to talk about that for a  
minute or so. This kind of "expert witness" can add credibility,  
even if the audience doesn't understand all the details. If Jobs  
and Wozniak had 10 minutes to present the Apple II, it might be a good plan  
to have Jobs speak for 9 minutes and have Woz speak for a minute  
in the middle about some of the technical feats he'd pulled off in  
the design. (Though of course if it were actually those two, Jobs  
would speak for the entire 10 minutes.)9. Seem confident.Between the brief time available and their lack of technical  
background, many in the audience will have a hard time evaluating  
what you're doing. Probably the single biggest piece of evidence,  
initially, will be your own confidence in it. You have  
to show you're impressed with what you've made.And I mean show, not tell. Never say "we're passionate" or "our  
product is great." People just ignore that—or worse, write you  
off as bullshitters. Such messages must be implicit.What you must not do is seem nervous and apologetic. If you've  
truly made something good, you're doing investors a favor by  
telling them about it. If you don't genuinely believe that, perhaps  
you ought to change what your company is doing. If you don't believe  
your startup has such promise that you'd be doing them a favor by  
letting them invest, why are you investing your time in it?10. Don't try to seem more than you are.Don't worry if your company is just a few months old and doesn't  
have an office yet, or your founders are technical people with no  
business experience. Google was like that once, and they turned out  
ok. Smart investors can see past such superficial flaws. They're  
not looking for finished, smooth presentations. They're looking  
for raw talent. All you need to convince them of is that you're  
smart and that you're onto something good. If you try too hard to  
conceal your rawness—by trying to seem corporate, or pretending  
to know about stuff you don't—you may just conceal your talent.You can afford to be candid about what you haven't figured out yet.  
Don't go out of your way to bring it up (e.g. by having a slide  
about what might go wrong), but don't try to pretend either that  
you're further along than you are. If you're a hacker and you're  
presenting to experienced investors, they're probably better at  
detecting bullshit than you are at producing it.11. Don't put too many words on slides.When there are a lot of words on a slide, people just skip reading  
it. So look at your slides and ask of each word "could I cross  
this out?" This includes gratuitous clip art. Try to get your  
slides under 20 words if you can.Don't read your slides. They should be something in the background  
as you face the audience and talk to them, not something you face  
and read to an audience sitting behind you.Cluttered sites don't do well in demos, especially when they're  
projected onto a screen. At the very least, crank up the font size  
big enough to make all the text legible. But cluttered sites are  
bad anyway, so perhaps you should use this opportunity to make your  
design simpler.12. Specific numbers are good.If you have any kind of data, however preliminary, tell the audience.  
Numbers stick in people's heads. If you can claim that the median  
visitor generates 12 page views, that's great.But don't give them more than four or five numbers, and only give  
them numbers specific to you. You don't need to tell them the size  
of the market you're in. Who cares, really, if it's 500 million  
or 5 billion a year? Talking about that is like an actor at the  
beginning of his career telling his parents how much Tom Hanks  
makes. Yeah, sure, but first you have to become Tom Hanks. The  
important part is not whether he makes ten million a year or a  
hundred, but how you get there.13. Tell stories about users.The biggest fear of investors looking at early stage startups is  
that you've built something based on your own a priori theories of  
what the world needs, but that no one will actually want. So it's  
good if you can talk about problems specific users have and how you  
solve them.Greg Mcadoo said one thing Sequoia looks for is the "proxy for  
demand." What are people doing now, using inadequate tools, that  
shows they need what you're making?Another sign of user need is when people pay a lot for something.  
It's easy to convince investors there will be demand for  
a cheaper alternative to something popular, if you preserve  
the qualities that made it popular.The best stories about user needs are about your own. A remarkable  
number of famous startups grew out of some need the founders had:  
Apple, Microsoft, Yahoo, Google. Experienced investors know that,  
so stories of this type will get their attention. The next best  
thing is to talk about the needs of people you know personally,  
like your friends or siblings.14. Make a soundbite stick in their heads.Professional investors hear a lot of pitches. After a while they  
all blur together. The first cut is simply to be one of those  
they remember. And the way to ensure that is to create a descriptive  
phrase about yourself that sticks in their heads.In Hollywood, these phrases seem to be of the form "x meets y."  
  
In the startup world, they're usually "the x of y" or "the x y."  
Viaweb's was "the Microsoft Word of ecommerce."Find one and launch it clearly (but apparently casually) in your  
talk, preferably near the beginning.It's a good exercise for you, too, to sit down and try to figure  
out how to describe your startup in one compelling phrase. If you  
can't, your plans may not be sufficiently focused.How to Fund a StartupHackers' Guide to InvestorsSpanish TranslationJapanese TranslationRussian Translation  
  
Image: Casey Muller: Trevor Blackwell at Rehearsal Day, summer 2006

# Copy What You Like

July 2006  
When I was in high school I spent a lot of time imitating bad  
writers. What we studied in English classes was mostly fiction,  
so I assumed that was the highest form of writing. Mistake number  
one. The stories that seemed to be most admired were ones in which  
people suffered in complicated ways. Anything funny or  
gripping was ipso facto suspect, unless it was old enough to be hard to  
understand, like Shakespeare or Chaucer. Mistake number two. The  
ideal medium seemed the short story, which I've since learned had  
quite a brief life, roughly coincident with the peak of magazine  
publishing. But since their size made them perfect for use in  
high school classes, we read a lot of them, which gave us the  
impression the short story was flourishing. Mistake number three.  
And because they were so short, nothing really had to happen; you  
could just show a randomly truncated slice of life, and that was  
considered advanced. Mistake number four. The result was that I  
wrote a lot of stories in which nothing happened except that someone  
was unhappy in a way that seemed deep.For most of college I was a philosophy major. I was very impressed  
by the papers published in philosophy journals. They were so  
beautifully typeset, and their tone was just captivating—alternately  
casual and buffer-overflowingly technical. A fellow would be walking  
along a street and suddenly modality qua modality would spring upon  
him. I didn't ever quite understand these papers, but I figured  
I'd get around to that later, when I had time to reread them more  
closely. In the meantime I tried my best to imitate them. This  
was, I can now see, a doomed undertaking, because they weren't  
really saying anything. No philosopher ever refuted another, for  
example, because no one said anything definite enough to refute.  
Needless to say, my imitations didn't say anything either.In grad school I was still wasting time imitating the wrong things.  
There was then a fashionable type of program called an expert system,  
at the core of which was something called an inference engine. I  
looked at what these things did and thought "I could write that in  
a thousand lines of code." And yet eminent professors were writing  
books about them, and startups were selling them for a year's salary  
a copy. What an opportunity, I thought; these impressive things  
seem easy to me; I must be pretty sharp. Wrong. It was simply a  
fad. The books the professors wrote about expert systems are now  
ignored. They were not even on a path to anything interesting.  
And the customers paying so much for them were largely the same  
government agencies that paid thousands for screwdrivers and toilet  
seats.How do you avoid copying the wrong things? Copy only what you  
genuinely like. That would have saved me in all three cases. I  
didn't enjoy the short stories we had to read in English classes;  
I didn't learn anything from philosophy papers; I didn't use expert  
systems myself. I believed these things were good because they  
were admired.It can be hard to separate the things you like from the things  
you're impressed with. One trick is to ignore presentation. Whenever  
I see a painting impressively hung in a museum, I ask myself: how  
much would I pay for this if I found it at a garage sale, dirty and  
frameless, and with no idea who painted it? If you walk around a  
museum trying this experiment, you'll find you get some truly  
startling results. Don't ignore this data point just because it's  
an outlier.Another way to figure out what you like is to look at what you enjoy  
as guilty pleasures. Many things people like, especially if they're  
young and ambitious, they like largely for the feeling of virtue  
in liking them. 99% of people reading Ulysses are thinking  
"I'm reading Ulysses" as they do it. A guilty pleasure is  
at least a pure one. What do you read when you don't feel up to being  
virtuous? What kind of book do you read and feel sad that there's  
only half of it left, instead of being impressed that you're half  
way through? That's what you really like.Even when you find genuinely good things to copy, there's another  
pitfall to be avoided. Be careful to copy what makes them good,  
rather than their flaws. It's easy to be drawn into imitating  
flaws, because they're easier to see, and of course easier to copy  
too. For example, most painters in the eighteenth and nineteenth  
centuries used brownish colors. They were imitating the great  
painters of the Renaissance, whose paintings by that time were brown  
with dirt. Those paintings have since been cleaned, revealing  
brilliant colors; their imitators are of course still brown.It was painting, incidentally, that cured me of copying the wrong  
things. Halfway through grad school I decided I wanted to try being  
a painter, and the art world was so manifestly corrupt that it  
snapped the leash of credulity. These people made philosophy  
professors seem as scrupulous as mathematicians. It was so clearly  
a choice of doing good work xor being an insider that I was forced  
to see the distinction. It's there to some degree in almost every  
field, but I had till then managed to avoid facing it.That was one of the most valuable things I learned from painting:  
you have to figure out for yourself what's   
good. You can't trust  
authorities. They'll lie to you on this one.  
  
Comment on this essay.Chinese TranslationRomanian TranslationSpanish TranslationRussian Translation

# The Island Test

July 2006I've discovered a handy test for figuring out what you're addicted  
to. Imagine you were going to spend the weekend at a friend's house  
on a little island off the coast of Maine. There are no shops on  
the island and you won't be able to leave while you're there. Also,  
you've never been to this house before, so you can't assume it will  
have more than any house might.What, besides clothes and toiletries, do you make a point of packing?  
That's what you're addicted to. For example, if you find yourself  
packing a bottle of vodka (just in case), you may want to stop and  
think about that.For me the list is four things: books, earplugs, a notebook, and a  
pen.There are other things I might bring if I thought of it, like music,  
or tea, but I can live without them. I'm not so addicted to caffeine  
that I wouldn't risk the house not having any tea, just for a  
weekend.Quiet is another matter. I realize it seems a bit eccentric to  
take earplugs on a trip to an island off the coast of Maine. If  
anywhere should be quiet, that should. But what if the person in  
the next room snored? What if there was a kid playing basketball?  
(Thump, thump, thump... thump.) Why risk it? Earplugs are small.Sometimes I can think with noise. If I already have momentum on  
some project, I can work in noisy places. I can edit an essay or  
debug code in an airport. But airports are not so bad: most of the  
noise is whitish. I couldn't work with the sound of a sitcom coming  
through the wall, or a car in the street playing thump-thump music.And of course there's another kind of thinking, when you're starting  
something new, that requires complete quiet. You never  
know when this will strike. It's just as well to carry plugs.The notebook and pen are professional equipment, as it were. Though  
actually there is something druglike about them, in the sense that  
their main purpose is to make me feel better. I hardly ever go  
back and read stuff I write down in notebooks. It's just that if  
I can't write things down, worrying about remembering one idea gets  
in the way of having the next. Pen and paper wick ideas.The best notebooks I've found are made by a company called Miquelrius.  
I use their smallest size, which is about 2.5 x 4 in.  
The secret to writing on such  
narrow pages is to break words only when you run out of space, like  
a Latin inscription. I use the cheapest plastic Bic ballpoints,  
partly because their gluey ink doesn't seep through pages, and  
partly so I don't worry about losing them.I only started carrying a notebook about three years ago. Before  
that I used whatever scraps of paper I could find. But the problem  
with scraps of paper is that they're not ordered. In a notebook  
you can guess what a scribble means by looking at the pages  
around it. In the scrap era I was constantly finding notes I'd  
written years before that might say something I needed to remember,  
if I could only figure out what.As for books, I know the house would probably have something to  
read. On the average trip I bring four books and only read one of  
them, because I find new books to read en route. Really bringing  
books is insurance.I realize this dependence on books is not entirely good—that what  
I need them for is distraction. The books I bring on trips are  
often quite virtuous, the sort of stuff that might be assigned  
reading in a college class. But I know my motives aren't virtuous.  
I bring books because if the world gets boring I need to be able  
to slip into another distilled by some writer. It's like eating  
jam when you know you should be eating fruit.There is a point where I'll do without books. I was walking in  
some steep mountains once, and decided I'd rather just think, if I  
was bored, rather than carry a single unnecessary ounce. It wasn't  
so bad. I found I could entertain myself by having ideas instead  
of reading other people's. If you stop eating jam, fruit starts  
to taste better.So maybe I'll try not bringing books on some future trip. They're  
going to have to pry the plugs out of my cold, dead ears, however.Spanish TranslationJapanese Translation

# The Power of the Marginal

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
June 2006(This essay is derived from talks at Usenix 2006 and  
Railsconf 2006.)A couple years ago my friend Trevor and I went to look at the Apple  
garage. As we stood there, he said that as a kid growing up in  
Saskatchewan he'd been amazed at the dedication Jobs and Wozniak  
must have had to work in a garage."Those guys must have been  
freezing!"That's one of California's hidden advantages: the mild climate means  
there's lots of marginal space. In cold places that margin gets  
trimmed off. There's a sharper line between outside and inside,  
and only projects that are officially sanctioned — by organizations,  
or parents, or wives, or at least by oneself — get proper indoor  
space. That raises the activation energy for new ideas. You can't  
just tinker. You have to justify.Some of Silicon Valley's most famous companies began in garages:  
Hewlett-Packard in 1938, Apple in 1976, Google in 1998. In Apple's  
case the garage story is a bit of an urban legend. Woz says all  
they did there was assemble some computers, and that he did all the  
actual design of the Apple I and Apple II in his apartment or his  
cube at HP.   
[1]  
This was apparently too marginal even for Apple's PR  
people.By conventional standards, Jobs and Wozniak were marginal people  
too. Obviously they were smart, but they can't have looked good  
on paper. They were at the time a pair of college dropouts with  
about three years of school between them, and hippies to boot.  
Their previous business experience consisted of making "blue boxes"  
to hack into the phone system, a business with the rare distinction  
of being both illegal and unprofitable.OutsidersNow a startup operating out of a garage in Silicon Valley would  
feel part of an exalted tradition, like the poet in his garret, or  
the painter who can't afford to heat his studio and thus has to  
wear a beret indoors. But in 1976 it didn't seem so cool. The  
world hadn't yet realized that starting a computer company was in  
the same category as being a writer or a painter. It hadn't been  
for long. Only in the preceding couple years had the dramatic fall  
in the cost of hardware allowed outsiders to compete.In 1976, everyone looked down on a company operating out of a garage,  
including the founders. One of the first things Jobs did when they  
got some money was to rent office space. He wanted Apple to seem  
like a real company.They already had something few real companies ever have: a fabulously well  
designed product. You'd think they'd have had more confidence.  
But I've talked to a lot of startup founders, and it's always this  
way. They've built something that's going to change the world, and  
they're worried about some nit like not having proper business  
cards.That's the paradox I want to explore: great new things often come  
from the margins, and yet the people who discover them are looked  
down on by everyone, including themselves.It's an old idea that new things come from the margins. I want to  
examine its internal structure. Why do great ideas come from the  
margins? What kind of ideas? And is there anything we can do to  
encourage the process?InsidersOne reason so many good ideas come from the margin is simply that  
there's so much of it. There have to be more outsiders than insiders,  
if insider means anything. If the number of outsiders is huge it  
will always seem as if a lot of ideas come from them, even if few  
do per capita. But I think there's more going on than this. There  
are real disadvantages to being an insider, and in some kinds of  
work they can outweigh the advantages.Imagine, for example, what would happen if the government decided  
to commission someone to write an official Great American Novel.  
First there'd be a huge ideological squabble over who to choose.  
Most of the best writers would be excluded for having offended one  
side or the other. Of the remainder, the smart ones would refuse  
such a job, leaving only a few with the wrong sort of ambition.  
The committee would choose one at the height of his career — that  
is, someone whose best work was behind him — and hand over the  
project with copious free advice about how the book should show in  
positive terms the strength and diversity of the American people,  
etc, etc.The unfortunate writer would then sit down to work with a huge  
weight of expectation on his shoulders. Not wanting to blow such  
a public commission, he'd play it safe. This book had better command  
respect, and the way to ensure that would be to make it a tragedy.  
Audiences have to be enticed to laugh, but if you kill people they  
feel obliged to take you seriously. As everyone knows, America  
plus tragedy equals the Civil War, so that's what it would have to  
be about. When finally  
completed twelve years later, the book would be a 900-page pastiche  
of existing popular novels — roughly Gone with the Wind plus  
Roots. But its bulk and celebrity would make it a bestseller  
for a few months, until blown out of the water by a talk-show host's  
autobiography. The book would be made into a movie and thereupon  
forgotten, except by the more waspish sort of reviewers, among whom  
it would be a byword for bogusness like Milli Vanilli or Battlefield  
Earth.Maybe I got a little carried away with this example. And yet is  
this not at each point the way such a project would play out? The  
government knows better than to get into the novel business, but  
in other fields where they have a natural monopoly, like nuclear  
waste dumps, aircraft carriers, and regime change, you'd find plenty  
of projects isomorphic to this one — and indeed, plenty that were  
less successful.This little thought experiment suggests a few of the disadvantages  
of insider projects: the selection of the wrong kind of people, the  
excessive scope, the inability to take risks, the need to seem  
serious, the weight of expectations, the power of vested interests,  
the undiscerning audience, and perhaps most dangerous, the tendency  
of such work to become a duty rather than a pleasure.TestsA world with outsiders and insiders implies some kind of test for  
distinguishing between them. And the trouble with most tests for  
selecting elites is that there are two ways to pass them: to be  
good at what they try to measure, and to be good at hacking the  
test itself.So the first question to ask about a field is how honest its tests  
are, because this tells you what it means to be an outsider. This  
tells you how much to trust your instincts when you disagree with  
authorities, whether it's worth going through the usual channels  
to become one yourself, and perhaps whether you want to work in  
this field at all.Tests are least hackable when there are consistent standards for  
quality, and the people running the test really care about its  
integrity. Admissions to PhD programs in the hard sciences are  
fairly honest, for example. The professors will get whoever they  
admit as their own grad students, so they try hard to choose well,  
and they have a fair amount of data to go on. Whereas undergraduate  
admissions seem to be much more hackable.One way to tell whether a field has consistent standards is the  
overlap between the leading practitioners and the people who teach  
the subject in universities. At one end of the scale you have  
fields like math and physics, where nearly all the teachers are  
among the best practitioners. In the middle are medicine, law,  
history, architecture, and computer science, where many are. At  
the bottom are business, literature, and the visual arts, where  
there's almost no overlap between the teachers and the leading  
practitioners. It's this end that gives rise to phrases like "those  
who can't do, teach."Incidentally, this scale might be helpful in deciding what to study  
in college. When I was in college the rule seemed to be that you  
should study whatever you were most interested in. But in retrospect  
you're probably better off studying something moderately interesting  
with someone who's good at it than something very interesting with  
someone who isn't. You often hear people say that you shouldn't  
major in business in college, but this is actually an instance of  
a more general rule: don't learn things from teachers who are bad  
at them.How much you should worry about being an outsider depends on the  
quality of the insiders. If you're an amateur mathematician and  
think you've solved a famous open problem, better go back and check.  
When I was in grad school, a friend in the math department had the  
job of replying to people who sent in proofs of Fermat's last theorem  
and so on, and it did not seem as if he saw it as a valuable source  
of tips — more like manning a mental health hotline. Whereas if  
the stuff you're writing seems different from what English professors  
are interested in, that's not necessarily a problem.Anti-TestsWhere the method of selecting the elite is thoroughly corrupt, most  
of the good people will be outsiders. In art, for example, the  
image of the poor, misunderstood genius is not just one possible  
image of a great artist: it's the standard image. I'm not  
saying it's correct, incidentally, but it is telling how well this  
image has stuck. You couldn't make a rap like that stick to math  
or medicine.   
[2]If it's corrupt enough, a test becomes an anti-test, filtering out  
the people it should select by making them to do things only the  
wrong people would do. Popularity in high school  
seems to be such a test. There are plenty of similar ones in the grownup  
world. For example, rising up through the hierarchy of the average  
big company demands an attention to politics few thoughtful people  
could spare.  
[3]  
Someone like Bill Gates can grow a company under  
him, but it's hard to imagine him having the patience to climb the  
corporate ladder at General Electric — or Microsoft, actually.It's kind of strange when you think about it, because lord-of-the-flies  
schools and bureaucratic companies are both the default. There are  
probably a lot of people who go from one to the other and never  
realize the whole world doesn't work this way.I think that's one reason big companies are so often blindsided by  
startups.   
People at big companies don't realize the extent to which  
they live in an environment that is one large, ongoing test for the  
wrong qualities.If you're an outsider, your best chances for beating insiders are  
obviously in fields where corrupt tests select a lame elite. But  
there's a catch: if the tests are corrupt, your victory won't be  
recognized, at least in your lifetime. You may feel you don't need  
that, but history suggests it's dangerous to work in fields with  
corrupt tests. You may beat the insiders, and yet not do as good  
work, on an absolute scale, as you would in a field that was more  
honest.Standards in art, for example, were almost as corrupt in the first  
half of the eighteenth century as they are today. This was the era  
of those fluffy idealized portraits of countesses with their lapdogs.  
Chardin   
decided to skip all that and paint ordinary things as he  
saw them. He's now considered the best of that period — and yet  
not the equal of Leonardo or Bellini or Memling, who all had the  
additional encouragement of honest standards.It can be worth participating in a corrupt contest, however, if  
it's followed by another that isn't corrupt. For example, it would  
be worth competing with a company that can spend more than you on  
marketing, as long as you can survive to the next round, when  
customers compare your actual products. Similarly, you shouldn't  
be discouraged by the comparatively corrupt test of college admissions,  
because it's followed immediately by less hackable tests.  
[4]RiskEven in a field with honest tests, there are still advantages to  
being an outsider. The most obvious is that outsiders have nothing  
to lose. They can do risky things, and if they fail, so what? Few  
will even notice.The eminent, on the other hand, are weighed down by their eminence.  
Eminence is like a suit: it impresses the wrong people, and it  
constrains the wearer.Outsiders should realize the advantage they have here. Being able  
to take risks is hugely valuable. Everyone values safety too much,  
both the obscure and the eminent. No one wants to look like a fool.  
But it's very useful to be able to. If most of your ideas aren't  
stupid, you're probably being too conservative. You're not bracketing  
the problem.Lord Acton said we should judge talent at its best and character  
at its worst. For example, if you write one great book and ten bad  
ones, you still count as a great writer — or at least, a better  
writer than someone who wrote eleven that were merely good. Whereas  
if you're a quiet, law-abiding citizen most of the time but  
occasionally cut someone up and bury them in your backyard, you're  
a bad guy.Almost everyone makes the mistake of treating ideas as if they were  
indications of character rather than talent — as if having a stupid  
idea made you stupid. There's a huge weight of tradition advising  
us to play it safe. "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps  
silent," says the Old Testament (Proverbs 17:28).Well, that may be fine advice for a bunch of goatherds in Bronze  
Age Palestine. There conservatism would be the order of the day.  
But times have changed. It might still be reasonable to stick with  
the Old Testament in political questions, but materially the world  
now has a lot more state. Tradition is less of a guide, not just  
because things change faster, but because the space of possibilities  
is so large. The more complicated the world gets, the more valuable  
it is to be willing to look like a fool.DelegationAnd yet the more successful people become, the more heat they get  
if they screw up — or even seem to screw up. In this respect, as  
in many others, the eminent are prisoners of their own success. So  
the best way to understand the advantages of being an outsider may  
be to look at the disadvantages of being an insider.If you ask eminent people what's wrong with their lives, the first  
thing they'll complain about is the lack of time. A friend of mine  
at Google is fairly high up in the company and went to work for  
them long before they went public. In other words, he's now rich  
enough not to have to work. I asked him if he could still endure  
the annoyances of having a job, now that he didn't have to. And  
he said that there weren't really any annoyances, except — and he  
got a wistful look when he said this — that he got so much  
email.The eminent feel like everyone wants to take a bite out of them.  
The problem is so widespread that people pretending to be eminent  
do it by pretending to be overstretched.The lives of the eminent become scheduled, and that's not good for  
thinking. One of the great advantages of being an outsider is long,  
uninterrupted blocks of time. That's what I remember about grad  
school: apparently endless supplies of time, which I spent worrying  
about, but not writing, my dissertation. Obscurity is like health  
food — unpleasant, perhaps, but good for you. Whereas fame tends  
to be like the alcohol produced by fermentation. When it reaches  
a certain concentration, it kills off the yeast that produced it.The eminent generally respond to the shortage of time by turning  
into managers. They don't have time to work. They're surrounded  
by junior people they're supposed to help or supervise. The obvious  
solution is to have the junior people do the work. Some good  
stuff happens this way, but there are problems it doesn't work so  
well for: the kind where it helps to have everything in one head.For example, it recently emerged that the famous glass artist Dale  
Chihuly hasn't actually blown glass for 27 years. He has assistants  
do the work for him. But one of the most valuable sources of ideas  
in the visual arts is the resistance of the medium. That's why oil  
paintings look so different from watercolors. In principle you  
could make any mark in any medium; in practice the medium steers  
you. And if you're no longer doing the work yourself, you stop  
learning from this.So if you want to beat those eminent enough to delegate, one way  
to do it is to take advantage of direct contact with the medium.  
In the arts it's obvious how: blow your own glass, edit your own  
films, stage your own plays. And in the process pay close attention  
to accidents and to new ideas you have on the fly. This technique  
can be generalized to any sort of work: if you're an outsider, don't  
be ruled by plans. Planning is often just a weakness forced on  
those who delegate.Is there a general rule for finding problems best solved in one  
head? Well, you can manufacture them by taking any project usually  
done by multiple people and trying to do it all yourself. Wozniak's  
work was a classic example: he did everything himself, hardware and  
software, and the result was miraculous. He claims not one bug was  
ever found in the Apple II, in either hardware or software.Another way to find good problems to solve in one head is to focus  
on the grooves in the chocolate bar — the places where tasks are  
divided when they're split between several people. If you want to  
beat delegation, focus on a vertical slice: for example, be both  
writer and editor, or both design buildings and construct them.One especially good groove to span is the one between tools and  
things made with them. For example, programming languages and  
applications are usually written by different people, and this is  
responsible for a lot of the worst flaws in   
programming languages.  
I think every language should be designed simultaneously with a  
large application written in it, the way C was with Unix.Techniques for competing with delegation translate well into business,  
because delegation is endemic there. Instead of avoiding it as a  
drawback of senility, many companies embrace it as a sign of maturity.  
In big companies software is often designed, implemented, and sold  
by three separate types of people. In startups one person may have  
to do all three. And though this feels stressful, it's one reason  
startups win. The needs of customers and the means of satisfying  
them are all in one head.FocusThe very skill of insiders can be a weakness. Once someone is good  
at something, they tend to spend all their time doing that. This  
kind of focus is very valuable, actually. Much of the skill of  
experts is the ability to ignore false trails. But focus has  
drawbacks: you don't learn from other fields, and when a new approach  
arrives, you may be the last to notice.For outsiders this translates into two ways to win. One is to work  
on a variety of things. Since you can't derive as much benefit  
(yet) from a narrow focus, you may as well cast a wider net and  
derive what benefit you can from similarities between fields. Just  
as you can compete with delegation by working on larger vertical  
slices, you can compete with specialization by working on larger  
horizontal slices — by both writing and illustrating your book, for  
example.The second way to compete with focus is to see what focus overlooks.  
In particular, new things. So if you're not good at anything yet,  
consider working on something so new that no one else is either.  
It won't have any prestige yet, if no one is good at it, but you'll  
have it all to yourself.The potential of a new medium is usually underestimated, precisely  
because no one has yet explored its possibilities. Before   
Durer  
tried making engravings, no one took them very seriously. Engraving  
was for making little devotional images — basically fifteenth century  
baseball cards of saints. Trying to make masterpieces in this  
medium must have seemed to Durer's contemporaries the way that,  
say, making masterpieces in   
comics   
might seem to the average person  
today.In the computer world we get not new mediums but new platforms: the  
minicomputer, the microprocessor, the web-based application. At  
first they're always dismissed as being unsuitable for real work.  
And yet someone always decides to try anyway, and it turns out you  
can do more than anyone expected. So in the future when you hear  
people say of a new platform: yeah, it's popular and cheap, but not  
ready yet for real work, jump on it.As well as being more comfortable working on established lines,  
insiders generally have a vested interest in perpetuating them.  
The professor who made his reputation by discovering some new idea  
is not likely to be the one to discover its replacement. This is  
particularly true with companies, who have not only skill and pride  
anchoring them to the status quo, but money as well. The Achilles  
heel of successful companies is their inability to cannibalize  
themselves. Many innovations consist of replacing something with  
a cheaper alternative, and companies just don't want to see a path  
whose immediate effect is to cut an existing source of revenue.So if you're an outsider you should actively seek out contrarian  
projects. Instead of working on things the eminent have made  
prestigious, work on things that could steal that prestige.The really juicy new approaches are not the ones insiders reject  
as impossible, but those they ignore as undignified. For example,  
after Wozniak designed the Apple II he offered it first to his  
employer, HP. They passed. One of the reasons was that, to save  
money, he'd designed the Apple II to use a TV as a monitor, and HP  
felt they couldn't produce anything so declasse.LessWozniak used a TV as a monitor for the simple reason that he couldn't  
afford a monitor. Outsiders are not merely free but compelled to  
make things that are cheap and lightweight. And both are good bets  
for growth: cheap things spread faster, and lightweight things  
evolve faster.The eminent, on the other hand, are almost forced to work on a large  
scale. Instead of garden sheds they must design huge art museums.  
One reason they work on big things is that they can: like our  
hypothetical novelist, they're flattered by such opportunities.  
They also know that big projects will by their sheer bulk impress  
the audience. A garden shed, however lovely, would be easy to  
ignore; a few might even snicker at it. You can't snicker at a  
giant museum, no matter how much you dislike it. And finally, there  
are all those people the eminent have working for them; they have  
to choose projects that can keep them all busy.Outsiders are free of all this. They can work on small things, and  
there's something very pleasing about small things. Small things  
can be perfect; big ones always have something wrong with them.  
But there's a   
magic   
in small things that goes beyond such rational  
explanations. All kids know it. Small things have more personality.Plus making them is more fun. You can do what you want; you don't  
have to satisfy committees. And perhaps most important, small  
things can be done fast. The prospect of seeing the finished project  
hangs in the air like the smell of dinner cooking. If you work  
fast, maybe you could have it done tonight.Working on small things is also a good way to learn. The most  
important kinds of learning happen one project at a time. ("Next  
time, I won't...") The faster you cycle through projects, the  
faster you'll evolve.Plain materials have a charm like small scale. And in addition  
there's the challenge of making do with less. Every designer's  
ears perk up at the mention of that game, because it's a game you  
can't lose. Like the JV playing the varsity, if you even tie, you  
win. So paradoxically there are cases where fewer resources yield  
better results, because the designers' pleasure at their own ingenuity  
more than compensates.  
[5]So if you're an outsider, take advantage of your ability to make  
small and inexpensive things. Cultivate the pleasure and simplicity  
of that kind of work; one day you'll miss it.ResponsibilityWhen you're old and eminent, what will you miss about being young  
and obscure? What people seem to miss most is the lack of  
responsibilities.Responsibility is an occupational disease of eminence. In principle  
you could avoid it, just as in principle you could avoid getting  
fat as you get old, but few do. I sometimes suspect that responsibility  
is a trap and that the most virtuous route would be to shirk it,  
but regardless it's certainly constraining.When you're an outsider you're constrained too, of course. You're  
short of money, for example. But that constrains you in different  
ways. How does responsibility constrain you? The worst thing is  
that it allows you not to focus on real work. Just as the most  
dangerous forms of   
procrastination   
are those that seem like work,  
the danger of responsibilities is not just that they can consume a  
whole day, but that they can do it without setting off the  
kind of alarms you'd set off if you spent a whole day sitting on a  
park bench.A lot of the pain of being an outsider is being aware of one's own  
procrastination. But this is actually a good thing. You're at  
least close enough to work that the smell of it makes you hungry.As an outsider, you're just one step away from getting things done.  
A huge step, admittedly, and one that most people never seem to  
make, but only one step. If you can summon up the energy to get  
started, you can work on projects with an intensity (in both senses)  
that few insiders can match. For insiders work turns into a duty,  
laden with responsibilities and expectations. It's never so pure  
as it was when they were young.Work like a dog being taken for a walk, instead of an ox being yoked  
to the plow. That's what they miss.AudienceA lot of outsiders make the mistake of doing the opposite; they  
admire the eminent so much that they copy even their flaws. Copying  
is a good way to learn, but copy the right things. When I was in  
college I imitated the pompous diction of famous professors. But  
this wasn't what made them eminent — it was more a flaw their  
eminence had allowed them to sink into. Imitating it was like  
pretending to have gout in order to seem rich.Half the distinguishing qualities of the eminent are actually  
disadvantages. Imitating these is not only a waste of time, but  
will make you seem a fool to your models, who are often well aware  
of it.What are the genuine advantages of being an insider? The greatest  
is an audience. It often seems to outsiders that the great advantage  
of insiders is money — that they have the resources to do what they  
want. But so do people who inherit money, and that doesn't seem  
to help, not as much as an audience. It's good for morale to know  
people want to see what you're making; it draws work out of you.If I'm right that the defining advantage of insiders is an audience,  
then we live in exciting times, because just in the last ten years  
the Internet has made audiences a lot more liquid. Outsiders don't  
have to content themselves anymore with a proxy audience of a few  
smart friends. Now, thanks to the Internet, they can start to grow  
themselves actual audiences. This is great news for the marginal,  
who retain the advantages of outsiders while increasingly being  
able to siphon off what had till recently been the prerogative of  
the elite.Though the Web has been around for more than ten years, I think  
we're just beginning to see its democratizing effects. Outsiders  
are still learning how to steal audiences. But more importantly,  
audiences are still learning how to be stolen — they're still just  
beginning to realize how much   
deeper bloggers can dig than  
journalists, how much  
more interesting   
a democratic news site can be than a  
front page controlled by editors, and how much  
funnier  
a bunch of kids  
with webcams can be than mass-produced sitcoms.The big media companies shouldn't worry that people will post their  
copyrighted material on YouTube. They should worry that people  
will post their own stuff on YouTube, and audiences will watch that  
instead.HackingIf I had to condense the power of the marginal into one sentence  
it would be: just try hacking something together. That phrase draws  
in most threads I've mentioned here. Hacking something together  
means deciding what to do as you're doing it, not a subordinate  
executing the vision of his boss. It implies the result won't  
be pretty, because it will be made quickly out of inadequate  
materials. It may work, but it won't be the sort of thing the  
eminent would want to put their name on. Something hacked together  
means something that barely solves the problem, or maybe doesn't  
solve the problem at all, but another you discovered en route. But  
that's ok, because the main value of that initial version is not the  
thing itself, but what it leads to. Insiders who daren't walk  
through the mud in their nice clothes will never make it to the  
solid ground on the other side.The word "try" is an especially valuable component. I disagree  
here with Yoda, who said there is no try. There is try. It implies  
there's no punishment if you fail. You're driven by curiosity  
instead of duty. That means the wind of procrastination will be  
in your favor: instead of avoiding this work, this will be what you  
do as a way of avoiding other work. And when you do it, you'll be  
in a better mood. The more the work depends on imagination, the  
more that matters, because most people have more ideas when they're  
happy.If I could go back and redo my twenties, that would be one thing  
I'd do more of: just try hacking things together. Like many people  
that age, I spent a lot of time worrying about what I should do.  
I also spent some time trying to build stuff. I should have spent  
less time worrying and more time building. If you're not sure what  
to do, make something.Raymond Chandler's advice to thriller writers was "When in doubt,  
have a man come through a door with a gun in his hand." He followed  
that advice. Judging from his books, he was often in doubt. But  
though the result is occasionally cheesy, it's never boring. In  
life, as in books, action is underrated.Fortunately the number of things you can just hack together keeps  
increasing. People fifty years ago would be astonished that one  
could just hack together a movie, for example. Now you can even  
hack together distribution. Just make stuff and put it online.InappropriateIf you really want to score big, the place to focus is the margin  
of the margin: the territories only recently captured from the  
insiders. That's where you'll find the juiciest projects still  
undone, either because they seemed too risky, or simply because  
there were too few insiders to explore everything.This is why I spend most of my time writing   
essays lately. The  
writing of essays used to be limited to those who could get them  
published. In principle you could have written them and just shown  
them to your friends; in practice that didn't work.   
[6]  
An  
essayist needs the resistance of an audience, just as an engraver  
needs the resistance of the plate.Up till a few years ago, writing essays was the ultimate insider's  
game. Domain experts were allowed to publish essays about their  
field, but the pool allowed to write on general topics was about  
eight people who went to the right parties in New York. Now the  
reconquista has overrun this territory, and, not surprisingly, found  
it sparsely cultivated. There are so many essays yet unwritten.  
They tend to be the naughtier ones; the insiders have pretty much  
exhausted the motherhood and apple pie topics.This leads to my final suggestion: a technique for determining when  
you're on the right track. You're on the right track when people  
complain that you're unqualified, or that you've done something  
inappropriate. If people are complaining, that means you're doing  
something rather than sitting around, which is the first step. And  
if they're driven to such empty forms of complaint, that means  
you've probably done something good.If you make something and people complain that it doesn't work,  
that's a problem. But if the worst thing they can hit you with is  
your own status as an outsider, that implies that in every other  
respect you've succeeded. Pointing out that someone is unqualified  
is as desperate as resorting to racial slurs. It's just a legitimate  
sounding way of saying: we don't like your type around here.But the best thing of all is when people call what you're doing  
inappropriate. I've been hearing this word all my life and I only  
recently realized that it is, in fact, the sound of the homing  
beacon. "Inappropriate" is the null criticism. It's merely the  
adjective form of "I don't like it."So that, I think, should be the highest goal for the marginal. Be  
inappropriate. When you hear people saying that, you're golden.  
And they, incidentally, are busted.Notes[1]  
The facts about Apple's early history are from an interview   
with Steve   
Wozniak in Jessica Livingston's   
Founders at Work.[2]  
As usual the popular image is several decades behind reality.  
Now the misunderstood artist is not a chain-smoking drunk who pours  
his soul into big, messy canvases that philistines see and say  
"that's not art" because it isn't a picture of anything. The  
philistines have now been trained that anything hung on a wall  
is art. Now the misunderstood artist is a coffee-drinking vegan  
cartoonist whose work they see and say "that's not art" because it  
looks like stuff they've seen in the Sunday paper.[3]  
In fact this would do fairly well as a definition of politics:  
what determines rank in the absence of objective tests.[4]  
In high school you're led to believe your whole future depends  
on where you go to college, but it turns out only to buy you a couple  
years. By your mid-twenties the people worth impressing  
already judge you more by what  
you've done than where you went to school.[5]  
Managers are presumably wondering, how can I make this miracle  
happen? How can I make the people working for me do more with less?  
Unfortunately the constraint probably has to be self-imposed. If  
you're expected to do more with less, then you're being  
starved, not eating virtuously.[6]  
Without the prospect of publication, the closest most people  
come to writing essays is to write in a journal. I find I never  
get as deeply into subjects as I do in proper essays. As the name  
implies, you don't go back and rewrite journal entries over  
and over for two weeks.Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Paul Buchheit, Sarah  
Harlin, Jessica Livingston, Jackie McDonough, Robert Morris, Olin  
Shivers, and Chris Small for reading drafts of this, and to Chris  
Small and Chad Fowler for inviting me to speak.  
Japanese TranslationChinese Translation

# Why Startups Condense in America

May 2006(This essay is derived from a keynote at Xtech.)Startups happen in clusters. There are a lot of them in Silicon  
Valley and Boston, and few in Chicago or Miami. A country that  
wants startups will probably also have to reproduce whatever makes  
these clusters form.I've claimed that the recipe is a  
great university near a town smart  
people like. If you set up those conditions within the US, startups  
will form as inevitably as water droplets condense on a cold piece  
of metal. But when I consider what it would take to reproduce  
Silicon Valley in another country, it's clear the US is a particularly  
humid environment. Startups condense more easily here.It is by no means a lost cause to try to create a silicon valley  
in another country. There's room not merely to equal Silicon Valley,  
but to surpass it. But if you want to do that, you have to  
understand the advantages startups get from being in America.1. The US Allows Immigration.For example, I doubt it would be possible to reproduce Silicon  
Valley in Japan, because one of Silicon Valley's most distinctive  
features is immigration. Half the people there speak with accents.  
And the Japanese don't like immigration. When they think about how  
to make a Japanese silicon valley, I suspect they unconsciously  
frame it as how to make one consisting only of Japanese people.  
This way of framing the question probably guarantees failure.A silicon valley has to be a mecca for the smart and the ambitious,  
and you can't have a mecca if you don't let people into it.Of course, it's not saying much that America is more open to  
immigration than Japan. Immigration policy is one area where a  
competitor could do better.2. The US Is a Rich Country.I could see India one day producing a rival to Silicon Valley.  
Obviously they have the right people: you can tell that by the  
number of Indians in the current Silicon Valley. The problem with  
India itself is that it's still so poor.In poor countries, things we take for granted are missing. A friend  
of mine visiting India sprained her ankle falling down the steps  
in a railway station. When she turned to see what had happened,  
she found the steps were all different heights. In industrialized  
countries we walk down steps our whole lives and never think about  
this, because there's an infrastructure that prevents such a staircase  
from being built.The US has never been so poor as some countries are now. There  
have never been swarms of beggars in the streets of American cities.  
So we have no data about what it takes to get from the swarms-of-beggars  
stage to the silicon-valley stage. Could you have both at once,  
or does there have to be some baseline prosperity before you get a  
silicon valley?I suspect there is some speed limit to the evolution  
of an economy. Economies are made out of people, and attitudes can  
only change a certain amount per generation.  
[1]3. The US Is Not (Yet) a Police State.Another country I could see wanting to have a silicon valley is  
China. But I doubt they could do it yet either. China still seems  
to be a police state, and although present rulers seem enlightened  
compared to the last, even enlightened despotism can probably only  
get you part way toward being a great economic power.It can get you factories for building things designed elsewhere.  
Can it get you the designers, though? Can imagination flourish  
where people can't criticize the government? Imagination means  
having odd ideas, and it's hard to have odd ideas about technology  
without also having odd ideas about politics. And in any case,  
many technical ideas do have political implications. So if you  
squash dissent, the back pressure will propagate into technical  
fields.   
[2]Singapore would face a similar problem. Singapore seems very aware  
of the importance of encouraging startups. But while energetic  
government intervention may be able to make a port run efficiently,  
it can't coax startups into existence. A state that bans chewing  
gum has a long way to go before it could create a San Francisco.Do you need a San Francisco? Might there not be an alternate route  
to innovation that goes through obedience and cooperation instead  
of individualism? Possibly, but I'd bet not. Most imaginative  
people seem to share a certain prickly independence,  
whenever and wherever they lived. You see it in Diogenes telling  
Alexander to get out of his light and two thousand years later in  
Feynman breaking into safes at Los Alamos.  
[3]  
Imaginative people  
don't want to follow or lead. They're most productive when everyone  
gets to do what they want.Ironically, of all rich countries the US has lost the most civil  
liberties recently. But I'm not too worried yet. I'm hoping once  
the present administration is out, the natural openness of American  
culture will reassert itself.4. American Universities Are Better.You need a great university to seed a silicon valley, and so far  
there are few outside the US. I asked a handful of American computer  
science professors which universities in Europe were most admired,  
and they all basically said "Cambridge" followed by a long pause  
while they tried to think of others. There don't seem to be many  
universities elsewhere that compare with the best in America, at  
least in technology.In some countries this is the result of a deliberate policy. The  
German and Dutch governments, perhaps from fear of elitism, try to  
ensure that all universities are roughly equal in quality. The  
downside is that none are especially good. The best professors  
are spread out, instead of being concentrated as they are in the  
US. This probably makes them less productive, because they don't  
have good colleagues to inspire them. It also means no one university  
will be good enough to act as a mecca, attracting talent from abroad  
and causing startups to form around it.The case of Germany is a strange one. The Germans invented the  
modern university, and up till the 1930s theirs were the best in  
the world. Now they have none that stand out. As I was mulling  
this over, I found myself thinking: "I can understand why German  
universities declined in the 1930s, after they excluded Jews. But  
surely they should have bounced back by now." Then I realized:  
maybe not. There are few Jews left in Germany and most Jews I know  
would not want to move there. And if you took any great American  
university and removed the Jews, you'd have some pretty big gaps.  
So maybe it would be a lost cause trying to create a silicon valley  
in Germany, because you couldn't establish the level of university  
you'd need as a seed.  
[4]It's natural for US universities to compete with one another because  
so many are private. To reproduce the quality of American universities  
you probably also have to reproduce this. If universities are  
controlled by the central government, log-rolling will pull them  
all toward the mean: the new Institute of X will end up at the  
university in the district of a powerful politician, instead of  
where it should be.5. You Can Fire People in America.I think one of the biggest obstacles to creating startups in Europe  
is the attitude toward employment. The famously rigid labor laws  
hurt every company, but startups especially, because startups have  
the least time to spare for bureaucratic hassles.The difficulty of firing people is a particular problem for startups  
because they have no redundancy. Every person has to do their  
job well.But the problem is more than just that some startup might have a  
problem firing someone they needed to. Across industries and  
countries, there's a strong inverse correlation between performance  
and job security. Actors and directors are fired at the end of  
each film, so they have to deliver every time. Junior professors  
are fired by default after a few years unless the university chooses  
to grant them tenure. Professional athletes know they'll be pulled  
if they play badly for just a couple games. At the other end of  
the scale (at least in the US) are auto workers, New York City  
schoolteachers, and civil servants, who are all nearly impossible  
to fire. The trend is so clear that you'd have to be willfully  
blind not to see it.Performance isn't everything, you say? Well, are auto workers,  
schoolteachers, and civil servants happier than actors,  
professors, and professional athletes?European public opinion will apparently tolerate people being fired  
in industries where they really care about performance. Unfortunately  
the only industry they care enough about so far is soccer. But  
that is at least a precedent.6. In America Work Is Less Identified with Employment.The problem in more traditional places like Europe and Japan goes  
deeper than the employment laws. More dangerous is the attitude  
they reflect: that an employee is a kind of servant, whom the  
employer has a duty to protect. It used to be that way in America  
too. In 1970 you were still supposed to get a job with a big  
company, for whom ideally you'd work your whole career. In return  
the company would take care of you: they'd try not to fire you,  
cover your medical expenses, and support you in old age.Gradually employment has been shedding such paternalistic overtones  
and becoming simply an economic exchange. But the importance of  
the new model is not just that it makes it easier for startups to  
grow. More important, I think, is that it it makes it easier for  
people to start startups.Even in the US most kids graduating from college still think they're  
supposed to get jobs, as if you couldn't be productive without being  
someone's employee. But the less you identify work with employment,  
the easier it becomes to start a startup. When you see your career  
as a series of different types of work, instead of a lifetime's  
service to a single employer, there's less risk in starting your  
own company, because you're only replacing one segment instead of  
discarding the whole thing.The old ideas are so powerful that even the most successful startup  
founders have had to struggle against them. A year after the  
founding of Apple, Steve Wozniak still hadn't quit HP. He still  
planned to work there for life. And when Jobs found someone to  
give Apple serious venture funding, on the condition that Woz quit,  
he initially refused, arguing that he'd designed both the Apple I  
and the Apple II while working at HP, and there was no reason he  
couldn't continue.7. America Is Not Too Fussy.If there are any laws regulating businesses, you can assume larval  
startups will break most of them, because they don't know what the  
laws are and don't have time to find out.For example, many startups in America begin in places where it's  
not really legal to run a business. Hewlett-Packard, Apple, and  
Google were all run out of garages. Many more startups, including  
ours, were initially run out of apartments. If the laws against  
such things were actually enforced, most startups wouldn't happen.That could be a problem in fussier countries. If Hewlett and Packard  
tried running an electronics company out of their garage in  
Switzerland, the old lady next door would report them to the municipal  
authorities.But the worst problem in other countries is probably the effort  
required just to start a company. A friend of mine started a company  
in Germany in the early 90s, and was shocked to discover, among  
many other regulations, that you needed $20,000 in capital to  
incorporate. That's one reason I'm not typing this on an Apfel  
laptop. Jobs and Wozniak couldn't have come up with that kind of  
money in a company financed by selling a VW bus and an HP calculator.  
We couldn't have started Viaweb either.  
[5]Here's a tip for governments that want to encourage startups: read  
the stories of existing startups, and then try to simulate what  
would have happened in your country. When you hit something that  
would have killed Apple, prune it off.Startups are marginal.   
They're started by the poor and the  
timid; they begin in marginal space and spare time; they're started  
by people who are supposed to be doing something else; and though  
businesses, their founders often know nothing about business. Young  
startups are fragile. A society that trims its margins sharply  
will kill them all.8. America Has a Large Domestic Market.What sustains a startup in the beginning is the prospect of getting  
their initial product out. The successful ones therefore make the  
first version as simple as possible. In the US they usually begin  
by making something just for the local market.This works in America, because the local market is 300 million  
people. It wouldn't work so well in Sweden. In a small country,  
a startup has a harder task: they have to sell internationally from  
the start.The EU was designed partly to simulate a single, large domestic  
market. The problem is that the inhabitants still speak many  
different languages. So a software startup in Sweden is still at  
a disadvantage relative to one in the US, because they have to deal  
with internationalization from the beginning. It's significant  
that the most famous recent startup in Europe, Skype, worked on a  
problem that was intrinsically international.However, for better or worse it looks as if Europe will in a few  
decades speak a single language. When I was a student in Italy in  
1990, few Italians spoke English. Now all educated people seem to  
be expected to-- and Europeans do not like to seem uneducated. This  
is presumably a taboo subject, but if present trends continue,  
French and German will eventually go the way of Irish and Luxembourgish:  
they'll be spoken in homes and by eccentric nationalists.9. America Has Venture Funding.Startups are easier to start in America because funding is easier  
to get. There are now a few VC firms outside the US, but startup  
funding doesn't only come from VC firms. A more important source,  
because it's more personal and comes earlier in the process, is  
money from individual angel investors. Google might never have got  
to the point where they could raise millions from VC funds if they  
hadn't first raised a hundred thousand from Andy Bechtolsheim. And  
he could help them because he was one of the founders of Sun. This  
pattern is repeated constantly in startup hubs. It's this pattern  
that makes them startup hubs.The good news is, all you have to do to get the process rolling is  
get those first few startups successfully launched. If they stick  
around after they get rich, startup founders will almost automatically  
fund and encourage new startups.The bad news is that the cycle is slow. It probably takes five  
years, on average, before a startup founder can make angel investments.  
And while governments might be able to set up local VC funds  
by supplying the money themselves and recruiting people from existing  
firms to run them, only organic growth can produce angel investors.Incidentally, America's private universities are one reason there's  
so much venture capital. A lot of the money in VC funds comes from  
their endowments. So another advantage of private universities is  
that a good chunk of the country's wealth is managed by enlightened  
investors.10. America Has Dynamic Typing for Careers.Compared to other industrialized countries the US is disorganized  
about routing people into careers. For example, in America people  
often don't decide to go to medical school till they've finished  
college. In Europe they generally decide in high school.The European approach reflects the old idea that each person has a  
single, definite occupation-- which is not far from the idea that  
each person has a natural "station" in life. If this were true,  
the most efficient plan would be to discover each person's station  
as early as possible, so they could receive the training appropriate  
to it.In the US things are more haphazard. But that turns out to be an  
advantage as an economy gets more liquid, just as dynamic typing  
turns out to work better than static for ill-defined problems. This  
is particularly true with startups. "Startup founder" is not the  
sort of career a high school student would choose. If you ask at  
that age, people will choose conservatively. They'll choose  
well-understood occupations like engineer, or doctor, or lawyer.Startups are the kind of thing people don't plan, so you're more  
likely to get them in a society where it's ok to make career decisions  
on the fly.For example, in theory the purpose of a PhD program is to train you  
to do research. But fortunately in the US this is another rule  
that isn't very strictly enforced. In the US most people in CS PhD  
programs are there simply because they wanted to learn more. They  
haven't decided what they'll do afterward. So American grad schools  
spawn a lot of startups, because students don't feel they're failing  
if they don't go into research.Those worried about America's "competitiveness" often suggest  
spending more on public schools. But perhaps America's lousy public  
schools have a hidden advantage. Because they're so bad, the kids  
adopt an attitude of waiting for college. I did; I knew I was  
learning so little that I wasn't even learning what the choices  
were, let alone which to choose. This is demoralizing, but it does  
at least make you keep an open mind.Certainly if I had to choose between bad high schools and good  
universities, like the US, and good high schools and bad universities,  
like most other industrialized countries, I'd take the US system.  
Better to make everyone feel like a late bloomer than a failed child  
prodigy.AttitudesThere's one item conspicuously missing from this list: American  
attitudes. Americans are said to be more entrepreneurial, and less  
afraid of risk. But America has no monopoly on this. Indians and  
Chinese seem plenty entrepreneurial, perhaps more than Americans.Some say Europeans are less energetic, but I don't believe it. I  
think the problem with Europe is not that they lack balls, but that  
they lack examples.Even in the US, the most successful startup founders are often  
technical people who are quite timid, initially, about the idea of  
starting their own company. Few are the sort of backslapping  
extroverts one thinks of as typically American. They can usually  
only summon up the activation energy to start a startup when they  
meet people who've done it and realize they could too.I think what holds back European hackers is simply that they don't  
meet so many people who've done it. You see that variation even  
within the US. Stanford students are more entrepreneurial than  
Yale students, but not because of some difference in their characters;  
the Yale students just have fewer examples.I admit there seem to be different attitudes toward ambition in  
Europe and the US. In the US it's ok to be overtly ambitious, and  
in most of Europe it's not. But this can't be an intrinsically  
European quality; previous generations of Europeans were as ambitious  
as Americans. What happened? My hypothesis is that ambition was  
discredited by the terrible things ambitious people did in the first  
half of the twentieth century. Now swagger is out. (Even now the  
image of a very ambitious German presses a button or two, doesn't  
it?)It would be surprising if European attitudes weren't affected by  
the disasters of the twentieth century. It takes a while to be  
optimistic after events like that. But ambition is human nature.  
Gradually it will re-emerge.  
[6]How To Do BetterI don't mean to suggest by this list that America is the perfect  
place for startups. It's the best place so far, but the sample  
size is small, and "so far" is not very long. On historical time   
scales, what we have now is just a  
prototype.So let's look at Silicon Valley the way you'd look at a product  
made by a competitor. What weaknesses could you exploit? How could  
you make something users would like better? The users in this case  
are those critical few thousand people you'd like to move to your  
silicon valley.To start with, Silicon Valley is too far from San Francisco. Palo  
Alto, the original ground zero, is about thirty miles away, and the  
present center more like forty. So people who come to work in  
Silicon Valley face an unpleasant choice: either live in the boring  
sprawl of the valley proper, or live in San Francisco and endure  
an hour commute each way.The best thing would be if the silicon valley were not merely closer  
to the interesting city, but interesting itself. And there is a  
lot of room for improvement here. Palo Alto is not so bad, but  
everything built since is the worst sort of strip development. You  
can measure how demoralizing it is by the number of people who will  
sacrifice two hours a day commuting rather than live there.Another area in which you could easily surpass Silicon Valley is  
public transportation. There is a train running the length of it,  
and by American standards it's not bad. Which is to say that to  
Japanese or Europeans it would seem like something out of the third  
world.The kind of people you want to attract to your silicon valley like  
to get around by train, bicycle, and on foot. So if you want to  
beat America, design a town that puts cars last. It will be a while  
before any American city can bring itself to do that.Capital GainsThere are also a couple things you could do to beat America at the  
national level. One would be to have lower capital gains taxes.  
It doesn't seem critical to have the lowest income taxes,  
because to take advantage of those, people have to move.  
[7]  
But  
if capital gains rates vary, you move assets, not yourself, so  
changes are reflected at market speeds. The lower the rate, the  
cheaper it is to buy stock in growing companies as opposed to real  
estate, or bonds, or stocks bought for the dividends they pay.So if you want to encourage startups you should have a low rate on  
capital gains. Politicians are caught between a rock and a hard  
place here, however: make the capital gains rate low and be accused  
of creating "tax breaks for the rich," or make it high and starve  
growing companies of investment capital. As Galbraith said,  
politics is a matter of choosing between the unpalatable and the  
disastrous. A lot of governments experimented with the disastrous  
in the twentieth century; now the trend seems to be toward the  
merely unpalatable.Oddly enough, the leaders now are European countries like Belgium,  
which has a capital gains tax rate of zero.ImmigrationThe other place you could beat the US would be with smarter immigration  
policy. There are huge gains to be made here. Silicon valleys are  
made of people, remember.Like a company whose software runs on Windows, those in the current  
Silicon Valley are all too aware of the shortcomings of the INS,  
but there's little they can do about it. They're hostages of the  
platform.America's immigration system has never been well run, and since  
2001 there has been an additional admixture of paranoia. What  
fraction of the smart people who want to come to America can even  
get in? I doubt even half. Which means if you made a competing  
technology hub that let in all smart people, you'd immediately get  
more than half the world's top talent, for free.US immigration policy is particularly ill-suited to startups, because  
it reflects a model of work from the 1970s. It assumes good technical  
people have college degrees, and that work means working for a big  
company.If you don't have a college degree you can't get an H1B visa, the  
type usually issued to programmers. But a test that excludes Steve  
Jobs, Bill Gates, and Michael Dell can't be a good one. Plus you  
can't get a visa for working on your own company, only for working  
as an employee of someone else's. And if you want to apply for  
citizenship you daren't work for a startup at all, because if your  
sponsor goes out of business, you have to start over.American immigration policy keeps out most smart people, and channels  
the rest into unproductive jobs. It would be easy to do better.  
Imagine if, instead, you treated immigration like recruiting-- if  
you made a conscious effort to seek out the smartest people and get  
them to come to your country.A country that got immigration right would have a huge advantage.  
At this point you could become a mecca for smart people simply by  
having an immigration system that let them in.A Good VectorIf you look at the kinds of things you have to do to create an  
environment where startups condense, none are great sacrifices.  
Great universities? Livable towns? Civil liberties? Flexible  
employment laws? Immigration policies that let in smart people?  
Tax laws that encourage growth? It's not as if you have to risk  
destroying your country to get a silicon valley; these are all good  
things in their own right.And then of course there's the question, can you afford not to? I  
can imagine a future in which the default choice of ambitious young  
people is to start their own company  
rather than work for someone else's. I'm not sure that will happen,  
but it's where the trend points now. And if that is the future,  
places that don't have startups will be a whole step behind,  
like those that missed the Industrial Revolution.Notes[1]  
On the verge of the Industrial Revolution, England was already  
the richest country in the world. As far as such things can be  
compared, per capita income in England in 1750 was higher than  
India's in 1960.Deane, Phyllis, The First Industrial Revolution, Cambridge  
University Press, 1965.[2]  
 This has already happened once in China, during the Ming  
Dynasty, when the country turned its back on industrialization at  
the command of the court. One of Europe's advantages was that it  
had no government powerful enough to do that.[3]  
Of course, Feynman and Diogenes were from adjacent traditions,  
but Confucius, though more polite, was no more willing to be told  
what to think.[4]  
For similar reasons it might be a lost cause to try to establish  
a silicon valley in Israel. Instead of no Jews moving there, only  
Jews would move there, and I don't think you could build a silicon  
valley out of just Jews any more than you could out of just Japanese.(This is not a remark about the qualities of these groups, just their  
sizes. Japanese are only about 2% of the world population, and  
Jews about .2%.)[5]  
According to the World Bank, the initial capital requirement  
for German companies is 47.6% of the per capita income. Doh.World Bank, Doing Business in 2006, http://doingbusiness.org[6]  
For most of the twentieth century, Europeans looked back on  
the summer of 1914 as if they'd been living in a dream world. It  
seems more accurate (or at least, as accurate) to call the years  
after 1914 a nightmare than to call those before a dream. A lot  
of the optimism Europeans consider distinctly American is simply  
what they too were feeling in 1914.[7]  
The point where things start to go wrong seems to be about  
50%. Above that people get serious about tax avoidance. The reason  
is that the payoff for avoiding tax grows hyperexponentially (x/1-x  
for 0 < x < 1). If your income tax rate is 10%, moving to Monaco  
would only give you 11% more income, which wouldn't even cover the  
extra cost. If it's 90%, you'd get ten times as much income. And  
at 98%, as it was briefly in Britain in the 70s, moving to Monaco  
would give you fifty times as much income. It seems quite likely  
that European governments of the 70s never drew this curve.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Matthias Felleisen, Jessica  
Livingston, Robert Morris, Neil Rimer, Hugues Steinier, Brad   
Templeton, Fred Wilson, and Stephen Wolfram for reading  
drafts of this, and to Ed Dumbill for inviting me to speak.French TranslationRussian TranslationJapanese TranslationArabic Translation

# How to Be Silicon Valley

May 2006(This essay is derived from a keynote at Xtech.)Could you reproduce Silicon Valley elsewhere, or is there something  
unique about it?It wouldn't be surprising if it were hard to reproduce in other  
countries, because you couldn't reproduce it in most of the US  
either. What does it take to make a silicon valley even here?What it takes is the right people. If you could get the right ten  
thousand people to move from Silicon Valley to Buffalo, Buffalo  
would become Silicon Valley.   
[1]That's a striking departure from the past. Up till a couple decades  
ago, geography was destiny for cities. All great cities were located  
on waterways, because cities made money by trade, and water was the  
only economical way to ship.Now you could make a great city anywhere, if you could get the right  
people to move there. So the question of how to make a silicon  
valley becomes: who are the right people, and how do you get them  
to move?Two TypesI think you only need two kinds of people to create a technology  
hub: rich people and nerds. They're the limiting reagents in the  
reaction that produces startups, because they're the only ones  
present when startups get started. Everyone else will move.Observation bears this out: within the US, towns have become startup  
hubs if and only if they have both rich people and nerds. Few  
startups happen in Miami, for example, because although it's full  
of rich people, it has few nerds. It's not the kind of place nerds  
like.Whereas Pittsburgh has the opposite problem: plenty of nerds, but  
no rich people. The top US Computer Science departments are said  
to be MIT, Stanford, Berkeley, and Carnegie-Mellon. MIT yielded  
Route 128. Stanford and Berkeley yielded Silicon Valley. But  
Carnegie-Mellon? The record skips at that point. Lower down the  
list, the University of Washington yielded a high-tech community  
in Seattle, and the University of Texas at Austin yielded one in  
Austin. But what happened in Pittsburgh? And in Ithaca, home of  
Cornell, which is also high on the list?I grew up in Pittsburgh and went to college at Cornell, so I can  
answer for both. The weather is terrible, particularly in winter,  
and there's no interesting old city to make up for it, as there is  
in Boston. Rich people don't want to live in Pittsburgh or Ithaca.  
So while there are plenty of hackers who could start startups,  
there's no one to invest in them.Not BureaucratsDo you really need the rich people? Wouldn't it work to have the  
government invest in the nerds? No, it would not. Startup investors  
are a distinct type of rich people. They tend to have a lot of  
experience themselves in the technology business. This (a) helps  
them pick the right startups, and (b) means they can supply advice  
and connections as well as money. And the fact that they have a  
personal stake in the outcome makes them really pay attention.Bureaucrats by their nature are the exact opposite sort of people  
from startup investors. The idea of them making startup investments  
is comic. It would be like mathematicians running Vogue-- or  
perhaps more accurately, Vogue editors running a math journal.  
[2]Though indeed, most things bureaucrats do, they do badly. We just  
don't notice usually, because they only have to compete against  
other bureaucrats. But as startup investors they'd have to compete  
against pros with a great deal more experience and motivation.Even corporations that have in-house VC groups generally forbid  
them to make their own investment decisions. Most are only allowed  
to invest in deals where some reputable private VC firm is willing  
to act as lead investor.Not BuildingsIf you go to see Silicon Valley, what you'll see are buildings.  
But it's the people that make it Silicon Valley, not the buildings.  
I read occasionally about attempts to set up "technology  
parks" in other places, as if the active ingredient of Silicon  
Valley were the office space. An article about Sophia Antipolis  
bragged that companies there included Cisco, Compaq, IBM, NCR, and  
Nortel. Don't the French realize these aren't startups?Building office buildings for technology companies won't get you a  
silicon valley, because the key stage in the life of a startup  
happens before they want that kind of space. The key stage is when  
they're three guys operating out of an apartment. Wherever the  
startup is when it gets funded, it will stay. The defining quality  
of Silicon Valley is not that Intel or Apple or Google have offices  
there, but that they were started there.So if you want to reproduce Silicon Valley, what you need to reproduce  
is those two or three founders sitting around a kitchen table  
deciding to start a company. And to reproduce that you need those  
people.UniversitiesThe exciting thing is, all you need are the people. If you could  
attract a critical mass of nerds and investors to live somewhere,  
you could reproduce Silicon Valley. And both groups are highly  
mobile. They'll go where life is good. So what makes a place good  
to them?What nerds like is other nerds. Smart people will go wherever other  
smart people are. And in particular, to great universities. In  
theory there could be other ways to attract them, but so far  
universities seem to be indispensable. Within the US, there are  
no technology hubs without first-rate universities-- or at least,  
first-rate computer science departments.So if you want to make a silicon valley, you not only need a  
university, but one of the top handful in the world. It has to be  
good enough to act as a magnet, drawing the best people from thousands  
of miles away. And that means it has to stand up to existing magnets  
like MIT and Stanford.This sounds hard. Actually it might be easy. My professor friends,  
when they're deciding where they'd like to work, consider one thing  
above all: the quality of the other faculty. What attracts professors  
is good colleagues. So if you managed to recruit, en masse, a  
significant number of the best young researchers, you could create  
a first-rate university from nothing overnight. And you could do  
that for surprisingly little. If you paid 200 people hiring bonuses  
of $3 million apiece, you could put together a faculty that would  
bear comparison with any in the world. And from that point the  
chain reaction would be self-sustaining. So whatever it costs to  
establish a mediocre university, for an additional half billion or  
so you could have a great one.   
[3]PersonalityHowever, merely creating a new university would not be enough to  
start a silicon valley. The university is just the seed. It has  
to be planted in the right soil, or it won't germinate. Plant it  
in the wrong place, and you just create Carnegie-Mellon.To spawn startups, your university has to be in a town that has  
attractions other than the university. It has to be a place where  
investors want to live, and students want to stay after they graduate.The two like much the same things, because most startup investors  
are nerds themselves. So what do nerds look for in a town? Their  
tastes aren't completely different from other people's, because a  
lot of the towns they like most in the US are also big tourist  
destinations: San Francisco, Boston, Seattle. But their tastes  
can't be quite mainstream either, because they dislike other big  
tourist destinations, like New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas.There has been a lot written lately about the "creative class." The  
thesis seems to be that as wealth derives increasingly from ideas,  
cities will prosper only if they attract those who have them. That  
is certainly true; in fact it was the basis of Amsterdam's prosperity  
400 years ago.A lot of nerd tastes they share with the creative class in general.  
For example, they like well-preserved old neighborhoods instead of  
cookie-cutter suburbs, and locally-owned shops and restaurants  
instead of national chains. Like the rest of the creative class,  
they want to live somewhere with personality.What exactly is personality? I think it's the feeling that each  
building is the work of a distinct group of people. A town with  
personality is one that doesn't feel mass-produced. So if you want  
to make a startup hub-- or any town to attract the "creative class"--  
you probably have to ban large development projects.  
When a large tract has been developed by a single organization, you  
can always tell.   
[4]Most towns with personality are old, but they don't have to be.  
Old towns have two advantages: they're denser, because they were  
laid out before cars, and they're more varied, because they were  
built one building at a time. You could have both now. Just have  
building codes that ensure density, and ban large scale developments.A corollary is that you have to keep out the biggest developer of  
all: the government. A government that asks "How can we build a  
silicon valley?" has probably ensured failure by the way they framed  
the question. You don't build a silicon valley; you let one grow.NerdsIf you want to attract nerds, you need more than a town with  
personality. You need a town with the right personality. Nerds  
are a distinct subset of the creative class, with different tastes  
from the rest. You can see this most clearly in New York, which  
attracts a lot of creative people, but few nerds.   
[5]What nerds like is the kind of town where people walk around smiling.  
This excludes LA, where no one walks at all, and also New York,  
where people walk, but not smiling. When I was in grad school in  
Boston, a friend came to visit from New York. On the subway back  
from the airport she asked "Why is everyone smiling?" I looked and  
they weren't smiling. They just looked like they were compared to  
the facial expressions she was used to.If you've lived in New York, you know where these facial expressions  
come from. It's the kind of place where your mind may be excited,  
but your body knows it's having a bad time. People don't so much  
enjoy living there as endure it for the sake of the excitement.  
And if you like certain kinds of excitement, New York is incomparable.  
It's a hub of glamour, a magnet for all the shorter half-life  
isotopes of style and fame.Nerds don't care about glamour, so to them the appeal of New York  
is a mystery. People who like New York will pay a fortune for a  
small, dark, noisy apartment in order to live in a town where the  
cool people are really cool. A nerd looks at that deal and sees  
only: pay a fortune for a small, dark, noisy apartment.Nerds will pay a premium to live in a town where the smart people  
are really smart, but you don't have to pay as much for that. It's  
supply and demand: glamour is popular, so you have to pay a lot for  
it.Most nerds like quieter pleasures. They like cafes instead of  
clubs; used bookshops instead of fashionable clothing shops; hiking  
instead of dancing; sunlight instead of tall buildings. A nerd's  
idea of paradise is Berkeley or Boulder.YouthIt's the young nerds who start startups, so it's those specifically  
the city has to appeal to. The startup hubs in the US are all  
young-feeling towns. This doesn't mean they have to be new.  
Cambridge has the oldest town plan in America, but it feels young  
because it's full of students.What you can't have, if you want to create a silicon valley, is a  
large, existing population of stodgy people. It would be a waste  
of time to try to reverse the fortunes of a declining industrial town  
like Detroit or Philadelphia by trying to encourage startups. Those  
places have too much momentum in the wrong direction. You're better  
off starting with a blank slate in the form of a small town. Or  
better still, if there's a town young people already flock to, that  
one.The Bay Area was a magnet for the young and optimistic for decades  
before it was associated with technology. It was a place people  
went in search of something new. And so it became synonymous with  
California nuttiness. There's still a lot of that there. If you  
wanted to start a new fad-- a new way to focus one's "energy," for  
example, or a new category of things not to eat-- the Bay Area would  
be the place to do it. But a place that tolerates oddness in the  
search for the new is exactly what you want in a startup hub, because  
economically that's what startups are. Most good startup ideas  
seem a little crazy; if they were obviously good ideas, someone  
would have done them already.(How many people are going to want computers in their houses?  
What, another search engine?)That's the connection between technology and liberalism. Without  
exception the high-tech cities in the US are also the most liberal.  
But it's not because liberals are smarter that this is so. It's  
because liberal cities tolerate odd ideas, and smart people by  
definition have odd ideas.Conversely, a town that gets praised for being "solid" or representing  
"traditional values" may be a fine place to live, but it's never  
going to succeed as a startup hub. The 2004 presidential election,  
though a disaster in other respects, conveniently supplied us with  
a county-by-county   
map of such places.   
[6]To attract the young, a town must have an intact center. In most  
American cities the center has been abandoned, and the growth, if  
any, is in the suburbs. Most American cities have been turned  
inside out. But none of the startup hubs has: not San Francisco,  
or Boston, or Seattle. They all have intact centers.  
[7]  
My guess is that no city with a dead center could be turned into a  
startup hub. Young people don't want to live in the suburbs.Within the US, the two cities I think could most easily be turned  
into new silicon valleys are Boulder and Portland. Both have the  
kind of effervescent feel that attracts the young. They're each  
only a great university short of becoming a silicon valley, if they  
wanted to.TimeA great university near an attractive town. Is that all it takes?  
That was all it took to make the original Silicon Valley. Silicon  
Valley traces its origins to William Shockley, one of the inventors  
of the transistor. He did the research that won him the Nobel Prize  
at Bell Labs, but when he started his own company in 1956 he moved  
to Palo Alto to do it. At the time that was an odd thing to do.  
Why did he? Because he had grown up there and remembered how nice  
it was. Now Palo Alto is suburbia, but then it was a charming  
college town-- a charming college town with perfect weather and San  
Francisco only an hour away.The companies that rule Silicon Valley now are all descended in  
various ways from Shockley Semiconductor. Shockley was a difficult  
man, and in 1957 his top people-- "the traitorous eight"-- left to  
start a new company, Fairchild Semiconductor. Among them were  
Gordon Moore and Robert Noyce, who went on to found Intel, and  
Eugene Kleiner, who founded the VC firm Kleiner Perkins. Forty-two  
years later, Kleiner Perkins funded Google, and the partner responsible  
for the deal was John Doerr, who came to Silicon Valley in 1974 to  
work for Intel.So although a lot of the newest companies in Silicon Valley don't  
make anything out of silicon, there always seem to be multiple links  
back to Shockley. There's a lesson here: startups beget startups.  
People who work for startups start their own. People who get rich  
from startups fund new ones. I suspect this kind of organic growth  
is the only way to produce a startup hub, because it's the only way  
to grow the expertise you need.That has two important implications. The first is that you need  
time to grow a silicon valley. The university you could create in  
a couple years, but the startup community around it has to grow  
organically. The cycle time is limited by the time it takes a  
company to succeed, which probably averages about five years.The other implication of the organic growth hypothesis is that you  
can't be somewhat of a startup hub. You either have a self-sustaining  
chain reaction, or not. Observation confirms this too: cities  
either have a startup scene, or they don't. There is no middle  
ground. Chicago has the third largest metropolitan area in America.  
As source of startups it's negligible compared to Seattle, number 15.The good news is that the initial seed can be quite small. Shockley  
Semiconductor, though itself not very successful, was big enough.  
It brought a critical mass of experts in an important new technology  
together in a place they liked enough to stay.CompetingOf course, a would-be silicon valley faces an obstacle the original  
one didn't: it has to compete with Silicon Valley. Can that be  
done? Probably.One of Silicon Valley's biggest advantages is its venture capital  
firms. This was not a factor in Shockley's day, because VC funds  
didn't exist. In fact, Shockley Semiconductor and Fairchild  
Semiconductor were not startups at all in our sense. They were  
subsidiaries-- of Beckman Instruments and Fairchild Camera and  
Instrument respectively. Those companies were apparently willing  
to establish subsidiaries wherever the experts wanted to live.Venture investors, however, prefer to fund startups within an hour's  
drive. For one, they're more likely to notice startups nearby.  
But when they do notice startups in other towns they prefer them  
to move. They don't want to have to travel to attend board meetings,  
and in any case the odds of succeeding are higher in a startup hub.The centralizing effect of venture firms is a double one: they cause  
startups to form around them, and those draw in more startups through  
acquisitions. And although the first may be weakening because it's  
now so cheap to start some startups, the second seems as strong as ever.  
Three of the most admired  
"Web 2.0" companies were started outside the usual startup hubs,  
but two of them have already been reeled in through acquisitions.Such centralizing forces make it harder for new silicon valleys to  
get started. But by no means impossible. Ultimately power rests  
with the founders. A startup with the best people will beat one  
with funding from famous VCs, and a startup that was sufficiently  
successful would never have to move. So a town that  
could exert enough pull over the right people could resist and  
perhaps even surpass Silicon Valley.For all its power, Silicon Valley has a great weakness: the paradise  
Shockley found in 1956 is now one giant parking lot. San Francisco  
and Berkeley are great, but they're forty miles away. Silicon  
Valley proper is soul-crushing suburban sprawl. It  
has fabulous weather, which makes it significantly better than the  
soul-crushing sprawl of most other American cities. But a competitor  
that managed to avoid sprawl would have real leverage. All a city  
needs is to be the kind of place the next traitorous eight look at  
and say "I want to stay here," and that would be enough to get the  
chain reaction started.Notes[1]  
It's interesting to consider how low this number could be  
made. I suspect five hundred would be enough, even if they could  
bring no assets with them. Probably just thirty, if I could pick them,   
would be enough to turn Buffalo into a significant startup hub.[2]  
Bureaucrats manage to allocate research funding moderately  
well, but only because (like an in-house VC fund) they outsource  
most of the work of selection. A professor at a famous university  
who is highly regarded by his peers will get funding, pretty much  
regardless of the proposal. That wouldn't work for startups, whose  
founders aren't sponsored by organizations, and are often unknowns.[3]  
You'd have to do it all at once, or at least a whole department  
at a time, because people would be more likely to come if they  
knew their friends were. And you should probably start from scratch,  
rather than trying to upgrade an existing university, or much energy  
would be lost in friction.[4]  
Hypothesis: Any plan in which multiple independent buildings  
are gutted or demolished to be "redeveloped" as a single project  
is a net loss of personality for the city, with the exception of  
the conversion of buildings not previously public, like warehouses.[5]  
A few startups get started in New York, but less  
than a tenth as many per capita as in Boston, and mostly  
in less nerdy fields like finance and media.[6]  
Some blue counties are false positives (reflecting the  
remaining power of Democractic party machines), but there are no  
false negatives. You can safely write off all the red counties.[7]  
Some "urban renewal" experts took a shot at destroying Boston's  
in the 1960s, leaving the area around city hall a bleak wasteland,  
but most neighborhoods successfully resisted them.Thanks to Chris Anderson, Trevor Blackwell, Marc Hedlund,  
Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris, Greg Mcadoo, Fred Wilson,  
and Stephen Wolfram for  
reading drafts of this, and to Ed Dumbill for inviting me to speak.(The second part of this talk became Why Startups  
Condense in America.)VC Deals by RegionStartup Jobs by RegionThey Would Be GodsInterview: Richard HodgsonSanta Clara Valley, 1971Scattered AbroadRussian TranslationSpanish TranslationJapanese TranslationPortuguese TranslationArabic Translation  
  
If you liked this, you may also like  
Hackers & Painters.

# The Hardest Lessons for Startups to Learn

April 2006(This essay is derived from a talk at the 2006   
Startup School.)The startups we've funded so far are pretty quick, but they seem  
quicker to learn some lessons than others. I think it's because  
some things about startups are kind of counterintuitive.We've now   
invested   
in enough companies that I've learned a trick  
for determining which points are the counterintuitive ones:  
they're the ones I have to keep repeating.So I'm going to number these points, and maybe with future startups  
I'll be able to pull off a form of Huffman coding. I'll make them  
all read this, and then instead of nagging them in detail, I'll  
just be able to say: number four!  
1. Release Early.The thing I probably repeat most is this recipe for a startup: get  
a version 1 out fast, then improve it based on users' reactions.By "release early" I don't mean you should release something full  
of bugs, but that you should release something minimal. Users hate  
bugs, but they don't seem to mind a minimal version 1, if there's  
more coming soon.There are several reasons it pays to get version 1 done fast. One  
is that this is simply the right way to write software, whether for  
a startup or not. I've been repeating that since 1993, and I haven't seen much since to  
contradict it. I've seen a lot of startups die because they were  
too slow to release stuff, and none because they were too quick.  
[1]One of the things that will surprise you if you build something  
popular is that you won't know your users. Reddit now has almost half a million  
unique visitors a month. Who are all those people? They have no  
idea. No web startup does. And since you don't know your users,  
it's dangerous to guess what they'll like. Better to release  
something and let them tell you.Wufoo took this to heart and released  
their form-builder before the underlying database. You can't even  
drive the thing yet, but 83,000 people came to sit in the driver's  
seat and hold the steering wheel. And Wufoo got valuable feedback  
from it: Linux users complained they used too much Flash, so they  
rewrote their software not to. If they'd waited to release everything  
at once, they wouldn't have discovered this problem till it was  
more deeply wired in.Even if you had no users, it would still be important to release  
quickly, because for a startup the initial release acts as a shakedown  
cruise. If anything major is broken-- if the idea's no good,  
for example, or the founders hate one another-- the stress of getting  
that first version out will expose it. And if you have such problems  
you want to find them early.Perhaps the most important reason to release early, though, is that  
it makes you work harder. When you're working on something that  
isn't released, problems are intriguing. In something that's out  
there, problems are alarming. There is a lot more urgency once you  
release. And I think that's precisely why people put it off. They  
know they'll have to work a lot harder once they do.   
[2]  
2. Keep Pumping Out Features.Of course, "release early" has a second component, without which  
it would be bad advice. If you're going to start with something  
that doesn't do much, you better improve it fast.What I find myself repeating is "pump out features." And this rule  
isn't just for the initial stages. This is something all startups  
should do for as long as they want to be considered startups.I don't mean, of course, that you should make your application ever  
more complex. By "feature" I mean one unit of hacking-- one quantum  
of making users' lives better.As with exercise, improvements beget improvements. If you run every  
day, you'll probably feel like running tomorrow. But if you skip  
running for a couple weeks, it will be an effort to drag yourself  
out. So it is with hacking: the more ideas you implement, the more  
ideas you'll have. You should make your system better at least in  
some small way every day or two.This is not just a good way to get development done; it is also a  
form of marketing. Users love a site that's constantly improving.  
In fact, users expect a site to improve. Imagine if you visited a  
site that seemed very good, and then returned two months later and  
not one thing had changed. Wouldn't it start to seem lame?   
[3]They'll like you even better when you improve in response to their  
comments, because customers are used to companies ignoring them.  
If you're the rare exception-- a company that actually listens--  
you'll generate fanatical loyalty. You won't need to advertise,  
because your users will do it for you.This seems obvious too, so why do I have to keep repeating it? I  
think the problem here is that people get used to how things are.  
Once a product gets past the stage where it has glaring flaws, you  
start to get used to it, and gradually whatever features it happens  
to have become its identity. For example, I doubt many people at  
Yahoo (or Google for that matter) realized how much better web mail  
could be till Paul Buchheit showed them.I think the solution is to assume that anything you've made is far  
short of what it could be. Force yourself, as a sort of intellectual  
exercise, to keep thinking of improvements. Ok, sure, what you  
have is perfect. But if you had to change something, what would  
it be?If your product seems finished, there are two possible explanations:  
(a) it is finished, or (b) you lack imagination. Experience suggests  
(b) is a thousand times more likely.  
3. Make Users Happy.Improving constantly is an instance of a more general rule: make  
users happy. One thing all startups have in common is that they  
can't force anyone to do anything. They can't force anyone to use  
their software, and they can't force anyone to do deals with them.  
A startup has to sing for its supper. That's why the successful  
ones make great things. They have to, or die.When you're running a startup you feel like a little bit of debris  
blown about by powerful winds. The most powerful wind is users.  
They can either catch you and loft you up into the sky, as they did  
with Google, or leave you flat on the pavement, as they do with  
most startups. Users are a fickle wind, but more powerful than any  
other. If they take you up, no competitor can keep you down.As a little piece of debris, the rational thing for you to do is  
not to lie flat, but to curl yourself into a shape the wind will  
catch.I like the wind metaphor because it reminds you how impersonal the  
stream of traffic is. The vast majority of people who visit your  
site will be casual visitors. It's them you have to design your  
site for. The people who really care will find what they want by  
themselves.The median visitor will arrive with their finger poised on the Back  
button. Think about your own experience: most links you  
follow lead to something lame. Anyone who has used the web for  
more than a couple weeks has been trained to click on Back after  
following a link. So your site has to say "Wait! Don't click on  
Back. This site isn't lame. Look at this, for example."There are two things you have to do to make people pause. The most  
important is to explain, as concisely as possible, what the hell  
your site is about. How often have you visited a site that seemed  
to assume you already knew what they did? For example, the corporate  
site that says the  
company makes  
  
 enterprise content management solutions for business that enable  
 organizations to unify people, content and processes to minimize  
 business risk, accelerate time-to-value and sustain lower total  
 cost of ownership.  
  
An established company may get away with such an opaque description,  
but no startup can. A startup  
should be able to explain in one or two sentences exactly what it  
does.   
[4]  
And not just to users. You need this for everyone:  
investors, acquirers, partners, reporters, potential employees, and  
even current employees. You probably shouldn't even start a company  
to do something that can't be described compellingly in one or two  
sentences.The other thing I repeat is to give people everything you've got,  
right away. If you have something impressive, try to put it on the  
front page, because that's the only one most visitors will see.  
Though indeed there's a paradox here: the more you push the good  
stuff toward the front, the more likely visitors are to explore  
further.   
[5]In the best case these two suggestions get combined: you tell  
visitors what your site is about by showing them. One of the  
standard pieces of advice in fiction writing is "show, don't tell."  
Don't say that a character's angry; have him grind his teeth, or  
break his pencil in half. Nothing will explain what your site does  
so well as using it.The industry term here is "conversion." The job of your site is  
to convert casual visitors into users-- whatever your definition  
of a user is. You can measure this in your growth rate. Either  
your site is catching on, or it isn't, and you must know which. If  
you have decent growth, you'll win in the end, no matter how obscure  
you are now. And if you don't, you need to fix something.  
4. Fear the Right Things.Another thing I find myself saying a lot is "don't worry." Actually,  
it's more often "don't worry about this; worry about that instead."  
Startups are right to be paranoid, but they sometimes fear the wrong  
things.Most visible disasters are not so alarming as they seem. Disasters  
are normal in a startup: a founder quits, you discover a patent  
that covers what you're doing, your servers keep crashing, you run  
into an insoluble technical problem, you have to change your name,  
a deal falls through-- these are all par for the course. They won't  
kill you unless you let them.Nor will most competitors. A lot of startups worry "what if Google  
builds something like us?" Actually big companies are not the ones  
you have to worry about-- not even Google. The people at Google  
are smart, but no smarter than you; they're not as motivated, because  
Google is not going to go out of business if this one product fails;  
and even at Google they have a lot of bureaucracy to slow them down.What you should fear, as a startup, is not the established players,  
but other startups you don't know exist yet. They're way more  
dangerous than Google because, like you, they're cornered animals.Looking just at existing competitors can give you a false sense of  
security. You should compete against what someone else could be  
doing, not just what you can see people doing. A corollary is that  
you shouldn't relax just because you have no visible competitors  
yet. No matter what your idea, there's someone else out there  
working on the same thing.That's the downside of it being easier to start a startup: more people  
are doing it. But I disagree with Caterina Fake when she says that  
makes this a bad time to start a startup. More people are starting  
startups, but not as many more as could. Most college graduates  
still think they have to get a job. The average person can't ignore  
something that's been beaten into their head since they were three  
just because serving web pages recently got a lot cheaper.And in any case, competitors are not the biggest threat. Way more  
startups hose themselves than get crushed by competitors. There  
are a lot of ways to do it, but the three main ones are internal  
disputes, inertia, and ignoring users. Each is, by itself, enough  
to kill you. But if I had to pick the worst, it would be ignoring  
users. If you want a recipe for a startup that's going to die,  
here it is: a couple of founders who have some great idea they know  
everyone is going to love, and that's what they're going to build,  
no matter what.Almost everyone's initial plan is broken. If companies stuck to  
their initial plans, Microsoft would be selling programming languages,  
and Apple would be selling printed circuit boards. In both cases  
their customers told them what their business should be-- and they  
were smart enough to listen.As Richard Feynman said, the imagination of nature is greater than  
the imagination of man. You'll find more interesting things by  
looking at the world than you could ever produce just by thinking.  
This principle is very powerful. It's why the best abstract painting  
still falls short of Leonardo, for example. And it applies to  
startups too. No idea for a product could ever be so clever as the  
ones you can discover by smashing a beam of prototypes into a beam  
of users.  
5. Commitment Is a Self-Fulfilling Prophecy.I now have enough experience with startups to be able to say what  
the most important quality is in a startup founder, and it's not  
what you might think. The most important quality in a startup  
founder is determination. Not intelligence-- determination.This is a little depressing. I'd like to believe Viaweb succeeded  
because we were smart, not merely determined. A lot of people in  
the startup world want to believe that. Not just founders, but  
investors too. They like the idea of inhabiting a world ruled by  
intelligence. And you can tell they really believe this, because  
it affects their investment decisions.Time after time VCs invest in startups founded by eminent professors.  
This may work in biotech, where a lot of startups simply commercialize  
existing research, but in software you want to invest in students,  
not professors. Microsoft, Yahoo, and Google were all founded by  
people who dropped out of school to do it. What students lack in  
experience they more than make up in dedication.Of course, if you want to get rich, it's not enough merely to be  
determined. You have to be smart too, right? I'd like to think  
so, but I've had an experience that convinced me otherwise: I spent  
several years living in New York.You can lose quite a lot in the brains department and it won't kill  
you. But lose even a little bit in the commitment department, and  
that will kill you very rapidly.Running a startup is like walking on your hands: it's possible, but  
it requires extraordinary effort. If an ordinary employee were  
asked to do the things a startup founder has to, he'd be very  
indignant. Imagine if you were hired at some big company, and in  
addition to writing software ten times faster than you'd ever had  
to before, they expected you to answer support calls, administer  
the servers, design the web site, cold-call customers, find the  
company office space, and go out and get everyone lunch.And to do all this not in the calm, womb-like atmosphere of a big  
company, but against a backdrop of constant disasters. That's the  
part that really demands determination. In a startup, there's  
always some disaster happening. So if you're the least bit inclined  
to find an excuse to quit, there's always one right there.But if you lack commitment, chances are it will have been hurting  
you long before you actually quit. Everyone who deals with startups  
knows how important commitment is, so if they sense you're ambivalent,  
they won't give you much attention. If you lack commitment, you'll  
just find that for some mysterious reason good things happen to  
your competitors but not to you. If you lack commitment, it will  
seem to you that you're unlucky.Whereas if you're determined to stick around, people will pay  
attention to you, because odds are they'll have to deal with you  
later. You're a local, not just a tourist, so everyone has to come  
to terms with you.At Y Combinator we sometimes mistakenly fund teams who have the  
attitude that they're going to give this startup thing a shot for  
three months, and if something great happens, they'll stick with  
it-- "something great" meaning either that someone wants to buy  
them or invest millions of dollars in them. But if this is your  
attitude, "something great" is very unlikely to happen to you,  
because both acquirers and investors judge you by your level of  
commitment.If an acquirer thinks you're going to stick around no matter what,  
they'll be more likely to buy you, because if they don't and you  
stick around, you'll probably grow, your price will go up, and  
they'll be left wishing they'd bought you earlier. Ditto for  
investors. What really motivates investors, even big VCs, is not  
the hope of good returns, but the fear of missing out.   
[6]  
So if  
you make it clear you're going to succeed no matter what, and the only  
reason you need them is to make it happen a little faster, you're  
much more likely to get money.You can't fake this. The only way to convince everyone that you're  
ready to fight to the death is actually to be ready to.You have to be the right kind of determined, though. I carefully  
chose the word determined rather than stubborn, because stubbornness  
is a disastrous quality in a startup. You have to be determined,  
but flexible, like a running back. A successful running back doesn't  
just put his head down and try to run through people. He improvises:  
if someone appears in front of him, he runs around them; if someone  
tries to grab him, he spins out of their grip; he'll even run in  
the wrong direction briefly if that will help. The one thing he'll  
never do is stand still.   
[7]  
6. There Is Always Room.I was talking recently to a startup founder about whether it might  
be good to add a social component to their software. He said he  
didn't think so, because the whole social thing was tapped out.  
Really? So in a hundred years the only social networking sites  
will be the Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, and Del.icio.us? Not likely.There is always room for new stuff. At every point in history,  
even the darkest bits of the dark ages, people were discovering  
things that made everyone say "why didn't anyone think of that  
before?" We know this continued to be true up till 2004, when the  
Facebook was founded-- though strictly speaking someone else did  
think of that.The reason we don't see the opportunities all around us is that we  
adjust to however things are, and assume that's how things have to  
be. For example, it would seem crazy to most people to try to make  
a better search engine than Google. Surely that field, at least,  
is tapped out. Really? In a hundred years-- or even twenty-- are  
people still going to search for information using something like  
the current Google? Even Google probably doesn't think that.In particular, I don't think there's any limit to the number of  
startups. Sometimes you hear people saying "All these guys starting  
startups now are going to be disappointed. How many little startups  
are Google and Yahoo going to buy, after all?" That sounds cleverly  
skeptical, but I can prove it's mistaken. No one proposes that  
there's some limit to the number of people who can be employed in  
an economy consisting of big, slow-moving companies with a couple  
thousand people each. Why should there be any limit to the number  
who could be employed by small, fast-moving companies with ten each?  
It seems to me the only limit would be the number of people who  
want to work that hard.The limit on the number of startups is not the number that can get  
acquired by Google and Yahoo-- though it seems even that should  
be unlimited, if the startups were actually worth buying-- but the  
amount of wealth that can be created. And I don't think there's  
any limit on that, except cosmological ones.So for all practical purposes, there is no limit to the number of  
startups. Startups make wealth, which means they make things people  
want, and if there's a limit on the number of things people want,  
we are nowhere near it. I still don't even have a flying car.  
7. Don't Get Your Hopes Up.This is another one I've been repeating since long before Y Combinator.  
It was practically the corporate motto at Viaweb.Startup founders are naturally optimistic. They wouldn't do it  
otherwise. But you should treat your optimism the way you'd treat  
the core of a nuclear reactor: as a source of power that's also  
very dangerous. You have to build a shield around it, or it will  
fry you.The shielding of a reactor is not uniform; the reactor would be  
useless if it were. It's pierced in a few places to let pipes in.  
An optimism shield has to be pierced too. I think the place to  
draw the line is between what you expect of yourself, and what you  
expect of other people. It's ok to be optimistic about what you  
can do, but assume the worst about machines and other people.This is particularly necessary in a startup, because you tend to  
be pushing the limits of whatever you're doing. So things don't  
happen in the smooth, predictable way they do in the rest of the  
world. Things change suddenly, and usually for the worse.Shielding your optimism is nowhere more important than with deals.  
If your startup is doing a deal, just assume it's not going to  
happen. The VCs who say they're going to invest in you aren't.  
The company that says they're going to buy you isn't. The big  
customer who wants to use your system in their whole company won't.  
Then if things work out you can be pleasantly surprised.The reason I warn startups not to get their hopes up is not to save  
them from being disappointed when things fall through. It's  
for a more practical reason: to prevent them from leaning their  
company against something that's going to fall over, taking them  
with it.For example, if someone says they want to invest in you, there's a  
natural tendency to stop looking for other investors. That's why  
people proposing deals seem so positive: they want you to  
stop looking. And you want to stop too, because doing deals is a  
pain. Raising money, in particular, is a huge time sink. So you  
have to consciously force yourself to keep looking.Even if you ultimately do the first deal, it will be to your advantage  
to have kept looking, because you'll get better terms. Deals are  
dynamic; unless you're negotiating with someone unusually honest,  
there's not a single point where you shake hands and the deal's  
done. There are usually a lot of subsidiary questions to be cleared  
up after the handshake, and if the other side senses weakness-- if  
they sense you need this deal-- they will be very tempted to screw  
you in the details.VCs and corp dev guys are professional negotiators. They're trained  
to take advantage of weakness.   
[8]  
So while they're often nice  
guys, they just can't help it. And as pros they do this more than  
you. So don't even try to bluff them. The only way a startup can  
have any leverage in a deal is genuinely not to need it. And if  
you don't believe in a deal, you'll be less likely to depend on it.So I want to plant a hypnotic suggestion in your heads: when you  
hear someone say the words "we want to invest in you" or "we want  
to acquire you," I want the following phrase to appear automatically  
in your head: don't get your hopes up. Just continue running  
your company as if this deal didn't exist. Nothing is more likely  
to make it close.The way to succeed in a startup is to focus on the goal of getting  
lots of users, and keep walking swiftly toward it while investors  
and acquirers scurry alongside trying to wave money in your face.  
Speed, not MoneyThe way I've described it, starting a startup sounds pretty stressful.  
It is. When I talk to the founders of the companies we've funded,  
they all say the same thing: I knew it would be hard, but I didn't  
realize it would be this hard.So why do it? It would be worth enduring a lot of pain and stress  
to do something grand or heroic, but just to make money? Is making  
money really that important?No, not really. It seems ridiculous to me when people take business  
too seriously. I regard making money as a boring errand to be got  
out of the way as soon as possible. There is nothing grand or  
heroic about starting a startup per se.So why do I spend so much time thinking about startups? I'll tell  
you why. Economically, a startup is best seen not as a way to get  
rich, but as a way to work faster. You have to make a living, and  
a startup is a way to get that done quickly, instead of letting it  
drag on through your whole life.  
[9]We take it for granted most of the time, but human life is fairly  
miraculous. It is also palpably short. You're given this marvellous  
thing, and then poof, it's taken away. You can see why people  
invent gods to explain it. But even to people who don't believe  
in gods, life commands respect. There are times in most of our  
lives when the days go by in a blur, and almost everyone has a  
sense, when this happens, of wasting something precious. As Ben  
Franklin said, if you love life, don't waste time, because time is  
what life is made of.So no, there's nothing particularly grand about making money. That's  
not what makes startups worth the trouble. What's important about  
startups is the speed. By compressing the dull but necessary task  
of making a living into the smallest possible time, you show respect  
for life, and there is something grand about that.Notes[1]  
Startups can die from releasing something full of bugs, and not  
fixing them fast enough, but I don't know of any that died from  
releasing something stable but minimal very early, then promptly  
improving it.[2]  
I know this is why I haven't released Arc. The moment I do,  
I'll have people nagging me for features.[3]  
A web site is different from a book or movie or desktop application  
in this respect. Users judge a site not as a single snapshot, but  
as an animation with multiple frames. Of the two, I'd say the rate of  
improvement is more important to users than where you currently  
are.[4]  
It should not always tell this to users, however. For example,  
MySpace is basically a replacement mall for mallrats. But it was  
wiser for them, initially, to pretend that the site was about bands.[5]  
Similarly, don't make users register to try your site. Maybe  
what you have is so valuable that visitors should gladly register  
to get at it. But they've been trained to expect the opposite.  
Most of the things they've tried on the web have sucked-- and  
probably especially those that made them register.[6]  
VCs have rational reasons for behaving this way. They don't  
make their money (if they make money) off their median investments.  
In a typical fund, half the companies fail, most of the rest generate  
mediocre returns, and one or two "make the fund" by succeeding  
spectacularly. So if they miss just a few of the most promising  
opportunities, it could hose the whole fund.[7]  
The attitude of a running back doesn't translate to soccer.  
Though it looks great when a forward dribbles past multiple defenders,  
a player who persists in trying such things will do worse in the  
long term than one who passes.[8]  
The reason Y Combinator never negotiates valuations  
is that we're not professional negotiators, and don't want to turn  
into them.[9]  
There are two ways to do   
work you love: (a) to make money, then work  
on what you love, or (b) to get a job where you get paid to work on  
stuff you love. In practice the first phases of both  
consist mostly of unedifying schleps, and in (b) the second phase is less  
secure.Thanks to Sam Altman, Trevor Blackwell, Beau Hartshorne, Jessica   
Livingston, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.Romanian TranslationRussian TranslationFrench TranslationJapanese Translation

# See Randomness

April 2006, rev August 2009Plato quotes Socrates as saying "the unexamined life is not worth  
living." Part of what he meant was that the proper role of humans is to  
think, just as the proper role of anteaters is to poke their noses  
into anthills.A lot of ancient philosophy had the quality — and I  
don't mean this in an insulting way — of the kind of conversations  
freshmen have late at night in common rooms:  
  
What is our purpose? Well, we humans are  
as conspicuously different from other animals as the anteater.  
In our case the distinguishing feature is the ability to reason.  
So obviously that is what we should be doing, and a human who  
doesn't is doing a bad job of being human — is no better than an  
animal.  
  
Now we'd give a different answer. At least, someone Socrates's age  
would. We'd ask why we even suppose we have a "purpose" in life.  
We may be better adapted for some things than others; we  
may be happier doing things we're adapted for; but why assume  
purpose?The history of ideas  
is a history of gradually discarding the assumption that it's all  
about us. No, it turns out, the earth is not the center of the  
universe — not even the center of the solar system. No, it turns  
out, humans are not created by God in his own image; they're just  
one species among many, descended not merely from apes, but from  
microorganisms. Even the concept of "me" turns out to be fuzzy  
around the edges if you examine it closely.The idea that we're the center of things is difficult to discard.  
So difficult that there's probably room to discard more. Richard  
Dawkins made another step in that direction only in the last several  
decades, with the idea of the   
selfish gene.   
No, it turns  
out, we're not even the protagonists: we're just the latest model  
vehicle our genes have constructed to travel around in. And having  
kids is our genes heading for the lifeboats. Reading  
that book snapped my brain out of its previous way of thinking the  
way Darwin's must have when it first appeared.(Few people can experience now what Darwin's contemporaries did  
when The Origin of Species was first published, because everyone  
now is raised either to take evolution for granted, or to regard  
it as a heresy. No one encounters the idea of natural selection for  
the first time as an adult.)So if you want to discover things that have been overlooked till  
now, one really good place to look is in our blind spot: in our  
natural, naive belief that it's all about us. And expect to encounter  
ferocious opposition if you do.Conversely, if you have to choose between two theories, prefer the  
one that doesn't center on you.This principle isn't only for big ideas. It works in everyday life,  
too. For example, suppose you're saving a piece of cake in the fridge, and you  
come home one day to find your housemate has eaten  
it. Two possible theories:  
  
a) Your housemate did it deliberately to upset you. He knew  
you were saving that piece of cake.b) Your housemate was hungry.  
  
I say pick b. No one knows who said "never attribute to malice what  
can be explained by incompetence," but it is a powerful idea.  
Its more general version is our answer to the Greeks:  
Don't see purpose where there isn't.  
Or better still, the positive version:  
See randomness.Korean Translation

# Are Software Patents Evil?

March 2006(This essay is derived from a talk at Google.)A few weeks ago I found to my surprise that I'd been granted four patents.   
This was all the more surprising  
because I'd only applied for three. The patents aren't mine, of  
course. They were assigned to Viaweb, and became Yahoo's when they  
bought us. But the news set me thinking about the question of  
software patents generally.Patents are a hard problem. I've had to advise most of the startups  
we've funded about them, and despite years of experience I'm still  
not always sure I'm giving the right advice.One thing I do feel pretty certain of is that if you're against  
software patents, you're against patents in general. Gradually our  
machines consist more and more of software. Things that used to  
be done with levers and cams and gears are now done with loops and  
trees and closures. There's nothing special about physical embodiments  
of control systems that should make them patentable, and the software  
equivalent not.Unfortunately, patent law is inconsistent on this point. Patent  
law in most countries says that algorithms aren't patentable. This  
rule is left over from a time when "algorithm" meant something like  
the Sieve of Eratosthenes. In 1800, people could not see as readily  
as we can that a great many patents on mechanical objects were  
really patents on the algorithms they embodied.Patent lawyers still have to pretend that's what they're doing when  
they patent algorithms. You must not use the word "algorithm" in  
the title of a patent application, just as you must not use the  
word "essays" in the title of a book. If you want to patent an  
algorithm, you have to frame it as a computer system executing that algorithm.  
Then it's mechanical; phew. The default euphemism for algorithm  
is "system and method." Try a patent search for that phrase and  
see how many results you get.Since software patents are no different from hardware patents,  
people who say "software patents are evil" are saying simply "patents  
are evil." So why do so many people complain about software patents  
specifically?I think the problem is more with the patent office than the concept  
of software patents. Whenever software meets government, bad things  
happen, because software changes fast and government changes slow.  
The patent office has been overwhelmed by both the volume and the  
novelty of applications for software patents, and as a result they've  
made a lot of mistakes.The most common is to grant patents that shouldn't be granted. To  
be patentable, an invention has to be more than new. It also has  
to be non-obvious. And this, especially, is where the USPTO has  
been dropping the ball. Slashdot has an icon that expresses the  
problem vividly: a knife and fork with the words "patent pending"  
superimposed.The scary thing is, this is the only icon they have for  
patent stories. Slashdot readers now take it for granted that a  
story about a patent will be about a bogus patent.  
That's how bad the problem has become.The problem with Amazon's notorious one-click patent, for example,  
is not that it's a software patent, but that it's obvious. Any  
online store that kept people's shipping addresses would have  
implemented this. The reason Amazon did it first was not that they  
were especially smart, but because they were one of the earliest  
sites with enough clout to force customers to log in before they  
could buy something.   
[1]We, as hackers, know the USPTO is letting people patent the knives  
and forks of our world. The problem is, the USPTO are not hackers.  
They're probably good at judging new inventions for casting steel  
or grinding lenses, but they don't understand software yet.At this point an optimist would be tempted to add "but they will  
eventually." Unfortunately that might not be true. The problem  
with software patents is an instance of a more general one: the  
patent office takes a while to understand new technology. If so,  
this problem will only get worse, because the rate of technological  
change seems to be increasing. In thirty years, the patent office  
may understand the sort of things we now patent as software, but  
there will be other new types of inventions they understand even  
less.Applying for a patent is a negotiation. You generally apply for a  
broader patent than you think you'll be granted, and the examiners  
reply by throwing out some of your claims and granting others. So  
I don't really blame Amazon for applying for the one-click patent.  
The big mistake was the patent office's, for not insisting on  
something narrower, with real technical content. By granting such  
an over-broad patent, the USPTO in effect slept with Amazon on the  
first date. Was Amazon supposed to say no?Where Amazon went over to the dark side was not in applying for the  
patent, but in enforcing it. A lot of companies (Microsoft, for  
example) have been granted large numbers of preposterously over-broad  
patents, but they keep them mainly for defensive purposes. Like  
nuclear weapons, the main role of big companies' patent portfolios  
is to threaten anyone who attacks them with a counter-suit. Amazon's  
suit against Barnes & Noble was thus the equivalent of a nuclear  
first strike.That suit probably hurt Amazon more than it helped them. Barnes &  
Noble was a lame site; Amazon would have crushed them anyway. To  
attack a rival they could have ignored, Amazon put a lasting black  
mark on their own reputation. Even now I think if you asked hackers  
to free-associate about Amazon, the one-click patent would turn up  
in the first ten topics.Google clearly doesn't feel that merely holding patents is evil.  
They've applied for a lot of them. Are they hypocrites? Are patents  
evil?There are really two variants of that question, and people answering  
it often aren't clear in their own minds which they're answering.  
There's a narrow variant: is it bad, given the current legal system,  
to apply for patents? and also a broader one: is it bad that the  
current legal system allows patents?These are separate questions. For example, in preindustrial societies  
like medieval Europe, when someone attacked you, you didn't call  
the police. There were no police. When attacked, you were supposed  
to fight back, and there were conventions about how to do it. Was  
this wrong? That's two questions: was it wrong to take justice  
into your own hands, and was it wrong that you had to? We tend to  
say yes to the second, but no to the first. If no one else will  
defend you, you have to defend yourself.   
[2]The situation with patents is similar. Business is a kind of  
ritualized warfare. Indeed, it evolved from actual warfare: most  
early traders switched on the fly from merchants to pirates depending  
on how strong you seemed. In business there are certain rules  
describing how companies may and may not compete with one another,  
and someone deciding that they're going to play by their own rules  
is missing the point. Saying "I'm not going to apply for patents  
just because everyone else does" is not like saying "I'm not going  
to lie just because everyone else does." It's more like saying  
"I'm not going to use TCP/IP just because everyone else does." Oh  
yes you are.A closer comparison might be someone seeing a hockey game for the  
first time, realizing with shock that the players were deliberately  
bumping into one another, and deciding that one would on no account  
be so rude when playing hockey oneself.Hockey allows checking. It's part of the game. If your team refuses  
to do it, you simply lose. So it is in business. Under the present  
rules, patents are part of the game.What does that mean in practice? We tell the startups we fund not  
to worry about infringing patents, because startups rarely get sued  
for patent infringement. There are only two reasons someone might  
sue you: for money, or to prevent you from competing with them.  
Startups are too poor to be worth suing for money. And in practice  
they don't seem to get sued much by competitors, either. They don't  
get sued by other startups because (a) patent suits are an expensive  
distraction, and (b) since the other startups are as young as they  
are, their patents probably haven't issued yet.   
[3]  
Nor do startups,  
at least in the software business, seem to get sued much by established  
competitors. Despite all the patents Microsoft holds, I don't know  
of an instance where they sued a startup for patent infringement.  
Companies like Microsoft and Oracle don't win by winning lawsuits.  
That's too uncertain. They win by locking competitors out of their  
sales channels. If you do manage to threaten them, they're more  
likely to buy you than sue you.When you read of big companies filing patent suits against smaller  
ones, it's usually a big company on the way down, grasping at  
straws. For example, Unisys's attempts to enforce their patent on  
LZW compression. When you see a big company threatening patent  
suits, sell. When a company starts fighting over IP, it's a sign  
they've lost the real battle, for users.A company that sues competitors for patent infringement is like  
a defender who has been beaten so thoroughly that he turns to plead  
with the referee. You don't do that if you can still reach the  
ball, even if you genuinely believe you've been fouled. So a company  
threatening patent suits is a company in trouble.When we were working on Viaweb, a bigger company in the e-commerce  
business was granted a patent on online ordering, or something like  
that. I got a call from a VP there asking if we'd like to license  
it. I replied that I thought the patent was completely bogus, and  
would never hold up in court. "Ok," he replied. "So, are you guys  
hiring?"If your startup grows big enough, however, you'll start to get sued,  
no matter what you do. If you go public, for example, you'll be  
sued by multiple patent trolls who hope you'll pay them off to go  
away. More on them later.In other words, no one will sue you for patent infringement till  
you have money, and once you have money, people will sue you whether  
they have grounds to or not. So I advise fatalism. Don't waste  
your time worrying about patent infringement. You're probably  
violating a patent every time you tie your shoelaces. At the start,  
at least, just worry about making something great and getting lots  
of users. If you grow to the point where anyone considers you worth  
attacking, you're doing well.We do advise the companies we fund to apply for patents, but not  
so they can sue competitors. Successful startups either get bought  
or grow into big companies. If a startup wants to grow into a big  
company, they should apply for patents to build up the patent  
portfolio they'll need to maintain an armed truce with other big  
companies. If they want to get bought, they should apply for patents  
because patents are part of the mating dance with acquirers.Most startups that succeed do it by getting bought, and most acquirers  
care about patents. Startup acquisitions are usually a build-vs-buy  
decision for the acquirer. Should we buy this little startup or  
build our own? And two things, especially, make them decide not  
to build their own: if you already have a large and rapidly growing  
user base, and if you have a fairly solid patent application on  
critical parts of your software.There's a third reason big companies should prefer buying to building:  
that if they built their own, they'd screw it up. But few big  
companies are smart enough yet to admit this to themselves. It's  
usually the acquirer's engineers who are asked how hard it would  
be for the company to build their own, and they overestimate their  
abilities.   
[4]  
A patent seems to change the balance. It gives the  
acquirer an excuse to admit they couldn't copy what you're doing.  
It may also help them to grasp what's special about your technology.Frankly, it surprises me how small a role patents play in the  
software business. It's kind of ironic, considering all the dire  
things experts say about software patents stifling innovation, but  
when one looks closely at the software business, the most striking  
thing is how little patents seem to matter.In other fields, companies regularly sue competitors for patent  
infringement. For example, the airport baggage scanning business  
was for many years a cozy duopoly shared between two companies,  
InVision and L-3. In 2002 a startup called Reveal appeared, with  
new technology that let them build scanners a third the size. They  
were sued for patent infringement before they'd even released a  
product.You rarely hear that kind of story in our world. The one example  
I've found is, embarrassingly enough, Yahoo, which filed a patent  
suit against a gaming startup called Xfire in 2005. Xfire doesn't  
seem to be a very big deal, and it's hard to say why Yahoo felt  
threatened. Xfire's VP of engineering had worked at Yahoo on similar  
stuff-- in fact, he was listed as an inventor on the patent Yahoo  
sued over-- so perhaps there was something personal about it. My  
guess is that someone at Yahoo goofed. At any rate they didn't  
pursue the suit very vigorously.Why do patents play so small a role in software? I can think of  
three possible reasons.One is that software is so complicated that patents by themselves  
are not worth very much. I may be maligning other fields here, but  
it seems that in most types of engineering you can hand the details  
of some new technique to a group of medium-high quality people and  
get the desired result. For example, if someone develops a new  
process for smelting ore that gets a better yield, and you assemble  
a team of qualified experts and tell them about it, they'll be able  
to get the same yield. This doesn't seem to work in software.  
Software is so subtle and unpredictable that "qualified experts"  
don't get you very far.That's why we rarely hear phrases like "qualified expert" in the  
software business. What that level of ability can get you is, say,  
to make your software compatible with some other piece of software--  
in eight months, at enormous cost. To do anything harder you need  
individual brilliance. If you assemble a team of qualified experts  
and tell them to make a new web-based email program, they'll get  
their asses kicked by a team of inspired nineteen year olds.Experts can implement, but they can't design.  
Or rather, expertise in implementation is the only kind most people,  
including the experts themselves, can measure.   
[5]But design is a definite skill. It's not just an airy intangible.  
Things always seem intangible when you don't understand them.  
Electricity seemed an airy intangible to most people in 1800. Who  
knew there was so much to know about it? So it is with design.  
Some people are good at it and some people are bad at it, and there's  
something very tangible they're good or bad at.The reason design counts so much in software is probably that there  
are fewer constraints than on physical things. Building physical  
things is expensive and dangerous. The space of possible choices  
is smaller; you tend to have to work as part of a larger group; and  
you're subject to a lot of regulations. You don't have any of that  
if you and a couple friends decide to create a new web-based  
application.Because there's so much scope for design in software, a successful  
application tends to be way more than the sum of its patents. What  
protects little companies from being copied by bigger competitors  
is not just their patents, but the thousand little things the big  
company will get wrong if they try.The second reason patents don't count for much in our world is that  
startups rarely attack big companies head-on, the way Reveal did.  
In the software business, startups beat established companies by  
transcending them. Startups don't build desktop word processing  
programs to compete with Microsoft Word.   
[6]  
They build Writely.  
If this paradigm is crowded, just wait for the next one; they run  
pretty frequently on this route.Fortunately for startups, big companies are extremely good at denial.  
If you take the trouble to attack them from an oblique angle, they'll  
meet you half-way and maneuver to keep you in their blind spot. To  
sue a startup would mean admitting it was dangerous, and that often  
means seeing something the big company doesn't want to see. IBM  
used to sue its mainframe competitors regularly, but they didn't  
bother much about the microcomputer industry because they didn't  
want to see the threat it posed. Companies building web based apps  
are similarly protected from Microsoft, which even now doesn't want  
to imagine a world in which Windows is irrelevant.The third reason patents don't seem to matter very much in software  
is public opinion-- or rather, hacker opinion. In a recent interview,  
Steve Ballmer coyly left open the possibility of attacking Linux  
on patent grounds. But I doubt Microsoft would ever be so stupid.  
They'd face the mother of all boycotts. And not just from the  
technical community in general; a lot of their own people would  
rebel.Good hackers care a lot about matters of principle, and they are  
highly mobile. If a company starts misbehaving, smart people won't  
work there. For some reason this seems to be more true in software  
than other businesses. I don't think it's because hackers have  
intrinsically higher principles so much as that their skills are  
easily transferrable. Perhaps we can split the difference and say  
that mobility gives hackers the luxury of being principled.Google's "don't be evil" policy may for this reason be the most  
valuable thing they've discovered. It's very constraining in some  
ways. If Google does do something evil, they get doubly whacked  
for it: once for whatever they did, and again for hypocrisy. But  
I think it's worth it. It helps them to hire the best people, and  
it's better, even from a purely selfish point of view, to be  
constrained by principles than by stupidity.(I wish someone would get this point across to the present  
administration.)I'm not sure what the proportions are of the preceding three  
ingredients, but the custom among the big companies seems to be not  
to sue the small ones, and the startups are mostly too busy and too  
poor to sue one another. So despite the huge number of software  
patents there's not a lot of suing going on. With one exception:  
patent trolls.Patent trolls are companies consisting mainly of lawyers whose whole  
business is to accumulate patents and threaten to sue companies who  
actually make things. Patent trolls, it seems safe to say, are  
evil. I feel a bit stupid saying that, because when you're saying  
something that Richard Stallman and Bill Gates would both agree  
with, you must be perilously close to tautologies.The CEO of Forgent, one of the most notorious patent trolls, says  
that what his company does is "the American way." Actually that's  
not true. The American way is to make money by creating wealth, not by suing people.   
[7]  
What companies like Forgent do is actually the proto-industrial  
way. In the period just before the industrial revolution, some of  
the greatest fortunes in countries like England and France were  
made by courtiers who extracted some lucrative right from the crown--  
like the right to collect taxes on the import of silk-- and then  
used this to squeeze money from the merchants in that business. So  
when people compare patent trolls to the mafia, they're more right  
than they know, because the mafia too are not merely bad, but bad  
specifically in the sense of being an obsolete business model.Patent trolls seem to have caught big companies by surprise. In  
the last couple years they've extracted hundreds of millions of  
dollars from them. Patent trolls are hard to fight precisely because  
they create nothing. Big companies are safe from being sued by  
other big companies because they can threaten a counter-suit. But  
because patent trolls don't make anything, there's nothing they can  
be sued for. I predict this loophole will get closed fairly quickly,  
at least by legal standards. It's clearly an abuse of the system,  
and the victims are powerful.  
[8]But evil as patent trolls are, I don't think they hamper innovation  
much. They don't sue till a startup has made money, and by that  
point the innovation that generated it has already happened. I  
can't think of a startup that avoided working on some problem because  
of patent trolls.So much for hockey as the game is played now. What about the more  
theoretical question of whether hockey would be a better game without  
checking? Do patents encourage or discourage innovation?This is a very hard question to answer in the general case. People  
write whole books on the topic. One of my main hobbies is the  
history of technology, and even though I've studied the subject for  
years, it would take me several weeks of research to be able to say  
whether patents have in general been a net win.One thing I can say is that 99.9% of the people who express opinions  
on the subject do it not based on such research, but out of a kind  
of religious conviction. At least, that's the polite way of putting  
it; the colloquial version involves speech coming out of organs not  
designed for that purpose.Whether they encourage innovation or not, patents were at least  
intended to. You don't get a patent for nothing. In return for  
the exclusive right to use an idea, you have to publish it,  
and it was largely to encourage such openness that patents were  
established.Before patents, people protected ideas by keeping them secret. With  
patents, central governments said, in effect, if you tell everyone  
your idea, we'll protect it for you. There is a parallel here to  
the rise of civil order, which happened at roughly the same time.  
Before central governments were powerful enough to enforce order,  
rich people had private armies. As governments got more powerful,  
they gradually compelled magnates to cede most responsibility for  
protecting them. (Magnates still have bodyguards, but no longer  
to protect them from other magnates.)Patents, like police, are involved in many abuses. But in both  
cases the default is something worse. The choice is not "patents  
or freedom?" any more than it is "police or freedom?" The actual  
questions are respectively "patents or secrecy?" and "police or  
gangs?"As with gangs, we have some idea what secrecy would be like, because  
that's how things used to be. The economy of medieval Europe was  
divided up into little tribes, each jealously guarding their  
privileges and secrets. In Shakespeare's time, "mystery" was  
synonymous with "craft." Even today we can see an echo of the  
secrecy of medieval guilds, in the now pointless secrecy of the  
Masons.The most memorable example of medieval industrial secrecy is probably  
Venice, which forbade glassblowers to leave the city, and sent  
assassins after those who tried. We might like to think we wouldn't  
go so far, but the movie industry has already tried to pass laws  
prescribing three year prison terms just for putting movies on  
public networks. Want to try a frightening thought experiment? If  
the movie industry could have any law they wanted, where would they  
stop? Short of the death penalty, one assumes, but how close would  
they get?Even worse than the spectacular abuses might be the overall decrease  
in efficiency that would accompany increased secrecy. As anyone  
who has dealt with organizations that operate on a "need to know"  
basis can attest, dividing information up into little cells is  
terribly inefficient. The flaw in the "need to know" principle is  
that you don't know who needs to know something. An idea  
from one area might spark a great discovery in another. But the  
discoverer doesn't know he needs to know it.If secrecy were the only protection for ideas, companies wouldn't  
just have to be secretive with other companies; they'd have to be  
secretive internally. This would encourage what is already the  
worst trait of big companies.I'm not saying secrecy would be worse than patents, just that we  
couldn't discard patents for free. Businesses would become more  
secretive to compensate, and in some fields this might get ugly.  
Nor am I defending the current patent system. There is clearly a  
lot that's broken about it. But the breakage seems to affect  
software less than most other fields.In the software business I know from experience whether patents  
encourage or discourage innovation, and the answer is the type that  
people who like to argue about public policy least like to hear:  
they don't affect innovation much, one way or the other. Most  
innovation in the software business happens in startups, and startups  
should simply ignore other companies' patents. At least, that's  
what we advise, and we bet money on that advice.The only real role of patents, for most startups, is as an element  
of the mating dance with acquirers. There patents do help a little.  
And so they do encourage innovation indirectly, in that they give  
more power to startups, which is where, pound for pound, the most  
innovation happens. But even in the mating dance, patents are of  
secondary importance. It matters more to make something great and  
get a lot of users.Notes[1]  
You have to be careful here, because a great discovery often  
seems obvious in retrospect. One-click ordering, however, is not  
such a discovery.[2]  
"Turn the other cheek" skirts the issue; the critical question  
is not how to deal with slaps, but sword thrusts.[3]  
Applying for a patent is now very slow, but it might actually  
be bad if that got fixed. At the moment the time it takes to get  
a patent is conveniently just longer than the time it takes a startup  
to succeed or fail.[4]  
Instead of the canonical "could you build this?" maybe the corp  
dev guys should be asking "will you build this?" or even "why haven't  
you already built this?"[5]  
Design ability is so hard to measure that you can't even trust  
the design world's internal standards. You can't assume that someone  
with a degree in design is any good at design, or that an eminent  
designer is any better than his peers. If that worked, any company  
could build products as good as Apple's just by hiring   
sufficiently qualified designers.[6]  
If anyone wanted to try, we'd be interested to hear from them.  
I suspect it's one of those things that's not as hard as everyone  
assumes.[7]  
Patent trolls can't even claim, like speculators, that they  
"create" liquidity.[8]  
If big companies don't want to wait for the government to take  
action, there is a way to fight back themselves. For a long time  
I thought there wasn't, because there was nothing to grab onto.  
But there is one resource patent trolls need: lawyers. Big technology  
companies between them generate a lot of legal business. If they  
agreed among themselves never to do business with any firm employing  
anyone who had worked for a patent troll, either as an employee or  
as outside counsel, they could probably starve the trolls of the  
lawyers they need.Thanks to Dan Bloomberg, Paul Buchheit, Sarah Harlin,   
Jessica Livingston, and Peter Norvig  
for reading drafts of this, to Joel Lehrer and Peter Eng for answering  
my questions about patents, and to Ankur Pansari for inviting me  
to speak.Japanese Translation

# 6,631,372

March 2006, rev August 2009A couple days ago I found to my surprise that I'd been granted a  
patent.  
It issued in 2003, but no one told me. I wouldn't know about it  
now except that a few months ago, while visiting Yahoo, I happened  
to run into a Big Cheese I knew from working there in the late  
nineties. He brought up something called Revenue Loop, which Viaweb  
had been working on when they bought us.The idea is basically that you sort search results not in order of  
textual "relevance" (as search engines did then) nor in order of  
how much advertisers bid (as Overture did) but in order of the bid  
times the number of transactions. Ordinarily you'd do this for  
shopping searches, though in fact one of the features of our scheme  
is that it automatically detects which searches are shopping searches.If you just order the results in order of bids, you can make the  
search results useless, because the first results could be dominated  
by lame sites that had bid the most. But if you order results by  
bid multiplied by transactions, far from selling out, you're getting  
a better measure of relevance. What could be a better sign that  
someone was satisfied with a search result than going to the site  
and buying something?And, of course, this algorithm automatically maximizes the revenue  
of the search engine.Everyone is focused on this type of approach now, but few were in  
1998. In 1998 it was all about selling banner ads. We didn't know  
that, so we were pretty excited when we figured out what seemed to  
us the optimal way of doing shopping searches.When Yahoo was thinking of buying us, we had a meeting with Jerry  
Yang in New York. For him, I now realize, this was supposed to be  
one of those meetings when you check out a company you've pretty  
much decided to buy, just to make sure they're ok guys. We weren't  
expected to do more than chat and seem smart and reasonable. He  
must have been dismayed when I jumped up to the whiteboard and  
launched into a presentation of our exciting new technology.I was just as dismayed when he didn't seem to care at all about it.  
At the time I thought, "boy, is this guy poker-faced. We present  
to him what has to be the optimal way of sorting product search  
results, and he's not even curious." I didn't realize till much later  
why he didn't care. In 1998, advertisers were overpaying enormously  
for ads on web sites.   
In 1998, if advertisers paid the maximum that traffic was worth to  
them, Yahoo's revenues would have decreased.Things are different now, of course. Now this sort of thing is all  
the rage. So when I ran into the Yahoo exec I knew from the old  
days in the Yahoo cafeteria a few months ago, the first thing he  
remembered was not (fortunately) all the fights I had with him, but  
Revenue Loop."Well," I said, "I think we actually applied for a patent on it.  
I'm not sure what happened to the application after I left.""Really? That would be an important patent."So someone investigated, and sure enough, that patent application  
had continued in the pipeline for several years after, and finally  
issued in 2003.The main thing that struck me on reading it, actually, is that  
lawyers at some point messed up my nice clear writing. Some clever  
person with a spell checker reduced one section to Zen-like incomprehensibility:  
  
 Also, common spelling errors will tend to get fixed. For example,  
 if users searching for "compact disc player" end up spending  
 considerable money at sites offering compact disc players, then  
 those pages will have a higher relevance for that search phrase,  
 even though the phrase "compact disc player" is not present on  
 those pages.  
  
(That "compat disc player" wasn't a typo, guys.)For the fine prose of the original, see the provisional application  
of February 1998, back when we were still Viaweb and couldn't afford  
to pay lawyers to turn every "a lot of" into "considerable."

# Why YC

March 2006, rev August 2009Yesterday one of the founders we funded asked me why we started   
Y  
Combinator. Or more precisely, he asked if we'd started YC mainly  
for fun.Kind of, but not quite. It is enormously fun to be able to work  
with Rtm and Trevor again. I missed that after we sold Viaweb, and  
for all the years after I always had a background process running,  
looking for something we could do together. There is definitely  
an aspect of a band reunion to Y Combinator. Every couple days I  
slip and call it "Viaweb."Viaweb we started very explicitly to make money. I was sick of  
living from one freelance project to the next, and decided to just  
work as hard as I could till I'd made enough to solve the problem  
once and for all. Viaweb was sometimes fun, but it wasn't designed  
for fun, and mostly it wasn't. I'd be surprised if any startup is.  
All startups are mostly schleps.The real reason we started Y Combinator is neither selfish nor  
virtuous. We didn't start it mainly to make money; we have no idea  
what our average returns might be, and won't know for years. Nor  
did we start YC mainly to help out young would-be founders, though  
we do like the idea, and comfort ourselves occasionally with the  
thought that if all our investments tank, we will thus have been  
doing something unselfish. (It's oddly nondeterministic.)The real reason we started Y Combinator is one probably only a  
hacker would understand. We did it because it seems such a great  
hack. There are thousands of smart people who could start companies  
and don't, and with a relatively small amount of force applied at  
just the right place, we can spring on the world a stream of new  
startups that might otherwise not have existed.In a way this is virtuous, because I think startups are a good  
thing. But really what motivates us is the completely amoral desire  
that would motivate any hacker who looked at some complex device  
and realized that with a tiny tweak he could make it run more  
efficiently. In this case, the device is the world's economy, which  
fortunately happens to be open source.

# How to Do What You Love

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
January 2006To do something well you have to like it. That idea is not exactly  
novel. We've got it down to four words: "Do what you love." But  
it's not enough just to tell people that. Doing what you love is  
complicated.The very idea is foreign to what most of us learn as kids. When I  
was a kid, it seemed as if work and fun were opposites by definition.  
Life had two states: some of the time adults were making you do  
things, and that was called work; the rest of the time you could  
do what you wanted, and that was called playing. Occasionally the  
things adults made you do were fun, just as, occasionally, playing  
wasn't — for example, if you fell and hurt yourself. But except  
for these few anomalous cases, work was pretty much defined as  
not-fun.And it did not seem to be an accident. School, it was implied, was  
tedious because it was preparation for grownup work.The world then was divided into two groups, grownups and kids.  
Grownups, like some kind of cursed race, had to work. Kids didn't,  
but they did have to go to school, which was a dilute version of  
work meant to prepare us for the real thing. Much as we disliked  
school, the grownups all agreed that grownup work was worse, and  
that we had it easy.Teachers in particular all seemed to believe implicitly that work  
was not fun. Which is not surprising: work wasn't fun for most of  
them. Why did we have to memorize state capitals instead of playing  
dodgeball? For the same reason they had to watch over a bunch of  
kids instead of lying on a beach. You couldn't just do what you  
wanted.I'm not saying we should let little kids do whatever they want.  
They may have to be made to work on certain things. But if we make  
kids work on dull stuff, it might be wise to tell them that tediousness  
is not the defining quality of work, and indeed that the reason  
they have to work on dull stuff now is so they can work on more  
interesting stuff later.  
[1]Once, when I was about 9 or 10, my father told me I could be whatever  
I wanted when I grew up, so long as I enjoyed it. I remember that  
precisely because it seemed so anomalous. It was like being told  
to use dry water. Whatever I thought he meant, I didn't think he  
meant work could literally be fun — fun like playing. It  
took me years to grasp that.JobsBy high school, the prospect of an actual job was on the horizon.  
Adults would sometimes come to speak to us about their work, or we  
would go to see them at work. It was always understood that they  
enjoyed what they did. In retrospect I think one may have: the  
private jet pilot. But I don't think the bank manager really did.The main reason they all acted as if they enjoyed their work was  
presumably the upper-middle class convention that you're supposed  
to. It would not merely be bad for your career to say that you  
despised your job, but a social faux-pas.Why is it conventional to pretend to like what you do? The first  
sentence of this essay explains that. If you have to like something  
to do it well, then the most successful people will all like what  
they do. That's where the upper-middle class tradition comes from.  
Just as houses all over America are full of   
chairs  
that are, without  
the owners even knowing it, nth-degree imitations of chairs designed  
250 years ago for French kings, conventional attitudes about work  
are, without the owners even knowing it, nth-degree imitations of  
the attitudes of people who've done great things.What a recipe for alienation. By the time they reach an age to  
think about what they'd like to do, most kids have been thoroughly  
misled about the idea of loving one's work. School has trained  
them to regard work as an unpleasant duty. Having a job is said  
to be even more onerous than schoolwork. And yet all the adults  
claim to like what they do. You can't blame kids for thinking "I  
am not like these people; I am not suited to this world."Actually they've been told three lies: the stuff they've been taught  
to regard as work in school is not real work; grownup work is not  
(necessarily) worse than schoolwork; and many of the adults around  
them are lying when they say they like what they do.The most dangerous liars can be the kids' own parents. If you take  
a boring job to give your family a high standard of living, as so  
many people do, you risk infecting your kids with the idea that  
work is boring.   
[2]  
Maybe it would be better for kids in this one  
case if parents were not so unselfish. A parent who set an example  
of loving their work might help their kids more than an expensive  
house.  
[3]It was not till I was in college that the idea of work finally broke  
free from the idea of making a living. Then the important question  
became not how to make money, but what to work on. Ideally these  
coincided, but some spectacular boundary cases (like Einstein in  
the patent office) proved they weren't identical.The definition of work was now to make some original contribution  
to the world, and in the process not to starve. But after the habit  
of so many years my idea of work still included a large component  
of pain. Work still seemed to require discipline, because only  
hard problems yielded grand results, and hard problems couldn't  
literally be fun. Surely one had to force oneself to work on them.If you think something's supposed to hurt, you're less likely to  
notice if you're doing it wrong. That about sums up my experience  
of graduate school.BoundsHow much are you supposed to like what you do? Unless you  
know that, you don't know when to stop searching. And if, like most  
people, you underestimate it, you'll tend to stop searching too  
early. You'll end up doing something chosen for you by your parents,  
or the desire to make money, or prestige — or sheer inertia.Here's an upper bound: Do what you love doesn't mean, do what you  
would like to do most this second. Even Einstein probably  
had moments when he wanted to have a cup of coffee, but told himself  
he ought to finish what he was working on first.It used to perplex me when I read about people who liked what they  
did so much that there was nothing they'd rather do. There didn't  
seem to be any sort of work I liked that much. If I had a  
choice of (a) spending the next hour working on something or (b)  
be teleported to Rome and spend the next hour wandering about, was  
there any sort of work I'd prefer? Honestly, no.But the fact is, almost anyone would rather, at any given moment,  
float about in the Carribbean, or have sex, or eat some delicious  
food, than work on hard problems. The rule about doing what you  
love assumes a certain length of time. It doesn't mean, do what  
will make you happiest this second, but what will make you happiest  
over some longer period, like a week or a month.Unproductive pleasures pall eventually. After a while you get tired  
of lying on the beach. If you want to stay happy, you have to do  
something.As a lower bound, you have to like your work more than any unproductive  
pleasure. You have to like what you do enough that the concept of  
"spare time" seems mistaken. Which is not to say you have to spend  
all your time working. You can only work so much before you get  
tired and start to screw up. Then you want to do something else  
— even something mindless. But you don't regard this time as the  
prize and the time you spend working as the pain you endure to earn  
it.I put the lower bound there for practical reasons. If your work  
is not your favorite thing to do, you'll have terrible problems  
with procrastination. You'll have to force yourself to work, and  
when you resort to that the results are distinctly inferior.To be happy I think you have to be doing something you not only  
enjoy, but admire. You have to be able to say, at the end, wow,  
that's pretty cool. This doesn't mean you have to make something.  
If you learn how to hang glide, or to speak a foreign language  
fluently, that will be enough to make you say, for a while at least,  
wow, that's pretty cool. What there has to be is a test.So one thing that falls just short of the standard, I think, is  
reading books. Except for some books in math and the hard sciences,  
there's no test of how well you've read a book, and that's why  
merely reading books doesn't quite feel like work. You have to do  
something with what you've read to feel productive.I think the best test is one Gino Lee taught me: to try to do things  
that would make your friends say wow. But it probably wouldn't  
start to work properly till about age 22, because most people haven't  
had a big enough sample to pick friends from before then.SirensWhat you should not do, I think, is worry about the opinion of  
anyone beyond your friends. You shouldn't worry about prestige.  
Prestige is the opinion of the rest of the world. When you can ask  
the opinions of people whose judgement you respect, what does it  
add to consider the opinions of people you don't even know?   
[4]This is easy advice to give. It's hard to follow, especially when  
you're young.   
[5]  
Prestige is like a powerful magnet that warps  
even your beliefs about what you enjoy. It causes you to work not  
on what you like, but what you'd like to like.That's what leads people to try to write novels, for example. They  
like reading novels. They notice that people who write them win  
Nobel prizes. What could be more wonderful, they think, than to  
be a novelist? But liking the idea of being a novelist is not  
enough; you have to like the actual work of novel-writing if you're  
going to be good at it; you have to like making up elaborate lies.Prestige is just fossilized inspiration. If you do anything well  
enough, you'll make it prestigious. Plenty of things we now  
consider prestigious were anything but at first. Jazz comes to  
mind — though almost any established art form would do. So just  
do what you like, and let prestige take care of itself.Prestige is especially dangerous to the ambitious. If you want to  
make ambitious people waste their time on errands, the way to do  
it is to bait the hook with prestige. That's the recipe for getting  
people to give talks, write forewords, serve on committees, be  
department heads, and so on. It might be a good rule simply to  
avoid any prestigious task. If it didn't suck, they wouldn't have  
had to make it prestigious.Similarly, if you admire two kinds of work equally, but one is more  
prestigious, you should probably choose the other. Your opinions  
about what's admirable are always going to be slightly influenced  
by prestige, so if the two seem equal to you, you probably have  
more genuine admiration for the less prestigious one.The other big force leading people astray is money. Money by itself  
is not that dangerous. When something pays well but is regarded  
with contempt, like telemarketing, or prostitution, or personal  
injury litigation, ambitious people aren't tempted by it. That  
kind of work ends up being done by people who are "just trying to  
make a living." (Tip: avoid any field whose practitioners say  
this.) The danger is when money is combined with prestige, as in,  
say, corporate law, or medicine. A comparatively safe and prosperous  
career with some automatic baseline prestige is dangerously tempting  
to someone young, who hasn't thought much about what they really  
like.The test of whether people love what they do is whether they'd do  
it even if they weren't paid for it — even if they had to work at  
another job to make a living. How many corporate lawyers would do  
their current work if they had to do it for free, in their spare  
time, and take day jobs as waiters to support themselves?This test is especially helpful in deciding between different kinds  
of academic work, because fields vary greatly in this respect. Most  
good mathematicians would work on math even if there were no jobs  
as math professors, whereas in the departments at the other end of  
the spectrum, the availability of teaching jobs is the driver:  
people would rather be English professors than work in ad agencies,  
and publishing papers is the way you compete for such jobs. Math  
would happen without math departments, but it is the existence of  
English majors, and therefore jobs teaching them, that calls into  
being all those thousands of dreary papers about gender and identity  
in the novels of Conrad. No one does   
that   
kind of thing for fun.The advice of parents will tend to err on the side of money. It  
seems safe to say there are more undergrads who want to be novelists  
and whose parents want them to be doctors than who want to be doctors  
and whose parents want them to be novelists. The kids think their  
parents are "materialistic." Not necessarily. All parents tend to  
be more conservative for their kids than they would for themselves,  
simply because, as parents, they share risks more than rewards. If  
your eight year old son decides to climb a tall tree, or your teenage  
daughter decides to date the local bad boy, you won't get a share  
in the excitement, but if your son falls, or your daughter gets  
pregnant, you'll have to deal with the consequences.DisciplineWith such powerful forces leading us astray, it's not surprising  
we find it so hard to discover what we like to work on. Most people  
are doomed in childhood by accepting the axiom that work = pain.  
Those who escape this are nearly all lured onto the rocks by prestige  
or money. How many even discover something they love to work on?  
A few hundred thousand, perhaps, out of billions.It's hard to find work you love; it must be, if so few do. So don't  
underestimate this task. And don't feel bad if you haven't succeeded  
yet. In fact, if you admit to yourself that you're discontented,  
you're a step ahead of most people, who are still in denial. If  
you're surrounded by colleagues who claim to enjoy work that you  
find contemptible, odds are they're lying to themselves. Not  
necessarily, but probably.Although doing great work takes less discipline than people think — because the way to do great work is to find something you like so  
much that you don't have to force yourself to do it — finding  
work you love does usually require discipline. Some people are  
lucky enough to know what they want to do when they're 12, and just  
glide along as if they were on railroad tracks. But this seems the  
exception. More often people who do great things have careers with  
the trajectory of a ping-pong ball. They go to school to study A,  
drop out and get a job doing B, and then become famous for C after  
taking it up on the side.Sometimes jumping from one sort of work to another is a sign of  
energy, and sometimes it's a sign of laziness. Are you dropping  
out, or boldly carving a new path? You often can't tell yourself.  
Plenty of people who will later do great things seem to be disappointments  
early on, when they're trying to find their niche.Is there some test you can use to keep yourself honest? One is to  
try to do a good job at whatever you're doing, even if you don't  
like it. Then at least you'll know you're not using dissatisfaction  
as an excuse for being lazy. Perhaps more importantly, you'll get  
into the habit of doing things well.Another test you can use is: always produce. For example, if you  
have a day job you don't take seriously because you plan to be a  
novelist, are you producing? Are you writing pages of fiction,  
however bad? As long as you're producing, you'll know you're not  
merely using the hazy vision of the grand novel you plan to write  
one day as an opiate. The view of it will be obstructed by the all  
too palpably flawed one you're actually writing."Always produce" is also a heuristic for finding the work you love.  
If you subject yourself to that constraint, it will automatically  
push you away from things you think you're supposed to work on,  
toward things you actually like. "Always produce" will discover  
your life's work the way water, with the aid of gravity, finds the  
hole in your roof.Of course, figuring out what you like to work on doesn't mean you  
get to work on it. That's a separate question. And if you're  
ambitious you have to keep them separate: you have to make a conscious  
effort to keep your ideas about what you want from being contaminated  
by what seems possible.   
[6]It's painful to keep them apart, because it's painful to observe  
the gap between them. So most people pre-emptively lower their  
expectations. For example, if you asked random people on the street  
if they'd like to be able to draw like Leonardo, you'd find most  
would say something like "Oh, I can't draw." This is more a statement  
of intention than fact; it means, I'm not going to try. Because  
the fact is, if you took a random person off the street and somehow  
got them to work as hard as they possibly could at drawing for the  
next twenty years, they'd get surprisingly far. But it would require  
a great moral effort; it would mean staring failure in the eye every  
day for years. And so to protect themselves people say "I can't."Another related line you often hear is that not everyone can do  
work they love — that someone has to do the unpleasant jobs. Really?  
How do you make them? In the US the only mechanism for forcing  
people to do unpleasant jobs is the draft, and that hasn't been  
invoked for over 30 years. All we can do is encourage people to  
do unpleasant work, with money and prestige.If there's something people still won't do, it seems as if society  
just has to make do without. That's what happened with domestic  
servants. For millennia that was the canonical example of a job  
"someone had to do." And yet in the mid twentieth century servants  
practically disappeared in rich countries, and the rich have just  
had to do without.So while there may be some things someone has to do, there's a good  
chance anyone saying that about any particular job is mistaken.  
Most unpleasant jobs would either get automated or go undone if no  
one were willing to do them.Two RoutesThere's another sense of "not everyone can do work they love"  
that's all too true, however. One has to make a living, and it's  
hard to get paid for doing work you love. There are two routes to  
that destination:  
  
 The organic route: as you become more eminent, gradually to  
 increase the parts of your job that you like at the expense of  
 those you don't.The two-job route: to work at things you don't like to get money  
 to work on things you do.  
  
The organic route is more common. It happens naturally to anyone  
who does good work. A young architect has to take whatever work  
he can get, but if he does well he'll gradually be in a position  
to pick and choose among projects. The disadvantage of this route  
is that it's slow and uncertain. Even tenure is not real freedom.The two-job route has several variants depending on how long you  
work for money at a time. At one extreme is the "day job," where  
you work regular hours at one job to make money, and work on what  
you love in your spare time. At the other extreme you work at  
something till you make enough not to   
have to work for money again.The two-job route is less common than the organic route, because  
it requires a deliberate choice. It's also more dangerous. Life  
tends to get more expensive as you get older, so it's easy to get  
sucked into working longer than you expected at the money job.  
Worse still, anything you work on changes you. If you work too  
long on tedious stuff, it will rot your brain. And the best paying  
jobs are most dangerous, because they require your full attention.The advantage of the two-job route is that it lets you jump over  
obstacles. The landscape of possible jobs isn't flat; there are  
walls of varying heights between different kinds of work.   
[7]  
The trick of maximizing the parts of your job that you like can get you  
from architecture to product design, but not, probably, to music.  
If you make money doing one thing and then work on another, you  
have more freedom of choice.Which route should you take? That depends on how sure you are of  
what you want to do, how good you are at taking orders, how much  
risk you can stand, and the odds that anyone will pay (in your  
lifetime) for what you want to do. If you're sure of the general  
area you want to work in and it's something people are likely to  
pay you for, then you should probably take the organic route. But  
if you don't know what you want to work on, or don't like to take  
orders, you may want to take the two-job route, if you can stand  
the risk.Don't decide too soon. Kids who know early what they want to do  
seem impressive, as if they got the answer to some math question  
before the other kids. They have an answer, certainly, but odds  
are it's wrong.A friend of mine who is a quite successful doctor complains constantly  
about her job. When people applying to medical school ask her for  
advice, she wants to shake them and yell "Don't do it!" (But she  
never does.) How did she get into this fix? In high school she  
already wanted to be a doctor. And she is so ambitious and determined  
that she overcame every obstacle along the way — including,  
unfortunately, not liking it.Now she has a life chosen for her by a high-school kid.When you're young, you're given the impression that you'll get  
enough information to make each choice before you need to make it.  
But this is certainly not so with work. When you're deciding what  
to do, you have to operate on ridiculously incomplete information.  
Even in college you get little idea what various types of work are  
like. At best you may have a couple internships, but not all jobs  
offer internships, and those that do don't teach you much more about  
the work than being a batboy teaches you about playing baseball.In the design of lives, as in the design of most other things, you  
get better results if you use flexible media. So unless you're  
fairly sure what you want to do, your best bet may be to choose a  
type of work that could turn into either an organic or two-job  
career. That was probably part of the reason I chose computers.  
You can be a professor, or make a lot of money, or morph it into  
any number of other kinds of work.It's also wise, early on, to seek jobs that let you do many different  
things, so you can learn faster what various kinds of work are like.  
Conversely, the extreme version of the two-job route is dangerous  
because it teaches you so little about what you like. If you work  
hard at being a bond trader for ten years, thinking that you'll  
quit and write novels when you have enough money, what happens when  
you quit and then discover that you don't actually like writing  
novels?Most people would say, I'd take that problem. Give me a million  
dollars and I'll figure out what to do. But it's harder than it  
looks. Constraints give your life shape. Remove them and most  
people have no idea what to do: look at what happens to those who  
win lotteries or inherit money. Much as everyone thinks they want  
financial security, the happiest people are not those who have it,  
but those who like what they do. So a plan that promises freedom  
at the expense of knowing what to do with it may not be as good as  
it seems.Whichever route you take, expect a struggle. Finding work you love  
is very difficult. Most people fail. Even if you succeed, it's  
rare to be free to work on what you want till your thirties or  
forties. But if you have the destination in sight you'll be more  
likely to arrive at it. If you know you can love work, you're in  
the home stretch, and if you know what work you love, you're  
practically there.Notes[1]  
Currently we do the opposite: when we make kids do boring work,  
like arithmetic drills, instead of admitting frankly that it's  
boring, we try to disguise it with superficial decorations.[2]  
One father told me about a related phenomenon: he found himself  
concealing from his family how much he liked his work. When he  
wanted to go to work on a saturday, he found it easier to say that  
it was because he "had to" for some reason, rather than admitting  
he preferred to work than stay home with them.[3]  
Something similar happens with suburbs. Parents move to suburbs  
to raise their kids in a safe environment, but suburbs are so dull  
and artificial that by the time they're fifteen the kids are convinced  
the whole world is boring.[4]  
I'm not saying friends should be the only audience for your  
work. The more people you can help, the better. But friends should  
be your compass.[5]  
Donald Hall said young would-be poets were mistaken to be so  
obsessed with being published. But you can imagine what it would  
do for a 24 year old to get a poem published in The New Yorker.  
Now to people he meets at parties he's a real poet. Actually he's  
no better or worse than he was before, but to a clueless audience  
like that, the approval of an official authority makes all the  
difference. So it's a harder problem than Hall realizes. The  
reason the young care so much about prestige is that the people  
they want to impress are not very discerning.[6]  
This is isomorphic to the principle that you should prevent  
your beliefs about how things are from being contaminated by how  
you wish they were. Most people let them mix pretty promiscuously.  
The continuing popularity of religion is the most visible index of  
that.[7]  
A more accurate metaphor would be to say that the graph of jobs  
is not very well connected.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Dan Friedman, Sarah Harlin,  
Jessica Livingston, Jackie McDonough, Robert Morris, Peter Norvig,   
David Sloo, and Aaron Swartz  
for reading drafts of this.Hebrew TranslationJapanese TranslationChinese TranslationRussian TranslationSlovak TranslationItalian TranslationGerman TranslationSpanish TranslationFrench TranslationHungarian TranslationPortuguese TranslationSerbian TranslationGreek TranslationVietnamese Translation

# Good and Bad Procrastination

December 2005The most impressive people I know are all terrible procrastinators.  
So could it be that procrastination isn't always bad?Most people who write about procrastination write about how to cure  
it. But this is, strictly speaking, impossible. There are an  
infinite number of things you could be doing. No matter what you  
work on, you're not working on everything else. So the question  
is not how to avoid procrastination, but how to procrastinate well.There are three variants of procrastination, depending on what you  
do instead of working on something: you could work on (a) nothing,  
(b) something less important, or (c) something more important. That  
last type, I'd argue, is good procrastination.That's the "absent-minded professor," who forgets to shave, or eat,  
or even perhaps look where he's going while he's thinking about  
some interesting question. His mind is absent from the everyday  
world because it's hard at work in another.That's the sense in which the most impressive people I know are all  
procrastinators. They're type-C procrastinators: they put off  
working on small stuff to work on big stuff.What's "small stuff?" Roughly, work that has zero chance of being  
mentioned in your obituary. It's hard to say at the time what will  
turn out to be your best work (will it be your magnum opus on  
Sumerian temple architecture, or the detective thriller you wrote  
under a pseudonym?), but there's a whole class of tasks you can  
safely rule out: shaving, doing your laundry, cleaning the house,  
writing thank-you notes—anything that might be called an errand.Good procrastination is avoiding errands to do real work.Good in a sense, at least. The people who want you to do the errands  
won't think it's good. But you probably have to annoy them if you  
want to get anything done. The mildest seeming people, if they  
want to do real work, all have a certain degree of ruthlessness  
when it comes to avoiding errands.Some errands, like replying to letters, go away if you  
ignore them (perhaps taking friends with them). Others, like mowing  
the lawn, or filing tax returns, only get worse if you put them  
off. In principle it shouldn't work to put off the second kind of  
errand. You're going to have to do whatever it is eventually. Why  
not (as past-due notices are always saying) do it now?The reason it pays to put off even those errands is that real work  
needs two things errands don't: big chunks of time, and the  
right mood. If you get inspired by some project, it can be a net  
win to blow off everything you were supposed to do for the next few  
days to work on it. Yes, those errands may cost you more time when  
you finally get around to them. But if you get a lot done during  
those few days, you will be net more productive.In fact, it may not be a difference in degree, but a difference in  
kind. There may be types of work that can only be done in long,  
uninterrupted stretches, when inspiration hits, rather than dutifully  
in scheduled little slices. Empirically it seems to be so. When  
I think of the people I know who've done great things, I don't  
imagine them dutifully crossing items off to-do lists. I imagine  
them sneaking off to work on some new idea.Conversely, forcing someone to perform errands synchronously is  
bound to limit their productivity. The cost of an interruption is  
not just the time it takes, but that it breaks the time on either  
side in half. You probably only have to interrupt someone a couple  
times a day before they're unable to work on hard problems at all.I've wondered a lot about why   
startups are most productive at the  
very beginning, when they're just a couple guys in an apartment.  
The main reason may be that there's no one to interrupt them yet.  
In theory it's good when the founders finally get enough money to  
hire people to do some of the work for them. But it may be better  
to be overworked than interrupted. Once you dilute a startup with  
ordinary office workers—with type-B procrastinators—the whole  
company starts to resonate at their frequency. They're interrupt-driven,  
and soon you are too.Errands are so effective at killing great projects that a lot of  
people use them for that purpose. Someone who has decided to write  
a novel, for example, will suddenly find that the house needs  
cleaning. People who fail to write novels don't do it by sitting  
in front of a blank page for days without writing anything. They  
do it by feeding the cat, going out to buy something they need for  
their apartment, meeting a friend for coffee, checking email. "I  
don't have time to work," they say. And they don't; they've made  
sure of that.(There's also a variant where one has no place to work. The cure  
is to visit the places where famous people worked, and see how  
unsuitable they were.)I've used both these excuses at one time or another. I've learned  
a lot of tricks for making myself work over the last 20 years, but  
even now I don't win consistently. Some days I get real work done.  
Other days are eaten up by errands. And I know it's usually my  
fault: I let errands eat up the day, to avoid  
facing some hard problem.The most dangerous form of procrastination is unacknowledged type-B  
procrastination, because it doesn't feel like procrastination.  
You're "getting things done." Just the wrong things.Any advice about procrastination that concentrates on crossing  
things off your to-do list is not only incomplete, but positively  
misleading, if it doesn't consider the possibility that the to-do  
list is itself a form of type-B procrastination. In fact, possibility  
is too weak a word. Nearly everyone's is. Unless you're working  
on the biggest things you could be working on, you're type-B  
procrastinating, no matter how much you're getting done.In his famous essay You and Your Research   
(which I recommend to  
anyone ambitious, no matter what they're working on), Richard Hamming  
suggests that you ask yourself three questions:  
  
 What are the most important problems in your field? Are you working on one of them? Why not?  
  
Hamming was at Bell Labs when he started asking such questions. In  
principle anyone there ought to have been able to work on the most  
important problems in their field. Perhaps not everyone can make  
an equally dramatic mark on the world; I don't know; but whatever  
your capacities, there are projects that stretch them. So Hamming's  
exercise can be generalized to:  
  
 What's the best thing you could be working on, and why aren't  
 you?  
  
Most people will shy away from this question. I shy away from it  
myself; I see it there on the page and quickly move on to the next  
sentence. Hamming used to go around actually asking people this,  
and it didn't make him popular. But it's a question anyone ambitious  
should face.The trouble is, you may end up hooking a very big fish with this  
bait. To do good work, you need to do more than find good projects.  
Once you've found them, you have to get yourself to work on them,  
and that can be hard. The bigger the problem, the harder it is to  
get yourself to work on it.Of course, the main reason people find it difficult to work on a  
particular problem is that they don't   
enjoy it. When you're young,  
especially, you often find yourself working on stuff you don't  
really like-- because it seems impressive, for example, or because  
you've been assigned to work on it. Most grad students are stuck  
working on big problems they don't really like, and grad school is  
thus synonymous with procrastination.But even when you like what you're working on, it's easier to get  
yourself to work on small problems than big ones. Why? Why is it  
so hard to work on big problems? One reason is that you may not  
get any reward in the forseeable future. If you work on something  
you can finish in a day or two, you can expect to have a nice feeling  
of accomplishment fairly soon. If the reward is indefinitely far  
in the future, it seems less real.Another reason people don't work on big projects is, ironically,  
fear of wasting time. What if they fail? Then all the time they  
spent on it will be wasted. (In fact it probably won't be, because  
work on hard projects almost always leads somewhere.)But the trouble with big problems can't be just that they promise  
no immediate reward and might cause you to waste a lot of time. If  
that were all, they'd be no worse than going to visit your in-laws.  
There's more to it than that. Big problems are terrifying.  
There's an almost physical pain in facing them. It's like having  
a vacuum cleaner hooked up to your imagination. All your initial  
ideas get sucked out immediately, and you don't have any more, and  
yet the vacuum cleaner is still sucking.You can't look a big problem too directly in the eye. You have to  
approach it somewhat obliquely. But you have to adjust the angle  
just right: you have to be facing the big problem directly enough  
that you catch some of the excitement radiating from it, but not  
so much that it paralyzes you. You can tighten the angle once you  
get going, just as a sailboat can sail closer to the wind once it  
gets underway.If you want to work on big things, you seem to have to trick yourself  
into doing it. You have to work on small things that could grow  
into big things, or work on successively larger things, or split  
the moral load with collaborators. It's not a sign of weakness to  
depend on such tricks. The very best work has been done this way.When I talk to people who've managed to make themselves work on big  
things, I find that all blow off errands, and all feel guilty about  
it. I don't think they should feel guilty. There's more to do  
than anyone could. So someone doing the best work they can is  
inevitably going to leave a lot of errands undone. It seems a  
mistake to feel bad about that.I think the way to "solve" the problem of procrastination is to let  
delight pull you instead of making a to-do list push you. Work on  
an ambitious project you really enjoy, and sail as close to the  
wind as you can, and you'll leave the right things undone.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston, and Robert  
Morris for reading drafts of this.Romanian TranslationRussian TranslationHebrew TranslationGerman TranslationPortuguese TranslationItalian TranslationJapanese TranslationSpanish Translation

# Web 2.0

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
November 2005Does "Web 2.0" mean anything? Till recently I thought it didn't,  
but the truth turns out to be more complicated. Originally, yes,  
it was meaningless. Now it seems to have acquired a meaning. And  
yet those who dislike the term are probably right, because if it  
means what I think it does, we don't need it.I first heard the phrase "Web 2.0" in the name of the Web 2.0  
conference in 2004. At the time it was supposed to mean using "the  
web as a platform," which I took to refer to web-based applications.  
[1]So I was surprised at a conference this summer when Tim O'Reilly  
led a session intended to figure out a definition of "Web 2.0."  
Didn't it already mean using the web as a platform? And if it  
didn't already mean something, why did we need the phrase at all?OriginsTim says the phrase "Web 2.0" first  
arose in "a brainstorming session between  
O'Reilly and Medialive International." What is Medialive International?  
"Producers of technology tradeshows and conferences," according to  
their site. So presumably that's what this brainstorming session  
was about. O'Reilly wanted to organize a conference about the web,  
and they were wondering what to call it.I don't think there was any deliberate plan to suggest there was a  
new version of the web. They just wanted to make the point  
that the web mattered again. It was a kind of semantic deficit  
spending: they knew new things were coming, and the "2.0" referred  
to whatever those might turn out to be.And they were right. New things were coming. But the new version  
number led to some awkwardness in the short term. In the process  
of developing the pitch for the first conference, someone must have  
decided they'd better take a stab at explaining what that "2.0"  
referred to. Whatever it meant, "the web as a platform" was at  
least not too constricting.The story about "Web 2.0" meaning the web as a platform didn't live  
much past the first conference. By the second conference, what  
"Web 2.0" seemed to mean was something about democracy. At least,  
it did when people wrote about it online. The conference itself  
didn't seem very grassroots. It cost $2800, so the only people who  
could afford to go were VCs and people from big companies.And yet, oddly enough, Ryan Singel's article  
about the conference in Wired News spoke of "throngs of  
geeks." When a friend of mine asked Ryan about this, it was news  
to him. He said he'd originally written something like "throngs  
of VCs and biz dev guys" but had later shortened it just to "throngs,"  
and that this must have in turn been expanded by the editors into  
"throngs of geeks." After all, a Web 2.0 conference would presumably  
be full of geeks, right?Well, no. There were about 7. Even Tim O'Reilly was wearing a   
suit, a sight so alien I couldn't parse it at first. I saw  
him walk by and said to one of the O'Reilly people "that guy looks  
just like Tim.""Oh, that's Tim. He bought a suit."  
I ran after him, and sure enough, it was. He explained that he'd  
just bought it in Thailand.The 2005 Web 2.0 conference reminded me of Internet trade shows  
during the Bubble, full of prowling VCs looking for the next hot  
startup. There was that same odd atmosphere created by a large   
number of people determined not to miss out. Miss out on what?  
They didn't know. Whatever was going to happen—whatever Web 2.0  
turned out to be.I wouldn't quite call it "Bubble 2.0" just because VCs are eager  
to invest again. The Internet is a genuinely big deal. The bust  
was as much an overreaction as  
the boom. It's to be expected that once we started to pull out of  
the bust, there would be a lot of growth in this area, just as there  
was in the industries that spiked the sharpest before the Depression.The reason this won't turn into a second Bubble is that the IPO  
market is gone. Venture investors  
are driven by exit strategies. The reason they were funding all   
those laughable startups during the late 90s was that they hoped  
to sell them to gullible retail investors; they hoped to be laughing  
all the way to the bank. Now that route is closed. Now the default  
exit strategy is to get bought, and acquirers are less prone to  
irrational exuberance than IPO investors. The closest you'll get   
to Bubble valuations is Rupert Murdoch paying $580 million for   
Myspace. That's only off by a factor of 10 or so.1. AjaxDoes "Web 2.0" mean anything more than the name of a conference  
yet? I don't like to admit it, but it's starting to. When people  
say "Web 2.0" now, I have some idea what they mean. And the fact  
that I both despise the phrase and understand it is the surest proof  
that it has started to mean something.One ingredient of its meaning is certainly Ajax, which I can still  
only just bear to use without scare quotes. Basically, what "Ajax"  
means is "Javascript now works." And that in turn means that  
web-based applications can now be made to work much more like desktop  
ones.As you read this, a whole new generation  
of software is being written to take advantage of Ajax. There  
hasn't been such a wave of new applications since microcomputers  
first appeared. Even Microsoft sees it, but it's too late for them  
to do anything more than leak "internal"   
documents designed to give the impression they're on top of this  
new trend.In fact the new generation of software is being written way too  
fast for Microsoft even to channel it, let alone write their own  
in house. Their only hope now is to buy all the best Ajax startups  
before Google does. And even that's going to be hard, because  
Google has as big a head start in buying microstartups as it did  
in search a few years ago. After all, Google Maps, the canonical  
Ajax application, was the result of a startup they bought.So ironically the original description of the Web 2.0 conference  
turned out to be partially right: web-based applications are a big  
component of Web 2.0. But I'm convinced they got this right by   
accident. The Ajax boom didn't start till early 2005, when Google  
Maps appeared and the term "Ajax" was coined.2. DemocracyThe second big element of Web 2.0 is democracy. We now have several  
examples to prove that amateurs can   
surpass professionals, when they have the right kind of system to   
channel their efforts. Wikipedia  
may be the most famous. Experts have given Wikipedia middling  
reviews, but they miss the critical point: it's good enough. And   
it's free, which means people actually read it. On the web, articles  
you have to pay for might as well not exist. Even if you were   
willing to pay to read them yourself, you can't link to them.   
They're not part of the conversation.Another place democracy seems to win is in deciding what counts as  
news. I never look at any news site now except Reddit.  
[2]  
 I know if something major  
happens, or someone writes a particularly interesting article, it   
will show up there. Why bother checking the front page of any  
specific paper or magazine? Reddit's like an RSS feed for the whole  
web, with a filter for quality. Similar sites include Digg, a technology news site that's  
rapidly approaching Slashdot in popularity, and del.icio.us, the collaborative  
bookmarking network that set off the "tagging" movement. And whereas  
Wikipedia's main appeal is that it's good enough and free, these  
sites suggest that voters do a significantly better job than human  
editors.The most dramatic example of Web 2.0 democracy is not in the selection  
of ideas, but their production.   
I've noticed for a while that the stuff I read on individual people's  
sites is as good as or better than the stuff I read in newspapers  
and magazines. And now I have independent evidence: the top links  
on Reddit are generally links to individual people's sites rather   
than to magazine articles or news stories.My experience of writing  
for magazines suggests an explanation. Editors. They control the  
topics you can write about, and they can generally rewrite whatever  
you produce. The result is to damp extremes. Editing yields 95th  
percentile writing—95% of articles are improved by it, but 5% are  
dragged down. 5% of the time you get "throngs of geeks."On the web, people can publish whatever they want. Nearly all of  
it falls short of the editor-damped writing in print publications.  
But the pool of writers is very, very large. If it's large enough,  
the lack of damping means the best writing online should surpass   
the best in print.  
[3]   
And now that the web has evolved mechanisms  
for selecting good stuff, the web wins net. Selection beats damping,  
for the same reason market economies beat centrally planned ones.Even the startups are different this time around. They are to the   
startups of the Bubble what bloggers are to the print media. During  
the Bubble, a startup meant a company headed by an MBA that was   
blowing through several million dollars of VC money to "get big  
fast" in the most literal sense. Now it means a smaller, younger, more technical group that just   
decided to make something great. They'll decide later if they want   
to raise VC-scale funding, and if they take it, they'll take it on  
their terms.3. Don't Maltreat UsersI think everyone would agree that democracy and Ajax are elements  
of "Web 2.0." I also see a third: not to maltreat users. During  
the Bubble a lot of popular sites were quite high-handed with users.  
And not just in obvious ways, like making them register, or subjecting  
them to annoying ads. The very design of the average site in the   
late 90s was an abuse. Many of the most popular sites were loaded  
with obtrusive branding that made them slow to load and sent the  
user the message: this is our site, not yours. (There's a physical  
analog in the Intel and Microsoft stickers that come on some  
laptops.)I think the root of the problem was that sites felt they were giving  
something away for free, and till recently a company giving anything  
away for free could be pretty high-handed about it. Sometimes it  
reached the point of economic sadism: site owners assumed that the  
more pain they caused the user, the more benefit it must be to them.   
The most dramatic remnant of this model may be at salon.com, where   
you can read the beginning of a story, but to get the rest you have  
sit through a movie.At Y Combinator we advise all the startups we fund never to lord  
it over users. Never make users register, unless you need to in  
order to store something for them. If you do make users register,   
never make them wait for a confirmation link in an email; in fact,  
don't even ask for their email address unless you need it for some  
reason. Don't ask them any unnecessary questions. Never send them  
email unless they explicitly ask for it. Never frame pages you  
link to, or open them in new windows. If you have a free version   
and a pay version, don't make the free version too restricted. And  
if you find yourself asking "should we allow users to do x?" just   
answer "yes" whenever you're unsure. Err on the side of generosity.In How to Start a Startup I advised startups  
never to let anyone fly under them, meaning never to let any other  
company offer a cheaper, easier solution. Another way to fly low   
is to give users more power. Let users do what they want. If you   
don't and a competitor does, you're in trouble.iTunes is Web 2.0ish in this sense. Finally you can buy individual  
songs instead of having to buy whole albums. The recording industry  
hated the idea and resisted it as long as possible. But it was  
obvious what users wanted, so Apple flew under the labels.  
[4]  
Though really it might be better to describe iTunes as Web 1.5.   
Web 2.0 applied to music would probably mean individual bands giving  
away DRMless songs for free.The ultimate way to be nice to users is to give them something for  
free that competitors charge for. During the 90s a lot of people   
probably thought we'd have some working system for micropayments   
by now. In fact things have gone in the other direction. The most   
successful sites are the ones that figure out new ways to give stuff  
away for free. Craigslist has largely destroyed the classified ad  
sites of the 90s, and OkCupid looks likely to do the same to the  
previous generation of dating sites.Serving web pages is very, very cheap. If you can make even a   
fraction of a cent per page view, you can make a profit. And  
technology for targeting ads continues to improve. I wouldn't be  
surprised if ten years from now eBay had been supplanted by an   
ad-supported freeBay (or, more likely, gBay).Odd as it might sound, we tell startups that they should try to  
make as little money as possible. If you can figure out a way to  
turn a billion dollar industry into a fifty million dollar industry,  
so much the better, if all fifty million go to you. Though indeed,  
making things cheaper often turns out to generate more money in the  
end, just as automating things often turns out to generate more  
jobs.The ultimate target is Microsoft. What a bang that balloon is going  
to make when someone pops it by offering a free web-based alternative   
to MS Office.  
[5]  
Who will? Google? They seem to be taking their  
time. I suspect the pin will be wielded by a couple of 20 year old  
hackers who are too naive to be intimidated by the idea. (How hard  
can it be?)The Common ThreadAjax, democracy, and not dissing users. What do they all have in   
common? I didn't realize they had anything in common till recently,  
which is one of the reasons I disliked the term "Web 2.0" so much.  
It seemed that it was being used as a label for whatever happened  
to be new—that it didn't predict anything.But there is a common thread. Web 2.0 means using the web the way  
it's meant to be used. The "trends" we're seeing now are simply  
the inherent nature of the web emerging from under the broken models  
that got imposed on it during the Bubble.I realized this when I read an interview with  
Joe Kraus, the co-founder of Excite.  
[6]  
  
 Excite really never got the business model right at all. We fell   
 into the classic problem of how when a new medium comes out it  
 adopts the practices, the content, the business models of the old  
 medium—which fails, and then the more appropriate models get  
 figured out.  
  
It may have seemed as if not much was happening during the years  
after the Bubble burst. But in retrospect, something was happening:  
the web was finding its natural angle of repose. The democracy   
component, for example—that's not an innovation, in the sense of  
something someone made happen. That's what the web naturally tends  
to produce.Ditto for the idea of delivering desktop-like applications over the  
web. That idea is almost as old as the web. But the first time   
around it was co-opted by Sun, and we got Java applets. Java has  
since been remade into a generic replacement for C++, but in 1996  
the story about Java was that it represented a new model of software.  
Instead of desktop applications, you'd run Java "applets" delivered  
from a server.This plan collapsed under its own weight. Microsoft helped kill it,  
but it would have died anyway. There was no uptake among hackers.  
When you find PR firms promoting  
something as the next development platform, you can be sure it's  
not. If it were, you wouldn't need PR firms to tell you, because   
hackers would already be writing stuff on top of it, the way sites   
like Busmonster used Google Maps as a  
platform before Google even meant it to be one.The proof that Ajax is the next hot platform is that thousands of   
hackers have spontaneously started building things on top  
of it. Mikey likes it.There's another thing all three components of Web 2.0 have in common.  
Here's a clue. Suppose you approached investors with the following  
idea for a Web 2.0 startup:  
  
 Sites like del.icio.us and flickr allow users to "tag" content  
 with descriptive tokens. But there is also huge source of  
 implicit tags that they ignore: the text within web links.  
 Moreover, these links represent a social network connecting the   
 individuals and organizations who created the pages, and by using  
 graph theory we can compute from this network an estimate of the  
 reputation of each member. We plan to mine the web for these   
 implicit tags, and use them together with the reputation hierarchy  
 they embody to enhance web searches.  
  
How long do you think it would take them on average to realize that  
it was a description of Google?Google was a pioneer in all three components of Web 2.0: their core  
business sounds crushingly hip when described in Web 2.0 terms,   
"Don't maltreat users" is a subset of "Don't be evil," and of course  
Google set off the whole Ajax boom with Google Maps.Web 2.0 means using the web as it was meant to be used, and Google  
does. That's their secret. They're sailing with the wind, instead of sitting   
becalmed praying for a business model, like the print media, or   
trying to tack upwind by suing their customers, like Microsoft and   
the record labels.  
[7]Google doesn't try to force things to happen their way. They try   
to figure out what's going to happen, and arrange to be standing   
there when it does. That's the way to approach technology—and   
as business includes an ever larger technological component, the  
right way to do business.The fact that Google is a "Web 2.0" company shows that, while  
meaningful, the term is also rather bogus. It's like the word  
"allopathic." It just means doing things right, and it's a bad   
sign when you have a special word for that.  
Notes[1]  
From the conference  
site, June 2004: "While the first wave of the Web was closely   
tied to the browser, the second wave extends applications across   
the web and enables a new generation of services and business  
opportunities." To the extent this means anything, it seems to be  
about   
web-based applications.[2]  
Disclosure: Reddit was funded by   
Y Combinator. But although  
I started using it out of loyalty to the home team, I've become a  
genuine addict. While we're at it, I'm also an investor in  
!MSFT, having sold all my shares earlier this year.[3]  
I'm not against editing. I spend more time editing than  
writing, and I have a group of picky friends who proofread almost  
everything I write. What I dislike is editing done after the fact   
by someone else.[4]  
Obvious is an understatement. Users had been climbing in through   
the window for years before Apple finally moved the door.[5]  
Hint: the way to create a web-based alternative to Office may  
not be to write every component yourself, but to establish a protocol  
for web-based apps to share a virtual home directory spread across  
multiple servers. Or it may be to write it all yourself.[6]  
In Jessica Livingston's  
Founders at  
Work.[7]  
Microsoft didn't sue their customers directly, but they seem   
to have done all they could to help SCO sue them.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Sarah Harlin, Jessica Livingston, Peter  
Norvig, Aaron Swartz, and Jeff Weiner for reading drafts of this, and to the  
guys at O'Reilly and Adaptive Path for answering my questions.Interview About Web 2.0Spanish TranslationGerman TranslationRussian TranslationJapanese Translation  
  
  
If you liked this, you may also like  
Hackers & Painters.

# How to Fund a Startup

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
November 2005  
Venture funding works like gears. A typical startup goes through  
several rounds of funding, and at each round you want to take just  
enough money to reach the speed where you can shift into the next  
gear.Few startups get it quite right. Many are underfunded. A few are  
overfunded, which is like trying to start driving in third gear.I think it would help founders to understand funding better—not  
just the mechanics of it, but what investors are thinking. I was  
surprised recently when I realized that all the worst problems we  
faced in our startup were due not to competitors, but investors.  
Dealing with competitors was easy by comparison.I don't mean to suggest that our investors were nothing but a drag  
on us. They were helpful in negotiating deals, for example. I  
mean more that conflicts with investors are particularly nasty.  
Competitors punch you in the jaw, but investors have you by the  
balls.Apparently our situation was not unusual. And if trouble with  
investors is one of the biggest threats to a startup, managing them  
is one of the most important skills founders need to learn.Let's start by talking about the five sources of startup funding.  
Then we'll trace the life of a hypothetical (very fortunate) startup  
as it shifts gears through successive rounds.Friends and FamilyA lot of startups get their first funding from friends and family.  
Excite did, for example: after the founders graduated from college,  
they borrowed $15,000 from their parents to start a company. With  
the help of some part-time jobs they made it last 18 months.If your friends or family happen to be rich, the line blurs between  
them and angel investors. At Viaweb we got our first $10,000 of  
seed money from our friend Julian, but he was sufficiently rich  
that it's hard to say whether he should be classified as a friend  
or angel. He was also a lawyer, which was great, because it meant  
we didn't have to pay legal bills out of that initial small sum.The advantage of raising money from friends and family is that  
they're easy to find. You already know them. There are three main  
disadvantages: you mix together your business and personal life;  
they will probably not be as well connected as angels or venture  
firms; and they may not be accredited investors, which could  
complicate your life later.The SEC defines an "accredited investor" as someone with over a  
million dollars in liquid assets or an income of over $200,000 a  
year. The regulatory burden is much lower if a company's shareholders  
are all accredited investors. Once you take money from the general  
public you're more restricted in what you can do.   
[1]A startup's life will be more complicated, legally, if any of the  
investors aren't accredited. In an IPO, it might not merely add  
expense, but change the outcome. A lawyer I asked about it said:  
  
 When the company goes public, the SEC will carefully study all  
 prior issuances of stock by the company and demand that it take  
 immediate action to cure any past violations of securities laws.  
 Those remedial actions can delay, stall or even kill the IPO.  
  
Of course the odds of any given startup doing an IPO are small.  
But not as small as they might seem. A lot of startups that end up  
going public didn't seem likely to at first. (Who could have guessed  
that the company Wozniak and Jobs started in their spare time selling  
plans for microcomputers would yield one of the biggest IPOs of the  
decade?) Much of the value of a startup consists of that tiny  
probability multiplied by the huge outcome.It wasn't because they weren't accredited investors that I didn't  
ask my parents for seed money, though. When we were starting Viaweb,  
I didn't know about the concept of an accredited investor, and  
didn't stop to think about the value of investors' connections.  
The reason I didn't take money from my parents was that I didn't  
want them to lose it.ConsultingAnother way to fund a startup is to get a job. The best sort of  
job is a consulting project in which you can build whatever software  
you wanted to sell as a startup. Then you can gradually transform  
yourself from a consulting company into a product company, and have  
your clients pay your development expenses.This is a good plan for someone with kids, because it takes most  
of the risk out of starting a startup. There never has to be a  
time when you have no revenues. Risk and reward are usually  
proportionate, however: you should expect a plan that cuts the risk  
of starting a startup also to cut the average return. In this case,  
you trade decreased financial risk for increased risk that your  
company won't succeed as a startup.But isn't the consulting company itself a startup? No, not generally.  
A company has to be more than small and newly founded to be a  
startup. There are millions of small businesses in America, but  
only a few thousand are startups. To be a startup, a company has  
to be a product business, not a service business. By which I mean  
not that it has to make something physical, but that it has to have  
one thing it sells to many people, rather than doing custom work  
for individual clients. Custom work doesn't scale. To be a startup  
you need to be the band that sells a million copies of a song, not  
the band that makes money by playing at individual weddings and bar  
mitzvahs.The trouble with consulting is that clients have an awkward habit  
of calling you on the phone. Most startups operate close to the  
margin of failure, and the distraction of having to deal with clients  
could be enough to put you over the edge. Especially if you have  
competitors who get to work full time on just being a startup.So you have to be very disciplined if you take the consulting route.  
You have to work actively to prevent your company growing into a  
"weed tree," dependent on this source of easy but low-margin money.  
[2]Indeed, the biggest danger of consulting may be that it gives you  
an excuse for failure. In a startup, as in grad school, a lot of  
what ends up driving you are the expectations of your family and  
friends. Once you start a startup and tell everyone that's what  
you're doing, you're now on a path labelled "get rich or bust." You  
now have to get rich, or you've failed.Fear of failure is an extraordinarily powerful force. Usually it  
prevents people from starting things, but once you publish some  
definite ambition, it switches directions and starts working in  
your favor. I think it's a pretty clever piece of jiujitsu to set  
this irresistible force against the slightly less immovable object  
of becoming rich. You won't have it driving you if your stated  
ambition is merely to start a consulting company that you will one  
day morph into a startup.An advantage of consulting, as a way to develop a product, is that  
you know you're making something at least one customer wants. But  
if you have what it takes to start a startup you should have  
sufficient vision not to need this crutch.Angel InvestorsAngels are individual rich people. The word was first used  
for backers of Broadway plays, but now applies to individual investors  
generally. Angels who've made money in technology are preferable,  
for two reasons: they understand your situation, and they're a  
source of contacts and advice.The contacts and advice can be more important than the money. When  
del.icio.us took money from investors, they took money from, among  
others, Tim O'Reilly. The amount he put in was small compared to  
the VCs who led the round, but Tim is a smart and influential guy  
and it's good to have him on your side.You can do whatever you want with money from consulting or friends  
and family. With angels we're now talking about venture funding  
proper, so it's time to introduce the concept of exit strategy.  
Younger would-be founders are often surprised that investors expect  
them either to sell the company or go public. The reason is that  
investors need to get their capital back. They'll only consider  
companies that have an exit strategy—meaning companies that could  
get bought or go public.This is not as selfish as it sounds. There are few large, private  
technology companies. Those that don't fail all seem to get bought  
or go public. The reason is that employees are investors too—of  
their time—and they want just as much to be able to cash out. If  
your competitors offer employees stock options that might make them  
rich, while you make it clear you plan to stay private, your  
competitors will get the best people. So the principle of an "exit"  
is not just something forced on startups by investors, but part of  
what it means to be a startup.Another concept we need to introduce now is valuation. When someone  
buys shares in a company, that implicitly establishes a value for  
it. If someone pays $20,000 for 10% of a company, the company is  
in theory worth $200,000. I say "in theory" because in early stage  
investing, valuations are voodoo. As a company gets more established,  
its valuation gets closer to an actual market value. But in a newly  
founded startup, the valuation number is just an artifact of the  
respective contributions of everyone involved.Startups often "pay" investors who will help the company in some  
way by letting them invest at low valuations. If I had a startup  
and Steve Jobs wanted to invest in it, I'd give him the stock for  
$10, just to be able to brag that he was an investor. Unfortunately,  
it's impractical (if not illegal) to adjust the valuation of the  
company up and down for each investor. Startups' valuations are  
supposed to rise over time. So if you're going to sell cheap stock  
to eminent angels, do it early, when it's natural for the company  
to have a low valuation.Some angel investors join together in syndicates. Any city where  
people start startups will have one or more of them. In Boston the  
biggest is the Common  
Angels. In the Bay Area it's the Band  
of Angels. You can find groups near you through the Angel Capital Association.  
[3]  
However, most angel investors don't belong to these groups. In  
fact, the more prominent the angel, the less likely they are to  
belong to a group.Some angel groups charge you money to pitch your idea to them.  
Needless to say, you should never do this.One of the dangers of taking investment from individual angels,  
rather than through an angel group or investment firm, is that they  
have less reputation to protect. A big-name VC firm will not screw  
you too outrageously, because other founders would avoid them if  
word got out. With individual angels you don't have this protection,  
as we found to our dismay in our own startup. In many startups'  
lives there comes a point when you're at the investors'   
mercy—when you're out of money and the only place to get more is your  
existing investors. When we got into such a scrape, our investors  
took advantage of it in a way that a name-brand VC probably wouldn't  
have.Angels have a corresponding advantage, however: they're also not  
bound by all the rules that VC firms are. And so they can, for  
example, allow founders to cash out partially in a funding round,  
by selling some of their stock directly to the investors. I think  
this will become more common; the average founder is eager to do  
it, and selling, say, half a million dollars worth of stock will  
not, as VCs fear, cause most founders to be any less committed to  
the business.The same angels who tried to screw us also let us do this, and so  
on balance I'm grateful rather than angry. (As in families, relations  
between founders and investors can be complicated.)The best way to find angel investors is through personal introductions.  
You could try to cold-call angel groups near you, but angels, like  
VCs, will pay more attention to deals recommended by someone they  
respect.Deal terms with angels vary a lot. There are no generally accepted  
standards. Sometimes angels' deal terms are as fearsome as VCs'.  
Other angels, particularly in the earliest stages, will invest based  
on a two-page agreement.Angels who only invest occasionally may not themselves know what  
terms they want. They just want to invest in this startup. What  
kind of anti-dilution protection do they want? Hell if they know.  
In these situations, the deal terms tend to be random: the angel  
asks his lawyer to create a vanilla agreement, and the terms end  
up being whatever the lawyer considers vanilla. Which in practice  
usually means, whatever existing agreement he finds lying around  
his firm. (Few legal documents are created from scratch.)These heaps o' boilerplate are a problem for small startups, because  
they tend to grow into the union of all preceding documents. I  
know of one startup that got from an angel investor what amounted  
to a five hundred pound handshake: after deciding to invest, the  
angel presented them with a 70-page agreement. The startup didn't  
have enough money to pay a lawyer even to read it, let alone negotiate  
the terms, so the deal fell through.One solution to this problem would be to have the startup's lawyer  
produce the agreement, instead of the angel's. Some angels might  
balk at this, but others would probably welcome it.Inexperienced angels often get cold feet when the time comes to  
write that big check. In our startup, one of the two angels in the  
initial round took months to pay us, and only did after repeated  
nagging from our lawyer, who was also, fortunately, his lawyer.It's obvious why investors delay. Investing in startups is risky!  
When a company is only two months old, every day you wait  
gives you 1.7% more data about their trajectory. But the investor  
is already being compensated for that risk in the low price of the  
stock, so it is unfair to delay.Fair or not, investors do it if you let them. Even VCs do it. And  
funding delays are a big distraction for founders, who ought to be  
working on their company, not worrying about investors. What's a  
startup to do? With both investors and acquirers, the only leverage  
you have is competition. If an investor knows you have other  
investors lined up, he'll be a lot more eager to close-- and not  
just because he'll worry about losing the deal, but because if other  
investors are interested, you must be worth investing in. It's the  
same with acquisitions. No one wants to buy you till someone else  
wants to buy you, and then everyone wants to buy you.The key to closing deals is never to stop pursuing alternatives.  
When an investor says he wants to invest in you, or an acquirer  
says they want to buy you, don't believe it till you get the  
check. Your natural tendency when an investor says yes will  
be to relax and go back to writing code. Alas, you can't; you have  
to keep looking for more investors, if only to get this one to act.  
[4]Seed Funding FirmsSeed firms are like angels in that they invest relatively small  
amounts at early stages, but like VCs in that they're companies  
that do it as a business, rather than individuals making occasional  
investments on the side.Till now, nearly all seed firms have been so-called "incubators,"  
so Y Combinator gets called  
one too, though the only thing we have in common is that we invest  
in the earliest phase.According to the National Association of Business Incubators, there  
are about 800 incubators in the US. This is an astounding number,  
because I know the founders of a lot of startups, and I can't think  
of one that began in an incubator.What is an incubator? I'm not sure myself. The defining quality  
seems to be that you work in their space. That's where the name  
"incubator" comes from. They seem to vary a great deal in other  
respects. At one extreme is the sort of pork-barrel project where  
a town gets money from the state government to renovate a vacant  
building as a "high-tech incubator," as if it were merely lack of  
the right sort of office space that had till now prevented the town  
from becoming a   
startup hub.   
At the other extreme are places like  
Idealab, which generates ideas for new startups internally and hires  
people to work for them.The classic Bubble incubators, most of which now seem to be dead,  
were like VC firms except that they took a much bigger role in the  
startups they funded. In addition to working in their space, you  
were supposed to use their office staff, lawyers, accountants, and  
so on.Whereas incubators tend (or tended) to exert more control than VCs,  
Y Combinator exerts less.   
And we think it's better if startups operate out of their own  
premises, however crappy, than the offices of their investors. So  
it's annoying that we keep getting called an "incubator," but perhaps  
inevitable, because there's only one of us so far and no word yet  
for what we are. If we have to be called something, the obvious  
name would be "excubator." (The name is more excusable if one  
considers it as meaning that we enable people to escape cubicles.)Because seed firms are companies rather than individual people,  
reaching them is easier than reaching angels. Just go to their web  
site and send them an email. The importance of personal introductions  
varies, but is less than with angels or VCs.The fact that seed firms are companies also means the investment  
process is more standardized. (This is generally true with angel  
groups too.) Seed firms will probably have set deal terms they use  
for every startup they fund. The fact that the deal terms are  
standard doesn't mean they're favorable to you, but if other startups  
have signed the same agreements and things went well for them, it's  
a sign the terms are reasonable.Seed firms differ from angels and VCs in that they invest exclusively  
in the earliest phases—often when the company is still just an  
idea. Angels and even VC firms occasionally do this, but they also  
invest at later stages.The problems are different in the early stages. For example, in  
the first couple months a startup may completely redefine their idea. So seed investors usually care less  
about the idea than the people. This is true of all venture funding,  
but especially so in the seed stage.Like VCs, one of the advantages of seed firms is the advice they  
offer. But because seed firms operate in an earlier phase, they  
need to offer different kinds of advice. For example, a seed firm  
should be able to give advice about how to approach VCs, which VCs  
obviously don't need to do; whereas VCs should be able to give  
advice about how to hire an "executive team," which is not an issue  
in the seed stage.In the earliest phases, a lot of the problems are technical, so  
seed firms should be able to help with technical as well as business  
problems.Seed firms and angel investors generally want to invest in the  
initial phases of a startup, then hand them off to VC firms for the  
next round. Occasionally startups go from seed funding direct to  
acquisition, however, and I expect this to become increasingly  
common.Google has been aggressively pursuing this route, and now Yahoo is too. Both  
now compete directly with VCs. And this is a smart move. Why wait  
for further funding rounds to jack up a startup's price? When a  
startup reaches the point where VCs have enough information to  
invest in it, the acquirer should have enough information to buy  
it. More information, in fact; with their technical depth, the  
acquirers should be better at picking winners than VCs.Venture Capital FundsVC firms are like seed firms in that they're actual companies, but  
they invest other people's money, and much larger amounts of it.  
VC investments average several million dollars. So they tend to  
come later in the life of a startup, are harder to get, and come  
with tougher terms.The word "venture capitalist" is sometimes used loosely for any  
venture investor, but there is a sharp difference between VCs and  
other investors: VC firms are organized as funds, much like  
hedge funds or mutual funds. The fund managers, who are called  
"general partners," get about 2% of the fund annually as a management  
fee, plus about 20% of the fund's gains.There is a very sharp dropoff in performance among VC firms, because  
in the VC business both success and failure are self-perpetuating.  
When an investment scores spectacularly, as Google did for Kleiner  
and Sequoia, it generates a lot of good publicity for the VCs. And  
many founders prefer to take money from successful VC firms, because  
of the legitimacy it confers. Hence a vicious (for the losers)  
cycle: VC firms that have been doing badly will only get the deals  
the bigger fish have rejected, causing them to continue to do badly.As a result, of the thousand or so VC funds in the US now, only  
about 50 are likely to make money, and it is very hard for a new  
fund to break into this group.In a sense, the lower-tier VC firms are a bargain for founders.  
They may not be quite as smart or as well connected as the big-name  
firms, but they are much hungrier for deals. This means you should  
be able to get better terms from them.Better how? The most obvious is valuation: they'll take less of  
your company. But as well as money, there's power. I think founders  
will increasingly be able to stay on as CEO, and on terms that will  
make it fairly hard to fire them later.The most dramatic change, I predict,  
is that VCs will allow founders to   
cash out partially by selling  
some of their stock direct to the VC firm. VCs have traditionally  
resisted letting founders get anything before the ultimate "liquidity  
event." But they're also desperate for deals. And since I know  
from my own experience that the rule against buying stock from  
founders is a stupid one, this is a natural place for things to  
give as venture funding becomes more and more a seller's market.The disadvantage of taking money from less known firms is that  
people will assume, correctly or not, that you were turned down by  
the more exalted ones. But, like where you went to college, the  
name of your VC stops mattering once you have some performance to  
measure. So the more confident you are, the less you need a  
brand-name VC. We funded Viaweb entirely with angel money; it never  
occurred to us that the backing of a well known VC firm would make  
us seem more impressive.  
[5]Another danger of less known firms is that, like angels, they have  
less reputation to protect. I suspect it's the lower-tier firms  
that are responsible for most of the tricks that have given VCs  
such a bad reputation among hackers. They are doubly hosed: the  
general partners themselves are less able, and yet they have harder  
problems to solve, because the top VCs skim off all the best deals,  
leaving the lower-tier firms exactly the startups that are likely  
to blow up.For example, lower-tier firms are much more likely to pretend to  
want to do a deal with you just to lock you up while they decide  
if they really want to. One experienced CFO said:  
  
 The better ones usually will not give a term sheet unless they  
 really want to do a deal. The second or third tier firms have a  
 much higher break rate—it could be as high as 50%.  
  
It's obvious why: the lower-tier firms' biggest fear, when chance  
throws them a bone, is that one of the big dogs will notice and  
take it away. The big dogs don't have to worry about that.Falling victim to this trick could really hurt you. As one  
VC told me:  
  
 If you were talking to four VCs, told three of them that you  
 accepted a term sheet, and then have to call them back to tell  
 them you were just kidding, you are absolutely damaged goods.  
  
Here's a partial solution: when a VC offers you a term sheet, ask  
how many of their last 10 term sheets turned into deals. This will  
at least force them to lie outright if they want to mislead you.Not all the people who work at VC firms are partners. Most firms  
also have a handful of junior employees called something like  
associates or analysts. If you get a call from a VC  
firm, go to their web site and check whether the person you talked  
to is a partner. Odds are it will be a junior person; they scour  
the web looking for startups their bosses could invest in. The  
junior people will tend to seem very positive about your company.  
They're not pretending; they want to believe you're a hot  
prospect, because it would be a huge coup for them if their firm  
invested in a company they discovered. Don't be misled by this  
optimism. It's the partners who decide, and they view things with  
a colder eye.Because VCs invest large amounts, the money comes with more  
restrictions. Most only come into effect if the company gets into  
trouble. For example, VCs generally write it into the deal that  
in any sale, they get their investment back first. So if the company  
gets sold at a low price, the founders could get nothing. Some VCs  
now require that in any sale they get 4x their investment back  
before the common stock holders (that is, you) get anything, but  
this is an abuse that should be resisted.Another difference with large investments is that the founders are  
usually required to accept "vesting"—to surrender their stock and  
earn it back over the next 4-5 years. VCs don't want to invest  
millions in a company the founders could just walk away from.  
Financially, vesting has little effect, but in some situations it  
could mean founders will have less power. If VCs got de facto  
control of the company and fired one of the founders, he'd lose any  
unvested stock unless there was specific protection against this.  
So vesting would in that situation force founders to toe the line.The most noticeable change when a startup takes serious funding is  
that the founders will no longer have complete control. Ten years  
ago VCs used to insist that founders step down as CEO and hand the  
job over to a business guy they supplied. This is less the rule  
now, partly because the disasters of the Bubble showed that generic  
business guys don't make such great CEOs.But while founders will increasingly be able to stay on as CEO,  
they'll have to cede some power, because the board of directors  
will become more powerful. In the seed stage, the board is generally  
a formality; if you want to talk to the other board members, you  
just yell into the next room. This stops with VC-scale money. In  
a typical VC funding deal, the board of directors might be composed  
of two VCs, two founders, and one outside person acceptable to both.  
The board will have ultimate power, which means the founders now  
have to convince instead of commanding.This is not as bad as it sounds, however. Bill Gates is in the  
same position; he doesn't have majority control of Microsoft; in  
principle he also has to convince instead of commanding. And yet  
he seems pretty commanding, doesn't he? As long as things are going  
smoothly, boards don't interfere much. The danger comes when there's  
a bump in the road, as happened to Steve Jobs at Apple.Like angels, VCs prefer to invest in deals that come to them through  
people they know. So while nearly all VC funds have some address  
you can send your business plan to, VCs privately admit the chance  
of getting funding by this route is near zero. One recently told  
me that he did not know a single startup that got funded this way.I suspect VCs accept business plans "over the transom" more as a  
way to keep tabs on industry trends than as a source of deals. In  
fact, I would strongly advise against mailing your business plan  
randomly to VCs, because they treat this as evidence of laziness.  
Do the extra work of getting personal introductions. As one VC put  
it:  
  
 I'm not hard to find. I know a lot of people. If you can't find  
 some way to reach me, how are you going to create a successful  
 company?  
  
One of the most difficult problems for startup founders is deciding  
when to approach VCs. You really only get one chance, because they  
rely heavily on first impressions. And you can't approach some and  
save others for later, because (a) they ask who else you've talked  
to and when and (b) they talk among themselves. If you're talking  
to one VC and he finds out that you were rejected by another several  
months ago, you'll definitely seem shopworn.So when do you approach VCs? When you can convince them. If the  
founders have impressive resumes and the idea isn't hard to understand,  
you could approach VCs quite early. Whereas if the founders are  
unknown and the idea is very novel, you might have to launch the  
thing and show that users loved it before VCs would be convinced.If several VCs are interested in you, they will sometimes be willing  
to split the deal between them. They're more likely to do this if  
they're close in the VC pecking order. Such deals may be a net win  
for founders, because you get multiple VCs interested in your  
success, and you can ask each for advice about the other. One  
founder I know wrote:  
  
 Two-firm deals are great. It costs you a little more equity, but  
 being able to play the two firms off each other (as well as ask  
 one if the other is being out of line) is invaluable.  
  
When you do negotiate with VCs, remember that they've done this a  
lot more than you have. They've invested in dozens of startups,  
whereas this is probably the first you've founded. But don't let  
them or the situation intimidate you. The average founder is smarter  
than the average VC. So just do what you'd do in any complex,  
unfamiliar situation: proceed deliberately, and question anything  
that seems odd.It is, unfortunately, common for VCs to put terms in an agreement  
whose consequences surprise founders later, and also common for VCs  
to defend things they do by saying that they're standard in the  
industry. Standard, schmandard; the whole industry is only a few  
decades old, and rapidly evolving. The concept of "standard" is a  
useful one when you're operating on a small scale (Y Combinator  
uses identical terms for every deal because for tiny seed-stage  
investments it's not worth the overhead of negotiating individual  
deals), but it doesn't apply at the VC level. On that scale, every  
negotiation is unique.Most successful startups get money from more than one of the preceding  
five sources.   
[6]  
And, confusingly, the names of funding sources  
also tend to be used as the names of different rounds. The best  
way to explain how it all works is to follow the case of a hypothetical  
startup.Stage 1: Seed RoundOur startup begins when a group of three friends have an idea--  
either an idea for something they might build, or simply the idea  
"let's start a company." Presumably they already have some source  
of food and shelter. But if you have food and shelter, you probably  
also have something you're supposed to be working on: either  
classwork, or a job. So if you want to work full-time on a startup,  
your money situation will probably change too.A lot of startup founders say they started the company without any  
idea of what they planned to do. This is actually less common than  
it seems: many have to claim they thought of the idea after quitting  
because otherwise their former employer would own it.The three friends decide to take the leap. Since most startups are  
in competitive businesses, you not only want to work full-time on  
them, but more than full-time. So some or all of the friends quit  
their jobs or leave school. (Some of the founders in a startup can  
stay in grad school, but at least one has to make the company his  
full-time job.)They're going to run the company out of one of their apartments at  
first, and since they don't have any users they don't have to pay  
much for infrastructure. Their main expenses are setting up the  
company, which costs a couple thousand dollars in legal work and  
registration fees, and the living expenses of the founders.The phrase "seed investment" covers a broad range. To some VC firms  
it means $500,000, but to most startups it means several months'  
living expenses. We'll suppose our group of friends start with  
$15,000 from their friend's rich uncle, who they give 5% of the  
company in return. There's only common stock at this stage. They  
leave 20% as an options pool for later employees (but they set  
things up so that they can issue this stock to themselves if they  
get bought early and most is still unissued), and the three founders  
each get 25%.By living really cheaply they think they can make the remaining  
money last five months. When you have five months' runway left,  
how soon do you need to start looking for your next round? Answer:  
immediately. It takes time to find investors, and time (always  
more than you expect) for the deal to close even after they say  
yes. So if our group of founders know what they're doing they'll  
start sniffing around for angel investors right away. But of course  
their main job is to build version 1 of their software.The friends might have liked to have more money in this first phase,  
but being slightly underfunded teaches them an important lesson.  
For a startup, cheapness is power. The lower your costs, the more  
options you have—not just at this stage, but at every point till  
you're profitable. When you have a high "burn rate," you're always  
under time pressure, which means (a) you don't have time for your  
ideas to evolve, and (b) you're often forced to take deals you don't  
like.Every startup's rule should be: spend little, and work fast.After ten weeks' work the three friends have built a prototype that  
gives one a taste of what their product will do. It's not what  
they originally set out to do—in the process of writing it, they  
had some new ideas. And it only does a fraction of what the finished  
product will do, but that fraction includes stuff that no one else  
has done before.They've also written at least a skeleton business plan, addressing  
the five fundamental questions: what they're going to do, why users  
need it, how large the market is, how they'll make money, and who  
the competitors are and why this company is going to beat them.  
(That last has to be more specific than "they suck" or "we'll work  
really hard.")If you have to choose between spending time on the demo or the  
business plan, spend most on the demo. Software is not only more  
convincing, but a better way to explore ideas.Stage 2: Angel RoundWhile writing the prototype, the group has been traversing their  
network of friends in search of angel investors. They find some  
just as the prototype is demoable. When they demo it, one of the  
angels is willing to invest. Now the group is looking for more  
money: they want enough to last for a year, and maybe to hire a  
couple friends. So they're going to raise $200,000.The angel agrees to invest at a pre-money valuation of $1 million.  
The company issues $200,000 worth of new shares to the angel; if  
there were 1000 shares before the deal, this means 200 additional  
shares. The angel now owns 200/1200 shares, or a sixth of the  
company, and all the previous shareholders' percentage ownership  
is diluted by a sixth. After the deal, the capitalization table  
looks like this:  
  
shareholder shares percent  
-------------------------------  
angel 200 16.7  
uncle 50 4.2  
each founder 250 20.8  
option pool 200 16.7  
 ---- -----  
total 1200 100  
  
To keep things simple, I had the angel do a straight cash for stock  
deal. In reality the angel might be more likely to make the  
investment in the form of a convertible loan. A convertible loan  
is a loan that can be converted into stock later; it works out the  
same as a stock purchase in the end, but gives the angel more  
protection against being squashed by VCs in future rounds.Who pays the legal bills for this deal? The startup, remember,  
only has a couple thousand left. In practice this turns out to be  
a sticky problem that usually gets solved in some improvised way.  
Maybe the startup can find lawyers who will do it cheaply in the  
hope of future work if the startup succeeds. Maybe someone has a  
lawyer friend. Maybe the angel pays for his lawyer to represent  
both sides. (Make sure if you take the latter route that the lawyer  
is representing you rather than merely advising you, or his  
only duty is to the investor.)An angel investing $200k would probably expect a seat on the board  
of directors. He might also want preferred stock, meaning a special  
class of stock that has some additional rights over the common stock  
everyone else has. Typically these rights include vetoes over major  
strategic decisions, protection against being diluted in future  
rounds, and the right to get one's investment back first if the  
company is sold.Some investors might expect the founders to accept vesting for a  
sum this size, and others wouldn't. VCs are more likely to require  
vesting than angels. At Viaweb we managed to raise $2.5 million  
from angels without ever accepting vesting, largely because we were  
so inexperienced that we were appalled at the idea. In practice  
this turned out to be good, because it made us harder to push around.Our experience was unusual; vesting is the norm for amounts that  
size. Y Combinator doesn't require vesting, because (a) we invest  
such small amounts, and (b) we think it's unnecessary, and that the  
hope of getting rich is enough motivation to keep founders at work.  
But maybe if we were investing millions we would think differently.I should add that vesting is also a way for founders to protect  
themselves against one another. It solves the problem of what to  
do if one of the founders quits. So some founders impose it on  
themselves when they start the company.The angel deal takes two weeks to close, so we are now three months  
into the life of the company.The point after you get the first big chunk of angel money will  
usually be the happiest phase in a startup's life. It's a lot like  
being a postdoc: you have no immediate financial worries, and few  
responsibilities. You get to work on juicy kinds of work, like  
designing software. You don't have to spend time on bureaucratic  
stuff, because you haven't hired any bureaucrats yet. Enjoy it  
while it lasts, and get as much done as you can, because you will  
never again be so productive.With an apparently inexhaustible sum of money sitting safely in the  
bank, the founders happily set to work turning their prototype into  
something they can release. They hire one of their friends—at  
first just as a consultant, so they can try him out—and then a  
month later as employee #1. They pay him the smallest salary he can  
live on, plus 3% of the company in restricted stock, vesting over  
four years. (So after this the option pool is down to 13.7%).   
[7]  
They also spend a little money on a freelance graphic designer.How much stock do you give early employees? That varies so much  
that there's no conventional number. If you get someone really  
good, really early, it might be wise to give him as much stock as  
the founders. The one universal rule is that the amount of stock  
an employee gets decreases polynomially with the age of the company.  
In other words, you get rich as a power of how early you were. So  
if some friends want you to come work for their startup, don't wait  
several months before deciding.A month later, at the end of month four, our group of founders have  
something they can launch. Gradually through word of mouth they  
start to get users. Seeing the system in use by real users—people  
they don't know—gives them lots of new ideas. Also they find  
they now worry obsessively about the status of their server. (How  
relaxing founders' lives must have been when startups wrote VisiCalc.)By the end of month six, the system is starting to have a solid  
core of features, and a small but devoted following. People start  
to write about it, and the founders are starting to feel like experts  
in their field.We'll assume that their startup is one that could put millions more  
to use. Perhaps they need to spend a lot on marketing, or build  
some kind of expensive infrastructure, or hire highly paid salesmen.  
So they decide to start talking to VCs. They get introductions to  
VCs from various sources: their angel investor connects them with  
a couple; they meet a few at conferences; a couple VCs call them  
after reading about them.Step 3: Series A RoundArmed with their now somewhat fleshed-out business plan and able  
to demo a real, working system, the founders visit the VCs they  
have introductions to. They find the VCs intimidating and inscrutable.  
They all ask the same question: who else have you pitched to? (VCs  
are like high school girls: they're acutely aware of their position  
in the VC pecking order, and their interest in a company is a  
function of the interest other VCs show in it.)One of the VC firms says they want to invest and offers the founders  
a term sheet. A term sheet is a summary of what the deal terms  
will be when and if they do a deal; lawyers will fill in the details  
later. By accepting the term sheet, the startup agrees to turn  
away other VCs for some set amount of time while this firm does the  
"due diligence" required for the deal. Due diligence is the corporate  
equivalent of a background check: the purpose is to uncover any  
hidden bombs that might sink the company later, like serious design  
flaws in the product, pending lawsuits against the company,  
intellectual property issues, and so on. VCs' legal and financial  
due diligence is pretty thorough, but the technical due diligence  
is generally a joke.   
[8]The due diligence discloses no ticking bombs, and six weeks later  
they go ahead with the deal. Here are the terms: a $2 million  
investment at a pre-money valuation of $4 million, meaning that  
after the deal closes the VCs will own a third of the company (2 /  
(4 + 2)). The VCs also insist that prior to the deal the option  
pool be enlarged by an additional hundred shares. So the total  
number of new shares issued is 750, and the cap table becomes:  
  
shareholder shares percent  
-------------------------------  
VCs 650 33.3  
angel 200 10.3  
uncle 50 2.6  
each founder 250 12.8  
employee 36\* 1.8 \*unvested  
option pool 264 13.5  
 ---- -----  
total 1950 100  
  
This picture is unrealistic in several respects. For example, while  
the percentages might end up looking like this, it's unlikely that  
the VCs would keep the existing numbers of shares. In fact, every  
bit of the startup's paperwork would probably be replaced, as if  
the company were being founded anew. Also, the money might come  
in several tranches, the later ones subject to various   
conditions—though this is apparently more common in deals with lower-tier VCs  
(whose lot in life is to fund more dubious startups) than with the  
top firms.And of course any VCs reading this are probably rolling on the floor  
laughing at how my hypothetical VCs let the angel keep his 10.3 of  
the company. I admit, this is the Bambi version; in simplifying  
the picture, I've also made everyone nicer. In the real world, VCs  
regard angels the way a jealous husband feels about his wife's  
previous boyfriends. To them the company didn't exist before they  
invested in it.   
[9]I don't want to give the impression you have to do an angel round  
before going to VCs. In this example I stretched things out to  
show multiple sources of funding in action. Some startups could go  
directly from seed funding to a VC round; several of the companies  
we've funded have.The founders are required to vest their shares over four years, and  
the board is now reconstituted to consist of two VCs, two founders,  
and a fifth person acceptable to both. The angel investor cheerfully  
surrenders his board seat.At this point there is nothing new our startup can teach us about  
funding—or at least, nothing good.   
[10]  
The startup will almost  
certainly hire more people at this point; those millions must be  
put to work, after all. The company may do additional funding  
rounds, presumably at higher valuations. They may if they are  
extraordinarily fortunate do an IPO, which we should remember is  
also in principle a round of funding, regardless of its de facto  
purpose. But that, if not beyond the bounds of possibility, is  
beyond the scope of this article.Deals Fall ThroughAnyone who's been through a startup will find the preceding portrait  
to be missing something: disasters. If there's one thing all  
startups have in common, it's that something is always going wrong.  
And nowhere more than in matters of funding.For example, our hypothetical startup never spent more than half  
of one round before securing the next. That's more ideal than  
typical. Many startups—even successful ones—come close to  
running out of money at some point. Terrible things happen to  
startups when they run out of money, because they're designed for  
growth, not adversity.But the most unrealistic thing about the series of deals I've  
described is that they all closed. In the startup world, closing  
is not what deals do. What deals do is fall through. If you're  
starting a startup you would do well to remember that. Birds fly;  
fish swim; deals fall through.Why? Partly the reason deals seem to fall through so often is that  
you lie to yourself. You want the deal to close, so you start to  
believe it will. But even correcting for this, startup deals fall  
through alarmingly often—far more often than, say, deals to buy  
real estate. The reason is that it's such a risky environment.  
People about to fund or acquire a startup are prone to wicked cases  
of buyer's remorse. They don't really grasp the risk they're taking  
till the deal's about to close. And then they panic. And not just  
inexperienced angel investors, but big companies too.So if you're a startup founder wondering why some angel investor  
isn't returning your phone calls, you can at least take comfort in  
the thought that the same thing is happening to other deals a hundred  
times the size.The example of a startup's history that I've presented is like a  
skeleton—accurate so far as it goes, but needing to be fleshed  
out to be a complete picture. To get a complete picture, just add  
in every possible disaster.A frightening prospect? In a way. And yet also in a way encouraging.  
The very uncertainty of startups frightens away almost everyone.  
People overvalue stability—especially young  
people, who ironically need it least. And so in starting a startup,  
as in any really bold undertaking, merely deciding to do it gets  
you halfway there. On the day of the race, most of the other runners  
won't show up.  
Notes[1]  
The aim of such regulations is to protect widows and orphans  
from crooked investment schemes; people with a million dollars in  
liquid assets are assumed to be able to protect themselves.  
The unintended consequence is that the investments that generate  
the highest returns, like hedge funds, are available only to the  
rich.[2]  
Consulting is where product companies go to die. IBM is the  
most famous example. So starting as a consulting company is like  
starting out in the grave and trying to work your way up into the  
world of the living.[3]  
If "near you" doesn't mean the Bay Area, Boston, or Seattle,  
consider moving. It's not a coincidence you haven't heard of many  
startups from Philadelphia.[4]  
Investors are often compared to sheep. And they are like sheep,  
but that's a rational response to their situation. Sheep act the  
way they do for a reason. If all the other sheep head for a certain  
field, it's probably good grazing. And when a wolf appears, is he  
going to eat a sheep in the middle of the flock, or one near the  
edge?[5]  
This was partly confidence, and partly simple ignorance. We  
didn't know ourselves which VC firms were the impressive ones. We  
thought software was all that mattered. But that turned out to be  
the right direction to be naive in: it's much better to overestimate  
than underestimate the importance of making a good product.[6]  
I've omitted one source: government grants. I don't think  
these are even worth thinking about for the average startup.  
Governments may mean well when they set up grant programs to encourage  
startups, but what they give with one hand they take away with the  
other: the process of applying is inevitably so arduous, and the  
restrictions on what you can do with the money so burdensome, that  
it would be easier to take a job to get the money.  
You should be especially suspicious of grants whose purpose is some  
kind of social engineering-- e.g. to encourage more startups to be  
started in Mississippi. Free money to start a startup in a place  
where few succeed is hardly free.Some government agencies run venture funding groups, which make  
investments rather than giving grants. For example, the CIA runs  
a venture fund called In-Q-Tel that is modelled on private sector  
funds and apparently generates good returns. They would probably  
be worth approaching—if you don't mind taking money from the CIA.[7]  
Options have largely been replaced with restricted stock, which  
amounts to the same thing. Instead of earning the right to buy  
stock, the employee gets the stock up front, and earns the right  
not to have to give it back. The shares set aside for this purpose  
are still called the "option pool."[8]  
First-rate technical people do not generally hire themselves  
out to do due diligence for VCs. So the most difficult  
part for startup founders is often responding politely to the inane  
questions of the "expert" they send to look you over.[9]  
VCs regularly wipe out angels by issuing arbitrary amounts of  
new stock. They seem to have a standard piece of casuistry for  
this situation: that the angels are no longer working to help the  
company, and so don't deserve to keep their stock. This of course  
reflects a willful misunderstanding of what investment means; like  
any investor, the angel is being compensated for risks he took  
earlier. By a similar logic, one could argue that the VCs should  
be deprived of their shares when the company goes public.[10]  
One new thing the company might encounter is a down  
round, or a funding round at valuation lower than the previous  
round. Down rounds are bad news; it is generally the common stock  
holders who take the hit. Some of the most fearsome provisions in  
VC deal terms have to do with down rounds—like "full ratchet  
anti-dilution," which is as frightening as it sounds.Founders are tempted to ignore these clauses, because they think  
the company will either be a big success or a complete bust. VCs  
know otherwise: it's not uncommon for startups to have moments of  
adversity before they ultimately succeed. So it's worth negotiating  
anti-dilution provisions, even though you don't think you need to,  
and VCs will try to make you feel that you're being gratuitously  
troublesome.Thanks to Sam Altman, Hutch Fishman, Steve Huffman, Jessica  
Livingston, Sesha Pratap, Stan Reiss, Andy Singleton, Zak Stone,  
and Aaron Swartz for reading drafts of this.Arabic Translation

# The Venture Capital Squeeze

November 2005In the next few years, venture capital funds will find themselves  
squeezed from four directions. They're already stuck with a seller's  
market, because of the huge amounts they raised at the end of the  
Bubble and still haven't invested. This by itself is not the end  
of the world. In fact, it's just a more extreme version of the  
norm  
in the VC business: too much money chasing too few deals.Unfortunately, those few deals now want less and less money, because  
it's getting so cheap to start a startup. The four causes: open  
source, which makes software free; Moore's law, which makes hardware  
geometrically closer to free; the Web, which makes promotion free  
if you're good; and better languages, which make development a lot  
cheaper.When we started our startup in 1995, the first three were our biggest  
expenses. We had to pay $5000 for the Netscape Commerce Server,  
the only software that then supported secure http connections. We  
paid $3000 for a server with a 90 MHz processor and 32 meg of  
memory. And we paid a PR firm about $30,000 to promote our launch.Now you could get all three for nothing. You can get the software  
for free; people throw away computers more powerful than our first  
server; and if you make something good you can generate ten times  
as much traffic by word of mouth online than our first PR firm got  
through the print media.And of course another big change for the average startup is that  
programming languages have improved-- or rather, the median language has. At most startups ten years  
ago, software development meant ten programmers writing code in  
C++. Now the same work might be done by one or two using Python  
or Ruby.During the Bubble, a lot of people predicted that startups would  
outsource their development to India. I think a better model for  
the future is David Heinemeier Hansson, who outsourced his development  
to a more powerful language instead. A lot of well-known applications  
are now, like BaseCamp, written by just one programmer. And one  
guy is more than 10x cheaper than ten, because (a) he won't waste  
any time in meetings, and (b) since he's probably a founder, he can  
pay himself nothing.Because starting a startup is so cheap, venture capitalists now  
often want to give startups more money than the startups want to  
take. VCs like to invest several million at a time. But as one  
VC told me after a startup he funded would only take about half a  
million, "I don't know what we're going to do. Maybe we'll just  
have to give some of it back." Meaning give some of the fund back  
to the institutional investors who supplied it, because it wasn't  
going to be possible to invest it all.Into this already bad situation comes the third problem: Sarbanes-Oxley.  
Sarbanes-Oxley is a law, passed after the Bubble, that drastically  
increases the regulatory burden on public companies. And in addition  
to the cost of compliance, which is at least two million dollars a  
year, the law introduces frightening legal exposure for corporate  
officers. An experienced CFO I know said flatly: "I would not  
want to be CFO of a public company now."You might think that responsible corporate governance is an area  
where you can't go too far. But you can go too far in any law, and  
this remark convinced me that Sarbanes-Oxley must have. This CFO  
is both the smartest and the most upstanding money guy I know. If  
Sarbanes-Oxley deters people like him from being CFOs of public   
companies, that's proof enough that it's broken.Largely because of Sarbanes-Oxley, few startups go public now. For  
all practical purposes, succeeding now equals getting bought. Which  
means VCs are now in the business of finding promising little 2-3  
man startups and pumping them up into companies that cost $100  
million to acquire. They didn't mean to be in this business; it's  
just what their business has evolved into.Hence the fourth problem: the acquirers have begun to realize they  
can buy wholesale. Why should they wait for VCs to make the startups  
they want more expensive? Most of what the VCs add, acquirers don't  
want anyway. The acquirers already have brand recognition and HR  
departments. What they really want is the software and the developers,  
and that's what the startup is in the early phase: concentrated  
software and developers.Google, typically, seems to have been the first to figure this out.  
"Bring us your startups early," said Google's speaker at the Startup School. They're quite  
explicit about it: they like to acquire startups at just the point  
where they would do a Series A round. (The Series A round is the  
first round of real VC funding; it usually happens in the first  
year.) It is a brilliant strategy, and one that other big technology  
companies will no doubt try to duplicate. Unless they want to have   
still more of their lunch eaten by Google.Of course, Google has an advantage in buying startups: a lot of the  
people there are rich, or expect to be when their options vest.  
Ordinary employees find it very hard to recommend an acquisition;  
it's just too annoying to see a bunch of twenty year olds get rich  
when you're still working for salary. Even if it's the right thing   
for your company to do.The Solution(s)Bad as things look now, there is a way for VCs to save themselves.  
They need to do two things, one of which won't surprise them, and   
another that will seem an anathema.Let's start with the obvious one: lobby to get Sarbanes-Oxley   
loosened. This law was created to prevent future Enrons, not to  
destroy the IPO market. Since the IPO market was practically dead  
when it passed, few saw what bad effects it would have. But now   
that technology has recovered from the last bust, we can see clearly  
what a bottleneck Sarbanes-Oxley has become.Startups are fragile plants—seedlings, in fact. These seedlings  
are worth protecting, because they grow into the trees of the  
economy. Much of the economy's growth is their growth. I think  
most politicians realize that. But they don't realize just how   
fragile startups are, and how easily they can become collateral  
damage of laws meant to fix some other problem.Still more dangerously, when you destroy startups, they make very  
little noise. If you step on the toes of the coal industry, you'll  
hear about it. But if you inadvertantly squash the startup industry,  
all that happens is that the founders of the next Google stay in   
grad school instead of starting a company.My second suggestion will seem shocking to VCs: let founders cash   
out partially in the Series A round. At the moment, when VCs invest  
in a startup, all the stock they get is newly issued and all the   
money goes to the company. They could buy some stock directly from  
the founders as well.Most VCs have an almost religious rule against doing this. They  
don't want founders to get a penny till the company is sold or goes  
public. VCs are obsessed with control, and they worry that they'll  
have less leverage over the founders if the founders have any money.This is a dumb plan. In fact, letting the founders sell a little stock  
early would generally be better for the company, because it would  
cause the founders' attitudes toward risk to be aligned with the  
VCs'. As things currently work, their attitudes toward risk tend  
to be diametrically opposed: the founders, who have nothing, would  
prefer a 100% chance of $1 million to a 20% chance of $10 million,  
while the VCs can afford to be "rational" and prefer the latter.Whatever they say, the reason founders are selling their companies  
early instead of doing Series A rounds is that they get paid up  
front. That first million is just worth so much more than the  
subsequent ones. If founders could sell a little stock early,  
they'd be happy to take VC money and bet the rest on a bigger  
outcome.So why not let the founders have that first million, or at least  
half million? The VCs would get same number of shares for the   
money. So what if some of the money would go to the   
founders instead of the company?Some VCs will say this is  
unthinkable—that they want all their money to be put to work  
growing the company. But the fact is, the huge size of current VC  
investments is dictated by the structure  
of VC funds, not the needs of startups. Often as not these large   
investments go to work destroying the company rather than growing  
it.The angel investors who funded our startup let the founders sell  
some stock directly to them, and it was a good deal for everyone.   
The angels made a huge return on that investment, so they're happy.  
And for us founders it blunted the terrifying all-or-nothingness  
of a startup, which in its raw form is more a distraction than a  
motivator.If VCs are frightened at the idea of letting founders partially  
cash out, let me tell them something still more frightening: you  
are now competing directly with Google.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Sarah Harlin, Jessica  
Livingston, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.Romanian TranslationHebrew TranslationJapanese Translation  
  
If you liked this, you may also like  
Hackers & Painters.

# Ideas for Startups

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
October 2005(This essay is derived from a talk at the 2005   
Startup School.)How do you get good ideas for   
startups? That's probably the number  
one question people ask me.I'd like to reply with another question: why do people think it's  
hard to come up with ideas for startups?That might seem a stupid thing to ask. Why do they think  
it's hard? If people can't do it, then it is hard, at least  
for them. Right?Well, maybe not. What people usually say is not that they can't  
think of ideas, but that they don't have any. That's not quite the  
same thing. It could be the reason they don't have any is that  
they haven't tried to generate them.I think this is often the case. I think people believe that coming  
up with ideas for startups is very hard-- that it must be  
very hard-- and so they don't try do to it. They assume ideas are  
like miracles: they either pop into your head or they don't.I also have a theory about why people think this. They overvalue  
ideas. They think creating a startup is just a matter of implementing  
some fabulous initial idea. And since a successful startup is worth  
millions of dollars, a good idea is therefore a million dollar idea.If coming up with an idea for a startup equals coming up with a  
million dollar idea, then of course it's going to seem hard. Too  
hard to bother trying. Our instincts tell us something so valuable  
would not be just lying around for anyone to discover.Actually, startup ideas are not million dollar ideas, and here's  
an experiment you can try to prove it: just try to sell one. Nothing  
evolves faster than markets. The fact that there's no market for  
startup ideas suggests there's no demand. Which means, in the  
narrow sense of the word, that startup ideas are worthless.QuestionsThe fact is, most startups end up nothing like the initial idea.  
It would be closer to the truth to say the main value of your initial  
idea is that, in the process of discovering it's broken, you'll  
come up with your real idea.The initial idea is just a starting point-- not a blueprint, but a  
question. It might help if they were expressed that way. Instead  
of saying that your idea is to make a collaborative, web-based  
spreadsheet, say: could one make a collaborative, web-based  
spreadsheet? A few grammatical tweaks, and a woefully incomplete  
idea becomes a promising question to explore.There's a real difference, because an assertion provokes objections  
in a way a question doesn't. If you say: I'm going to build a  
web-based spreadsheet, then critics-- the most dangerous of which  
are in your own head-- will immediately reply that you'd be competing  
with Microsoft, that you couldn't give people the kind of UI they  
expect, that users wouldn't want to have their data on your servers,  
and so on.A question doesn't seem so challenging. It becomes: let's try  
making a web-based spreadsheet and see how far we get. And everyone  
knows that if you tried this you'd be able to make something  
useful. Maybe what you'd end up with wouldn't even be a spreadsheet.  
Maybe it would be some kind of new spreasheet-like collaboration  
tool that doesn't even have a name yet. You wouldn't have thought  
of something like that except by implementing your way toward it.Treating a startup idea as a question changes what you're looking  
for. If an idea is a blueprint, it has to be right. But if it's  
a question, it can be wrong, so long as it's wrong in a way that  
leads to more ideas.One valuable way for an idea to be wrong is to be only a partial  
solution. When someone's working on a problem that seems too  
big, I always ask: is there some way to bite off some subset of the  
problem, then gradually expand from there? That will generally  
work unless you get trapped on a local maximum, like 1980s-style  
AI, or C.UpwindSo far, we've reduced the problem from thinking of a million dollar  
idea to thinking of a mistaken question. That doesn't seem so hard,  
does it?To generate such questions you need two things: to be familiar with   
promising new technologies, and to have the right kind of friends.  
New technologies are the ingredients startup ideas are made of, and  
conversations with friends are the kitchen they're cooked in.Universities have both, and that's why so many startups grow out  
of them. They're filled with new technologies, because they're  
trying to produce research, and only things that are new count as  
research. And they're full of exactly the right kind of people to   
have ideas with: the other students, who will be not only smart but  
elastic-minded to a fault.The opposite extreme would be a well-paying but boring job at a big  
company. Big companies are biased against new technologies, and  
the people you'd meet there would be wrong too.In an essay I wrote for high school students,   
I said a good rule of thumb was to stay upwind-- to  
work on things that maximize your future options. The principle  
applies for adults too, though perhaps it has to be modified to:  
stay upwind for as long as you can, then cash in the potential  
energy you've accumulated when you need to pay for kids.I don't think people consciously realize this, but one reason  
downwind jobs like churning out Java for a bank pay so well is   
precisely that they are downwind. The market price for that kind  
of work is higher because it gives you fewer options for the future.  
A job that lets you work on exciting new stuff will tend to pay  
less, because part of the compensation is in the form of the new  
skills you'll learn.Grad school is the other end of the spectrum from a coding job at  
a big company: the pay's low but you spend most of your time working  
on new stuff. And of course, it's called "school," which makes  
that clear to everyone, though in fact all jobs are some percentage  
school.The right environment for having startup ideas need not be a  
university per se. It just has to be a situation with a large  
percentage of school.It's obvious why you want exposure to new technology, but why do   
you need other people? Can't you just think of new ideas yourself?  
The empirical answer is: no. Even Einstein needed people to bounce  
ideas off. Ideas get developed in the process of explaining them  
to the right kind of person. You need that resistance, just  
as a carver needs the resistance of the wood.This is one reason Y Combinator has a rule against investing in   
startups with only one founder. Practically every successful company  
has at least two. And because startup founders work under great   
pressure, it's critical they be friends.I didn't realize it till I was writing this, but that may help  
explain why there are so few female startup founders. I read on  
the Internet (so it must be true) that only 1.7% of VC-backed  
startups are founded by women. The percentage of female hackers  
is small, but not that small. So why the discrepancy?When you realize that successful startups tend to have multiple  
founders who were already friends, a  
possible explanation emerges. People's best friends are likely to   
be of the same sex, and if one group is a minority in some population,  
pairs of them will be a minority squared.  
[1]DoodlingWhat these groups of co-founders do together is more complicated   
than just sitting down and trying to think of ideas. I suspect the   
most productive setup is a kind of together-alone-together sandwich.  
Together you talk about some hard problem, probably getting nowhere.  
Then, the next morning, one of you has an idea in the shower about  
how to solve it. He runs eagerly to to tell the others, and together  
they work out the kinks.What happens in that shower? It seems to me that ideas just pop  
into my head. But can we say more than that?Taking a shower is like a form of meditation. You're alert, but  
there's nothing to distract you. It's in a situation like this,  
where your mind is free to roam, that it bumps into new ideas.What happens when your mind wanders? It may be like doodling. Most  
people have characteristic ways of doodling. This habit is   
unconscious, but not random: I found my doodles changed after I   
started studying painting. I started to make the kind of gestures  
I'd make if I were drawing from life. They were atoms of drawing,   
but arranged randomly.  
[2]Perhaps letting your mind wander is like doodling with ideas. You  
have certain mental gestures you've learned in your work, and when  
you're not paying attention, you keep making these same gestures,   
but somewhat randomly. In effect, you call the same functions on  
random arguments. That's what a metaphor is: a function applied   
to an argument of the wrong type.Conveniently, as I was writing this, my mind wandered: would it be  
useful to have metaphors in a programming language? I don't know;  
I don't have time to think about this. But it's convenient because  
this is an example of what I mean by habits of mind. I spend a lot  
of time thinking about language design, and my habit of always   
asking "would x be useful in a programming language" just got  
invoked.If new ideas arise like doodles, this would explain why you have  
to work at something for a while before you have any. It's not  
just that you can't judge ideas till you're an expert in a field.  
You won't even generate ideas, because you won't have any habits  
of mind to invoke.Of course the habits of mind you invoke on some field don't have  
to be derived from working in that field. In fact, it's often  
better if they're not. You're not just looking for good ideas, but  
for good new ideas, and you have a better chance of generating  
those if you combine stuff from distant fields. As hackers, one  
of our habits of mind is to ask, could one open-source x? For   
example, what if you made an open-source operating system? A fine  
idea, but not very novel. Whereas if you ask, could you make an  
open-source play? you might be onto something.Are some kinds of work better sources of habits of mind than others?  
I suspect harder fields may be better sources, because to attack  
hard problems you need powerful solvents. I find math is a good  
source of metaphors-- good enough that it's worth studying just for  
that. Related fields are also good sources, especially when they're  
related in unexpected ways. Everyone knows computer science and  
electrical engineering are related, but precisely because everyone  
knows it, importing ideas from one to the other doesn't yield great  
profits. It's like importing something from Wisconsin to Michigan.   
Whereas (I claim) hacking and painting are  
also related, in the sense that hackers and painters are both   
makers,  
and this source of new ideas is practically virgin territory.ProblemsIn theory you could stick together ideas at random and see what you  
came up with. What if you built a peer-to-peer dating site? Would  
it be useful to have an automatic book? Could you turn theorems  
into a commodity? When you assemble ideas at random like this,   
they may not be just stupid, but semantically ill-formed. What   
would it even mean to make theorems a commodity? You got me. I  
didn't think of that idea, just its name.You might come up with something useful this way, but I never have.  
It's like knowing a fabulous sculpture is hidden inside a block of  
marble, and all you have to do is remove the marble that isn't part  
of it. It's an encouraging thought, because it reminds you there   
is an answer, but it's not much use in practice because the search  
space is too big.I find that to have good ideas I need to be working on some problem.  
You can't start with randomness. You have to start with a problem,  
then let your mind wander just far enough for new ideas to form.In a way, it's harder to see problems than their solutions. Most   
people prefer to remain in denial about problems. It's obvious  
why: problems are irritating. They're problems! Imagine if people  
in 1700 saw their lives the way we'd see them. It would have been  
unbearable. This denial is such a powerful force that, even when   
presented with possible solutions, people often prefer to believe  
they wouldn't work.I saw this phenomenon when I worked on spam filters. In 2002, most  
people preferred to ignore spam, and most of those who didn't  
preferred to believe the heuristic filters then available were the  
best you could do.I found spam intolerable, and I felt it had to be possible to  
recognize it statistically. And it turns out that was all you   
needed to solve the problem. The algorithm I used was ridiculously  
simple. Anyone who'd really tried to solve the problem would have  
found it. It was just that no one had really tried to solve the  
problem.  
[3]Let me repeat that recipe: finding the problem intolerable and   
feeling it must be possible to solve it. Simple as it seems, that's  
the recipe for a lot of startup ideas.WealthSo far most of what I've said applies to ideas in general. What's   
special about startup ideas? Startup ideas are ideas for companies,  
and companies have to make money. And the way to make money is to  
make something people want.Wealth is what people want. I don't mean that as some kind of   
philosophical statement; I mean it as a tautology.So an idea for a startup is an idea for something people want.  
Wouldn't any good idea be something people want? Unfortunately   
not. I think new theorems are a fine thing to create, but there  
is no great demand for them. Whereas there appears to be great  
demand for celebrity gossip magazines. Wealth is defined democratically.  
Good ideas and valuable ideas are not quite the same thing; the  
difference is individual tastes.But valuable ideas are very close to good ideas, especially in  
technology. I think they're so close that you can get away with  
working as if the goal were to discover good ideas, so long as, in  
the final stage, you stop and ask: will people actually pay for   
this? Only a few ideas are likely to make it that far and then get  
shot down; RPN calculators might be one example.One way to make something people want is to look at stuff people   
use now that's broken. Dating sites are a prime example. They   
have millions of users, so they must be promising something people   
want. And yet they work horribly. Just ask anyone who uses them.   
It's as if they used the worse-is-better approach but stopped after  
the first stage and handed the thing over to marketers.Of course, the most obvious breakage in the average computer user's   
life is Windows itself. But this is a special case: you can't  
defeat a monopoly by a frontal attack. Windows can and will be   
overthrown, but not by giving people a better desktop OS. The way  
to kill it is to redefine the problem as a superset of the current   
one. The problem is not, what operating system should people use  
on desktop computers? but how should people use applications?  
There are answers to that question that don't even involve desktop  
computers.Everyone thinks Google is going to solve this problem, but it is a  
very subtle one, so subtle that a company as big as Google might  
well get it wrong. I think the odds are better than 50-50 that the  
Windows killer-- or more accurately, Windows transcender-- will  
come from some little startup.Another classic way to make something people want is to take a  
luxury and make it into a commmodity. People must want something  
if they pay a lot for it. And it is a very rare product that can't  
be made dramatically cheaper if you try.This was Henry Ford's plan. He made cars, which had been a luxury  
item, into a commodity. But the idea is much older than Henry Ford.  
Water mills transformed mechanical power from a luxury into a  
commodity, and they were used in the Roman empire. Arguably  
pastoralism transformed a luxury into a commodity.When you make something cheaper you can sell more of them. But if  
you make something dramatically cheaper you often get qualitative  
changes, because people start to use it in different ways. For  
example, once computers get so cheap that most people can have one  
of their own, you can use them as communication devices.Often to make something dramatically cheaper you have to redefine   
the problem. The Model T didn't have all the features previous  
cars did. It only came in black, for example. But it solved the  
problem people cared most about, which was getting from place to  
place.One of the most useful mental habits I know I learned from Michael  
Rabin: that the best way to solve a problem is often to redefine  
it. A lot of people use this technique without being consciously  
aware of it, but Rabin was spectacularly explicit. You need a big  
prime number? Those are pretty expensive. How about if I give you  
a big number that only has a 10 to the minus 100 chance of not being  
prime? Would that do? Well, probably; I mean, that's probably  
smaller than the chance that I'm imagining all this anyway.Redefining the problem is a particularly juicy heuristic when you  
have competitors, because it's so hard for rigid-minded people to   
follow. You can work in plain sight and they don't realize the   
danger. Don't worry about us. We're just working on search. Do   
one thing and do it well, that's our motto.Making things cheaper is actually a subset of a more general  
technique: making things easier. For a long time it was most of   
making things easier, but now that the things we build are so  
complicated, there's another rapidly growing subset: making things   
easier to use.This is an area where there's great room for improvement. What you  
want to be able to say about technology is: it just works. How  
often do you say that now?Simplicity takes effort-- genius, even. The average programmer   
seems to produce UI designs that are almost willfully bad. I was   
trying to use the stove at my mother's house a couple weeks ago.   
It was a new one, and instead of physical knobs it had buttons and  
an LED display. I tried pressing some buttons I thought would cause  
it to get hot, and you know what it said? "Err." Not even "Error."  
"Err." You can't just say "Err" to the user of a stove.  
You should design the UI so that errors are impossible. And the   
boneheads who designed this stove even had an example of such a UI  
to work from: the old one. You turn one knob to set the temperature  
and another to set the timer. What was wrong with that? It just  
worked.It seems that, for the average engineer, more options just means  
more rope to hang yourself. So if you want to start a startup, you  
can take almost any existing technology produced by a big company,   
and assume you could build something way easier to use.Design for ExitSuccess for a startup approximately equals getting bought. You  
need some kind of exit strategy, because you can't get the smartest  
people to work for you without giving them options likely to be  
worth something. Which means you either have to get bought or go  
public, and the number of startups that go public is very small.If success probably means getting bought, should you make that a  
conscious goal? The old answer was no: you were supposed to pretend  
that you wanted to create a giant, public company, and act surprised  
when someone made you an offer. Really, you want to buy us? Well,  
I suppose we'd consider it, for the right price.I think things are changing. If 98% of the time success means   
getting bought, why not be open about it? If 98% of the time you're  
doing product development on spec for some big company, why not  
think of that as your task? One advantage of this approach is that  
it gives you another source of ideas: look at big companies, think  
what they should   
be doing, and do it yourself. Even if  
they already know it, you'll probably be done faster.Just be sure to make something multiple acquirers will want. Don't  
fix Windows, because the only potential acquirer is Microsoft, and   
when there's only one acquirer, they don't have to hurry. They can  
take their time and copy you instead of buying you. If you want  
to get market price, work on something where there's competition.If an increasing number of startups are created to do product  
development on spec, it will be a natural counterweight to monopolies.  
Once some type of technology is captured by a monopoly, it will   
only evolve at big company rates instead of startup rates, whereas  
alternatives will evolve with especial speed. A free market  
interprets monopoly as damage and routes around it.The Woz RouteThe most productive way to generate startup ideas is also the  
most unlikely-sounding: by accident. If you look at how famous  
startups got started, a lot of them weren't initially supposed to   
be startups. Lotus began with a program Mitch Kapor wrote for a  
friend. Apple got started because Steve Wozniak wanted to build  
microcomputers, and his employer, Hewlett-Packard, wouldn't let him  
do it at work. Yahoo began as David Filo's personal collection of  
links.This is not the only way to start startups. You can sit down and  
consciously come up with an idea for a company; we did. But measured  
in total market cap, the build-stuff-for-yourself model might be   
more fruitful. It certainly has to be the most fun way to come up  
with startup ideas. And since a startup ought to have multiple  
founders who were already friends before they decided to start a   
company, the rather surprising conclusion is that the best way to   
generate startup ideas is to do what hackers do for fun: cook up  
amusing hacks with your friends.It seems like it violates some kind of conservation law, but there  
it is: the best way to get a "million dollar idea" is just to do  
what hackers enjoy doing anyway.  
Notes[1]  
This phenomenon may account for a number of discrepancies  
currently blamed on various forbidden isms. Never attribute to   
malice what can be explained by math.[2]   
A lot of classic abstract expressionism is doodling of this type:  
artists trained to paint from life using the same gestures but  
without using them to represent anything. This explains why such  
paintings are (slightly) more interesting than random marks would be.[3]  
Bill Yerazunis had solved the problem, but he got there by  
another path. He made a general-purpose file classifier so good  
that it also worked for spam.One Specific IdeaRomanian TranslationJapanese TranslationTraditional Chinese TranslationRussian TranslationArabic Translation

# What I Did this Summer

October 2005The first Summer Founders Program has just finished. We were  
surprised how well it went. Overall only about 10% of startups   
succeed, but if I had to guess now, I'd predict three or four of   
the eight startups we funded will make it.Of the startups that needed further funding, I believe all have  
either closed a round or are likely to soon. Two have already  
turned down (lowball) acquisition offers.We would have been happy if just one of the eight seemed promising  
by the end of the summer. What's going on? Did some kind of anomaly  
make this summer's applicants especially good? We worry about that,  
but we can't think of one. We'll find out this winter.The whole summer was full of surprises. The best was that the hypothesis we were testing seems to be  
correct. Young hackers can start viable companies. This is good  
news for two reasons: (a) it's an encouraging thought, and (b) it   
means that Y Combinator, which is predicated on the idea, is not  
hosed.AgeMore precisely, the hypothesis was that success in a startup depends  
mainly on how smart and energetic you are, and much less on how old  
you are or how much business experience you have. The results so  
far bear this out. The 2005 summer founders ranged in age from 18   
to 28 (average 23), and there is no correlation between their ages  
and how well they're doing.This should not really be surprising. Bill Gates and Michael Dell   
were both 19 when they started the companies that made them famous.  
Young founders are not a new phenomenon: the trend began as soon  
as computers got cheap enough for college kids to afford them.Another of our hypotheses was that you can start a startup on less  
money than most people think. Other investors were surprised to  
hear the most we gave any group was $20,000. But we knew it was  
possible to start on that little because we started Viaweb on  
$10,000.And so it proved this summer. Three months' funding is enough to  
get into second gear. We had a demo day for potential investors  
ten weeks in, and seven of the eight groups had a prototype ready  
by that time. One, Reddit, had  
already launched, and were able to give a demo of their live site.A researcher who studied the SFP startups said the one thing they   
had in common was that they all worked ridiculously hard. People  
this age are commonly seen as lazy. I think in some cases it's not  
so much that they lack the appetite for work, but that the work  
they're offered is unappetizing.The experience of the SFP suggests that if you let motivated people  
do real work, they work hard, whatever their age. As one of the  
founders said "I'd read that starting a startup consumed your life,   
but I had no idea what that meant until I did it."I'd feel guilty if I were a boss making people work this hard. But  
we're not these people's bosses. They're working on their own  
projects. And what makes them work is not us but their competitors.  
Like good athletes, they don't work hard because the coach yells  
at them, but because they want to win.We have less power than bosses, and yet the founders work harder   
than employees. It seems like a win for everyone. The only catch  
is that we get on average only about 5-7% of the upside, while an  
employer gets nearly all of it. (We're counting on it being 5-7%  
of a much larger number.)As well as working hard, the groups all turned out to be extraordinarily  
responsible. I can't think of a time when one failed to do something  
they'd promised to, even by being late for an appointment. This  
is another lesson the world has yet to learn. One of the founders  
discovered that the hardest part of arranging a meeting with  
executives at a big cell phone carrier was getting a rental company  
to rent him a car, because he was too young.I think the problem here is much the same as with the apparent  
laziness of people this age. They seem lazy because the work they're  
given is pointless, and they act irresponsible because they're not  
given any power. Some of them, anyway. We only have a sample size  
of about twenty, but it seems so far that if you let people in their  
early twenties be their own bosses, they rise to the occasion.MoraleThe summer founders were as a rule very idealistic. They also   
wanted very much to get rich. These qualities might seem incompatible,  
but they're not. These guys want to get rich, but they want to do  
it by changing the world. They wouldn't (well, seven of the eight  
groups wouldn't) be interested in making money by speculating in  
stocks. They want to make something people use.I think this makes them more effective as founders. As hard as   
people will work for money, they'll work harder for a cause. And   
since success in a startup depends so much on motivation, the  
paradoxical result is that the people likely to make the most money  
are those who aren't in it just for the money.The founders of Kiko, for example,   
are working on an Ajax calendar. They want to get rich, but they  
pay more attention to design than they would if that were their  
only motivation. You can tell just by looking at it.I never considered it till this summer, but this might be another  
reason startups run by hackers tend to do better than those run by  
MBAs. Perhaps it's not just that hackers understand technology  
better, but that they're driven by more powerful motivations.  
Microsoft, as I've said before, is a dangerously misleading example.   
Their mean corporate culture only works for monopolies.   
Google is a better model.Considering that the summer founders are the sharks in this ocean,  
we were surprised how frightened most of them were of competitors.  
But now that I think of it, we were just as frightened when we  
started Viaweb. For the first year, our initial reaction to news   
of a competitor was always: we're doomed. Just as a hypochondriac  
magnifies his symptoms till he's convinced he has some terrible  
disease, when you're not used to competitors you magnify them into  
monsters.Here's a handy rule for startups: competitors are rarely as dangerous  
as they seem. Most will self-destruct before you can destroy them.  
And it certainly doesn't matter how many of them there are, any  
more than it matters to the winner of a marathon how many runners  
are behind him."It's a crowded market," I remember one founder saying worriedly."Are you the current leader?" I asked."Yes.""Is anyone able to develop software faster than you?""Probably not.""Well, if you're ahead now, and you're the fastest, then you'll  
stay ahead. What difference does it make how many others there  
are?"Another group was worried when they realized they had to rewrite  
their software from scratch. I told them it would be a bad sign  
if they didn't. The main function of your initial version is to   
be rewritten.That's why we advise groups to ignore issues like scalability,  
internationalization, and heavy-duty security at first. [1] I can  
imagine an advocate of "best practices" saying these ought to be  
considered from the start. And he'd be right, except that they  
interfere with the primary function of software in a startup: to   
be a vehicle for experimenting with its own design. Having to  
retrofit internationalization or scalability is a pain, certainly.   
The only bigger pain is not needing to, because your initial version  
was too big and rigid to evolve into something users wanted.I suspect this is another reason startups beat big companies.  
Startups can be irresponsible and release version 1s that are light  
enough to evolve. In big companies, all the pressure is in the   
direction of over-engineering.What Got LearnedOne thing we were curious about this summer was where these groups   
would need help. That turned out to vary a lot. Some we helped  
with technical advice-- for example, about how to set up an application  
to run on multiple servers. Most we helped with strategy questions,  
like what to patent, and what to charge for and what to give away.  
Nearly all wanted advice about dealing with future investors: how   
much money should they take and what kind of terms should they  
expect?However, all the groups quickly learned how to deal with stuff like  
patents and investors. These problems aren't intrinsically difficult,  
just unfamiliar.It was surprising-- slightly frightening even-- how fast they  
learned. The weekend before the demo day for investors, we had a   
practice session where all the groups gave their presentations.   
They were all terrible. We tried to explain how to make them better,  
but we didn't have much hope. So on demo day I told the assembled  
angels and VCs that these guys were hackers, not MBAs, and so while  
their software was good, we should not expect slick presentations   
from them.The groups then proceeded to give fabulously slick presentations.   
Gone were the mumbling recitations of lists of features. It was  
as if they'd spent the past week at acting school. I still don't   
know how they did it.Perhaps watching each others' presentations helped them see what  
they'd been doing wrong. Just as happens in college, the summer   
founders learned a lot from one another-- maybe more than they  
learned from us. A lot of the problems they face are the same,   
from dealing with investors to hacking Javascript.I don't want to give the impression there were no problems this   
summer. A lot went wrong, as usually happens with startups. One  
group got an "exploding  
term-sheet" from some VCs. Pretty much all the groups who had  
dealings with big companies found that big companies do everything  
infinitely slowly. (This is to be expected. If big companies  
weren't incapable, there would be no room for startups to exist.)  
And of course there were the usual nightmares associated with  
servers. In short, the disasters this summer were just the usual childhood  
diseases. Some of this summer's eight startups will   
probably die eventually; it would be extraordinary if all eight   
succeeded. But what kills them will not be dramatic, external   
threats, but a mundane, internal one: not getting enough done.So far, though, the news is all good. In fact, we were surprised  
how much fun the summer was for us. The main reason was how much  
we liked the founders. They're so earnest and hard-working. They  
seem to like us too. And this illustrates another advantage of  
investing over hiring: our relationship with them is way better   
than it would be between a boss and an employee. Y Combinator ends  
up being more like an older brother than a parent.I was surprised how much time I spent making introductions.  
Fortunately I discovered that when a startup needed to talk to  
someone, I could usually get to the right person by at most one  
hop. I remember wondering, how did my friends get to be so eminent?  
and a second later realizing: shit, I'm forty.Another surprise was that the three-month batch format,  
which we were forced into by the constraints of the summer, turned  
out to be an advantage. When we started Y Combinator, we planned  
to invest the way other venture firms do: as proposals came in,   
we'd evaluate them and decide yes or no. The SFP  
was just an experiment to get things started. But it worked so  
well that we plan to do   
all   
our investing this way, one cycle in  
the summer and one in winter. It's more efficient for us, and  
better for the startups too.Several groups said our weekly dinners saved them from a common  
problem afflicting startups: working so hard that one has no social  
life. (I remember that part all too well.) This way, they were  
guaranteed a social event at least once a week.IndependenceI've heard Y Combinator described as an "incubator." Actually we're  
the opposite: incubators exert more control than ordinary VCs, and  
we make a point of exerting less. Among other things, incubators  
usually make you work in their office-- that's where the   
word "incubator" comes from. That seems the wrong model. If  
investors get too involved, they smother one of the most powerful   
forces in a startup: the feeling that it's your own company.Incubators were conspicuous failures during the Bubble. There's   
still debate about whether this was because of the Bubble, or because  
they're a bad idea. My vote is they're a bad idea. I think they   
fail because they select for the wrong people. When we were starting  
a startup, we would never have taken funding from an "incubator."  
We can find office space, thanks; just give us the money. And   
people with that attitude are the ones likely to succeed in startups.Indeed, one quality all the founders shared this summer was a spirit  
of independence. I've been wondering about that. Are some people  
just a lot more independent than others, or would everyone be this  
way if they were allowed to?As with most nature/nurture questions, the answer is probably: some  
of each. But my main conclusion from the summer is that there's  
more environment in the mix than most people realize. I could see  
that from how the founders' attitudes changed during the   
summer. Most were emerging from twenty or so years of being told  
what to do. They seemed a little surprised at having total freedom.  
But they grew into it really quickly; some of these guys now seem  
about four inches taller (metaphorically) than they did at the  
beginning of the summer.When we asked the summer founders what surprised them most about  
starting a company, one said "the most shocking thing is that it   
worked."It will take more experience to know for sure, but my guess is that  
a lot of hackers could do this-- that if you put people in a position  
of independence, they develop the qualities they need. Throw them  
off a cliff, and most will find on the way down that they have   
wings.The reason this is news to anyone is that the same forces work in  
the other direction too. Most hackers are   
employees, and this molds  
you into someone to whom starting a startup seems impossible as  
surely as starting a startup molds you into someone who can handle  
it.If I'm right, "hacker" will mean something different in twenty years  
than it does now. Increasingly it will mean the people who run the  
company. Y Combinator is just accelerating a process that would  
have happened anyway. Power is shifting from the people who deal  
with money to the people who create technology, and if our experience  
this summer is any guide, this will be a good thing.Notes[1] By heavy-duty security I mean efforts to protect against truly  
determined attackers.The image  
shows us, the 2005 summer founders, and Smartleaf  
co-founders Mark Nitzberg and Olin Shivers at the 30-foot table   
Kate Courteau designed for us. Photo by Alex Lewin.Thanks to Sarah Harlin, Steve Huffman, Jessica Livingston,  
Zak Stone, and Aaron Swartz for reading drafts of this.  
Romanian TranslationJapanese Translation

# Inequality and Risk

August 2005(This essay is derived from a talk at Defcon 2005.)Suppose you wanted to get rid of economic inequality. There are  
two ways to do it: give money to the poor, or take it away from the   
rich. But they amount to the same thing, because if you want to  
give money to the poor, you have to get it from somewhere. You  
can't get it from the poor, or they just end up where they started.  
You have to get it from the rich.There is of course a way to make the poor richer without simply  
shifting money from the rich. You could help the poor become more  
productive — for example, by improving access to education. Instead  
of taking money from engineers and giving it to checkout clerks,  
you could enable people who would have become checkout clerks to  
become engineers.This is an excellent strategy for making the poor richer. But the  
evidence of the last 200 years shows that it doesn't reduce economic  
inequality, because it makes the rich richer too. If there  
are more engineers, then there are more opportunities to hire them  
and to sell them things. Henry Ford couldn't have made a fortune   
building cars in a society in which most people were still subsistence  
farmers; he would have had neither workers nor customers.If you want to reduce economic inequality instead of just improving  
the overall standard of living, it's not enough just to raise up   
the poor. What if one of your newly minted engineers gets ambitious  
and goes on to become another Bill Gates? Economic inequality will  
be as bad as ever. If you actually want to compress the gap between  
rich and poor, you have to push down on the top as well as pushing  
up on the bottom.How do you push down on the top? You could try to decrease the  
productivity of the people who make the most money: make the best   
surgeons operate with their left hands, force popular actors to  
overeat, and so on. But this approach is hard to implement. The  
only practical solution is to let people do the best work they can,  
and then (either by taxation or by limiting what they can charge)  
to confiscate whatever you deem to be surplus.So let's be clear what reducing economic inequality means. It is   
identical with taking money from the rich.When you transform a mathematical expression into another form, you  
often notice new things. So it is in this case. Taking money from  
the rich turns out to have consequences one might not foresee when  
one phrases the same idea in terms of "reducing inequality."The problem is, risk and reward have to be proportionate. A bet   
with only a 10% chance of winning has to pay more than one with a  
50% chance of winning, or no one will take it. So if you lop off  
the top of the possible rewards, you thereby decrease people's  
willingness to take risks.Transposing into our original expression, we get: decreasing economic  
inequality means decreasing the risk people are willing to take.There are whole classes of risks that are no longer worth taking   
if the maximum return is decreased. One reason high tax rates are  
disastrous is that this class of risks includes starting new  
companies.InvestorsStartups are intrinsically risky. A startup  
is like a small boat  
in the open sea. One big wave and you're sunk. A competing product,  
a downturn in the economy, a delay in getting funding or regulatory  
approval, a patent suit, changing technical standards, the departure  
of a key employee, the loss of a big account — any one of these can  
destroy you overnight. It seems only about 1 in 10 startups succeeds.  
[1]Our startup paid its first round of outside investors 36x. Which   
meant, with current US tax rates, that it made sense to invest in  
us if we had better than a 1 in 24 chance of succeeding. That   
sounds about right. That's probably roughly how we looked when we  
were a couple of nerds with no business experience operating out  
of an apartment.If that kind of risk doesn't pay, venture investing, as we know it,  
doesn't happen.That might be ok if there were other sources of capital for new  
companies. Why not just have the government, or some large  
almost-government organization like Fannie Mae, do the venture  
investing instead of private funds?I'll tell you why that wouldn't work. Because then you're asking  
government or almost-government employees to do the one thing they   
are least able to do: take risks.As anyone who has worked for the government knows, the important  
thing is not to make the right choices, but to make choices that  
can be justified later if they fail. If there is a safe option,  
that's the one a bureaucrat will choose. But that is exactly the   
wrong way to do venture investing. The nature of the business means  
that you want to make terribly risky choices, if the upside looks  
good enough.VCs are currently   
paid in a way that makes them   
focus on the upside:  
they get a percentage of the fund's gains. And that helps overcome  
their understandable fear of investing in a company run by nerds  
who look like (and perhaps are) college students.If VCs weren't allowed to get rich, they'd behave like bureaucrats.  
Without hope of gain, they'd have only fear of loss. And so they'd  
make the wrong choices. They'd turn down the nerds in favor of the  
smooth-talking MBA in a suit, because that investment would be  
easier to justify later if it failed.FoundersBut even if you could somehow redesign venture funding to work  
without allowing VCs to become rich, there's another kind of investor  
you simply cannot replace: the startups' founders and early employees.What they invest is their time and ideas. But these are equivalent  
to money; the proof is that investors are willing (if forced) to  
treat them as interchangeable, granting the same status to "sweat   
equity" and the equity they've purchased with cash.The fact that you're investing time doesn't change the relationship  
between risk and reward. If you're going to invest your time in  
something with a small chance of succeeding, you'll only do it if  
there is a proportionately large payoff.  
[2]  
If large payoffs aren't allowed, you may as well play it safe.Like many startup founders, I did it to get rich. But not because   
I wanted to buy expensive things. What I wanted was security. I   
wanted to make enough money that I didn't have to worry about money.  
If I'd been forbidden to make enough from a startup to do this, I  
would have sought security by some other means: for example, by  
going to work for a big, stable organization from which it would  
be hard to get fired. Instead of busting my ass in a startup, I   
would have tried to get a nice, low-stress job at a big research   
lab, or tenure at a university.That's what everyone does in societies where risk isn't rewarded.  
If you can't ensure your own security, the next best thing is to  
make a nest for yourself in some large organization where your  
status depends mostly on seniority.  
[3]Even if we could somehow replace investors, I don't see how we could  
replace founders. Investors mainly contribute money, which in  
principle is the same no matter what the source. But the founders  
contribute ideas. You can't replace those.Let's rehearse the chain of argument so far. I'm heading for a   
conclusion to which many readers will have to be dragged kicking   
and screaming, so I've tried to make each link unbreakable. Decreasing  
economic inequality means taking money from the rich. Since risk  
and reward are equivalent, decreasing potential rewards automatically  
decreases people's appetite for risk. Startups are intrinsically  
risky. Without the prospect of rewards proportionate to the risk,  
founders will not invest their time in a startup. Founders are  
irreplaceable. So eliminating economic inequality means eliminating  
startups.Economic inequality is not just a consequence of startups.  
It's the engine that drives them, in the same way a fall of water   
drives a water mill. People start startups in the hope of becoming  
much richer than they were before. And if your society tries to  
prevent anyone from being much richer than anyone else, it will  
also prevent one person from being much richer at t2 than t1.GrowthThis argument applies proportionately. It's not just that if you   
eliminate economic inequality, you get no startups. To the extent   
you reduce economic inequality, you decrease the number of startups.  
[4]  
Increase taxes, and willingness to take risks decreases in  
proportion.And that seems bad for everyone. New technology and new jobs both  
come disproportionately from new companies. Indeed, if you don't  
have startups, pretty soon you won't have established companies  
either, just as, if you stop having kids, pretty soon you won't  
have any adults.It sounds benevolent to say we ought to reduce economic inequality.   
When you phrase it that way, who can argue with you? Inequality  
has to be bad, right? It sounds a good deal less benevolent to say  
we ought to reduce the rate at which new companies are founded.  
And yet the one implies the other.Indeed, it may be that reducing investors' appetite for risk doesn't  
merely kill off larval startups, but kills off the most promising  
ones especially. Startups yield faster growth at greater risk than  
established companies. Does this trend also hold among startups?  
That is, are the riskiest startups the ones that generate most  
growth if they succeed? I suspect the answer is yes. And that's   
a chilling thought, because it means that if you cut investors'  
appetite for risk, the most beneficial startups are the first to   
go.Not all rich people got that way from startups, of course. What  
if we let people get rich by starting startups, but taxed away all  
other surplus wealth? Wouldn't that at least decrease inequality?Less than you might think. If you made it so that people could  
only get rich by starting startups, people who wanted to get rich  
would all start startups. And that might be a great thing. But I  
don't think it would have much effect on the distribution of wealth.  
People who want to get rich will do whatever they have to. If  
startups are the only way to do it, you'll just get far more people  
starting startups. (If you write the laws very carefully, that is.  
More likely, you'll just get a lot of people doing things that can  
be made to look on paper like startups.)If we're determined to eliminate economic inequality, there is still  
one way out: we could say that we're willing to go ahead and do  
without startups. What would happen if we did?At a minimum, we'd have to accept lower rates of technological   
growth. If you believe that large, established companies could   
somehow be made to develop new technology as fast as startups, the  
ball is in your court to explain how. (If you can come up with a   
remotely plausible story, you can make a fortune writing business  
books and consulting for large companies.)  
[5]Ok, so we get slower growth. Is that so bad? Well, one reason  
it's bad in practice is that other countries might not agree to  
slow down with us. If you're content to develop new technologies  
at a slower rate than the rest of the world, what happens is that  
you don't invent anything at all. Anything you might discover has  
already been invented elsewhere. And the only thing you can offer   
in return is raw materials and cheap labor. Once you sink that  
low, other countries can do whatever they like with you: install  
puppet governments, siphon off your best workers, use your women  
as prostitutes, dump their toxic waste on your territory — all the  
things we do to poor countries now. The only defense is to isolate  
yourself, as communist countries did in the twentieth century. But  
the problem then is, you have to become a police state to enforce   
it.  
Wealth and PowerI realize startups are not the main target of those who want to  
eliminate economic inequality. What they really dislike is the  
sort of wealth that becomes self-perpetuating through an alliance  
with power. For example, construction firms that fund politicians'  
campaigns in return for government contracts, or rich parents who   
get their children into good colleges by sending them to expensive  
schools designed for that purpose. But if you try to attack this type of wealth  
through economic policy, it's hard to hit without destroying  
startups as collateral damage.The problem here is not wealth, but corruption. So why not go after  
corruption?We don't need to prevent people from being rich if we can prevent  
wealth from translating into power. And there has been progress  
on that front. Before he died of drink in 1925, Commodore Vanderbilt's  
wastrel grandson Reggie ran down pedestrians on five separate   
occasions, killing two of them. By 1969, when Ted Kennedy drove   
off the bridge at Chappaquiddick, the limit seemed to be down to   
one. Today it may well be zero. But what's changed is not variation  
in wealth. What's changed is the ability to translate wealth into  
power.How do you break the connection between wealth and power? Demand   
transparency. Watch closely how power is exercised, and demand an  
account of how decisions are made. Why aren't all police interrogations  
videotaped? Why did 36% of Princeton's class of 2007 come from  
prep schools, when only 1.7% of American kids attend them? Why did  
the US really invade Iraq? Why don't government officials disclose  
more about their finances, and why only during their term of office?A friend of mine who knows a lot about computer security says the  
single most important step is to log everything. Back when he was  
a kid trying to break into computers, what worried him most was the  
idea of leaving a trail. He was more inconvenienced by the need   
to avoid that than by any obstacle deliberately put in his path.Like all illicit connections, the connection between wealth and   
power flourishes in secret. Expose all transactions, and you will  
greatly reduce it. Log everything. That's a strategy that already  
seems to be working, and it doesn't have the side effect of making  
your whole country poor.I don't think many people realize there is a connection between  
economic inequality and risk. I didn't fully grasp it till recently.  
I'd known for years of course that if one didn't score in a startup,  
the other alternative was to get a cozy, tenured research job. But  
I didn't understand the equation governing my behavior. Likewise,   
it's obvious empirically that a country that doesn't let people get  
rich is headed for disaster, whether it's Diocletian's Rome or   
Harold Wilson's Britain. But I did not till recently understand  
the role risk played.If you try to attack wealth, you end up nailing risk as well, and   
with it growth. If we want a fairer world, I think we're better   
off attacking one step downstream, where wealth turns into power.Notes  
[1]  
Success here is defined from the initial investors' point of  
view: either an IPO, or an acquisition for more than the valuation  
at the last round of funding. The conventional 1 in 10 success rate  
is suspiciously neat, but conversations with VCs suggest it's roughly  
correct for startups overall. Top VC firms expect to do better.[2]  
I'm not claiming founders sit down and calculate the expected   
after-tax return from a startup. They're motivated by examples of  
other people who did it. And those examples do reflect after-tax returns.[3]  
Conjecture: The variation in wealth in a (non-corrupt)   
country or organization  
will be inversely proportional to the prevalence of systems of  
seniority. So if you suppress variation in wealth, seniority will  
become correspondingly more important. So far, I know of no  
counterexamples, though in very corrupt countries you may get   
both simultaneously. (Thanks to Daniel Sobral for pointing  
this out.)[4]  
In a country with a truly feudal economy, you might be able to  
redistribute wealth successfully, because there are no startups to  
kill.[5]  
The speed at which startups develop new techology is the other   
reason they pay so well. As I explained in "How to Make Wealth", what you do in a startup is compress a  
lifetime's worth of work into a few years. It seems as  
dumb to discourage that as to discourage risk-taking.  
Thanks to Chris Anderson, Trevor Blackwell, Dan Giffin,  
Jessica Livingston, and Evan Williams for reading drafts of this  
essay, and to Langley Steinert, Sangam Pant, and Mike Moritz for  
information about venture investing.Romanian TranslationDutch TranslationTraditional Chinese TranslationJapanese TranslationHebrew Translation  
  
If you liked this, you may also like  
Hackers & Painters.

# After the Ladder

August 2005Thirty years ago, one was supposed to work one's way up the corporate  
ladder. That's less the rule now. Our generation wants to get  
paid up front. Instead of developing a product for some big company  
in the expectation of getting job security in return, we develop  
the product ourselves, in a startup, and sell it to the big company.  
At the very least we want options.Among other things, this shift has created the appearance of a rapid  
increase in economic inequality. But really the two cases are not  
as different as they look in economic statistics.Economic statistics are misleading because they ignore the value  
of safe jobs. An easy job from which one can't be fired is worth  
money; exchanging the two is one of the commonest forms of  
corruption. A sinecure is, in effect, an annuity. Except sinecures  
don't appear in economic statistics. If they did, it would be clear  
that in practice socialist countries have nontrivial disparities  
of wealth, because they usually have a class of powerful bureaucrats  
who are paid mostly by seniority and can never be fired.While not a sinecure, a position on the corporate ladder was genuinely  
valuable, because big companies tried not to fire people, and  
promoted from within based largely on seniority. A position on the  
corporate ladder had a value analogous to the "goodwill" that is a  
very real element in the valuation of companies. It meant one could  
expect future high paying jobs.One of main causes of the decay of the corporate ladder is the trend  
for takeovers that began in the 1980s. Why waste your time climbing  
a ladder that might disappear before you reach the top?And, by no coincidence, the corporate ladder was one of the reasons  
the early corporate raiders were so successful. It's not only  
economic statistics that ignore the value of safe jobs. Corporate  
balance sheets do too. One reason it was profitable to carve up 1980s  
companies and sell them for parts was that they hadn't formally  
acknowledged their implicit debt to employees who had done good  
work and expected to be rewarded with high-paying executive jobs  
when their time came.In the movie Wall Street, Gordon Gekko  
ridicules a company overloaded with vice presidents. But the company  
may not be as corrupt as it seems; those VPs' cushy jobs were  
probably payment for work done earlier.I like the new model better. For one thing, it seems a bad plan  
to treat jobs as rewards. Plenty of good engineers got made into  
bad managers that way. And the old system meant people had to deal  
with a lot more corporate politics, in order to protect the work  
they'd invested in a position on the ladder.The big disadvantage of the new system is that it involves more risk. If you develop ideas in a startup instead  
of within a big company, any number of random factors could sink  
you before you can finish. But maybe the older generation would  
laugh at me for saying that the way we do things is riskier. After  
all, projects within big companies were always getting cancelled  
as a result of arbitrary decisions from higher up. My father's  
entire industry (breeder reactors) disappeared that way.For better or worse, the idea of the corporate ladder is probably  
gone for good. The new model seems more liquid, and more efficient.  
But it is less of a change, financially, than one might think. Our  
fathers weren't that stupid.Romanian TranslationJapanese Translation

# What Business Can Learn from Open Source

August 2005(This essay is derived from a talk at Oscon 2005.)Lately companies have been paying more attention to open source.  
Ten years ago there seemed a real danger Microsoft would extend its  
monopoly to servers. It seems safe to say now that open source has  
prevented that. A recent survey found 52% of companies are replacing  
Windows servers with Linux servers.  
[1]More significant, I think, is which 52% they are. At this point,  
anyone proposing to run Windows on servers should be prepared to  
explain what they know about servers that Google, Yahoo, and Amazon  
don't.But the biggest thing business has to learn from open source is not  
about Linux or Firefox, but about the forces that produced them.  
Ultimately these will affect a lot more than what software you use.We may be able to get a fix on these underlying forces by triangulating  
from open source and blogging. As you've probably noticed, they  
have a lot in common.Like open source, blogging is something people do themselves, for  
free, because they enjoy it. Like open source hackers, bloggers  
compete with people working for money, and often win. The method  
of ensuring quality is also the same: Darwinian. Companies ensure  
quality through rules to prevent employees from screwing up. But  
you don't need that when the audience can communicate with one  
another. People just produce whatever they want; the good stuff  
spreads, and the bad gets ignored. And in both cases, feedback  
from the audience improves the best work.Another thing blogging and open source have in common is the Web.  
People have always been willing to do great work  
for free, but before the Web it was harder to reach an audience  
or collaborate on projects.AmateursI think the most important of the new principles business has to learn is  
that people work a lot harder on stuff they like. Well, that's  
news to no one. So how can I claim business has to learn it? When  
I say business doesn't know this, I mean the structure of business  
doesn't reflect it.Business still reflects an older model, exemplified by the French  
word for working: travailler. It has an English cousin, travail,  
and what it means is torture.  
[2]This turns out not to be the last word on work, however.  
As societies get richer, they learn something about  
work that's a lot like what they learn about diet. We know now that the  
healthiest diet is the one our peasant ancestors were forced to  
eat because they were poor. Like rich food, idleness  
only seems desirable when you don't get enough of it. I think we were  
designed to work, just as we were designed to eat a certain amount  
of fiber, and we feel bad if we don't.There's a name for people who work for the love of it: amateurs.  
The word now has such bad connotations that we forget its etymology,  
though it's staring us in the face. "Amateur" was originally rather  
a complimentary word. But the thing to be in the twentieth century  
was professional, which amateurs, by definition, are not.That's why the business world was so surprised by one lesson from  
open source: that people working for love often surpass those working  
for money. Users don't switch from Explorer to Firefox because  
they want to hack the source. They switch because it's a better  
browser.It's not that Microsoft isn't trying. They know controlling the  
browser is one of the keys to retaining their monopoly. The problem  
is the same they face in operating systems: they can't pay people  
enough to build something better than a group of inspired hackers  
will build for free.I suspect professionalism was always overrated-- not just in the  
literal sense of working for money, but also connotations like  
formality and detachment. Inconceivable as it would have seemed  
in, say, 1970, I think professionalism was largely a fashion,  
driven by conditions that happened to exist in the twentieth century.One of the most powerful of those was the existence of "channels." Revealingly,  
the same term was used for both products and information: there  
were distribution channels, and TV and radio channels.It was the narrowness of such channels that made professionals  
seem so superior to amateurs. There were only a few jobs as  
professional journalists, for example, so competition ensured the  
average journalist was fairly good. Whereas anyone can express  
opinions about current events in a bar. And so the average person  
expressing his opinions in a bar sounds like an idiot compared to  
a journalist writing about the subject.On the Web, the barrier for publishing your ideas is even lower.  
You don't have to buy a drink, and they even let kids in.  
Millions of people are publishing online, and the average  
level of what they're writing, as you might expect, is not very  
good. This has led some in the media to conclude that blogs don't  
present much of a threat-- that blogs are just a fad.Actually, the fad is the word "blog," at least the way the print  
media now use it. What they mean by "blogger" is not someone who  
publishes in a weblog format, but anyone who publishes online.  
That's going to become a problem as the Web becomes the default  
medium for publication. So I'd  
like to suggest an alternative word for someone who publishes online.  
How about "writer?"Those in the print media who dismiss the writing online because of  
its low average quality are missing an important point: no one reads  
the average blog. In the old world of channels, it meant something  
to talk about average quality, because that's what you were getting  
whether you liked it or not.  
But now you can read any writer you want. So the average  
quality of writing online isn't what the print media are competing  
against. They're competing against the best writing online. And,   
like Microsoft, they're losing.I know that from my own experience as a reader. Though most print  
publications are online, I probably  
read two or three articles on individual people's sites for every  
one I read on the site of a newspaper or magazine.And when I read, say, New York Times stories, I never reach  
them through the Times front page. Most I find through aggregators  
like Google News or Slashdot or Delicious. Aggregators show how  
much better   
you can do than the channel. The New York Times front page is  
a list of articles written by people who work for the New York Times. Delicious  
is a list of articles that are interesting. And it's only now that  
you can see the two side by side that you notice how little overlap there is.Most articles in the print media are boring. For example, the  
president notices that a majority of voters now think invading Iraq  
was a mistake, so he makes an address to the nation to drum up  
support. Where is the man bites dog in that? I didn't hear the  
speech, but I could probably tell you exactly what he said. A  
speech like that is, in the most literal sense, not news: there is  
nothing new in it.  
[3]Nor is there anything new, except the names and places, in most  
"news" about things going wrong. A child is abducted; there's a  
tornado; a ferry sinks; someone gets bitten by a shark; a small  
plane crashes. And what do you learn about the world from these  
stories? Absolutely nothing. They're outlying data points; what  
makes them gripping also makes them irrelevant.As in software, when professionals produce such crap, it's not  
surprising if amateurs can do better. Live by the channel, die by  
the channel: if you depend on an oligopoly, you sink into bad habits  
that are hard to overcome when you suddenly get competition.  
[4]WorkplacesAnother thing blogs and open source software have in common is that  
they're often made by people working at home. That may not seem  
surprising. But it should be. It's the architectural equivalent  
of a home-made aircraft shooting down an F-18. Companies spend  
millions to build office buildings for a single purpose: to be a  
place to work. And yet people working in their own homes,  
which aren't even designed to be workplaces, end up  
being more productive.This proves something a lot of us have suspected. The average  
office is a miserable place to get work done. And a lot of what  
makes offices bad are the very qualities we associate with  
professionalism. The sterility  
of offices is supposed to suggest efficiency. But suggesting  
efficiency is a different thing from actually being efficient.The atmosphere of the average workplace is to productivity what  
flames painted on the side of a car are to speed. And it's not  
just the way offices look that's bleak. The way people act is just  
as bad.Things are different in a startup. Often as not a startup begins  
in an apartment. Instead of matching beige cubicles  
they have an assortment of furniture they bought used. They work  
odd hours, wearing the most casual of clothing. They look at  
whatever they want online without worrying whether it's "work safe."  
The cheery, bland language of the office is replaced by wicked humor. And  
you know what? The company at this stage is probably the most  
productive it's ever going to be.Maybe it's not a coincidence. Maybe some aspects of professionalism  
are actually a net lose.To me the most demoralizing aspect of the traditional office is  
that you're supposed to be there at certain times. There are usually  
a few people in a company who really have to, but the reason most  
employees work fixed hours is that the company can't measure their  
productivity.The basic idea behind office hours is that if you can't make people  
work, you can at least prevent them from having fun. If employees  
have to be in the building a certain number of hours a day, and are  
forbidden to do non-work things while there, then they must be  
working. In theory. In practice they spend a lot of their time  
in a no-man's land, where they're neither working nor having fun.If you could measure how much work people did, many companies  
wouldn't need any fixed workday. You could just say: this is what  
you have to do. Do it whenever you like, wherever you like. If  
your work requires you to talk to other people in the company, then  
you may need to be here a certain amount. Otherwise we don't care.That may seem utopian, but it's what we told people who came to  
work for our company. There were no fixed office hours. I never  
showed up before 11 in the morning. But we weren't saying this to  
be benevolent. We were saying: if you work here we expect you to  
get a lot done. Don't try to fool us just by being here a lot.The problem with the facetime model is not just that it's demoralizing, but  
that the people pretending to work interrupt  
the ones actually working. I'm convinced the facetime model  
is the main reason large organizations have so many meetings.  
Per capita, large organizations accomplish very little.  
And yet all those people have to be on site at least eight hours a  
day. When so much time goes in one end and so little achievement  
comes out the other, something has to give. And meetings are the  
main mechanism for taking up the slack.For one year I worked at a regular nine to five job, and I remember  
well the strange, cozy feeling that comes over one during meetings.  
I was very aware, because of the novelty, that I was being paid for  
programming. It seemed just amazing, as if there was a machine on  
my desk that spat out a dollar bill every two minutes no matter  
what I did. Even while I was in the bathroom! But because the  
imaginary machine was always running, I felt I always ought to be  
working. And so meetings felt wonderfully relaxing. They  
counted as work, just like programming, but they were so much easier.  
All you had to do was sit and look attentive.Meetings are like an opiate with a network effect. So is email,  
on a smaller scale. And in addition to the direct cost in time,  
there's the cost in fragmentation-- breaking people's day up into  
bits too small to be useful.You can see how dependent you've become on something by removing  
it suddenly. So for big companies I propose the following experiment.  
Set aside one day where meetings are forbidden-- where everyone has to  
sit at their desk all day and work without interruption on  
things they can do without talking to anyone else.  
Some amount of communication is necessary in most jobs, but I'm  
sure many employees could find eight hours worth of stuff they could  
do by themselves. You could call it "Work Day."The other problem with pretend work  
is that it often looks better than real work. When I'm  
writing or hacking I spend as much time just thinking as I do  
actually typing. Half the time I'm sitting drinking a cup of tea,  
or walking around the neighborhood. This is a critical phase--  
this is where ideas come from-- and yet I'd feel guilty doing this  
in most offices, with everyone else looking busy.It's hard to see how bad some practice is till you have something  
to compare it to. And that's one reason open source, and even blogging  
in some cases, are so important. They show us what real work looks like.We're funding eight new startups at the moment. A friend asked  
what they were doing for office space, and seemed surprised when I  
said we expected them to work out of whatever apartments they found  
to live in. But we didn't propose that to save money. We did it  
because we want their software to be good. Working in crappy  
informal spaces is one of the things startups do right without  
realizing it. As soon as you get into an office, work and life  
start to drift apart.That is one of the key tenets of professionalism. Work and life  
are supposed to be separate. But that part, I'm convinced, is a   
mistake.Bottom-UpThe third big lesson we can learn from open source and  
blogging is that ideas can bubble up from the bottom, instead of  
flowing down from the top. Open source and blogging both work  
bottom-up: people make what they want, and the best stuff  
prevails.Does this sound familiar? It's the principle of a market economy.  
Ironically, though open source and blogs are done for free, those  
worlds resemble market economies, while most companies, for all  
their talk about the value of free markets, are run internally like  
communist states.There are two forces that together steer design: ideas about  
what to do next, and the enforcement of quality. In the channel  
era, both flowed down from the top. For example, newspaper editors  
assigned stories to reporters, then edited what they wrote.Open source and blogging show us things don't have to work that  
way. Ideas and even the enforcement of quality can flow bottom-up.  
And in both cases the results are not merely acceptable, but better.  
For example, open source software is more reliable precisely because  
it's open source; anyone can find mistakes.The same happens with writing. As we got close to publication, I  
found I was very worried about the essays in   
Hackers  
& Painters  
that hadn't been online. Once an essay has had a couple thousand  
page views I feel reasonably confident about it. But these had had   
literally orders of magnitude less scrutiny. It felt like  
releasing software without testing it.That's what all publishing used to be like. If  
you got ten people to read a manuscript, you were lucky. But I'd  
become so used to publishing online that the old method now seemed  
alarmingly unreliable, like navigating by dead reckoning once you'd  
gotten used to a GPS.The other thing I like about publishing online is that you can write  
what you want and publish when you want. Earlier this year I wrote  
something that seemed suitable for a magazine, so  
I sent it to an editor I know.  
As I was waiting to hear back, I found to my surprise that I was  
hoping they'd reject it. Then I could put it online right away.  
If they accepted it, it wouldn't be read by anyone for months, and  
in the meantime I'd have to fight word-by-word to save it from being  
mangled by some twenty five year old copy editor.  
[5]Many employees would like to build great things for the companies  
they work for, but more often than not management won't let them.  
How many of us have heard stories of employees going to management  
and saying, please let us build this thing to make money for you--  
and the company saying no? The most famous example is probably Steve Wozniak,  
who originally wanted to build microcomputers for his then-employer, HP.  
And they turned him down. On the blunderometer, this episode ranks  
with IBM accepting a non-exclusive license for DOS. But I think this  
happens all the time. We just don't hear about it usually,  
because to prove yourself right you have to quit  
and start your own company, like Wozniak did.StartupsSo these, I think, are the three big lessons open source and blogging  
have to teach business: (1) that people work harder on stuff they  
like, (2) that the standard office environment is very unproductive,  
and (3) that bottom-up often works better than top-down.I can imagine managers at this point saying: what is this guy talking  
about? What good does it do me to know that my programmers  
would be more productive  
working at home on their own projects? I need their asses in here  
working on version 3.2 of our software, or we're never going to  
make the release date.And it's true, the benefit that specific manager could derive from  
the forces I've described is near zero. When I say business can  
learn from open source, I don't mean any specific business can. I  
mean business can learn about new conditions the same way a gene  
pool does. I'm not claiming companies can get smarter, just that  
dumb ones will die.So what will business look like when it has assimilated the lessons  
of open source and blogging? I think the big obstacle preventing  
us from seeing the future of business is the assumption that people  
working for you have to be employees. But think about what's going  
on underneath: the company has some money, and they pay it to the  
employee in the hope that he'll make something worth more than they  
paid him. Well, there are other ways to arrange that relationship.  
Instead of paying the guy money as a salary, why not give it to him  
as investment? Then instead of coming to your office to work on  
your projects, he can work wherever he wants on projects of his own.Because few of us know any alternative, we have no idea how much  
better we could do than the traditional employer-employee relationship.  
Such customs evolve with glacial slowness. Our   
employer-employee relationship still retains a big chunk of  
master-servant DNA.  
[6]I dislike being on either end of it.  
I'll work my ass off for a customer, but I resent being told what  
to do by a boss. And being a boss is also horribly frustrating;   
half the time it's easier just to do stuff yourself than to get  
someone else to do it for you.  
I'd rather do almost anything than give or receive a  
performance review.On top of its unpromising origins, employment  
has accumulated a lot of cruft over the years. The list of what  
you can't ask in job interviews is now so long that for convenience  
I assume it's infinite. Within the  
office you now have to walk on eggshells lest anyone   
say or do  
something that makes the company prey to a lawsuit. And God help  
you if you fire anyone.Nothing shows more clearly that employment is not an ordinary economic  
relationship than companies being sued for firing people. In any  
purely economic relationship you're free to do what you want. If  
you want to stop buying steel pipe from one supplier and start  
buying it from another, you don't have to explain why. No one can  
accuse you of unjustly switching pipe suppliers. Justice implies  
some kind of paternal obligation that isn't there in  
transactions between equals.Most of the legal restrictions on employers are intended to protect  
employees. But you can't have action without an equal and opposite  
reaction. You can't expect employers to have some kind of paternal  
responsibility toward employees without putting employees in the  
position of children. And that seems a bad road to go down.Next time you're in a moderately large city, drop by the main post  
office and watch the body language of the people working there.  
They have the same sullen resentment as children made to do  
something they don't want to. Their union has exacted pay  
increases and work restrictions that would have been the envy of  
previous generations of postal workers, and yet they don't seem any  
happier for it. It's demoralizing  
to be on the receiving end of a paternalistic relationship, no  
matter how cozy the terms. Just ask any teenager.I see the disadvantages of the employer-employee relationship because  
I've been on both sides of a better one: the investor-founder relationship.  
I wouldn't claim it's painless. When I was running a  
startup, the thought of our investors used to keep me up at night.  
And now that I'm an investor,  
the thought of our startups keeps me  
up at night. All the pain of whatever problem you're trying to  
solve is still there.  
But the pain hurts less when it isn't  
mixed with resentment.I had the misfortune to participate in what amounted to a controlled  
experiment to prove that. After Yahoo bought our startup I went  
to work for them. I was doing exactly the same work, except with  
bosses. And to my horror I started acting like a child. The   
situation pushed buttons I'd forgotten  
I had.The big advantage of investment over employment, as the examples of open  
source and blogging suggest, is that people working on projects of  
their own are enormously more productive. And a  
startup is a project  
of one's own in two senses, both of them important: it's creatively  
one's own, and also economically ones's own.Google is a rare example of a big company in tune with the forces  
I've described. They've tried hard to make their offices less sterile  
than the usual cube farm. They give employees who do great work  
large grants of stock to simulate the rewards of a startup. They  
even let hackers spend 20% of their time on their own projects.Why not let people spend 100% of their time on their own projects,  
and instead of trying to approximate the value of what they create,  
give them the actual market value? Impossible? That is in fact  
what venture capitalists do.So am I claiming that no one is going to be an employee anymore--  
that everyone should go and start a startup? Of course not.  
But more people could do it than do it now.  
At the moment, even the smartest students leave school thinking  
they have to get a job.   
Actually what they need to do is make  
something valuable. A job is one way to do that, but the more  
ambitious ones will ordinarily be better off taking money from an  
investor than an employer.Hackers tend to think business is for MBAs. But business  
administration is not what you're doing in a startup. What you're  
doing is business creation. And the first phase of that  
is mostly product creation-- that is, hacking. That's the  
hard part. It's a lot harder to create something people love than  
to take something people love and figure out how to make money from  
it.Another thing that keeps people away from starting startups is the  
risk. Someone with kids and a mortgage should think twice before  
doing it. But most young hackers have neither.And as the example of open source and blogging suggests, you'll  
enjoy it more, even if you fail. You'll be working on your own  
thing, instead of going to some office and doing what you're told.  
There may be more pain in your own company, but it won't hurt as  
much.That may be the greatest effect, in the long run, of the forces   
underlying open source and blogging: finally ditching the old  
paternalistic employer-employee relationship, and replacing it with  
a purely economic one, between equals.  
Notes[1]  
Survey by Forrester Research reported in the cover story of  
Business Week, 31 Jan 2005. Apparently someone believed you have to  
replace the actual server in order to switch the operating system.[2]  
It derives from the late Latin tripalium,  
a torture device so called because it consisted of three stakes.  
I don't know how the stakes were used. "Travel" has the same root.[3]  
It would be much bigger news, in that sense, if the president  
faced unscripted questions by giving a press conference.[4]  
One measure of the incompetence of newspapers is that so many  
still make you register to read stories. I have yet to find a blog  
that tried that.[5]  
They accepted the article, but I took so long to  
send them the final version that by the time I did the section of  
the magazine they'd accepted it for had disappeared in a reorganization.[6]  
The word "boss" is derived from the Dutch baas, meaning  
"master."Thanks to Sarah Harlin, Jessica Livingston, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.French TranslationRussian TranslationJapanese TranslationSpanish TranslationArabic Translation

# Hiring is Obsolete

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
May 2005(This essay is derived from a talk at the Berkeley CSUA.)The three big powers on the Internet now are Yahoo, Google, and  
Microsoft. Average age of their founders: 24. So it is pretty  
well established now that grad students can start successful  
companies. And if grad students can do it, why not undergrads?Like everything else in technology, the cost of starting a startup  
has decreased dramatically. Now it's so low that it has disappeared  
into the noise. The main cost of starting a Web-based  
startup is food and rent. Which means it doesn't cost much more  
to start a company than to be a total slacker. You can probably  
start a startup on ten thousand dollars of seed funding, if you're  
prepared to live on ramen.The less it costs to start a company, the less you need the permission  
of investors to do it. So a lot of people will be able to start  
companies now who never could have before.The most interesting subset may be those in their early twenties.  
I'm not so excited about founders who have everything investors  
want except intelligence, or everything except energy. The most  
promising group to be liberated by the new, lower threshold are  
those who have everything investors want except experience.Market RateI once claimed that nerds were unpopular  
in secondary school mainly because they had better things to do  
than work full-time at being popular. Some said I was just telling  
people what they wanted to hear. Well, I'm now about to do that  
in a spectacular way: I think undergraduates are undervalued.Or more precisely, I think few realize the huge  
spread in the value of 20 year olds. Some, it's true, are not very  
capable. But others are more capable than all but a handful of 30  
year olds. [1]Till now the problem has always been that it's difficult to pick  
them out. Every VC in the world, if they could go back in time,  
would try to invest in Microsoft. But which would have then? How  
many would have understood that this particular 19 year old was  
Bill Gates?It's hard to judge the young because (a) they change rapidly, (b)  
there is great variation between them, and (c) they're individually  
inconsistent. That last one is a big problem. When you're young,  
you occasionally say and do stupid things even when you're smart.  
So if the algorithm is to filter out people who say stupid things,  
as many investors and employers unconsciously do, you're going to  
get a lot of false positives.Most organizations who hire people right out of college are only  
aware of the average value of 22 year olds, which is not that high.   
And so the idea for most of the twentieth century was that everyone  
had to begin as a trainee in some   
entry-level job. Organizations   
realized there was a lot of variation in the incoming stream, but  
instead of pursuing this thought they tended to suppress it, in the  
belief that it was good for even the most promising kids to start   
at the bottom, so they didn't get swelled heads.The most productive young people will always be undervalued  
by large organizations, because the young have no performance to  
measure yet, and any error in guessing their ability will tend   
toward the mean.What's an especially productive 22 year old to do? One thing you   
can do is go over the heads of organizations, directly to the users.  
Any company that hires you is, economically, acting as a proxy for  
the customer. The rate at which they value you (though they may  
not consciously realize it) is an attempt to guess your value to   
the user. But there's a way to appeal their judgement. If you  
want, you can opt to be valued directly by users, by starting your  
own company.The market is a lot more discerning than any employer. And it is  
completely non-discriminatory. On the Internet, nobody knows you're  
a dog. And more to the point, nobody knows you're 22. All users  
care about is whether your site or software gives them what they  
want. They don't care if the person behind it is a high school   
kid.If you're really productive, why not make employers pay market rate  
for you? Why go work as an ordinary employee for a big  
company, when you could start a startup and make them buy it to get  
you?When most people hear the word "startup," they think of the famous   
ones that have gone public. But most startups that succeed do it  
by getting bought. And usually the acquirer doesn't just want the  
technology, but the people who created it as well.Often big companies buy startups before they're profitable. Obviously  
in such cases they're not after revenues. What they want is the   
development team and the software they've built so far. When a  
startup gets bought for 2 or 3 million six months in, it's really  
more of a hiring bonus than an acquisition.I think this sort of thing will happen more and more, and that it   
will be better for everyone. It's obviously better for the people  
who start the startup, because they get a big chunk of money up  
front. But I think it will be better for the acquirers too. The  
central problem in big companies, and the main reason they're so   
much less productive than small companies, is the difficulty of  
valuing each person's work. Buying larval startups solves that   
problem for them: the acquirer doesn't pay till the developers have  
proven themselves. Acquirers are protected on the downside, but   
still get most of the upside.Product DevelopmentBuying startups also solves another problem afflicting big companies:  
they can't do product development. Big companies are good at  
extracting the value from existing products, but bad at creating   
new ones.Why? It's worth studying this phenomenon in detail, because this   
is the raison d'etre of startups.To start with, most big companies have some kind of turf to protect,  
and this tends to warp their development decisions. For example,  
Web-based applications are hot now, but  
within Microsoft there must  
be a lot of ambivalence about them, because the very idea of Web-based  
software threatens the desktop. So any Web-based application that   
Microsoft ends up with, will probably, like Hotmail, be something   
developed outside the company.Another reason big companies are bad at developing new products is  
that the kind of people who do that tend not to have much power in  
big companies (unless they happen to be the CEO). Disruptive  
technologies are developed by disruptive people. And they either  
don't work for the big company, or have been outmaneuvered by yes-men  
and have comparatively little influence.Big companies also lose because they usually only build one of each  
thing. When you only have one Web browser, you can't do anything  
really risky with it. If ten different startups design ten different  
Web browsers and you take the best, you'll probably get something  
better.The more general version of this problem is that there are too many  
new ideas for companies to explore them all. There might be 500   
startups right now who think they're making something Microsoft  
might buy. Even Microsoft probably couldn't manage 500 development  
projects in-house.Big companies also don't pay people the right way. People developing  
a new product at a big company get paid roughly the same whether  
it succeeds or fails. People at a startup expect to get rich if  
the product succeeds, and get nothing if it fails. [2] So naturally  
the people at the startup work a lot harder.The mere bigness of big companies is an obstacle. In startups,   
developers are often forced to talk directly to users, whether they  
want to or not, because there is no one else to do sales and support.  
It's painful doing sales, but you learn much more from  
trying to sell people something than reading what   
they said in focus groups.And then of course, big companies are bad at product development   
because they're bad at everything. Everything happens slower in  
big companies than small ones, and product development is something  
that has to happen fast, because you have to go through a lot of   
iterations to get something good.TrendI think the trend of big companies buying startups will only  
accelerate. One of the biggest remaining obstacles is pride. Most   
companies, at least unconsciously, feel they ought to be able to  
develop stuff in house, and that buying startups is to some degree   
an admission of failure. And so, as people generally do with  
admissions of failure, they put it off for as long as possible.  
That makes the acquisition very expensive when it finally happens.What companies should do is go out and discover startups when they're  
young, before VCs have puffed them up into something that costs  
hundreds of millions to acquire. Much of what VCs add, the acquirer  
doesn't need anyway.Why don't acquirers try to predict the companies they're going to  
have to buy for hundreds of millions, and grab them early for a   
tenth or a twentieth of that? Because they can't predict the winners  
in advance? If they're only paying a twentieth as much, they only  
have to predict a twentieth as well. Surely they can manage that.I think companies that acquire technology will gradually learn to   
go after earlier stage startups. They won't necessarily buy them  
outright. The solution may be some hybrid of investment and  
acquisition: for example, to buy a chunk of the company and get an  
option to buy the rest later.When companies buy startups, they're effectively fusing recruiting   
and product development. And I think that's more efficient than   
doing the two separately, because you always get people who are  
really committed to what they're working on.Plus this method yields teams of developers who already work well  
together. Any conflicts between them have been ironed out under   
the very hot iron of running a startup. By the time the acquirer   
gets them, they're finishing one another's sentences. That's   
valuable in software, because so many bugs occur at the boundaries   
between different people's code.InvestorsThe increasing cheapness of starting a company doesn't just give  
hackers more power relative to employers. It also gives them more   
power relative to investors.The conventional wisdom among VCs is that hackers shouldn't be   
allowed to run their own companies. The founders are supposed to   
accept MBAs as their bosses, and themselves take on some title like   
Chief Technical Officer. There may be cases where this is a good   
idea. But I think founders will increasingly be able to push back  
in the matter of control, because they just don't need the investors'  
money as much as they used to.Startups are a comparatively new phenomenon. Fairchild Semiconductor  
is considered the first VC-backed startup, and they were founded   
in 1959, less than fifty years ago. Measured on the time scale of   
social change, what we have now is pre-beta. So we shouldn't assume  
the way startups work now is the way they have to work.Fairchild needed a lot of money to get started. They had to build  
actual factories. What does the first round of venture funding for  
a Web-based startup get spent on today? More money can't get  
software written faster; it isn't needed for facilities, because  
those can now be quite cheap; all money can really buy you is sales  
and marketing. A sales force is worth something, I'll admit. But  
marketing is increasingly irrelevant. On the Internet, anything  
genuinely good will spread by word of mouth.Investors' power comes from money. When startups need less money,   
investors have less power over them. So future founders may not  
have to accept new CEOs if they don't want them. The VCs will have   
to be dragged kicking and screaming down this road, but like many  
things people have to be dragged kicking and screaming toward, it  
may actually be good for them.Google is a sign of the way things are going. As a condition of  
funding, their investors insisted they hire someone old and experienced  
as CEO. But from what I've heard the founders didn't just give in  
and take whoever the VCs wanted. They delayed for an entire year,  
and when they did finally take a CEO, they chose a guy with a PhD   
in computer science.It sounds to me as if the founders are still the most powerful  
people in the company, and judging by Google's performance, their  
youth and inexperience doesn't seem to have hurt them. Indeed, I  
suspect Google has done better than they would have if the founders  
had given the VCs what they wanted, when they wanted it, and let   
some MBA take over as soon as they got their first round of funding.I'm not claiming the business guys installed by VCs have no value.  
Certainly they have. But they don't need to become the founders'  
bosses, which is what that title CEO means. I predict that in the   
future the executives installed by VCs will increasingly be COOs  
rather than CEOs. The founders will run engineering directly, and  
the rest of the company through the COO.The Open CageWith both employers and investors, the balance of power is slowly  
shifting towards the young. And yet they seem the last to realize  
it. Only the most ambitious undergrads even consider starting their  
own company when they graduate. Most just want to get a job.Maybe this is as it should be. Maybe if the idea of starting a   
startup is intimidating, you filter out the uncommitted. But I   
suspect the filter is set a little too high. I think there are  
people who could, if they tried, start successful startups, and who  
instead let themselves be swept into the intake ducts of big  
companies.Have you ever noticed that when animals are let out of cages, they  
don't always realize at first that the door's open? Often they  
have to be poked with a stick to get them out. Something similar   
happened with blogs. People could have been publishing online in   
1995, and yet blogging has only really taken off in the last couple  
years. In 1995 we thought only professional writers were entitled  
to publish their ideas, and that anyone else who did was a crank.  
Now publishing online is becoming so popular that everyone wants   
to do it, even print journalists. But blogging has not taken off   
recently because of any technical innovation; it just took eight  
years for everyone to realize the cage was open.I think most undergrads don't realize yet that the economic cage   
is open. A lot have been told by their parents that the route to  
success is to get a good job. This was true when their parents  
were in college, but it's less true now. The route to success is  
to build something valuable, and you don't have to be working for   
an existing company to do that. Indeed, you can often do it better  
if you're not.When I talk to undergrads, what surprises me most about them is how  
conservative they are. Not politically, of course. I mean they  
don't seem to want to take risks. This is a mistake, because the  
younger you are, the more risk you can take.RiskRisk and reward are always proportionate. For example, stocks are  
riskier than bonds, and over time always have greater returns. So  
why does anyone invest in bonds? The catch is that phrase "over  
time." Stocks will generate greater returns over thirty years, but  
they might lose value from year to year. So what you should invest  
in depends on how soon you need the money. If you're young, you   
should take the riskiest investments you can find.All this talk about investing may seem very theoretical. Most  
undergrads probably have more debts than assets. They may feel  
they have nothing to invest. But that's not true: they have their  
time to invest, and the same rule about risk applies there. Your  
early twenties are exactly the time to take insane career risks.The reason risk is always proportionate to reward is that market   
forces make it so. People will pay extra for stability. So if you  
choose stability-- by buying bonds, or by going to work for a big  
company-- it's going to cost you.Riskier career moves pay better on average, because there is less  
demand for them. Extreme choices like starting a startup are so   
frightening that most people won't even try. So you don't end up   
having as much competition as you might expect, considering the  
prizes at stake.The math is brutal. While perhaps 9 out of 10 startups fail, the   
one that succeeds will pay the founders more than 10 times what  
they would have made in an ordinary job. [3]  
That's the sense in  
which startups pay better "on average."Remember that. If you start a startup, you'll probably fail. Most  
startups fail. It's the nature of the business. But it's not  
necessarily a mistake to try something that has a 90% chance of  
failing, if you can afford the risk. Failing at 40, when you have   
a family to support, could be serious. But if you fail at 22, so   
what? If you try to start a startup right out of college and it   
tanks, you'll end up at 23 broke and a lot smarter. Which, if you  
think about it, is roughly what you hope to get from a graduate   
program.Even if your startup does tank, you won't harm your prospects with  
employers. To make sure I asked some friends who work for big  
companies. I asked managers at Yahoo, Google, Amazon, Cisco and  
Microsoft how they'd feel about two candidates, both 24, with equal  
ability, one who'd tried to start a startup that tanked, and another  
who'd spent the two years since college working as a developer at  
a big company. Every one responded that they'd prefer the guy who'd  
tried to start his own company. Zod Nazem, who's in charge of   
engineering at Yahoo, said:  
 I actually put more value on the guy with the failed  
 startup. And you can quote me!   
So there you have it. Want to get hired by Yahoo? Start your own   
company.The Man is the CustomerIf even big employers think highly of young hackers who start  
companies, why don't more do it? Why are undergrads so conservative?  
I think it's because they've spent so much time in institutions.The first twenty years of everyone's life consists of being piped  
from one institution to another. You probably didn't have much  
choice about the secondary schools you went to. And after high  
school it was probably understood that you were supposed to go to  
college. You may have had a few different colleges to choose  
between, but they were probably pretty similar. So by this point  
you've been riding on a subway line for twenty years, and the next  
stop seems to be a job.Actually college is where the line ends. Superficially, going to  
work for a company may feel like just the next in a series of   
institutions, but underneath, everything is different. The end of  
school is the fulcrum of your life, the point where you go from   
net consumer to net producer.The other big change is that now, you're steering. You can go  
anywhere you want. So it may be worth standing back and understanding  
what's going on, instead of just doing the default thing.All through college, and probably long before that, most undergrads   
have been thinking about what employers want. But what really   
matters is what customers want, because they're the ones who give  
employers the money to pay you.So instead of thinking about what employers want, you're probably  
better off thinking directly about what users want. To the extent   
there's any difference between the two, you can even use that to  
your advantage if you start a company of your own. For example,  
big companies like docile conformists. But this is merely an  
artifact of their bigness, not something customers need.Grad SchoolI didn't consciously realize all this when I was graduating from   
college-- partly because I went straight to grad school. Grad  
school can be a pretty good deal, even if you think of one day   
starting a startup. You can start one when you're done, or even  
pull the ripcord part way through, like the founders of Yahoo and  
Google.Grad school makes a good launch pad for startups, because you're  
collected together with a lot of smart people, and you have bigger   
chunks of time to work on your own projects than an undergrad or  
corporate employee would. As long as you have a fairly tolerant  
advisor, you can take your time developing an idea before turning   
it into a company. David Filo and Jerry Yang started the Yahoo   
directory in February 1994 and were getting a million hits a day  
by the fall, but they didn't actually drop out of grad school and  
start a company till March 1995.You could also try the startup first, and if it doesn't work, then  
go to grad school. When startups tank they usually do it fairly  
quickly. Within a year you'll know if you're wasting your time.If it fails, that is. If it succeeds, you may have to delay grad  
school a little longer. But you'll have a much more enjoyable life   
once there than you would on a regular grad student stipend.ExperienceAnother reason people in their early twenties don't start startups  
is that they feel they don't have enough experience. Most investors  
feel the same.I remember hearing a lot of that word "experience" when I was in   
college. What do people really mean by it? Obviously it's not the  
experience itself that's valuable, but something it changes in your  
brain. What's different about your brain after you have "experience,"  
and can you make that change happen faster?I now have some data on this, and I can tell you what tends to be   
missing when people lack experience. I've said that every   
startup needs three things: to start with good people,  
to make something users want, and not to spend too much money. It's  
the middle one you get wrong when you're inexperienced. There are   
plenty of undergrads with enough technical skill to write good  
software, and undergrads are not especially prone to waste money.  
If they get something wrong, it's usually not realizing they have   
to make something people want.This is not exclusively a failing of the young. It's common for  
startup founders of all ages to build things no one wants.Fortunately, this flaw should be easy to fix. If undergrads were   
all bad programmers, the problem would be a lot harder. It can   
take years to learn how to program. But I don't think it takes   
years to learn how to make things people want. My hypothesis is  
that all you have to do is smack hackers on the side of the head  
and tell them: Wake up. Don't sit here making up a priori theories  
about what users need. Go find some users and see what they need.Most successful startups not only do something very specific, but   
solve a problem people already know they have.The big change that "experience" causes in your brain is learning  
that you need to solve people's problems. Once you grasp that, you  
advance quickly to the next step, which is figuring out what those  
problems are. And that takes some effort, because the way software  
actually gets used, especially by the people who pay the most for  
it, is not at all what you might expect. For example, the stated   
purpose of Powerpoint is to present ideas. Its real role is to   
overcome people's fear of public speaking. It allows you to give  
an impressive-looking talk about nothing, and it causes the audience  
to sit in a dark room looking at slides, instead of a bright one   
looking at you.This kind of thing is out there for anyone to see. The key is to  
know to look for it-- to realize that having an idea for a startup  
is not like having an idea for a class project. The goal in a  
startup is not to write a cool piece of software. It's to make   
something people want. And to do that you have to look at users--  
forget about hacking, and just look at users. This can be quite a  
mental adjustment, because little if any of the software you write  
in school even has users. A few steps before a Rubik's Cube is solved, it still looks like a  
mess. I think there are a lot of undergrads whose brains are in a   
similar position: they're only a few steps away from being able to  
start successful startups, if they wanted to, but they don't realize  
it. They have more than enough technical skill. They just haven't  
realized yet that the way to create wealth is to make what users   
want, and that employers are just proxies for users in which risk   
is pooled.If you're young and smart, you don't need either of those. You  
don't need someone else to tell you what users want, because you   
can figure it out yourself. And you don't want to pool risk, because  
the younger you are, the more risk you should take.A Public Service MessageI'd like to conclude with a joint message from me and your parents.  
Don't drop out of college to start a startup. There's no rush.   
There will be plenty of time to start companies after you graduate.  
In fact, it may be just as well to go work for an existing company  
for a couple years after you graduate, to learn how companies work.And yet, when I think about it, I can't imagine telling Bill Gates  
at 19 that he should wait till he graduated to start a company.   
He'd have told me to get lost. And could I have honestly claimed  
that he was harming his future-- that he was learning less by working  
at ground zero of the microcomputer revolution than he would have  
if he'd been taking classes back at Harvard? No, probably not.And yes, while it is probably true that you'll learn some valuable  
things by going to work for an existing company for a couple years  
before starting your own, you'd learn a thing or two running your   
own company during that time too.The advice about going to work for someone else would get an even  
colder reception from the 19 year old Bill Gates. So I'm supposed   
to finish college, then go work for another company for two years,  
and then I can start my own? I have to wait till I'm 23? That's   
four years. That's more than twenty percent of my life so  
far. Plus in four years it will be way too late to make money   
writing a Basic interpreter for the Altair.And he'd be right. The Apple II was launched just two years later.  
In fact, if Bill had finished college and gone to work for another  
company as we're suggesting, he might well have gone to work for  
Apple. And while that would probably have been better for all of  
us, it wouldn't have been better for him.So while I stand by our responsible advice to finish college and  
then go work for a while before starting a startup, I have to admit  
it's one of those things the old tell the young, but don't expect  
them to listen to. We say this sort of thing mainly so we can claim  
we warned you. So don't say I didn't warn you.  
Notes[1]  
The average B-17 pilot in World War II was in his early twenties.  
(Thanks to Tad Marko for pointing this out.)[2] If a company tried to pay employees this way, they'd be called  
unfair. And yet when they buy some startups and not others, no one  
thinks of calling that unfair.   
[3] The 1/10 success rate for startups is a bit of an urban legend.  
It's suspiciously neat. My guess is the odds are slightly worse.Thanks to Jessica Livingston for reading drafts of this, to  
the friends I promised anonymity to for their opinions about hiring,  
and to Karen Nguyen and the Berkeley CSUA for organizing this talk.Russian TranslationRomanian TranslationJapanese Translation  
  
If you liked this, you may also like  
Hackers & Painters.

# The Submarine

April 2005"Suits make a corporate comeback," says the New  
York Times. Why does this sound familiar? Maybe because  
the suit was also back in February,  
  
September  
2004, June  
2004, March  
2004, September  
2003,   
  
November  
2002,   
April 2002,  
and February  
2002.  
  
Why do the media keep running stories saying suits are back? Because  
PR firms tell   
them to. One of the most surprising things I discovered  
during my brief business career was the existence of the PR industry,  
lurking like a huge, quiet submarine beneath the news. Of the  
stories you read in traditional media that aren't about politics,  
crimes, or disasters, more than half probably come from PR firms.I know because I spent years hunting such "press hits." Our startup spent  
its entire marketing budget on PR: at a time when we were assembling  
our own computers to save money, we were paying a PR firm $16,000  
a month. And they were worth it. PR is the news equivalent of  
search engine optimization; instead of buying ads, which readers  
ignore, you get yourself inserted directly into the stories. [1]Our PR firm  
was one of the best in the business. In 18 months, they got press  
hits in over 60 different publications.   
And we weren't the only ones they did great things for.   
In 1997 I got a call from another  
startup founder considering hiring them to promote his company. I  
told him they were PR gods, worth every penny of their outrageous   
fees. But I remember thinking his company's name was odd.  
Why call an auction site "eBay"?  
SymbiosisPR is not dishonest. Not quite. In fact, the reason the best PR  
firms are so effective is precisely that they aren't dishonest.  
They give reporters genuinely valuable information. A good PR firm  
won't bug reporters just because the client tells them to; they've  
worked hard to build their credibility with reporters, and they  
don't want to destroy it by feeding them mere propaganda.If anyone is dishonest, it's the reporters. The main reason PR   
firms exist is that reporters are lazy. Or, to put it more nicely,  
overworked. Really they ought to be out there digging up stories  
for themselves. But it's so tempting to sit in their offices and  
let PR firms bring the stories to them. After all, they know good  
PR firms won't lie to them.A good flatterer doesn't lie, but tells his victim selective truths  
(what a nice color your eyes are). Good PR firms use the same  
strategy: they give reporters stories that are true, but whose truth  
favors their clients.For example, our PR firm often pitched stories about how the Web   
let small merchants compete with big ones. This was perfectly true.  
But the reason reporters ended up writing stories about this  
particular truth, rather than some other one, was that small merchants  
were our target market, and we were paying the piper.Different publications vary greatly in their reliance on PR firms.  
At the bottom of the heap are the trade press, who make most of  
their money from advertising and would give the magazines away for  
free if advertisers would let them. [2] The average  
trade publication is a bunch of ads, glued together by just enough  
articles to make it look like a magazine. They're so desperate for  
"content" that some will print your press releases almost verbatim,  
if you take the trouble to write them to read like articles.At the other extreme are publications like the New York Times  
and the Wall Street Journal. Their reporters do go out and  
find their own stories, at least some of the time. They'll listen   
to PR firms, but briefly and skeptically. We managed to get press   
hits in almost every publication we wanted, but we never managed   
to crack the print edition of the Times. [3]The weak point of the top reporters is not laziness, but vanity.  
You don't pitch stories to them. You have to approach them as if  
you were a specimen under their all-seeing microscope, and make it  
seem as if the story you want them to run is something they thought   
of themselves.Our greatest PR coup was a two-part one. We estimated, based on  
some fairly informal math, that there were about 5000 stores on the  
Web. We got one paper to print this number, which seemed neutral   
enough. But once this "fact" was out there in print, we could quote  
it to other publications, and claim that with 1000 users we had 20%  
of the online store market.This was roughly true. We really did have the biggest share of the  
online store market, and 5000 was our best guess at its size. But  
the way the story appeared in the press sounded a lot more definite.Reporters like definitive statements. For example, many of the  
stories about Jeremy Jaynes's conviction say that he was one of the  
10 worst spammers. This "fact" originated in Spamhaus's ROKSO list,  
which I think even Spamhaus would admit is a rough guess at the top  
spammers. The first stories about Jaynes cited this source, but  
now it's simply repeated as if it were part of the indictment.   
[4]All you can say with certainty about Jaynes is that he was a fairly  
big spammer. But reporters don't want to print vague stuff like  
"fairly big." They want statements with punch, like "top ten." And  
PR firms give them what they want.  
Wearing suits, we're told, will make us   
3.6  
percent more productive.BuzzWhere the work of PR firms really does get deliberately misleading is in  
the generation of "buzz." They usually feed the same story to   
several different publications at once. And when readers see similar  
stories in multiple places, they think there is some important trend  
afoot. Which is exactly what they're supposed to think.When Windows 95 was launched, people waited outside stores  
at midnight to buy the first copies. None of them would have been  
there without PR firms, who generated such a buzz in  
the news media that it became self-reinforcing, like a nuclear chain  
reaction.I doubt PR firms realize it yet, but the Web makes it possible to   
track them at work. If you search for the obvious phrases, you  
turn up several efforts over the years to place stories about the   
return of the suit. For example, the Reuters article   
  
that got picked up by USA  
Today in September 2004. "The suit is back," it begins.Trend articles like this are almost always the work of  
PR firms. Once you know how to read them, it's straightforward to  
figure out who the client is. With trend stories, PR firms usually  
line up one or more "experts" to talk about the industry generally.   
In this case we get three: the NPD Group, the creative director of  
GQ, and a research director at Smith Barney. [5] When  
you get to the end of the experts, look for the client. And bingo,   
there it is: The Men's Wearhouse.Not surprising, considering The Men's Wearhouse was at that moment   
running ads saying "The Suit is Back." Talk about a successful  
press hit-- a wire service article whose first sentence is your own  
ad copy.The secret to finding other press hits from a given pitch  
is to realize that they all started from the same document back at  
the PR firm. Search for a few key phrases and the names of the  
clients and the experts, and you'll turn up other variants of this   
story.Casual  
fridays are out and dress codes are in writes Diane E. Lewis  
in The Boston Globe. In a remarkable coincidence, Ms. Lewis's  
industry contacts also include the creative director of GQ.Ripped jeans and T-shirts are out, writes Mary Kathleen Flynn in  
US News & World Report. And she too knows the   
creative director of GQ.Men's suits  
are back writes Nicole Ford in Sexbuzz.Com ("the ultimate men's  
entertainment magazine").Dressing  
down loses appeal as men suit up at the office writes Tenisha  
Mercer of The Detroit News.  
Now that so many news articles are online, I suspect you could find  
a similar pattern for most trend stories placed by PR firms. I  
propose we call this new sport "PR diving," and I'm sure there are  
far more striking examples out there than this clump of five stories.OnlineAfter spending years chasing them, it's now second nature  
to me to recognize press hits for what they are. But before we  
hired a PR firm I had no idea where articles in the mainstream media  
came from. I could tell a lot of them were crap, but I didn't  
realize why.Remember the exercises in critical reading you did in school, where  
you had to look at a piece of writing and step back and ask whether  
the author was telling the whole truth? If you really want to be  
a critical reader, it turns out you have to step back one step  
further, and ask not just whether the author is telling the truth,  
but why he's writing about this subject at all.Online, the answer tends to be a lot simpler. Most people who  
publish online write what they write for the simple reason that  
they want to. You  
can't see the fingerprints of PR firms all over the articles, as  
you can in so many print publications-- which is one of the reasons,  
though they may not consciously realize it, that readers trust  
bloggers more than Business Week.I was talking recently to a friend who works for a  
big newspaper. He thought the print media were in serious trouble,  
and that they were still mostly in denial about it. "They think  
the decline is cyclic," he said. "Actually it's structural."In other words, the readers are leaving, and they're not coming  
back.  
Why? I think the main reason is that the writing online is more honest.  
Imagine how incongruous the New York Times article about  
suits would sound if you read it in a blog:  
 The urge to look corporate-- sleek, commanding,  
 prudent, yet with just a touch of hubris on your well-cut sleeve--  
 is an unexpected development in a time of business disgrace.  
   
The problem  
with this article is not just that it originated in a PR firm.  
The whole tone is bogus. This is the tone of someone writing down  
to their audience.Whatever its flaws, the writing you find online  
is authentic. It's not mystery meat cooked up  
out of scraps of pitch letters and press releases, and pressed into   
molds of zippy  
journalese. It's people writing what they think.I didn't realize, till there was an alternative, just how artificial  
most of the writing in the mainstream media was. I'm not saying  
I used to believe what I read in Time and Newsweek. Since high  
school, at least, I've thought of magazines like that more as  
guides to what ordinary people were being  
told to think than as   
sources of information. But I didn't realize till the last   
few years that writing for publication didn't have to mean writing  
that way. I didn't realize you could write as candidly and  
informally as you would if you were writing to a friend.Readers aren't the only ones who've noticed the  
change. The PR industry has too.  
A hilarious article  
on the site of the PR Society of America gets to the heart of the   
matter:  
 Bloggers are sensitive about becoming mouthpieces  
 for other organizations and companies, which is the reason they  
 began blogging in the first place.   
PR people fear bloggers for the same reason readers  
like them. And that means there may be a struggle ahead. As  
this new kind of writing draws readers away from traditional media, we  
should be prepared for whatever PR mutates into to compensate.   
When I think   
how hard PR firms work to score press hits in the traditional   
media, I can't imagine they'll work any less hard to feed stories  
to bloggers, if they can figure out how.  
Notes[1] PR has at least   
one beneficial feature: it favors small companies. If PR didn't   
work, the only alternative would be to advertise, and only big  
companies can afford that.[2] Advertisers pay   
less for ads in free publications, because they assume readers   
ignore something they get for free. This is why so many trade  
publications nominally have a cover price and yet give away free  
subscriptions with such abandon.[3] Different sections  
of the Times vary so much in their standards that they're  
practically different papers. Whoever fed the style section reporter  
this story about suits coming back would have been sent packing by  
the regular news reporters.[4] The most striking  
example I know of this type is the "fact" that the Internet worm   
of 1988 infected 6000 computers. I was there when it was cooked up,  
and this was the recipe: someone guessed that there were about  
60,000 computers attached to the Internet, and that the worm might  
have infected ten percent of them.Actually no one knows how many computers the worm infected, because  
the remedy was to reboot them, and this destroyed all traces. But  
people like numbers. And so this one is now replicated  
all over the Internet, like a little worm of its own.[5] Not all were  
necessarily supplied by the PR firm. Reporters sometimes call a few  
additional sources on their own, like someone adding a few fresh   
vegetables to a can of soup.  
Thanks to Ingrid Basset, Trevor Blackwell, Sarah Harlin, Jessica   
Livingston, Jackie McDonough, Robert Morris, and Aaron Swartz (who  
also found the PRSA article) for reading drafts of this.Correction: Earlier versions used a recent  
Business Week article mentioning del.icio.us as an example  
of a press hit, but Joshua Schachter tells me   
it was spontaneous.The Web is a Writing EnvironmentA Sell-Out's TaleHow to Pitch BloggersBlogging for Milk7 Habits of Highly Effective Blog PRPR People Need To Learn To Deal With New GatekeepersMarqui Blogosphere ProgramPR WatchReal Men ExfoliateHow the News is MadeJanuary 2006: The suit is back yet againThe Decline of the TieJapanese Translation  
  
  
If you liked this, you may also like  
Hackers & Painters.

# Why Smart People Have Bad Ideas

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
April 2005This summer, as an   
experiment, some   
friends and I are giving seed  
funding to a bunch of new startups. It's an experiment because  
we're prepared to fund younger founders than most investors would.  
That's why we're doing it during the summer—so even college  
students can participate.We know from Google and Yahoo that grad students can start successful  
startups. And we know from experience that some undergrads are as  
capable as most grad students. The accepted age for startup founders  
has been creeping downward. We're trying to find the lower bound.  
The deadline has now passed, and we're sifting through 227 applications.  
  
We expected to divide them into two categories, promising  
and unpromising. But we soon saw we needed a third: promising  
people with unpromising ideas.  
[1]The Artix PhaseWe should have expected this. It's very common for a group of  
founders to go through one lame idea before realizing that a startup  
has to make something people will pay for. In fact, we ourselves  
did.Viaweb wasn't the first startup Robert Morris and I started. In  
January 1995, we and a couple friends started a company called  
Artix. The plan was to put art galleries on the Web. In retrospect,  
I wonder how we could have wasted our time on anything so stupid.  
Galleries are not especially excited about being on  
the Web even now, ten years later. They don't want to have their  
stock visible to any random visitor, like an antique store.   
[2]Besides which, art dealers are the most technophobic people on  
earth. They didn't become art dealers after a difficult choice  
between that and a career in the hard sciences. Most of them had  
never seen the Web before we came to tell them why they should be  
on it. Some didn't even have computers. It doesn't do justice to  
the situation to describe it as a hard sell; we soon sank  
to building sites for free, and it was hard to convince galleries  
even to do that.Gradually it dawned on us that   
instead of trying to make Web sites for  
people who didn't want them, we could make sites for  
people who did. In fact, software that would let people who wanted  
sites make their own. So we ditched Artix and  
started a new company, Viaweb, to make software for building online stores.  
That one succeeded.We're in good company here. Microsoft was not the first company  
Paul Allen and Bill Gates started either. The first was called  
Traf-o-data. It does not seem to have done as well as Micro-soft.  
In Robert's defense, he was skeptical about Artix. I dragged him  
into it.   
[3]  
But there were moments when he was optimistic. And  
if we, who were 29 and 30 at the time, could get excited about such  
a thoroughly boneheaded idea, we should not be surprised that hackers  
aged 21 or 22 are pitching us ideas with little hope of making money.The Still Life EffectWhy does this happen? Why do good hackers have bad business ideas?Let's look at our case. One reason we had such a lame idea was  
that it was the first thing we thought of. I was in New York trying  
to be a starving artist at the time (the starving part is actually  
quite easy), so I was haunting galleries anyway. When I learned  
about the Web, it seemed natural to mix the two. Make Web sites  
for galleries—that's the ticket!If you're going to spend years working on something, you'd think  
it might be wise to spend at least a couple days considering different  
ideas, instead of going with the first that comes into your head.  
You'd think. But people don't. In fact, this is a constant problem  
when you're painting still lifes. You plonk down a bunch of stuff  
on a table, and maybe spend five or ten minutes rearranging it to   
look interesting. But you're so impatient to get started painting  
that ten minutes of rearranging feels very long. So you start  
painting. Three days later, having spent twenty hours staring at  
it, you're kicking yourself for having set up such an awkward and   
boring composition, but by then it's too late.Part of the problem is that big projects tend to grow out of small  
ones. You set up a still life to make a quick sketch when you have  
a spare hour, and days later you're still working on it. I once  
spent a month painting three versions of a still life I set up in  
about four minutes. At each point (a day, a week, a month) I thought  
I'd already put in so much time that it was too late to change.So the biggest cause of bad ideas is the still life effect: you   
come up with a random idea, plunge into it, and then at each point  
(a day, a week, a month) feel you've put so much time into it that  
this must be the idea.How do we fix that? I don't think we should discard plunging.   
Plunging into an idea is a good thing. The solution is at the other  
end: to realize that having invested time in something doesn't make  
it good.This is clearest in the case of names. Viaweb was originally  
called Webgen, but we discovered someone else had a product called  
that. We were so attached to our name that we offered him 5%  
of the company if he'd let us have it. But he wouldn't, so  
we had to think of another.   
[4]  
The best we could do was Viaweb,  
which we disliked at first. It was like having a new mother. But   
within three days we loved it, and Webgen sounded lame and  
old-fashioned.If it's hard to change something so simple as a name, imagine  
how hard it is to garbage-collect an idea. A name only has one   
point of attachment into your head. An idea for a company gets  
woven into your thoughts. So you must consciously discount for   
that. Plunge in, by all means, but remember later to look at your   
idea in the harsh light of morning and ask: is this something people  
will pay for? Is this, of all the things we could make, the thing  
people will pay most for?MuckThe second mistake we made with Artix is also very common. Putting  
galleries on the Web seemed cool.One of the most valuable things my father taught me is an old  
Yorkshire saying: where there's muck, there's brass. Meaning that   
unpleasant work pays. And more to the point here, vice versa. Work  
people like doesn't pay well, for reasons of supply and demand.  
The most extreme case is developing programming languages, which  
doesn't pay at all, because people like it so much they do it for   
free.When we started Artix, I was still ambivalent about business. I  
wanted to keep one foot in the art world. Big, big, mistake. Going  
into business is like a hang-glider launch: you'd better do it   
wholeheartedly, or not at all. The purpose of a company, and a  
startup especially, is to make money. You can't have divided  
loyalties.Which is not to say that you have to do the most disgusting sort   
of work, like spamming, or starting a company whose only purpose   
is patent litigation. What I mean is, if you're starting a company  
that will do something cool, the aim had better be to make money   
and maybe be cool, not to be cool and maybe make money.It's hard enough to make money that you can't do it by accident.  
Unless it's your first priority, it's unlikely to happen at all.HyenasWhen I probe our motives with Artix, I see a third mistake: timidity.  
If you'd proposed at the time that we go into the e-commerce business,  
we'd have found the idea terrifying. Surely a field like that would  
be dominated by fearsome startups with five million dollars of VC  
money each. Whereas we felt pretty sure that we could hold our own  
in the slightly less competitive business of generating Web sites   
for art galleries.We erred ridiculously far on the side of safety. As it turns out,  
VC-backed startups are not that fearsome. They're too busy trying  
to spend all that   
money to get software written. In 1995, the  
e-commerce business was very competitive as measured in press  
releases, but not as measured in software. And really it never  
was. The big fish like Open Market (rest their souls) were just  
consulting companies pretending to be product companies   
[5], and   
the offerings at our end of the market were a couple hundred lines  
of Perl scripts. Or could have been implemented as a couple hundred  
lines of Perl; in fact they were probably tens of thousands of lines  
of C++ or Java. Once we actually took the plunge into e-commerce,  
it turned out to be surprisingly easy to compete.So why were we afraid? We felt we were good at programming, but  
we lacked confidence in our ability to do a mysterious, undifferentiated  
thing we called "business." In fact there is no such thing as  
"business." There's selling, promotion, figuring out what people  
want, deciding how much to charge, customer support, paying your  
bills, getting customers to pay you, getting incorporated, raising  
money, and so on. And the combination is not as hard as it seems,   
because some tasks (like raising money and getting incorporated)  
are an O(1) pain in the ass, whether you're big or small, and others  
(like selling and promotion) depend more on energy and imagination  
than any kind of special training.Artix was like a hyena, content to survive on carrion because we  
were afraid of the lions. Except the lions turned out not to have   
any teeth, and the business of putting galleries online barely  
qualified as carrion.A Familiar ProblemSum up all these sources of error, and it's no wonder we had such  
a bad idea for a company. We did the first thing we thought of;  
we were ambivalent about being in business at all; and we deliberately  
chose an impoverished market to avoid competition.Looking at the applications for the Summer Founders Program, I see  
signs of all three. But the first is by far the biggest problem.   
Most of the groups applying have not stopped to ask: of all the   
things we could do, is this the one with the best chance of  
making money?If they'd already been through their Artix phase, they'd have learned  
to ask that. After the reception we got from art dealers, we were  
ready to. This time, we thought, let's make something people want.Reading the Wall Street Journal for a week should give anyone  
ideas for two or three new startups. The articles are full of  
descriptions of problems that need to be solved. But most of the  
applicants don't seem to have looked far for ideas.We expected the most common proposal to be for multiplayer games.  
We were not far off: this was the second most common.   
The most common was some combination of a blog, a calendar,  
a dating site, and Friendster. Maybe there is some new killer app  
to be discovered here, but it seems perverse to go poking around  
in this fog when there are valuable, unsolved problems lying about  
in the open for anyone to see. Why did no one propose a new scheme   
for micropayments? An ambitious project, perhaps, but I can't   
believe we've considered every alternative. And newspapers and  
magazines are (literally) dying for a solution.Why did so few applicants really think about what customers want?  
I think the problem with many, as with people in their early twenties  
generally, is that they've been trained their whole lives to jump  
through predefined hoops. They've spent 15-20 years solving problems  
other people have set for them. And how much time deciding what   
problems would be good to solve? Two or three course projects?   
  
They're good at solving problems, but bad at choosing them.But that, I'm convinced, is just the effect of training. Or more  
precisely, the effect of grading. To make grading efficient,  
everyone has to solve the same problem, and that means it has to  
be decided in advance. It would be great if schools taught students  
how to choose problems as well as how to solve them, but I don't  
know how you'd run such a class in practice.Copper and TinThe good news is, choosing problems is something that can be learned.  
I know that from experience. Hackers can learn to make things  
customers want.   
[6]This is a controversial view. One expert on "entrepreneurship"  
told me that any startup had to include business people, because  
only they could focus on what customers wanted. I'll probably  
alienate this guy forever by quoting him, but I have to risk it,  
because his email was such a perfect example of this view:  
   
 80% of MIT spinoffs succeed provided they   
 have at least one management person in the team at the start. The   
 business person represents the "voice of the customer" and that's  
 what keeps the engineers and product development on track.  
  
This is, in my opinion, a crock. Hackers are perfectly capable of  
hearing the voice of the customer without a business person to  
amplify the signal for them. Larry Page and Sergey Brin were grad  
students in computer science, which presumably makes them "engineers."  
Do you suppose Google is only good because they had some business  
guy whispering in their ears what customers wanted? It seems to   
me the business guys who did the most for Google were the ones who   
obligingly flew Altavista into a hillside just as Google was getting  
started.The hard part about figuring out what customers want is figuring   
out that you need to figure it out. But that's something you can  
learn quickly. It's like seeing the other interpretation of an  
ambiguous picture. As soon as someone tells you there's a rabbit  
as well as a duck, it's hard not to see it.And compared to the sort of problems hackers are used to solving,  
giving customers what they want is easy. Anyone who can write an   
optimizing compiler can design a UI that doesn't confuse users,   
once they choose to focus on that problem. And once you   
apply that kind of brain power to petty but profitable questions,   
you can create wealth very rapidly.That's the essence of a startup: having brilliant people do work  
that's beneath them. Big companies try to hire the right person  
for the job. Startups win because they don't—because they take  
people so smart that they would in a big company be doing "research,"  
and set them to work instead on problems of the most immediate and  
mundane sort. Think Einstein designing refrigerators.  
[7]If you want to learn what people want, read  
Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People.  
[8]  
When a friend recommended this book, I couldn't believe he was  
serious. But he insisted it was good, so I read it, and he was   
right. It deals with the most difficult problem in human experience:  
how to see things from other people's point of view, instead of  
thinking only of yourself.Most smart people don't do that very well. But adding this ability  
to raw brainpower is like adding tin to copper. The result is  
bronze, which is so much harder that it seems a different metal.A hacker who has learned what to make, and not just how to make,  
is extraordinarily powerful. And not just at making money: look  
what a small group of volunteers has achieved with Firefox.Doing an Artix teaches you to make something people want in the  
same way that not drinking anything would teach you how much you  
depend on water. But it would be more convenient for all involved  
if the Summer Founders didn't learn this on our dime—if they could  
skip the Artix phase and go right on to make something customers  
wanted. That, I think, is going to be the real experiment this   
summer. How long will it take them to grasp this? We decided  
we ought to have T-Shirts for the SFP, and we'd been thinking about   
what to print on the back. Till now we'd been planning to use  
If you can read this, I should be working.  
but now we've decided it's going to be  
Make something people want.  
Notes[1]   
SFP applicants: please don't assume that not being accepted  
means we think your idea is bad. Because we want to keep the  
number of startups small this first summer, we're going to have   
to turn down some good proposals too.[2]   
Dealers try to give each customer the impression that the stuff  
they're showing him is something special that only a few people   
have seen, when in fact it may have been sitting in their racks for  
years while they tried to unload it on buyer after buyer.[3]   
On the other hand, he was skeptical about Viaweb too. I have  
a precise measure of that, because at one point in the first couple  
months we made a bet: if he ever made a million dollars out of   
Viaweb, he'd get his ear pierced. We didn't let him   
off, either.[4]   
I wrote a program to generate all the combinations of "Web"   
plus a three letter word. I learned from this that most three   
letter words are bad: Webpig, Webdog, Webfat, Webzit, Webfug. But  
one of them was Webvia; I swapped them to make Viaweb.[5]   
It's much easier to sell services than a product, just as it's  
easier to make a living playing at weddings than by selling recordings.   
But the margins are greater on products. So during the   
Bubble a lot of companies used consulting to generate revenues  
they could attribute to the sale of products, because it made a  
better story for an IPO.[6]   
Trevor Blackwell presents the following recipe for a startup:   
"Watch people who have money to spend, see what they're wasting  
their time on, cook up a solution, and try selling it to them. It's   
surprising how small a problem can be and still provide a profitable  
market for a solution."[7]   
You need to offer especially large rewards to get great people  
to do tedious work. That's why startups always pay equity rather  
than just salary.[8]   
Buy an old   
copy from the 1940s or 50s instead of the current edition, which has been  
rewritten to suit present fashions. The original edition contained  
a few unPC ideas, but it's always better to read an original book,  
bearing in mind that it's a book from a past era, than to read a  
new version sanitized for your protection.Thanks to Bill Birch, Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston,  
and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.Russian TranslationItalian TranslationJapanese Translation  
  
  
If you liked this, you may also like  
Hackers & Painters.

# Return of the Mac

March 2005All the best hackers   
I know are gradually switching to Macs. My  
friend Robert said his whole research group at MIT recently bought  
themselves Powerbooks. These guys are not the graphic designers  
and grandmas who were buying Macs at Apple's low point in the  
mid 1990s. They're about as hardcore OS hackers as you can get.The reason, of course, is OS X. Powerbooks are beautifully designed  
and run FreeBSD. What more do you need to know?I got a Powerbook at the end of last year. When my IBM Thinkpad's  
hard disk died soon after, it became my only laptop. And when my  
friend Trevor showed up at my house recently, he was carrying a  
Powerbook identical to mine.For most of us, it's not a switch to Apple, but a return. Hard as  
this was to believe in the mid 90s, the Mac was in its time the  
canonical hacker's computer.In the fall of 1983,  
the professor in one of my college CS classes got up and announced,  
like a prophet, that there would soon be a computer with half a MIPS  
of processing power that would fit under an airline seat and cost  
so little that we could save enough to buy one from a summer job.  
The whole room gasped.  
And when the Mac appeared, it was even better than we'd hoped. It  
was small and powerful and cheap, as promised. But it was also  
something we'd never considered a computer could be: fabulously  
well designed.I had to have one. And I wasn't alone. In the mid to late 1980s,  
all the hackers I knew were either writing software for the Mac,  
or wanted to. Every futon sofa in Cambridge seemed to have the  
same fat white book lying open on it. If you turned it over, it  
said "Inside Macintosh." Then came Linux and FreeBSD, and hackers, who follow the most  
powerful OS wherever it leads, found themselves switching to Intel  
boxes. If you cared about design, you could buy a Thinkpad, which  
was at least not actively repellent, if you could get the Intel and  
Microsoft stickers   
off the front. [1]With OS X, the hackers are back. When I walked into the Apple store  
in Cambridge, it was like coming home. Much  
was changed, but there was still that Apple coolness in the air,  
that feeling that the show was being run by someone who really  
cared, instead of random corporate deal-makers.So what, the business world may say. Who cares if hackers like Apple  
again? How big is the hacker market, after all?Quite small, but important out of proportion to its size. When it  
comes to computers, what hackers are doing now, everyone will be  
doing in ten years. Almost all technology, from Unix to bitmapped  
displays to the Web, became popular first within CS departments and  
research labs, and gradually spread to the rest of the world.I remember telling my father back in 1986 that there was a new kind  
of computer called a Sun that was a serious Unix machine, but  
so small and cheap that you could  
have one of your own to sit in front of, instead of sitting in front  
of a VT100 connected to a single central Vax. Maybe, I suggested,  
he should buy some stock in this company. I think he really wishes  
he'd listened.In 1994 my friend Koling wanted to talk to his girlfriend in Taiwan,  
and to save long-distance bills he wrote some software that would   
convert sound to data packets that could be sent over the Internet.  
We weren't sure at the time whether this was a proper use of the   
Internet, which was still then a quasi-government entity. What he  
was doing is now called VoIP, and it is a huge and rapidly growing  
business.If you want to know what ordinary people will be doing with computers  
in ten years, just walk around the CS department at a good university.  
Whatever they're doing, you'll be doing.In the matter of "platforms" this tendency is even more pronounced,  
because novel software originates with   
great hackers, and they tend  
to write it first for whatever computer they personally use. And  
software sells hardware. Many if not most of the initial sales of  
the Apple II came from people who bought one to run VisiCalc. And  
why did Bricklin and Frankston write VisiCalc for the Apple II?  
Because they personally liked it. They could have chosen any machine  
to make into a star.If you want to attract hackers to write software that will sell  
your hardware, you have to make it something that they themselves  
use. It's not enough to make it "open." It has to be open and  
good.And open and good is what Macs are again, finally. The intervening  
years have created a situation that is, as far as I know, without  
precedent: Apple is popular at the low end and the high end, but  
not in the middle. My seventy year old mother has a Mac laptop.  
My friends with PhDs in computer science have Mac laptops. [2] And yet   
Apple's overall market share is still small.Though unprecedented, I predict this situation is also temporary.So Dad, there's this company called Apple. They make a new kind of  
computer that's as well designed as a Bang & Olufsen stereo system,  
and underneath is the best Unix machine you can buy. Yes, the price  
to earnings ratio is kind of high, but I think a lot of people are  
going to want these.  
Notes[1] These horrible stickers are much like the intrusive ads popular  
on pre-Google search engines. They say to the customer: you are  
unimportant. We care about Intel and Microsoft, not you.[2] Y Combinator  
is (we hope) visited mostly by  
hackers. The proportions of OSes are:   
Windows 66.4%, Macintosh 18.8%, Linux 11.4%, and FreeBSD 1.5%.  
The Mac number is  
a big change from what it would have been five years ago.Italian TranslationRussian TranslationChinese Translation

# Writing, Briefly

March 2005  
(In the process  
of answering an email, I accidentally wrote a tiny essay about writing.  
I usually spend weeks on an essay. This one took 67 minutes—23  
of writing, and 44 of rewriting.)I think it's far more important to write well than most people  
realize. Writing doesn't just communicate ideas; it generates them.  
If you're bad at writing and don't like to do it, you'll miss out  
on most of the ideas writing would have generated.As for how to write well, here's the short version:   
Write a bad version  
1 as fast as you can; rewrite it over and over; cut out everything  
unnecessary; write in a conversational tone; develop a nose for  
bad writing, so you can see and fix it in yours; imitate writers  
you like; if you can't get started, tell someone what you plan to  
write about, then write down what you said; expect  
80% of the ideas in an essay to happen after you start writing it,  
and 50% of those you start with to be wrong; be confident enough  
to cut; have friends you trust read your stuff and tell you which  
bits are confusing or drag; don't (always) make detailed outlines;  
mull ideas over for a few days before  
writing; carry a small notebook or scrap paper with you; start writing   
when you think of the first   
sentence; if a deadline  
forces you to start before that, just say the most important sentence  
first; write about stuff you like; don't try to sound impressive; don't hesitate to change the topic on the fly;  
use footnotes to contain digressions; use anaphora to knit  
sentences together; read your essays out loud to see (a) where you stumble  
over awkward phrases and (b) which bits are boring (the  
paragraphs you dread reading); try to tell the  
reader something new and useful; work in fairly big quanta of time;  
when you restart, begin by rereading what you have so far; when you  
finish, leave yourself something easy to start with; accumulate  
notes for topics you plan to cover at the bottom of the file; don't  
feel obliged to cover any of them; write for a reader who won't  
read the essay as carefully as you do, just as pop songs are  
designed to sound ok on crappy car radios;   
if you say anything mistaken, fix it immediately;  
ask friends which sentence you'll regret most; go back and tone  
down harsh remarks; publish stuff online, because  
an audience makes you write more, and thus generate more  
ideas; print out drafts instead of just looking at them  
on the screen; use simple, germanic words; learn to distinguish  
surprises from digressions; learn to recognize the approach of an  
ending, and when one appears, grab it.Russian TranslationJapanese TranslationRomanian TranslationSpanish TranslationGerman TranslationChinese TranslationHungarian TranslationCatalan TranslationDanish TranslationArabic Translation

# Undergraduation

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
  
March 2005(Parts of this essay began as replies to students who wrote to  
me with questions.)Recently I've had several emails from computer science  
undergrads asking what to do in college. I might not  
be the best source of advice, because I was a philosophy major in  
college. But I took so many CS classes that most CS majors thought  
I was one. I was certainly a hacker, at least.HackingWhat should you do in college to become a   
good hacker? There are two  
main things you can do: become very good at programming, and learn  
a lot about specific, cool problems. These turn out to be equivalent,  
because each drives you to do the other.The way to be good at programming is to work (a) a lot (b) on hard  
problems. And the way to make yourself work on hard problems is  
to work on some very engaging project.  
Odds are this project won't be a class assignment. My friend Robert  
learned a lot by writing network software when he was an  
undergrad. One of his projects was to connect Harvard to the  
Arpanet; it had been one of the original nodes, but by 1984 the  
connection had died. [1] Not only was this  
work not for a class, but because he spent all his time on it  
and neglected his studies, he was kicked out of  
school for a year. [2] It all evened out in the end, and now he's  
a professor at MIT. But you'll probably be happier if you don't  
go to that extreme; it caused him a lot of worry at the time.Another way to be good at programming is to find other people who  
are good at it, and learn what they know. Programmers tend to sort  
themselves into tribes according to the type of work they do and  
the tools they use, and some tribes are   
smarter than others. Look  
around you and see what the smart people seem to be working on;  
there's usually a reason.Some of the smartest people around you are professors. So one way  
to find interesting work is to volunteer as a research assistant.  
Professors are especially interested in people who can solve tedious  
system-administration type problems for them, so that is a way to  
get a foot in the door. What they fear are  
flakes and resume padders. It's all too  
common for an assistant to result in a net increase in work. So  
you have to make it clear you'll mean a net decrease.Don't be put off if they say no. Rejection is almost always less  
personal than the rejectee imagines. Just move on to the next.  
(This applies to dating too.)Beware, because although most professors are smart, not all of them  
work on interesting stuff. Professors have to publish novel results  
to advance their careers, but there is more competition in more  
interesting areas of research. So what less ambitious professors  
do is turn out a series of papers whose conclusions are novel because  
no one else cares about them. You're better off avoiding these.I never worked as a research assistant, so I feel a bit dishonest  
recommending that route. I learned to program by writing stuff of  
my own, particularly by trying to reverse-engineer Winograd's  
SHRDLU. I was as obsessed with that program as a mother with a new baby.Whatever the disadvantages of working by yourself, the advantage  
is that the project is all your own. You never have to compromise  
or ask anyone's permission, and if you have a new idea you can just  
sit down and start implementing it.In your own projects you don't have to worry about novelty (as  
professors do) or profitability (as businesses do). All that matters  
is how hard the project is technically, and that has no correlation  
to the nature of the application. "Serious" applications like   
databases are often trivial and dull technically (if you ever suffer  
from insomnia, try reading the technical literature about databases)  
while "frivolous" applications like games are often very sophisticated.  
I'm sure there are game companies out there working on products  
with more intellectual content than the research at the  
bottom nine tenths of university CS departments.If I were in college now I'd probably work on  
graphics: a network game, for example, or a tool for 3D animation.  
When I was an undergrad there weren't enough cycles around to make  
graphics interesting, but it's hard to imagine anything more fun  
to work on now.MathWhen I was in college, a lot of the professors believed (or at least  
wished) that   
computer science was a branch of math. This idea was  
strongest at Harvard, where there wasn't even a CS major till the  
1980s; till then one had to major in applied math. But it was  
nearly as bad at Cornell. When I told the fearsome Professor Conway  
that I was interested in AI (a hot topic then), he told me I should  
major in math. I'm still not sure whether he thought AI required  
math, or whether he thought AI was nonsense and that majoring in  
something rigorous would cure me of such stupid ambitions.In fact, the amount of math you need as a hacker is a lot less   
than most university departments like to admit. I don't think you   
need much more than high school math plus a few concepts from the  
theory of computation. (You have to know what an n^2 algorithm is  
if you want to avoid writing them.) Unless you're planning to write  
math applications, of course. Robotics, for example, is all math.But while you don't literally need math for most kinds of hacking,  
in the sense of knowing 1001 tricks for differentiating formulas,   
math is very much worth studying for its own sake. It's a   
valuable source of metaphors for almost any kind of work.[3] I wish   
I'd studied more math in college for that reason.Like a lot of people, I was mathematically abused as a child. I   
learned to think of math as a collection of formulas that were  
neither beautiful nor had any relation to my life (despite attempts  
to translate them into "word problems"), but had to be memorized   
in order to do well on tests.One of the most valuable things you could do in college would be  
to learn what math is really about. This may not be easy, because  
a lot of good mathematicians are bad teachers. And while there are  
many popular books on math, few seem good. The best I can think  
of are W. W. Sawyer's. And of course Euclid. [4]EverythingThomas Huxley said "Try to learn something about everything and   
everything about something." Most universities aim at this  
ideal.But what's everything? To me it means, all that people  
learn in the course of working honestly on hard problems. All such   
work tends to be related, in that ideas and techniques from one   
field can often be transplanted successfully to others. Even others  
that seem quite distant. For example, I write   
essays the same way  
I write software: I sit down and blow out a lame version 1 as fast  
as I can type, then spend several weeks rewriting it.Working on hard problems is not, by itself, enough. Medieval   
alchemists were working on a hard problem, but their approach was   
so bogus that there was little  
to learn from studying it, except possibly about people's ability   
to delude themselves. Unfortunately the sort of AI I was trying   
to learn in college had the same flaw: a very hard problem, blithely  
approached with hopelessly inadequate techniques. Bold? Closer   
to fraudulent.  
The social sciences are also fairly bogus, because they're so much   
influenced by intellectual fashions. If a   
physicist met a colleague  
from 100 years ago, he could teach him some new things; if a psychologist  
met a colleague from 100 years ago, they'd just get into an  
ideological argument.  
Yes, of course, you'll learn something by taking a  
psychology class. The point is, you'll learn more by taking  
a class in another department.The worthwhile departments, in my opinion, are math, the hard  
sciences, engineering, history (especially economic and social   
history, and the history of science), architecture, and the classics.  
A survey course in art history may be worthwhile. Modern literature  
is important, but the way to learn about it is just to read. I  
don't know enough about music to say.You can skip the social sciences, philosophy, and the various  
departments created recently in response to political pressures.  
Many of these fields talk about important problems, certainly. But  
the way they talk about them is useless. For example, philosophy   
talks, among other things, about our obligations to one another;   
but you can learn more about this from a wise grandmother or E. B.  
White than from an academic philosopher.I speak here from experience. I should probably have been offended   
when people laughed at Clinton for saying "It depends on what the   
meaning of the word 'is' is." I took about five classes in college  
on what the meaning of "is" is.Another way to figure out which fields are worth studying is to   
create the dropout graph. For example, I know many people   
who switched from math to computer science because they found math   
too hard, and no one who did the opposite. People don't do hard  
things gratuitously; no one will work on a harder problem unless   
it is proportionately (or at least log(n)) more rewarding. So  
probably math is more worth studying than computer science. By  
similar comparisons you can make a graph of all the departments in  
a university. At the bottom you'll find the subjects with least   
intellectual content.If you use this method, you'll get roughly the same answer I just   
gave.Language courses are an anomaly. I think they're better considered  
as extracurricular activities, like pottery classes. They'd be far  
more useful when combined with some time living in a country where   
the language is spoken. On a whim I studied Arabic as a freshman.  
It was a lot of work, and the only lasting benefits were a weird   
ability to identify semitic roots and some insights into how people  
recognize words.Studio art and creative writing courses are wildcards. Usually   
you don't get taught much: you just work (or don't work) on whatever  
you want, and then sit around offering "crits" of one another's  
creations under the vague supervision of the teacher. But writing and  
art are both very hard problems that (some) people work honestly  
at, so they're worth doing, especially if you can find a good  
teacher.JobsOf course college students have to think about more than just  
learning. There are also two practical problems to consider: jobs,  
and graduate school.In theory a liberal education is not supposed to supply job training.  
But everyone knows this is a bit of a fib. Hackers at every college  
learn practical skills, and not by accident.What you should learn to get a job depends on the kind you want.  
If you want to work in a big company, learn how to hack   
Blub on  
Windows. If you want to work at a cool little company or research   
lab, you'll do better to learn Ruby on Linux. And if you want to   
start your own company, which I think will be more and more common,  
master the most powerful tools you can find, because you're going  
to be in a race against your competitors, and they'll be your horse.There is not a direct correlation between the skills you should   
learn in college and those you'll use in a job. You should aim   
slightly high in college.In workouts a football player may bench press 300 pounds, even  
though he may never have to exert anything like that much force in  
the course of a game. Likewise, if your professors try to make you  
learn stuff that's more advanced than you'll need in a job, it may  
not just be because they're academics, detached from the real world.  
They may be trying to make you lift weights with your brain.The programs you write in classes differ in three critical ways  
from the ones you'll write in the real world: they're small; you  
get to start from scratch; and the problem is usually artificial   
and predetermined. In the real world, programs are bigger, tend   
to involve existing code, and often require you to figure out what   
the problem is before you can solve it.You don't have to wait to leave (or even enter) college to learn   
these skills. If you want to learn how to deal with existing code,  
for example, you can contribute to open-source projects. The sort  
of employer you want to work for will be as impressed by that as   
good grades on class assignments.In existing open-source projects you don't get much practice at  
the third skill, deciding what problems to solve. But there's   
nothing to stop you starting new projects of your own. And good  
employers will be even more impressed  
with that.What sort of problem should you try to solve? One way to answer  
that is to ask what you need as a user. For example, I stumbled  
on a good algorithm for spam filtering because I wanted to stop   
getting spam. Now what I wish I had was a mail reader that somehow  
prevented my inbox from filling up. I tend to use my inbox as a  
todo list. But that's like using a screwdriver to open  
bottles; what one really wants is a bottle opener.Grad SchoolWhat about grad school? Should you go? And how do you get into a   
good one?In principle, grad school is professional training in research, and  
you shouldn't go unless you want to do research as a career. And   
yet half the people who get PhDs in CS don't go into research.  
I didn't go to grad school to become a professor. I went because   
I wanted to learn more.So if you're mainly interested in hacking and you go to grad school,  
you'll find a lot of other people who are similarly out of their   
element. And if half the people around you are out of their element in the  
same way you are, are you really out of your element?There's a fundamental problem in "computer science," and it surfaces  
in situations like this. No one is sure what "research" is supposed to be.   
A lot  
of research is hacking that had to be crammed into the form of an  
academic paper to yield one more quantum of publication.So it's kind of misleading to ask whether you'll be at home in grad  
school, because very few people are quite at home in computer  
science. The whole field is uncomfortable in its own skin. So  
the fact that you're mainly interested in hacking shouldn't deter   
you from going to grad school. Just be warned you'll have to do a lot of stuff   
you don't like.Number one will be your dissertation. Almost everyone hates their  
dissertation by the time they're done with it. The  
process inherently tends to produce an unpleasant result, like a cake made out  
of whole wheat flour and baked for twelve hours. Few dissertations   
are read with pleasure, especially by their authors.But thousands before you have suffered through writing a dissertation.  
And aside from that, grad school is close to paradise. Many people  
remember it as the happiest time of their lives. And nearly all  
the rest, including me, remember it as a period that would have   
been, if they hadn't had to write a dissertation. [5]The danger with grad school is that you don't see the scary part  
upfront. PhD programs start out as college part 2, with several  
years of classes. So by the time you face the horror of writing a   
dissertation, you're already several years in. If you quit now,  
you'll be a grad-school dropout, and you probably won't like that  
idea. When Robert got kicked out of grad school for writing the  
Internet worm of 1988, I envied him enormously for finding a way out  
without the stigma of failure. On the whole, grad school is probably better than most alternatives. You meet a   
lot of smart people, and your glum procrastination will at least   
be a powerful common bond. And of course you have a PhD at the  
end. I forgot about that. I suppose that's worth something.The greatest advantage of a PhD (besides being the union card of  
academia, of course) may be that it gives you some baseline confidence.  
For example, the Honeywell thermostats in my house have the most  
atrocious UI. My mother, who has the same model, diligently spent  
a day reading the user's manual to learn how to operate hers. She  
assumed the problem was with her. But I can think to myself "If  
someone with a PhD in computer science can't understand this  
thermostat, it must be badly   
designed."If you still want to go to grad school after this equivocal  
recommendation, I can give you solid advice about how to get in.   
A lot of my friends are CS professors now, so I have the inside  
story about admissions. It's quite different from college. At  
most colleges, admissions officers decide who gets in. For PhD  
programs, the professors do. And they try to do  
it well, because the people they admit are going to be working for  
them.Apparently only recommendations really matter at the best schools.  
Standardized tests count for nothing, and grades for little. The  
essay is mostly an opportunity to disqualify yourself by saying   
something stupid. The only thing professors  
trust is recommendations, preferably from people they know. [6]So if you want to get into a PhD program, the key is to impress  
your professors. And from my friends who are professors I know   
what impresses them: not merely trying to impress them. They're  
not impressed by students who get good grades or want to be their  
research assistants so they can get into grad school. They're  
impressed by students who get good grades and want to be their   
research assistants because they're genuinely interested in the   
topic.So the best thing you can do in college, whether you want to get  
into grad school or just be good at hacking, is figure out what you  
truly like. It's hard to trick professors into letting you into  
grad school, and impossible to trick problems into letting you solve  
them. College is where faking stops working. From this point,  
unless you want to go work for a big company, which is like reverting  
to high school, the only way forward is through doing what you   
love.Notes  
[1] No one seems to have minded, which shows how unimportant  
the Arpanet (which became the Internet) was as late as  
1984.[2] This is why, when I became an employer, I didn't care  
about GPAs. In fact, we actively sought out people   
who'd failed out of school. We once put up posters around Harvard  
saying "Did you just get kicked out for doing badly in your classes  
because you spent all your time working on some project of your   
own? Come work for us!" We managed to find a kid who had been,   
and he was a great hacker.When Harvard kicks undergrads out for a year, they have to get jobs.  
The idea is to show them how awful the real world is, so they'll   
understand how lucky they are to be in college. This plan backfired  
with the guy who came to work for us, because he had more fun than  
he'd had in school, and made more that year from stock options than  
any of his professors did in salary. So instead of crawling back  
repentant at the end of the year, he took another year off and went  
to Europe. He did eventually graduate at about 26.[3] Eric Raymond says the best metaphors for hackers are  
in set theory, combinatorics, and graph theory.Trevor Blackwell reminds you to take math classes intended for math majors.  
"'Math for engineers' classes sucked mightily. In fact any 'x for  
engineers' sucks, where x includes math, law, writing and visual  
design."[4] Other highly recommended books: What is Mathematics?, by  
Courant and Robbins; Geometry and the Imagination by Hilbert and   
Cohn-Vossen.  
And for those interested in graphic design,  
Byrne's Euclid.  
[5] If you wanted to have the perfect life, the thing to do would  
be to go to grad school, secretly write your dissertation in the  
first year or two, and then just enjoy yourself for the next three  
years, dribbling out a chapter at a time. This prospect will make  
grad students' mouths water, but I know of no one who's had the  
discipline to pull it off.[6] One professor friend says that 15-20% of the grad students they  
admit each year are "long shots." But what he means by long shots  
are people whose applications are perfect in every way, except  
that no one on the admissions committee knows the professors who  
wrote the recommendations.So if you want to get into  
grad school in the sciences, you need to go to college somewhere with  
real research professors. Otherwise you'll seem a risky bet  
to admissions committees, no matter how good you are.Which implies  
a surprising but apparently inevitable consequence:  
little liberal arts colleges are doomed.  
 Most smart  
high school kids at least consider going into the sciences, even  
if they ultimately choose not to.  
Why go to a college that limits their options?Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Alex Lewin, Jessica Livingston,  
Robert Morris, Eric  
Raymond, and several   
anonymous CS professors   
for reading drafts of this, and to the students whose questions  
began it.More Advice for UndergradsJoel Spolsky: Advice for Computer Science College StudentsEric Raymond: How to Become a Hacker

# A Unified Theory of VC Suckage

March 2005A couple months ago I got an email from a recruiter asking if I was  
interested in being a "technologist in residence" at a new venture  
capital fund. I think the idea was to play Karl Rove to the VCs'  
George Bush.I considered it for about four seconds. Work for a VC fund? Ick.One of my most vivid memories from our startup is going to visit  
Greylock, the famous Boston VCs. They were the most arrogant  
people I've met in my life. And I've met a lot of arrogant people.  
[1]I'm not alone in feeling this way, of course. Even a VC friend of  
mine dislikes VCs. "Assholes," he says.But lately I've been learning more about how the VC world works,  
  
and a few days ago it hit me that there's a reason VCs are the way  
they are. It's not so much that the business attracts jerks, or  
even that the power they wield corrupts them. The real problem is  
the way they're paid.The problem with VC funds is that they're funds. Like the  
managers of mutual funds or hedge funds, VCs get paid a percentage  
of the money they manage: about 2% a year in management fees,  
plus a percentage of the gains. So they want  
the fund to be huge-- hundreds of millions of dollars, if possible.  
But that means each partner ends up being responsible for investing  
a lot of money. And since one person can only manage so many deals,  
each deal has to be for multiple millions of dollars.This turns out to explain nearly all the characteristics of VCs  
that founders hate.It explains why VCs take so agonizingly long to make up their minds,  
and why their due diligence feels like a body cavity search. [2]  
With so much at stake, they have to be paranoid.It explains why they steal your ideas. Every founder knows that  
VCs will tell your secrets to your competitors if they end up  
investing in them. It's not unheard of for VCs to meet you when  
they have no intention of funding you, just to pick your brain for  
a competitor. This prospect makes naive founders clumsily secretive.  
Experienced founders treat it as a cost of doing business. Either  
way it sucks. But again, the only reason VCs are so sneaky is the  
giant deals they do. With so much at stake, they have to be devious.It explains why VCs tend to interfere in the companies they invest  
in. They want to be on your board not just so that they can advise  
you, but so that they can watch you. Often they even install a new  
CEO. Yes, he may have extensive business experience. But he's  
also their man: these newly installed CEOs always play something   
of the role of a political commissar in a Red Army unit. With  
so much at stake, VCs can't resist micromanaging you.The huge investments themselves are something founders would dislike,  
if they realized how damaging they can be. VCs don't invest $x  
million because that's the amount you need, but because that's the  
amount the structure of their business requires them to invest.   
Like steroids, these sudden huge investments can do more harm than   
good. Google survived enormous VC funding because it could  
legitimately absorb large amounts of money. They had to buy a lot  
of servers and a lot of bandwidth to crawl the whole Web. Less  
fortunate startups just end up hiring armies of people to sit around  
having meetings.In principle you could take a huge VC investment, put it in treasury  
bills, and continue to operate frugally. You just try it.And of course giant investments mean giant valuations. They have  
to, or there's not enough stock left to keep the founders interested.  
You might think a high valuation is a great thing. Many founders   
do. But you can't eat paper. You can't benefit from a high valuation  
unless you can somehow achieve what those in the business   
  
call a "liquidity event," and the higher   
your valuation, the narrower your options for doing that. Many a   
founder would be happy to sell his company for $15 million, but VCs  
who've just invested at a pre-money valuation of $8 million won't  
hear of that. You're rolling the dice again, whether you like it  
or not.Back in 1997, one of our competitors raised $20 million in a single   
round of VC funding. This was at the time more than the valuation  
of our entire company. Was I worried? Not at all: I was delighted.  
It was like watching a car you're chasing turn down a street that  
you know has no outlet.Their smartest move at that point would have been to take every   
penny of the $20 million and use it to buy us. We would have sold.  
Their investors would have been furious of course. But I think the   
main reason they never considered this was that they never imagined  
we could be had so cheap. They probably assumed we were on the  
same VC gravy train they were.In fact we only spent about $2 million in our entire existence.   
And that gave us flexibility. We could sell ourselves to Yahoo for  
$50 million, and everyone was delighted. If our competitor had  
done that, the last round of investors would presumably have lost  
money. I assume they could have vetoed such a deal. But no one   
those days was paying a lot more than Yahoo. So unless their  
founders could pull off an IPO (which would be difficult with Yahoo  
as a competitor), they had no choice but to ride the thing down.The puffed-up companies that went public during the Bubble didn't  
do it just because they were pulled into it by unscrupulous investment   
bankers. Most were pushed just as hard from the other side by VCs  
who'd invested at high valuations, leaving an IPO as the only way   
out. The only people dumber were retail investors. So it was  
literally IPO or bust. Or rather, IPO then bust, or just bust.Add up all the evidence of VCs' behavior, and the resulting personality  
is not attractive. In fact, it's the classic villain: alternately  
cowardly, greedy, sneaky, and overbearing.I used to take it for granted that VCs were like this. Complaining   
that VCs were jerks used to seem as naive to me as complaining that  
users didn't read the reference manual. Of course VCs were jerks.  
How could it be otherwise?But I realize now that they're not intrinsically jerks. VCs are   
like car salesmen or bureaucrats: the nature of their work  
turns them into jerks.I've met a few VCs I like. Mike Moritz seems a good guy. He even   
has a sense of humor, which is almost unheard of among VCs. From   
what I've read about John Doerr, he sounds like a good guy too,   
almost a hacker. But they work for the very best VC funds. And   
my theory explains why they'd tend to be different: just as the  
very most popular kids don't have to persecute   
nerds, the very best  
VCs don't have to act like VCs. They get the pick of all the best   
deals. So they don't have to be so paranoid and sneaky, and they   
can choose those rare companies, like Google, that will actually  
benefit from the giant sums they're compelled to invest.VCs often complain that in their business there's too much money  
chasing too few deals. Few realize that this also describes a flaw  
in the way funding works at the level of individual firms.Perhaps this was the sort of strategic insight I was supposed to   
come up with as a "technologist in residence." If so, the good  
news is that they're getting it for free. The bad news is it  
means that if you're not one of the very top funds, you're   
condemned to be the bad guys.Notes[1] After Greylock booted founder Philip Greenspun out of ArsDigita,  
he wrote a hilarious but also very informative  
essay about it.  
[2] Since most VCs aren't tech guys, the technology side of their  
due diligence tends to be like a body cavity search by someone with  
a faulty knowledge of human anatomy. After a while we were quite  
sore from VCs attempting to probe our nonexistent database orifice.No, we don't use Oracle. We just store the data in files. Our  
secret is to use an OS that doesn't lose our data. Which OS?  
FreeBSD. Why do you use that instead of Windows NT? Because it's  
better and it doesn't cost anything. What, you're using a  
freeware OS?How many times that conversation was repeated.  
Then when we got to Yahoo, we found they used FreeBSD and stored  
their data in files too.Chinese TranslationJapanese Translation

# How to Start a Startup

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
March 2005(This essay is derived from a talk at the Harvard Computer  
Society.)You need three things to create a successful startup: to start with  
good people, to make something customers actually want, and to spend  
as little money as possible. Most startups that fail do it because  
they fail at one of these. A startup that does all three will  
probably succeed.And that's kind of exciting, when you think about it, because all  
three are doable. Hard, but doable. And since a startup that  
succeeds ordinarily makes its founders rich, that implies getting  
rich is doable too. Hard, but doable.If there is one message I'd like to get across about startups,  
that's it. There is no magically difficult step that requires  
brilliance to solve.The IdeaIn particular, you don't need a brilliant   
idea to start a startup  
around. The way a startup makes money is to offer people better  
technology than they have now. But what people have now is often  
so bad that it doesn't take brilliance to do better.Google's plan, for example, was simply to create a search site that  
didn't suck. They had three new ideas: index more of the Web, use  
links to rank search results, and have clean, simple web pages with  
unintrusive keyword-based ads. Above all, they were determined to  
make a site that was good to use. No doubt there are great technical  
tricks within Google, but the overall plan was straightforward.  
And while they probably have bigger ambitions now, this alone brings  
them a billion dollars a year. [1]There are plenty of other areas that are just as backward as search  
was before Google. I can think of several heuristics for generating  
ideas for startups, but most reduce to this: look at something  
people are trying to do, and figure out how to do it in a way that  
doesn't suck.For example, dating sites currently suck far worse than search did  
before Google. They all use the same simple-minded model.  
They seem to have approached the problem by thinking about how to  
do database matches instead of how dating works in the real world.  
An undergrad could build something better as a class project. And  
yet there's a lot of money at stake. Online dating is a valuable  
business now, and it might be worth a hundred times as much if it  
worked.An idea for a startup, however, is only a beginning. A lot of  
would-be startup founders think the key to the whole process is the  
initial idea, and from that point all you have to do is execute.  
Venture capitalists know better. If you go to VC firms with a  
brilliant idea that you'll tell them about if they sign a nondisclosure  
agreement, most will tell you to get lost. That shows how much a   
mere idea is worth. The market price is less than the inconvenience   
of signing an NDA.Another sign of how little the initial idea is worth is the number  
of startups that change their plan en route. Microsoft's original  
plan was to make money selling programming languages, of all things.  
Their current business model didn't occur to them until IBM dropped  
it in their lap five years later.Ideas for startups are worth something, certainly, but the trouble  
is, they're not transferrable. They're not something you could  
hand to someone else to execute. Their value is mainly as starting  
points: as questions for the people who had them to continue thinking  
about.What matters is not ideas, but the people who have them. Good  
people can fix bad ideas, but good ideas can't save bad people.   
PeopleWhat do I mean by good people? One of the best tricks I learned   
during our startup was a rule for deciding   
who to hire. Could you  
describe the person as an animal? It might be hard to translate   
that into another language, but I think everyone in the US knows   
what it means. It means someone who takes their work a little too   
seriously; someone who does what they do so well that they pass  
right through professional and cross over into obsessive.What it means specifically depends on the job: a salesperson who  
just won't take no for an answer; a hacker who will stay up till   
4:00 AM rather than go to bed leaving code with a bug in it; a PR   
person who will cold-call New York Times reporters on their cell  
phones; a graphic designer who feels physical pain when something   
is two millimeters out of place.Almost everyone who worked for us was an animal at what they did.   
The woman in charge of sales was so tenacious that I used to feel  
sorry for potential customers on the phone with her. You could   
sense them squirming on the hook, but you knew there would be no   
rest for them till they'd signed up.If you think about people you know, you'll find the animal test is  
easy to apply. Call the person's image to mind and imagine the  
sentence "so-and-so is an animal." If you laugh, they're not. You  
don't need or perhaps even want this quality in big companies, but  
you need it in a startup.For programmers we had three additional tests. Was the person  
genuinely smart? If so, could they actually get things done? And  
finally, since a few good hackers have unbearable personalities,   
could we stand to have them around?That last test filters out surprisingly few people. We could bear  
any amount of nerdiness if someone was truly smart. What we couldn't  
stand were people with a lot of attitude. But most of those weren't  
truly smart, so our third test was largely a restatement of the  
first.When nerds are unbearable it's usually because they're trying too  
hard to seem smart. But the smarter they are, the less pressure  
they feel to act smart. So as a rule you can recognize genuinely  
smart people by their ability to say things like "I don't know,"   
"Maybe you're right," and "I don't understand x well enough."This technique doesn't always work, because people can be influenced  
by their environment. In the MIT CS department, there seems to be  
a tradition of acting like a brusque know-it-all. I'm told it derives  
ultimately from Marvin Minsky, in the same way the classic airline  
pilot manner is said to derive from Chuck Yeager. Even genuinely  
smart people start to act this way there, so you have to make  
allowances.It helped us to have Robert Morris, who is one of the readiest to  
say "I don't know" of anyone I've met. (At least, he was before he   
became a professor at MIT.) No one dared put on attitude around   
Robert, because he was obviously smarter than they were and yet had  
zero attitude himself.Like most startups, ours began with a group of friends, and it was  
through personal contacts that we got most of the people we hired.  
This is a crucial difference between startups and big companies.  
Being friends with someone for even a couple days will tell you   
more than companies could ever learn in interviews. [2]It's no coincidence that startups start around universities, because  
that's where smart people meet. It's not what people learn in   
classes at MIT and Stanford that has made technology companies  
spring up around them. They could sing campfire songs in the classes  
so long as admissions worked the same.If you start a startup, there's a good chance it will be with people  
you know from college or grad school. So in theory you ought to   
try to make friends with as many smart people as you can in school,  
right? Well, no. Don't make a conscious effort to schmooze; that  
doesn't work well with hackers.What you should do in college is work on your own projects. Hackers  
should do this even if they don't plan to start startups, because   
it's the only real way to learn how to program. In some cases you  
may collaborate with other students, and this is the best way to  
get to know good hackers. The project may even grow into a startup.  
But once again, I wouldn't aim too directly at either target. Don't  
force things; just work on stuff you like with people you like.Ideally you want between two and four founders. It would be hard  
to start with just one. One person would find the moral weight of  
starting a company hard to bear. Even Bill Gates, who seems to be   
able to bear a good deal of moral weight, had to have a co-founder.   
But you don't want so many founders that the company starts to look  
like a group photo. Partly because you don't need a lot of people  
at first, but mainly because the more founders you have, the worse  
disagreements you'll have. When there are just two or three founders,  
you know you have to resolve disputes immediately or perish. If  
there are seven or eight, disagreements can linger and harden into  
factions. You don't want mere voting; you need unanimity.In a technology startup, which most startups are, the founders  
should include technical people. During the Internet Bubble there   
were a number of startups founded by business people who then went  
looking for hackers to create their product for them. This doesn't   
work well. Business people are bad at deciding what to do with   
technology, because they don't know what the options are, or which  
kinds of problems are hard and which are easy. And when business  
people try to hire hackers, they can't tell which ones are   
good.  
Even other hackers have a hard time doing that.   
For business people it's roulette.Do the founders of a startup have to include business people? That  
depends. We thought so when we started ours, and we asked several   
people who were said to know about this mysterious thing called  
"business" if they would be the president. But they all said no,  
so I had to do it myself. And what I discovered was that business  
was no great mystery. It's not something like physics or medicine  
that requires extensive study. You just try to get people to pay  
you for stuff.I think the reason I made such a mystery of business was that I was  
disgusted by the idea of doing it. I wanted to work in the pure,   
intellectual world of software, not deal with customers' mundane   
problems. People who don't want to get dragged into some kind of  
work often develop a protective incompetence at it. Paul Erdos was  
particularly good at this. By seeming unable even to cut a grapefruit  
in half (let alone go to the store and buy one), he forced other  
people to do such things for him, leaving all his time free for  
math. Erdos was an extreme case, but most husbands use the same   
trick to some degree.Once I was forced to discard my protective incompetence, I found  
that business was neither so hard nor so boring as I feared. There  
are esoteric areas of business that are quite hard, like tax law  
or the pricing of derivatives, but you don't need to know about   
those in a startup. All you need to know about business to run a   
startup are commonsense things people knew before there were business  
schools, or even universities.If you work your way down the Forbes 400 making an x next to the   
name of each person with an MBA, you'll learn something important  
about business school. After Warren Buffett, you don't hit another   
MBA till number 22,  
Phil Knight, the CEO of Nike. There are only 5 MBAs in the top  
50. What you notice in the Forbes 400 are a lot of people with   
technical backgrounds. Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Larry Ellison,  
Michael Dell, Jeff Bezos, Gordon Moore. The rulers of the technology  
business tend to come from technology, not business. So if you   
want to invest two years in something that will help you succeed   
in business, the evidence suggests you'd do better to learn how to   
hack than get an MBA. [3]There is one reason you might want to include business people in a  
startup, though: because you have to have at least one person willing  
and able to focus on what customers want. Some believe only business  
people can do this-- that hackers can implement software, but not   
design it. That's nonsense. There's nothing about knowing how to  
program that prevents hackers from understanding users, or about  
not knowing how to program that magically enables business people   
to understand them.If you can't understand users, however, you should either learn how  
or find a co-founder who can. That is the single most important  
issue for technology startups, and the rock that sinks more of them  
than anything else.What Customers WantIt's not just startups that have to worry about this. I think most  
businesses that fail do it because they don't give customers what  
they want. Look at restaurants. A large percentage fail, about a  
quarter in the first year. But can you think of one restaurant  
that had really good food and went out of business?Restaurants with great food seem to prosper no matter what. A   
restaurant with great food can be expensive, crowded, noisy, dingy,  
out of the way, and even have bad service, and people will keep  
coming. It's true that a restaurant with mediocre food can sometimes   
attract customers through gimmicks. But that approach is very   
risky. It's more straightforward just to make the food good.It's the same with technology. You hear all kinds of reasons why  
startups fail. But can you think of one that had a massively popular  
product and still failed?In nearly every failed startup, the real problem was that customers  
didn't want the product. For most, the cause of death is listed   
as "ran out of funding," but that's only the immediate cause. Why   
couldn't they get more funding? Probably because the product was  
a dog, or never seemed likely to be done, or both.When I was trying to think of the things every startup needed to   
do, I almost included a fourth: get a version 1 out as soon as you  
can. But I decided not to, because that's implicit in making  
something customers want. The only way to make something customers  
want is to get a prototype in front of them and refine it based on   
their reactions.The other approach is what I call the "Hail Mary" strategy. You   
make elaborate plans for a product, hire a team of engineers to   
develop it (people who do this tend to use the term "engineer" for   
hackers), and then find after a year that you've spent two million  
dollars to develop something no one wants. This was not uncommon  
during the Bubble, especially in companies run by business types,   
who thought of software development as something terrifying that  
therefore had to be carefully planned.We never even considered that approach. As a Lisp hacker, I come   
from the tradition of rapid prototyping. I would not claim (at  
least, not here) that this is the right way to write every program,  
but it's certainly the right way to write software for a startup.  
In a startup, your initial plans are almost certain to be wrong in  
some way, and your first priority should be to figure out where.   
The only way to do that is to try implementing them.Like most startups, we changed our plan on the fly. At first we  
expected our customers to be Web consultants. But it turned out  
they didn't like us, because our software was easy to use and we hosted  
the site. It would be too easy for clients to fire them. We also  
thought we'd be able to sign up a lot of catalog companies, because  
selling online was a natural extension of their existing business.  
But in 1996 that was a hard sell. The middle managers we talked   
to at catalog companies saw the Web not as an opportunity, but as  
something that meant more work for them.We did get a few of the more adventurous catalog companies. Among  
them was Frederick's of Hollywood, which gave us valuable experience  
dealing with heavy loads on our servers. But most of our users   
were small, individual merchants who saw the Web as an opportunity   
to build a business. Some had retail stores, but many only existed  
online. And so we changed direction to focus on these users.  
Instead of concentrating on the features Web consultants and catalog  
companies would want, we worked to make the software easy to use.I learned something valuable from that. It's worth trying very,   
very hard to make technology easy to use. Hackers are so used to  
computers that they have no idea how horrifying software seems to  
normal people. Stephen Hawking's editor told him that every equation  
he included in his book would cut sales in half. When you work on  
making technology easier to use, you're riding that curve up instead   
of down. A 10% improvement in ease of use doesn't just increase   
your sales 10%. It's more likely to double your sales.How do you figure out what customers want? Watch them. One of the  
best places to do this was at trade shows. Trade shows didn't pay   
as a way of getting new customers, but they were worth it as market  
research. We didn't just give canned presentations at trade shows.  
We used to show people how to build real, working stores. Which   
meant we got to watch as they used our software, and talk to them   
about what they needed.No matter what kind of startup you start, it will probably be a   
stretch for you, the founders, to understand what users want. The  
only kind of software you can build without studying users is the   
sort for which you are the typical user. But this is just the kind  
that tends to be open source: operating systems, programming  
languages, editors, and so on. So if you're developing technology  
for money, you're probably not going to be developing it for people  
like you. Indeed, you can use this as a way to generate ideas for  
startups: what do people who are not like you want from technology?When most people think of startups, they think of companies like  
Apple or Google. Everyone knows these, because they're big consumer  
brands. But for every startup like that, there are twenty more   
that operate in niche markets or live quietly down in the infrastructure.  
So if you start a successful startup, odds are you'll start one of   
those.Another way to say that is, if you try to start the kind of startup  
that has to be a big consumer brand, the odds against succeeding  
are steeper. The best odds are in niche markets. Since startups   
make money by offering people something better than they had before,  
the best opportunities are where things suck most. And it would   
be hard to find a place where things suck more than in corporate   
IT departments. You would not believe the amount of money companies  
spend on software, and the crap they get in return. This imbalance  
equals opportunity.If you want ideas for startups, one of the most valuable things you  
could do is find a middle-sized non-technology company and spend a   
couple weeks just watching what they do with computers. Most good  
hackers have no more idea of the horrors perpetrated in these places  
than rich Americans do of what goes on in Brazilian slums.Start by writing software for smaller companies, because it's easier  
to sell to them. It's worth so much to sell stuff to big companies  
that the people selling them the crap they currently use spend a  
lot of time and money to do it. And while you can outhack Oracle  
with one frontal lobe tied behind your back, you can't outsell an  
Oracle salesman. So if you want to win through better technology,  
aim at smaller customers. [4]They're the more strategically valuable part of the market anyway.   
In technology, the low end always eats the high end. It's easier   
to make an inexpensive product more powerful than to make a powerful  
product cheaper. So the products that start as cheap, simple options  
tend to gradually grow more powerful till, like water rising in a   
room, they squash the "high-end" products against the ceiling. Sun  
did this to mainframes, and Intel is doing it to Sun. Microsoft  
Word did it to desktop publishing software like Interleaf and  
Framemaker. Mass-market digital cameras are doing it to the expensive  
models made for professionals. Avid did it to the manufacturers   
of specialized video editing systems, and now Apple is doing it to  
Avid. Henry Ford did it to the car makers that preceded  
him. If you build the simple, inexpensive option, you'll not only  
find it easier to sell at first, but you'll also be in the best   
position to conquer the rest of the market.It's very dangerous to let anyone fly under you. If you have the  
cheapest, easiest product, you'll own the low end. And if you  
don't, you're in the crosshairs of whoever does.Raising MoneyTo make all this happen, you're going to need money. Some startups  
have been self-funding-- Microsoft for example-- but most aren't.  
I think it's wise to take money from investors. To be self-funding,  
you have to start as a consulting company, and it's hard to switch  
from that to a product company.Financially, a startup is like a pass/fail course. The way to get  
rich from a startup is to maximize the company's chances of succeeding,  
not to maximize the amount of stock you retain. So if you can trade  
stock for something that improves your odds, it's probably a smart   
move.To most hackers, getting investors seems like a terrifying and  
mysterious process. Actually it's merely tedious. I'll try to  
give an outline of how it works.The first thing you'll need is a few tens of thousands of dollars   
to pay your expenses while you develop a prototype. This is called  
seed capital. Because so little money is involved, raising seed  
capital is comparatively easy-- at least in the sense of getting a  
quick yes or no.Usually you get seed money from individual rich people called  
"angels." Often they're people who themselves got rich from technology.  
At the seed stage, investors don't expect you to have an elaborate  
business plan. Most know that they're supposed to decide quickly.  
It's not unusual to get a check within a week based on a half-page  
agreement.We started Viaweb with $10,000 of seed money from our friend Julian.  
But he gave us a lot more than money. He's a former CEO and also  
a corporate lawyer, so he gave us a lot of valuable advice about  
business, and also did all the legal work of getting us set up as  
a company. Plus he introduced us to one of the two   
angel investors who supplied our next round of funding.Some angels, especially those with technology backgrounds, may be   
satisfied with a demo and a verbal description of what you plan to   
do. But many will want a copy of your business plan, if only to  
remind themselves what they invested in.Our angels asked for one, and looking back, I'm amazed how much  
worry it caused me. "Business plan" has that word "business" in  
it, so I figured it had to be something I'd have to read a book  
about business plans to write. Well, it doesn't. At this stage,  
all most investors expect is a brief description of what you plan   
to do and how you're going to make money from it, and the resumes   
of the founders. If you just sit down and write out what you've  
been saying to one another, that should be fine. It shouldn't take  
more than a couple hours, and you'll probably find that writing it  
all down gives you more ideas about what to do.For the angel to have someone to make the check out to, you're going  
to have to have some kind of company. Merely incorporating yourselves  
isn't hard. The problem is, for the company to exist, you have to  
decide who the founders are, and how much stock they each have. If  
there are two founders with the same qualifications who are both  
equally committed to the business, that's easy. But if you have a  
number of people who are expected to contribute in varying degrees,  
arranging the proportions of stock can be hard. And once you've  
done it, it tends to be set in stone.I have no tricks for dealing with this problem. All I can say is,  
try hard to do it right. I do have a rule of thumb for recognizing  
when you have, though. When everyone feels they're getting a  
slightly bad deal, that they're doing more than they should for the  
amount of stock they have, the stock is optimally apportioned.There is more to setting up a company than incorporating it, of  
course: insurance, business license, unemployment compensation,   
various things with the IRS. I'm not even sure what the list is,  
because we, ah, skipped all that. When we got real funding near  
the end of 1996, we hired a great CFO, who fixed everything   
retroactively. It turns out that no one comes and arrests you if  
you don't do everything you're supposed to when starting a company.  
And a good thing too, or a lot of startups would never get started.  
[5]It can be dangerous to delay turning yourself into a company, because  
one or more of the founders might decide to split off and start   
another company doing the same thing. This does happen. So when  
you set up the company, as well as as apportioning the stock, you  
should get all the founders to sign something agreeing that everyone's  
ideas belong to this company, and that this company is going to be  
everyone's only job.[If this were a movie, ominous music would begin here.]While you're at it, you should ask what else they've signed. One  
of the worst things that can happen to a startup is to run into   
intellectual property problems. We did, and it came closer to   
killing us than any competitor ever did.As we were in the middle of getting bought, we discovered that one  
of our people had, early on, been bound by an agreement that said  
all his ideas belonged to the giant company that was paying for him  
to go to grad school. In theory, that could have meant someone  
else owned big chunks of our software. So the acquisition came to  
a screeching halt while we tried to sort this out. The problem   
was, since we'd been about to be acquired, we'd allowed ourselves   
to run low on cash. Now we needed to raise more to keep going.   
But it's hard to raise money with an IP cloud over your head, because  
investors can't judge how serious it is.Our existing investors, knowing that we needed money and had nowhere  
else to get it, at this point attempted certain gambits which I  
will not describe in detail, except to remind readers that the word   
"angel" is a metaphor. The founders thereupon proposed to walk   
away from the company, after giving the investors a brief tutorial   
on how to administer the servers themselves. And while this was  
happening, the acquirers used the delay as an excuse to welch on   
the deal.Miraculously it all turned out ok. The investors backed down; we  
did another round of funding at a reasonable valuation; the giant  
company finally gave us a piece of paper saying they didn't own our  
software; and six months later we were bought by Yahoo for much  
more than the earlier acquirer had agreed to pay. So we were happy  
in the end, though the experience probably took several years off   
my life.Don't do what we did. Before you consummate a startup, ask   
everyone about their previous IP history.Once you've got a company set up, it may seem presumptuous to go  
knocking on the doors of rich people and asking them to invest tens  
of thousands of dollars in something that is really just a bunch   
of guys with some ideas. But when you look at it from the rich  
people's point of view, the picture is more encouraging. Most rich   
people are looking for good investments. If you really think you  
have a chance of succeeding, you're doing them a favor by letting  
them invest. Mixed with any annoyance they might feel about being   
approached will be the thought: are these guys the next Google?Usually angels are financially equivalent to founders. They get   
the same kind of stock and get diluted the same amount in future  
rounds. How much stock should they get? That depends on how  
ambitious you feel. When you offer x percent of your company for  
y dollars, you're implicitly claiming a certain value for the whole  
company. Venture investments are usually described in terms of  
that number. If you give an investor new shares equal to 5% of  
those already outstanding in return for $100,000, then you've done  
the deal at a pre-money valuation of $2 million.How do you decide what the value of the company should be? There  
is no rational way. At this stage the company is just a bet. I  
didn't realize that when we were raising money. Julian  
thought we ought to value the company at several million   
dollars. I thought it was preposterous to claim that a couple  
thousand lines of code, which was all we had at the time, were worth  
several million dollars. Eventually we settled on one million,  
because Julian said no one would invest in a company with a valuation  
any lower. [6]What I didn't grasp at the time was that the valuation wasn't just   
the value of the code we'd written so far. It was also the value  
of our ideas, which turned out to be right, and of all the future  
work we'd do, which turned out to be a lot.The next round of funding is the one in which you might deal with   
actual   
venture capital firms.   
But don't wait till you've burned   
through your last round of funding to start approaching them. VCs are slow to  
make up their minds. They can take months. You don't want to be   
running out of money while you're trying to negotiate with them.Getting money from an actual VC firm is a bigger deal than getting  
money from angels. The amounts of money involved are larger, millions  
usually. So the deals take longer, dilute you more, and impose  
more onerous conditions.Sometimes the VCs want to install a new CEO of their own choosing.   
Usually the claim is that you need someone mature and experienced,  
with a business background. Maybe in some cases this is true. And  
yet Bill Gates was young and inexperienced and had no business   
background, and he seems to have done ok. Steve Jobs got booted  
out of his own company by someone mature and experienced, with a  
business background, who then proceeded to ruin the company. So I  
think people who are mature and experienced, with a business  
background, may be overrated. We used to call these guys "newscasters,"  
because they had neat hair and spoke in deep, confident voices, and  
generally didn't know much more than they read on the teleprompter.We talked to a number of VCs, but eventually we ended up financing  
our startup entirely with angel money. The main reason was that   
we feared a brand-name VC firm would stick us with a newscaster as  
part of the deal. That might have been ok if he was content to  
limit himself to talking to the press, but what if he wanted to   
have a say in running the company? That would have led to disaster,  
because our software was so complex. We were a company whose whole  
m.o. was to win through better technology. The strategic decisions  
were mostly decisions about technology, and we didn't need any help  
with those.This was also one reason we didn't go public. Back in 1998 our CFO  
tried to talk me into it. In those days you could go public as a  
dogfood portal, so as a company with a real product and real revenues,  
we might have done well. But I feared it would have meant taking  
on a newscaster-- someone who, as they say, "can talk Wall Street's  
language."I'm happy to see Google is bucking that trend. They didn't talk  
Wall Street's language when they did their IPO, and Wall Street  
didn't buy. And now Wall Street is collectively kicking itself.  
They'll pay attention next time. Wall Street learns new languages   
fast when money is involved.You have more leverage negotiating with VCs than you realize. The   
reason is other VCs. I know a number of VCs now, and when you talk  
to them you realize that it's a seller's market. Even now there  
is too much money chasing too few good deals.VCs form a pyramid. At the top are famous ones like Sequoia and  
Kleiner Perkins, but beneath those are a huge number you've never   
heard of. What they all have in common is that a dollar from them   
is worth one dollar. Most VCs will tell you that they don't just   
provide money, but connections and advice. If you're talking to   
Vinod Khosla or John Doerr or Mike Moritz, this is true. But such  
advice and connections can come very expensive. And as you go down  
the food chain the VCs get rapidly   
  
dumber. A few steps down from   
the top you're basically talking to bankers who've picked up a few  
new vocabulary words from reading Wired. (Does your product  
use XML?) So I'd advise you to be skeptical about claims  
of experience and connections. Basically, a VC is a source of  
money. I'd be inclined to go with whoever offered the most money   
the soonest with the least strings attached.You may wonder how much to tell VCs. And you should, because some  
of them may one day be funding your competitors. I think the best  
plan is not to be overtly secretive, but not to tell them everything  
either. After all, as most VCs say, they're more interested in the  
people than the ideas. The main reason they want to talk about  
your idea is to judge you, not the idea. So as long as you seem  
like you know what you're doing, you can probably keep a few things  
back from them. [7]Talk to as many VCs as you can, even if you don't want their money,  
because a) they may be on the board of someone who will buy you,   
and b) if you seem impressive, they'll be discouraged from investing  
in your competitors. The most efficient way to reach VCs, especially  
if you only want them to know about you and don't want their money,  
is at the conferences that are occasionally organized for startups   
to present to them.Not Spending ItWhen and if you get an infusion of real money from investors, what  
should you do with it? Not spend it, that's what. In nearly every   
startup that fails, the proximate cause is running out of money.   
Usually there is something deeper wrong. But even a proximate cause  
of death is worth trying hard to avoid.During the Bubble many startups tried to "get big fast." Ideally  
this meant getting a lot of customers fast. But it was easy for  
the meaning to slide over into hiring a lot of people fast.Of the two versions, the one where you get a lot of customers fast  
is of course preferable. But even that may be overrated. The idea  
is to get there first and get all the users, leaving none for  
competitors. But I think in most businesses the advantages of being  
first to market are not so overwhelmingly great. Google is again  
a case in point. When they appeared it seemed as if search was a  
mature market, dominated by big players who'd spent millions to  
build their brands: Yahoo, Lycos, Excite, Infoseek, Altavista,   
Inktomi. Surely 1998 was a little late to arrive at the party.But as the founders of Google knew, brand is worth next to nothing  
in the search business. You can come along at any point and make   
something better, and users will gradually seep over to you. As   
if to emphasize the point, Google never did any advertising. They're  
like dealers; they sell the stuff, but they know better than to use  
it themselves.The competitors Google buried would have done better to spend those  
millions improving their software. Future startups should learn  
from that mistake. Unless you're in a market where products are   
as undifferentiated as cigarettes or vodka or laundry detergent,  
spending a lot on brand advertising is a sign of breakage. And few  
if any Web businesses are so undifferentiated. The dating sites   
are running big ad campaigns right now, which is all the   
more evidence they're ripe for the picking. (Fee, fie, fo, fum, I   
smell a company run by marketing guys.)We were compelled by circumstances to grow slowly, and in retrospect  
it was a good thing. The founders all learned to do every job in   
the company. As well as writing software, I had to do sales and  
customer support. At sales I was not very good. I was persistent,  
but I didn't have the smoothness of a good salesman. My message   
to potential customers was: you'd be stupid not to sell online, and   
if you sell online you'd be stupid to use anyone else's software.   
Both statements were true, but that's not the way to convince people.I was great at customer support though. Imagine talking to a  
customer support person who not only knew everything about the  
product, but would apologize abjectly if there was a bug, and then  
fix it immediately, while you were on the phone with them. Customers  
loved us. And we loved them, because when you're growing slow by  
word of mouth, your first batch of users are the ones who were smart  
enough to find you by themselves. There is nothing more valuable,  
in the early stages of a startup, than smart users. If you listen  
to them, they'll tell you exactly how to make a winning product.   
And not only will they give you this advice for free, they'll pay  
you.We officially launched in early 1996. By the end of that year we  
had about 70 users. Since this was the era of "get big fast," I  
worried about how small and obscure we were. But in fact we were  
doing exactly the right thing. Once you get big (in users or  
employees) it gets hard to change your product. That year was  
effectively a laboratory for improving our software. By the end   
of it, we were so far ahead of our competitors that they never had   
a hope of catching up. And since all the hackers had spent many  
hours talking to users, we understood online commerce way better  
than anyone else.That's the key to success as a startup. There is nothing more   
important than understanding your business. You might think that  
anyone in a business must, ex officio, understand it. Far from it.   
Google's secret  
weapon was simply that they understood search. I was working for   
Yahoo when Google appeared, and Yahoo didn't understand search. I  
know because I once tried to convince the powers that be that we  
had to make search better, and I got in reply what was then the  
party line about it: that Yahoo was no longer a mere "search engine."  
Search was now only a small percentage of our page views, less than  
one month's growth, and now that we were established as a "media   
company," or "portal," or whatever we were, search could safely be  
allowed to wither and drop off, like an umbilical cord.Well, a small fraction of page views they may be, but they are an   
important fraction, because they are the page views that Web sessions   
start with. I think Yahoo gets that now.Google understands a few other things most Web companies still  
don't. The most important is that you should put users before  
advertisers, even though the advertisers are paying and users aren't.  
One of my favorite bumper stickers reads "if the people lead, the   
leaders will follow." Paraphrased for the Web, this becomes "get  
all the users, and the advertisers will follow." More generally,  
design your product to please users first, and then think about how  
to make money from it. If you don't put users first, you leave a   
gap for competitors who do.To make something users love, you have to understand them. And the  
bigger you are, the harder that is. So I say "get big slow." The  
slower you burn through your funding, the more time you have to  
learn.The other reason to spend money slowly is to encourage a culture   
of cheapness. That's something Yahoo did understand. David Filo's   
title was "Chief Yahoo," but he was proud that his unofficial title  
was "Cheap Yahoo." Soon after we arrived at Yahoo, we got an email  
from Filo, who had been crawling around our directory hierarchy,   
asking if it was really necessary to store so much of our data on  
expensive RAID drives. I was impressed by that. Yahoo's market  
cap then was already in the billions, and they were still worrying  
about wasting a few gigs of disk space.When you get a couple million dollars from a VC firm, you tend to  
feel rich. It's important to realize you're not. A rich company  
is one with large revenues. This money isn't revenue. It's money  
investors have given you in the hope you'll be able to generate   
revenues. So despite those millions in the bank, you're still poor.For most startups the model should be grad student, not law firm.  
Aim for cool and cheap, not expensive and impressive. For us the  
test of whether a startup understood this was whether they had Aeron  
chairs. The Aeron came out during the Bubble and was very popular  
with startups. Especially the type, all too common then, that was  
like a bunch of kids playing house with money supplied by VCs. We   
had office chairs so cheap that the arms all fell off. This was   
slightly embarrassing at the time, but in retrospect the grad-studenty  
atmosphere of our office was another of those things we did right   
without knowing it.Our offices were in a wooden triple-decker in Harvard Square. It  
had been an apartment until about the 1970s, and there was still a   
claw-footed bathtub in the bathroom. It must once have been inhabited  
by someone fairly eccentric, because a lot of the chinks in the   
walls were stuffed with aluminum foil, as if to protect against   
cosmic rays. When eminent visitors came to see us, we were a bit  
sheepish about the low production values. But in fact that place  
was the perfect space for a startup. We felt like our role was to   
be impudent underdogs instead of corporate stuffed shirts, and that   
is exactly the spirit you want.An apartment is also the right kind of place for developing software.  
Cube farms suck for that, as you've probably discovered if you've  
tried it. Ever notice how much easier it is to hack at home than  
at work? So why not make work more like home?When you're looking for space for a startup, don't feel that it has  
to look professional. Professional means doing good work, not  
elevators and glass walls. I'd advise most startups to avoid  
corporate space at first and just rent an apartment. You want to  
live at the office in a startup, so why not have a place designed  
to be lived in as your office?Besides being cheaper and better to work in, apartments tend to be  
in better locations than office buildings. And for a startup  
location is very important. The key to productivity is for people  
to come back to work after dinner. Those hours after the phone  
stops ringing are by far the best for getting work done. Great  
things happen when a group of employees go out to dinner together,   
talk over ideas, and then come back to their offices to implement   
them. So you want to be in a place where there are a lot of  
restaurants around, not some dreary office park that's a wasteland  
after 6:00 PM. Once a company shifts over into the model where   
everyone drives home to the suburbs for dinner, however late, you've  
lost something extraordinarily valuable. God help you if you  
actually start in that mode.If I were going to start a startup today, there are only three   
places I'd consider doing it: on the Red Line near Central, Harvard,  
or Davis Squares (Kendall is too sterile); in Palo Alto on University  
or California Aves; and in Berkeley immediately north or south of   
campus. These are the only places I know that have the right kind  
of vibe.The most important way to not spend money is by not hiring people.   
I may be an extremist, but I think hiring people is the worst thing  
a company can do. To start with, people are a recurring expense,   
which is the worst kind. They also tend to cause you to grow out   
of your space, and perhaps even move to the sort of uncool office  
building that will make your software worse. But worst of all,  
they slow you down: instead of sticking your head in someone's   
office and checking out an idea with them, eight people have to  
have a meeting about it. So the fewer people you can hire, the  
better.During the Bubble a lot of startups had the opposite policy. They  
wanted to get "staffed up" as soon as possible, as if you couldn't   
get anything done unless there was someone with the corresponding   
job title. That's big company thinking. Don't hire people to fill  
the gaps in some a priori org chart. The only reason to hire someone  
is to do something you'd like to do but can't.If hiring unnecessary people is expensive and slows you down, why  
do nearly all companies do it? I think the main reason is that  
people like the idea of having a lot of people working for them.  
This weakness often extends right up to the CEO. If you ever end  
up running a company, you'll find the most common question people  
ask is how many employees you have. This is their way of weighing  
you. It's not just random people who ask this; even reporters do.  
And they're going to be a lot more impressed if the answer is a  
thousand than if it's ten.This is ridiculous, really. If two companies have the same revenues,  
it's the one with fewer employees that's more impressive. When   
people used to ask me how many people our startup had, and I answered  
"twenty," I could see them thinking that we didn't count for much.  
I used to want to add "but our main competitor, whose ass we regularly  
kick, has a hundred and forty, so can we have credit for the larger  
of the two numbers?"As with office space, the number of your employees is a choice   
between seeming impressive, and being impressive. Any of you who   
were nerds in high school know about this   
choice. Keep doing it when you start a company.Should You?But should you start a company? Are you the right sort of person  
to do it? If you are, is it worth it?More people are the right sort of person to start a startup than  
realize it. That's the main reason I wrote this. There could be   
ten times more startups than there are, and that would probably be  
a good thing.I was, I now realize, exactly the right sort of person to start a   
startup. But the idea terrified me at first. I was forced into   
it because I was a Lisp hacker. The company  
I'd been consulting for seemed to be running into trouble, and there   
were not a lot of other companies using Lisp. Since I couldn't   
bear the thought of programming in another language (this was 1995,  
remember, when "another language" meant C++) the only option seemed  
to be to start a new company using Lisp.I realize this sounds far-fetched, but if you're a Lisp hacker  
you'll know what I mean. And if the idea of starting a startup  
frightened me so much that I only did it out of necessity, there   
must be a lot of people who would be good at it but who are too   
intimidated to try.So who should start a startup? Someone who is a good hacker, between  
about 23 and 38, and who wants to solve the money problem in one  
shot instead of getting paid gradually over a conventional working  
life.I can't say precisely what a good hacker is. At a first rate   
university this might include the top half of computer science   
majors. Though of course you don't have to be a CS major to be a  
hacker; I was a philosophy major in college.It's hard to tell whether you're a good hacker, especially when  
you're young. Fortunately the process of starting startups tends  
to select them automatically. What drives people to start startups  
is (or should be) looking at existing technology and thinking, don't   
these guys realize they should be doing x, y, and z? And that's   
also a sign that one is a good hacker.I put the lower bound at 23 not because there's something that  
doesn't happen to your brain till then, but because you need to see  
what it's like in an existing business before you try running your  
own. The business doesn't have to be a startup. I spent a year  
working for a software company to pay off my college loans. It was  
the worst year of my adult life, but I learned, without realizing   
it at the time, a lot of valuable lessons about the software business.  
In this case they were mostly negative lessons: don't have a lot  
of meetings; don't have chunks of code that multiple people own;  
don't have a sales guy running the company; don't make a high-end  
product; don't let your code get too big; don't leave finding bugs  
to QA people; don't go too long between releases; don't isolate  
developers from users; don't move from Cambridge to Route 128; and  
so on. [8] But negative lessons are just as valuable as positive   
ones. Perhaps even more valuable: it's hard to repeat a brilliant  
performance, but it's straightforward to avoid errors. [9]The other reason it's hard to start a company before 23 is that   
people won't take you seriously. VCs won't trust you, and will try  
to reduce you to a mascot as a condition of funding. Customers  
will worry you're going to flake out and leave them stranded. Even  
you yourself, unless you're very unusual, will feel your age to   
some degree; you'll find it awkward to be the boss of someone much   
older than you, and if you're 21, hiring only people younger rather   
limits your options.Some people could probably start a company at 18 if they wanted to.  
Bill Gates was 19 when he and Paul Allen started Microsoft. (Paul   
Allen was 22, though, and that probably made a difference.) So if  
you're thinking, I don't care what he says, I'm going to start a  
company now, you may be the sort of person who could get away with  
it.The other cutoff, 38, has a lot more play in it. One reason I put   
it there is that I don't think many people have the physical stamina  
much past that age. I used to work till 2:00 or 3:00 AM every  
night, seven days a week. I don't know if I could do that now.Also,  
startups are a big risk financially. If you try something that  
blows up and leaves you broke at 26, big deal; a lot of 26 year  
olds are broke. By 38 you can't take so many risks-- especially  
if you have kids.My final test may be the most restrictive. Do you actually want  
to start a startup? What it amounts to, economically, is compressing  
your working life into the smallest possible space. Instead of  
working at an ordinary rate for 40 years, you work like hell for   
four. And maybe end up with nothing-- though in that case it  
probably won't take four years.During this time you'll do little but work, because when you're not  
working, your competitors will be. My only leisure activities were  
running, which I needed to do to keep working anyway, and about  
fifteen minutes of reading a night. I had a girlfriend for a total  
of two months during that three year period. Every couple weeks I  
would take a few hours off to visit a used bookshop or go to a   
friend's house for dinner. I went to visit my family twice.  
Otherwise I just worked.Working was often fun, because the people I worked with were some  
of my best friends. Sometimes it was even technically interesting.  
But only about 10% of the time. The best I can say for the other  
90% is that some of it is funnier in hindsight than it seemed then.  
Like the time the power went off in Cambridge for about six hours,  
and we made the mistake of trying to start a gasoline powered  
generator inside our offices. I won't try that again.I don't think the amount of bullshit you have to deal with in a  
startup is more than you'd endure in an ordinary working life. It's  
probably less, in fact; it just seems like a lot because it's   
compressed into a short period. So mainly what a startup buys you   
is time. That's the way to think about it if you're trying to   
decide whether to start one. If you're the sort of person who would  
like to solve the money problem once and for all instead of working   
for a salary for 40 years, then a startup makes sense.For a lot of people the conflict is between startups and graduate  
school. Grad students are just the age, and just the sort of people,  
to start software startups. You may worry that if you do you'll   
blow your chances of an academic career. But it's possible to be   
part of a startup and stay in grad school, especially at first.   
Two of our three original hackers were in grad school the whole   
time, and both got their degrees.   
There are few sources of energy  
so powerful as a procrastinating grad student.If you do have to  
leave grad school, in the worst case it won't be for too long. If  
a startup fails, it will probably fail quickly enough that you can   
return to academic life. And if it succeeds, you may find you no   
longer have such a burning desire to be an assistant professor.If you want to do it, do it. Starting a startup is not the great  
mystery it seems from outside. It's not something you have to know  
about "business" to do. Build something users love, and spend less  
than you make. How hard is that?Notes[1] Google's revenues are about two billion a year, but half comes  
from ads on other sites.[2] One advantage startups have over established companies is that  
there are no discrimination laws about starting businesses. For   
example, I would be reluctant to start a startup with a woman  
who had small children, or was likely to have them soon. But you're  
not allowed to ask prospective employees if they plan to have kids   
soon. Believe it or not, under current US law, you're not even   
allowed to discriminate on the basis of intelligence. Whereas when  
you're starting a company, you can discriminate on any basis you  
want about who you start it with.[3] Learning to hack is a lot cheaper than business school, because  
you can do it mostly on your own. For the price of a Linux box, a  
copy of K&R, and a few hours of advice from your neighbor's fifteen  
year old son, you'll be well on your way.[4] Corollary: Avoid starting a startup to sell things to the biggest  
company of all, the government. Yes, there are lots of opportunities  
to sell them technology. But let someone else start those startups.[5] A friend who started a company in Germany told me they do care   
about the paperwork there, and that there's more of it. Which helps  
explain why there are not more startups in Germany.[6] At the seed stage our valuation was in principle $100,000, because  
Julian got 10% of the company. But this is a very misleading number,  
because the money was the least important of the things Julian gave us.[7] The same goes for companies that seem to want to acquire you.  
There will be a few that are only pretending to in order to pick  
your brains. But you can never tell for sure which these are, so  
the best approach is to seem entirely open, but to fail to mention  
a few critical technical secrets.[8] I was as bad an employee as this place was a company. I  
apologize to anyone who had to work with me there.[9] You could probably write a book about how to succeed in business  
by doing everything in exactly the opposite way from the DMV.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Sarah Harlin, Jessica Livingston,  
and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this essay, and to Steve  
Melendez and Gregory Price for inviting me to speak.Domain Name SearchTurkish TranslationHebrew TranslationRussian TranslationChinese TranslationFrench TranslationJapanese TranslationArabic Translation

# What You'll Wish You'd Known

January 2005(I wrote this talk for a  
high school. I never actually   
gave it, because the school authorities vetoed the plan to invite me.)When I said I was speaking at a high school, my friends were curious.  
What will you say to high school students? So I asked them, what  
do you wish someone had told you in high school? Their answers  
were remarkably similar. So I'm going to tell you what we all wish  
someone had told us.I'll start by telling you something you don't have to know in high  
school: what you want to do with your life. People are always  
asking you this, so you think you're supposed to have an answer.  
But adults ask this mainly as a conversation starter. They want  
to know what sort of person you are, and this question is just to  
get you talking. They ask it the way you might poke a hermit crab  
in a tide pool, to see what it does.If I were back in high school and someone asked about my plans, I'd  
say that my first priority was to learn what the options were. You  
don't need to be in a rush to choose your life's work. What you   
need to do is discover what you like. You have to work on stuff   
you like if you want to be good at what you do.It might seem that nothing would be easier than deciding what you  
like, but it turns out to be hard, partly because it's hard to get  
an accurate picture of most jobs. Being a doctor is not the way  
it's portrayed on TV. Fortunately you can also watch real doctors,  
by volunteering in hospitals. [1]But there are other jobs you can't learn about, because no one is  
doing them yet. Most of the work I've done in the last ten years  
didn't exist when I was in high school. The world changes fast,   
and the rate at which it changes is itself speeding up. In such a  
world it's not a good idea to have fixed plans.And yet every May, speakers all over the country fire up the Standard   
Graduation Speech, the theme of which is: don't give up on your  
dreams. I know what they mean, but this is a bad way to put it,  
because it implies you're supposed to be bound by some plan you  
made early on. The computer world has a name for this: premature  
optimization. And it is synonymous with disaster. These speakers  
would do better to say simply, don't give up.What they really mean is, don't get demoralized. Don't think that   
you can't do what other people can. And I agree you shouldn't   
underestimate your potential. People who've done great things tend  
to seem as if they were a race apart. And most biographies only   
exaggerate this illusion, partly due to the worshipful attitude   
biographers inevitably sink into, and partly because, knowing how  
the story ends, they can't help streamlining the plot till it seems  
like the subject's life was a matter of destiny, the mere unfolding  
of some innate genius. In fact I suspect if you had the sixteen  
year old Shakespeare or Einstein in school with you, they'd seem  
impressive, but not totally unlike your other friends.Which is an uncomfortable thought. If they were just like us, then  
they had to work very hard to do what they did. And that's one   
reason we like to believe in genius. It gives us an excuse for  
being lazy. If these guys were able to do what they did only because  
of some magic Shakespeareness or Einsteinness, then it's not our  
fault if we can't do something as good.I'm not saying there's no such thing as genius. But if you're  
trying to choose between two theories and one gives you an excuse   
for being lazy, the other one is probably right.So far we've cut the Standard Graduation Speech down from "don't  
give up on your dreams" to "what someone else can do, you can do."  
But it needs to be cut still further. There is some variation  
in natural ability. Most people overestimate its role, but it does   
exist. If I were talking to a guy four feet tall whose ambition   
was to play in the NBA, I'd feel pretty stupid saying, you can  
do anything if you really try. [2]We need to cut the Standard Graduation Speech down to, "what someone  
else with your abilities can do, you can do; and don't underestimate  
your abilities." But as so often happens, the closer you get to  
the truth, the messier your sentence gets. We've taken a nice,   
neat (but wrong) slogan, and churned it up like a mud puddle. It  
doesn't make a very good speech anymore. But worse still, it doesn't  
tell you what to do anymore. Someone with your abilities? What   
are your abilities?UpwindI think the solution is to work in the other direction. Instead  
of working back from a goal, work forward from promising situations.  
This is what most successful people actually do anyway.In the graduation-speech approach, you decide where you want to be  
in twenty years, and then ask: what should I do now to get there?   
I propose instead that you don't commit to anything in the future,  
but just look at the options available now, and choose those that  
will give you the most promising range of options afterward.It's not so important what you work on, so long as you're not wasting  
your time. Work on things that interest you and increase your  
options, and worry later about which you'll take.Suppose you're a college freshman deciding whether to major in math   
or economics. Well, math will give you more options: you can go into  
almost any field from math. If you major in math it will be easy  
to get into grad school in economics, but if you major in economics  
it will be hard to get into grad school in math.Flying a glider is a good metaphor here. Because a glider doesn't  
have an engine, you can't fly into the wind without losing a lot  
of altitude. If you let yourself get far downwind of good places   
to land, your options narrow uncomfortably. As a rule you want to  
stay upwind. So I propose that as a replacement for "don't give   
up on your dreams." Stay upwind.How do you do that, though? Even if math is upwind of economics,  
how are you supposed to know that as a high school student?Well, you don't, and that's what you need to find out. Look for smart people  
and hard problems. Smart people tend to clump together, and if you  
can find such a clump, it's probably worthwhile to join it. But  
it's not straightforward to find these, because there is a lot of   
faking going on.To a newly arrived undergraduate, all university departments look  
much the same. The professors all seem forbiddingly intellectual  
and publish papers unintelligible to outsiders. But while in some  
fields the papers are unintelligible because they're full of hard  
ideas, in others they're deliberately written in an obscure way to  
seem as if they're saying something important. This may seem a   
scandalous proposition, but it has been experimentally verified,  
in the famous Social Text affair. Suspecting that the papers  
published by literary theorists were often just intellectual-sounding  
nonsense, a physicist deliberately wrote a paper full of  
intellectual-sounding nonsense, and submitted it to a literary  
theory journal, which published it.The best protection is always to be working on hard problems.   
Writing novels is hard. Reading novels isn't.   
Hard means worry: if you're not worrying that  
something you're making will come out badly, or that you won't be   
able to understand something you're studying, then it isn't hard  
enough. There has to be suspense.Well, this seems a grim view of the world, you may think. What I'm  
telling you is that you should worry? Yes, but it's not as bad as  
it sounds. It's exhilarating to overcome worries. You don't see  
faces much happier than people winning gold medals. And you know  
why they're so happy? Relief.I'm not saying this is the only way to be happy. Just that some  
kinds of worry are not as bad as they sound.AmbitionIn practice, "stay upwind" reduces to "work on hard problems." And   
you can start today. I wish I'd grasped that in  
high school.Most people like to be good at what they do. In the so-called real   
world this need is a powerful force. But high school students  
rarely benefit from it, because they're given a fake thing to do.   
When I was in high school, I let myself believe that my job was to   
be a high school student. And so I let my need to be good at what   
I did be satisfied by merely doing well in school.If you'd asked me in high school what the difference was between  
high school kids and adults, I'd have said it was that adults had   
to earn a living. Wrong. It's that adults take responsibility for  
themselves. Making a living is only a small part of it.  
Far more important is to take intellectual responsibility for oneself.If I had to go through high school again, I'd treat it like a day  
job. I don't mean that I'd slack in school. Working at something  
as a day job doesn't mean doing it badly. It means not being defined  
by it. I mean I wouldn't think of myself as a high school student,  
just as a musician with a day job as a waiter doesn't think of   
himself as a waiter. [3] And when I wasn't working at my day job  
I'd start trying to do real work.When I ask people what they regret most about high school, they  
nearly all say the same thing: that they wasted so much time. If  
you're wondering what you're doing now that you'll regret most  
later, that's probably it. [4]Some people say this is inevitable — that high school students  
aren't capable of getting anything done yet. But I don't think  
this is true. And the proof is that you're bored. You probably  
weren't bored when you were eight. When you're eight it's called  
"playing" instead of "hanging out," but it's the same thing. And  
when I was eight, I was rarely bored. Give me a back yard and a  
few other kids and I could play all day.The reason this got stale in middle school and high school, I now  
realize, is that I was ready for something else. Childhood was  
getting old.I'm not saying you shouldn't hang out with your friends — that you  
should all become humorless little robots who do nothing but work.  
Hanging out with friends is like chocolate cake. You enjoy it more  
if you eat it occasionally than if you eat nothing but chocolate   
cake for every meal. No matter how much you like chocolate cake,  
you'll be pretty queasy after the third meal of it. And that's   
what the malaise one feels in high school is: mental queasiness.  
[5]You may be thinking, we have to do more than get good grades. We  
have to have extracurricular activities. But you know  
perfectly well how bogus most of these are. Collecting donations  
for a charity is an admirable thing to do, but it's not hard.  
It's not getting something done. What I mean by getting something  
done is learning how to write well, or how to program computers,  
or what life was really like in preindustrial societies, or how to   
draw the human face from life. This sort of thing rarely translates  
into a line item on a college application.CorruptionIt's dangerous to design your life around getting into college,   
because the people you have to impress to get into college are not   
a very discerning audience. At most colleges, it's not the professors  
who decide whether you get in, but admissions officers, and they  
are nowhere near as smart. They're the NCOs of the intellectual  
world. They can't tell how smart you are.  
The mere existence of prep schools is proof of that.Few parents  
would pay so much for their kids to go to a school that didn't   
improve their admissions prospects. Prep schools openly say this  
is one of their aims. But what that means, if you stop to   
think about it, is that they can  
hack the admissions process: that they can take the very same kid  
and make him seem a more appealing candidate than he would if he   
went to the local public school. [6]Right now most of you feel your job in life is to be a promising  
college applicant. But that means you're designing your life to  
satisfy a process so mindless that there's a whole industry devoted  
to subverting it. No wonder you become cynical. The malaise you  
feel is the same that a producer of reality TV shows or a tobacco   
industry executive feels. And you don't even get paid a lot.So what do you do? What you should not do is rebel. That's what  
I did, and it was a mistake. I didn't realize exactly what was   
happening to us, but I smelled a major rat. And so I just gave up.  
Obviously the world sucked, so why bother?When I discovered that one of our teachers was herself using Cliff's  
Notes, it seemed par for the course. Surely it meant nothing to  
get a good grade in such a class.In retrospect this was stupid. It was like someone getting fouled  
in a soccer game and saying, hey, you fouled me, that's against the  
rules, and walking off the field in indignation. Fouls happen.   
The thing to do when you get fouled is not to lose your cool. Just  
keep playing. By putting you in this situation, society has fouled you. Yes,   
as you suspect, a lot of the stuff you learn in your classes is   
crap. And yes, as you suspect, the college admissions process is  
largely a charade. But like many fouls, this one was unintentional.  
[7] So just keep playing.Rebellion is almost as stupid as obedience. In either case you let  
yourself be defined by what they tell you to do. The best plan, I  
think, is to step onto an orthogonal vector. Don't just do what   
they tell you, and don't just refuse to. Instead treat school as  
a day job. As day jobs go, it's pretty sweet. You're done at 3  
o'clock, and you can even work on your own stuff while you're there.CuriosityAnd what's your real job supposed to be? Unless you're Mozart,   
your first task is to figure that out. What are the great things  
to work on? Where are the imaginative people? And most importantly,  
what are you interested in? The word "aptitude" is misleading,  
because it implies something innate. The most powerful sort of  
aptitude is a consuming interest in some question, and such interests  
are often acquired tastes.A distorted version of this idea has filtered into popular culture  
under the name "passion." I recently saw an ad for waiters saying  
they wanted people with a "passion for service." The real thing   
is not something one could have for waiting on tables. And passion  
is a bad word for it. A better name would be curiosity.Kids are curious, but the curiosity I mean has a different shape from kid  
curiosity. Kid curiosity is broad and shallow; they ask why at  
random about everything. In most adults this curiosity dries up  
entirely. It has to: you can't get anything done if you're always  
asking why about everything. But in ambitious adults, instead of  
drying up, curiosity becomes narrow and deep. The mud flat morphs  
into a well.Curiosity turns work into play. For Einstein, relativity wasn't a  
book full of hard stuff he had to learn for an exam. It was a  
mystery he was trying to solve. So it probably felt like less work  
to him to invent it than it would seem to someone now to learn it  
in a class.One of the most dangerous illusions you get from school is the idea  
that doing great things requires a lot of discipline. Most subjects  
are taught in such a boring way that it's only by discipline that  
you can flog yourself through them. So I was surprised when, early  
in college, I read a quote by Wittgenstein saying that he had no   
self-discipline and had never been able to deny himself anything,   
not even a cup of coffee.Now I know a number of people who do great work, and it's the same  
with all of them. They have little discipline. They're all terrible  
procrastinators and find it almost impossible to make themselves  
do anything they're not interested in. One still hasn't sent out  
his half of the thank-you notes from his wedding, four years ago.  
Another has 26,000 emails in her inbox.I'm not saying you can get away with zero self-discipline. You   
probably need about the amount you need to go running. I'm often   
reluctant to go running, but once I do, I enjoy it. And if I don't   
run for several days, I feel ill. It's the same with people who   
do great things. They know they'll feel bad if they don't work,  
and they have enough discipline to get themselves to their desks  
to start working. But once they get started, interest takes over,  
and discipline is no longer necessary.Do you think Shakespeare was gritting his teeth and diligently  
trying to write Great Literature? Of course not. He was having  
fun. That's why he's so good.If you want to do good work, what you need is a great curiosity   
about a promising question. The critical moment for Einstein  
was when he looked at Maxwell's equations and said, what the hell  
is going on here?It can take years to zero in on a productive question, because it  
can take years to figure out what a subject is really about. To  
take an extreme example, consider math. Most people think they  
hate math, but the boring stuff you do in school under the name  
"mathematics" is not at all like what mathematicians do.The great mathematician G. H. Hardy said he didn't like math in   
high school either. He only took it up because he was better at  
it than the other students. Only later did he realize math was  
interesting — only later did he start to ask questions instead of  
merely answering them correctly.When a friend of mine used to grumble because he had to write a  
paper for school, his mother would tell him: find a way to make it  
interesting. That's what you need to do: find a question that makes  
the world interesting. People who do great things look at the same  
world everyone else does, but notice some odd detail that's  
compellingly mysterious.And not only in intellectual matters. Henry Ford's great question   
was, why do cars have to be a luxury item? What would happen if  
you treated them as a commodity? Franz Beckenbauer's was, in effect,  
why does everyone have to stay in his position? Why can't defenders  
score goals too?NowIf it takes years to articulate great questions, what do you do now,  
at sixteen? Work toward finding one. Great questions don't appear  
suddenly. They gradually congeal in your head. And what makes  
them congeal is experience. So the way to find great questions is  
not to search for them — not to wander about thinking, what great   
discovery shall I make? You can't answer that; if you could, you'd   
have made it.The way to get a big idea to appear in your head is not to hunt for  
big ideas, but to put in a lot of time on work that interests you,  
and in the process keep your mind open enough that a big idea can  
take roost. Einstein, Ford, and Beckenbauer all used this recipe.  
They all knew their work like a piano player knows the keys. So   
when something seemed amiss to them, they had the confidence to  
notice it.Put in time how and on what? Just pick a project that seems  
interesting: to master some chunk of material, or to make something,  
or to answer some question. Choose a project that will take less  
than a month, and make it something you have the means to finish.  
Do something hard enough to stretch you, but only just, especially   
at first. If you're deciding between two projects, choose whichever   
seems most fun. If one blows up in your face, start another. Repeat  
till, like an internal combustion engine, the process becomes   
self-sustaining, and each project generates the next one. (This  
could take years.)It may be just as well not to do a project "for school," if that  
will restrict you or make it seem like work. Involve your friends  
if you want, but not too many, and only if they're not flakes.   
Friends offer moral support (few startups are started by one person),  
but secrecy also has its advantages. There's something pleasing  
about a secret project. And you can take more risks, because no   
one will know if you fail.Don't worry if a project doesn't seem to be on the path to some  
goal you're supposed to have. Paths can bend a lot more than you  
think. So let the path grow out the project. The most important  
thing is to be excited about it, because it's by doing that you   
learn.Don't disregard unseemly motivations. One of the most powerful is  
the desire to be better than other people at something. Hardy said  
that's what got him started, and I think the only unusual thing   
about him is that he admitted it. Another powerful motivator is  
the desire to do, or know, things you're not supposed to. Closely  
related is the desire to do something audacious. Sixteen year olds  
aren't supposed to write novels. So if you try, anything you achieve  
is on the plus side of the ledger; if you fail utterly, you're doing  
no worse than expectations. [8]Beware of bad models. Especially when they excuse laziness. When   
I was in high school I used to write "existentialist" short stories  
like ones I'd seen by famous writers. My stories didn't have a lot  
of plot, but they were very deep. And they were less work to write  
than entertaining ones would have been. I should have known that  
was a danger sign. And in fact I found my stories pretty boring;   
what excited me was the idea of writing serious, intellectual stuff  
like the famous writers.Now I have enough experience to realize that those famous writers  
actually sucked. Plenty of famous people do; in the short term,  
the quality of one's work is only a small component of fame.   
I should have been less worried about doing something  
that seemed cool, and just done something I liked. That's the  
actual road to coolness anyway.A key ingredient in many projects, almost a project on its own, is   
to find good books. Most books are bad. Nearly all textbooks are  
bad. [9] So don't assume a subject is to be learned from whatever  
book on it happens to be closest. You have to search actively for   
the tiny number of good books.The important thing is to get out there and do stuff. Instead of  
waiting to be taught, go out and learn.Your life doesn't have to be shaped by admissions officers. It   
could be shaped by your own curiosity. It is for all ambitious   
adults. And you don't have to wait to start. In fact, you don't   
have to wait to be an adult. There's no switch inside you that  
magically flips when you turn a certain age or graduate from some  
institution. You start being an adult when you decide to take  
responsibility for your life. You can do that at any age. [10]This may sound like bullshit. I'm just a minor, you may think, I  
have no money, I have to live at home, I have to do what adults   
tell me all day long. Well, most adults labor under restrictions   
just as cumbersome, and they manage to get things done. If you  
think it's restrictive being a kid, imagine having kids.The only real difference between adults and high school kids is  
that adults realize they need to get things done, and high school  
kids don't. That realization hits most people around 23. But I'm  
letting you in on the secret early. So get to work. Maybe you can  
be the first generation whose greatest regret from high school isn't  
how much time you wasted.  
Notes[1] A doctor friend warns that even this can give an inaccurate   
picture. "Who knew how much time it would take up, how little  
autonomy one would have for endless years of training, and how  
unbelievably annoying it is to carry a beeper?"[2] His best bet would probably be to become dictator and intimidate  
the NBA into letting him play. So far the closest anyone has come  
is Secretary of Labor.[3] A day job is one you take to pay the bills so you can do what  
you really want, like play in a band, or invent relativity.Treating high school as a day job might actually make it easier for  
some students to get good grades. If you treat your classes  
as a game, you won't be demoralized if they seem pointless.However bad your classes, you need to get good grades in them to   
get into a decent college. And that is worth doing, because  
universities are where a lot of the clumps of smart people are these  
days.[4] The second biggest regret was caring so much about unimportant  
things. And especially about what other people thought of them.I think what they really mean, in the latter case, is caring what  
random people thought of them. Adults care just as much what other  
people think, but they get to be more selective about the other  
people.I have about thirty friends whose opinions I care about,  
and the opinion of the rest of the world barely affects me. The  
problem in high school is that your peers are chosen for you by   
accidents of age and geography, rather than by you based on respect  
for their judgement.[5] The key to wasting time is distraction. Without distractions  
it's too obvious to your brain that you're not doing anything with  
it, and you start to feel uncomfortable. If you want to measure   
how dependent you've become on distractions, try this experiment:  
set aside a chunk of time on a weekend and sit alone and think.  
You can have a notebook to write your thoughts down in, but nothing  
else: no friends, TV, music, phone, IM, email, Web, games, books,   
newspapers, or magazines. Within an hour most people will feel a   
strong craving for distraction.[6] I don't mean to imply that the only function of prep schools  
is to trick admissions officers. They also generally provide a   
better education. But try this thought experiment: suppose prep  
schools supplied the same superior education but had a tiny (.001)  
negative effect on college admissions. How many parents would still  
send their kids to them?It might also be argued that kids who went to prep schools, because  
they've learned more, are better college candidates. But  
this seems empirically false. What you learn in even the best high  
school is rounding error compared to what you learn in college.   
Public school kids arrive at college with a slight disadvantage,   
but they start to pull ahead in the sophomore year.(I'm not saying public school kids are smarter than preppies, just  
that they are within any given college. That follows necessarily  
if you agree prep schools improve kids' admissions prospects.)[7] Why does society foul you? Indifference, mainly. There are  
simply no outside forces pushing high school to be good. The air  
traffic control system works because planes would crash otherwise.  
Businesses have to deliver because otherwise competitors would take  
their customers. But no planes crash if your school sucks, and it  
has no competitors. High school isn't evil; it's random; but random  
is pretty bad.[8] And then of course there is money. It's not a big factor in  
high school, because you can't do much that anyone wants. But a  
lot of great things were created mainly to make money. Samuel  
Johnson said "no man but a blockhead ever wrote except for money."  
(Many hope he was exaggerating.)[9] Even college textbooks are bad. When you get to college,  
you'll find that (with a few stellar exceptions) the textbooks are  
not written by the leading scholars in the field they describe.  
Writing college textbooks is unpleasant work, done mostly by people  
who need the money. It's unpleasant because the publishers exert  
so much control, and there are few things worse than close supervision  
by someone who doesn't understand what you're doing. This phenomenon  
is apparently   
even worse in the production of high school textbooks.[10] Your teachers are always telling you to behave like adults.  
I wonder if they'd like it if you did. You may be loud and  
disorganized, but you're very docile compared to adults. If you  
actually started acting like adults, it would be just as if a bunch  
of adults had been transposed into your bodies. Imagine the reaction  
of an FBI agent or taxi driver or reporter to being told they had  
to ask permission to go the bathroom, and only one person could go  
at a time. To say nothing of the things you're taught. If a bunch  
of actual adults suddenly found themselves trapped in high school,  
the first thing they'd do is form a union and renegotiate all the  
rules with the administration.Thanks to Ingrid Bassett, Trevor Blackwell,   
Rich Draves, Dan Giffin, Sarah  
Harlin, Jessica Livingston, Jackie McDonough, Robert Morris, Mark Nitzberg, Lisa   
Randall, and Aaron Swartz for reading drafts of this, and to many  
others for talking to me about high school.Why Nerds are UnpopularJapanese TranslationRussian TranslationGeorgian Translation

# Made in USA

November 2004(This is a new essay for the Japanese edition of   
Hackers   
& Painters.  
It tries to explain why Americans make some things well   
and others badly.)A few years ago an Italian friend of mine travelled by train from  
Boston to Providence. She had only been in America for a  
couple weeks and hadn't seen much of the country yet. She arrived  
looking astonished. "It's so ugly!"People from other rich countries can scarcely imagine  
the squalor of the man-made bits of America. In travel books  
they show you mostly natural environments: the Grand Canyon,  
whitewater rafting, horses in a field. If you see  
pictures with man-made things in them, it will be either a  
view of the New York skyline shot from a discreet distance,  
or a carefully cropped image of a seacoast town in Maine.How can it be, visitors must wonder. How can the richest country  
in the world look like this?Oddly enough, it may not be a coincidence. Americans are good  
at some things and bad at others. We're good at making  
movies and software, and bad at making cars and cities.  
And I think we may be good at what we're good at for the same  
reason we're bad at what we're bad at. We're impatient.  
In America, if you want to do something, you don't worry that  
it might come out badly, or upset delicate social balances, or  
that people might think you're getting above yourself. If you  
want to do something, as Nike says, just do it.This works well in some fields and badly in others. I suspect  
it works in movies and software because they're both messy   
processes. "Systematic"  
is the last word I'd use to describe the way   
good programmers write software.  
Code is not something they assemble painstakingly after  
careful planning, like the pyramids. It's something they  
plunge into, working fast and constantly changing their minds,  
like a charcoal sketch.In software, paradoxical  
as it sounds, good craftsmanship means working fast.  
If you work slowly and meticulously,  
you merely end up with a very fine implementation of your initial,  
mistaken idea.  
Working slowly and meticulously is  
premature optimization. Better to get a  
prototype done fast, and see what new ideas  
it gives you.It sounds like making movies works a lot like making software.  
Every movie is a Frankenstein, full of imperfections  
and usually quite different from what was originally envisioned.   
But interesting, and finished fairly quickly. I think we get away with this in movies and software  
because they're both malleable mediums. Boldness pays.  
  
And if at the last minute two parts don't quite   
fit, you can figure out some hack that will at least conceal  
the problem.Not so with cars, or cities. They are all too physical.  
If the car business worked like software or movies, you'd  
surpass your competitors by making a car that weighed only  
fifty pounds, or folded up to the size of a motorcycle when   
you wanted to park it. But with physical products there are  
more constraints. You don't win by dramatic innovations  
so much as by good taste and attention to detail.The trouble is, the very word "taste"  
sounds slightly ridiculous to American ears.  
It seems pretentious, or frivolous, or even effeminate.  
Blue staters think it's "subjective," and red staters   
think it's for sissies. So anyone in America  
who really cares about design will be sailing upwind.Twenty years ago we used to hear that the problem with  
the US car industry was the workers.  
We don't hear that any more now that Japanese companies  
are building cars in the US. The problem with  
American cars is bad design. You can see that just by  
looking at them.All that extra sheet metal on the AMC Matador wasn't  
added by the workers. The problem  
with this car, as with American cars today, is that it was  
designed by marketing people instead of designers.Why do the Japanese make better cars than us? Some say it's  
because their culture encourages cooperation. That may come  
into it. But in this case it seems more to the point that  
their culture prizes design and craftsmanship.For centuries the Japanese have made finer things than we  
have in the West. When you look at swords they  
made in 1200, you just can't believe the date on the label  
is right.  
Presumably their cars fit together more   
precisely than ours for the same reason their joinery always has.  
They're obsessed with making things well.Not us.  
When we make something in America, our aim is just to get the   
job done. Once we reach that point, we take one of two routes.  
We can stop there, and have something crude but  
serviceable, like a Vise-grip. Or we can improve it,  
which usually means encrusting it with gratuitous ornament.  
When we want to make a car "better,"  
we stick tail fins on it, or make it   
longer, or make the   
windows smaller, depending on the current fashion.Ditto for houses. In America you can have either a flimsy box banged  
together out of two by fours and drywall, or a McMansion-- a  
flimsy box banged together out of two by fours and drywall,  
but larger, more dramatic-looking, and full of expensive fittings.  
Rich people don't get better design or craftsmanship;  
they just get a larger, more conspicuous version of the  
standard house.We don't especially prize design or craftsmanship here. What  
we like is speed, and we're willing to do something in an ugly  
way to get it done fast. In some  
fields, like software or movies, this is a net win.   
But it's not just that software and movies are malleable mediums.  
In those businesses, the designers (though they're  
not generally called that) have more power.   
Software companies, at least successful ones, tend to be run  
by programmers. And in the film industry, though producers  
may second-guess directors, the director controls most of  
what appears on the screen.  
And so American software and movies, and Japanese cars, all  
have this in common: the people in charge care about  
design-- the former because the designers are in charge, and the latter  
because the whole culture cares about design.I think most Japanese executives would be horrified at  
the idea of making a bad car. Whereas American executives,  
in their hearts, still believe the most important thing about  
a car is the image it projects.  
Make a good car? What's "good?" It's so subjective.  
If you want to know how to design a car, ask a focus group.Instead of relying on their own internal design compass  
(like Henry Ford did),  
American car companies try to make what marketing people  
think consumers want. But it isn't working. American cars continue  
to lose market share. And the reason is that the customer  
doesn't want what he thinks he wants.Letting focus groups design your cars for you   
only wins in the short term. In the long term, it pays  
to bet on good design. The focus group may say they want the  
meretricious feature du jour, but what they want even more is  
to imitate sophisticated buyers, and they, though a  
small minority, really do care about good design.  
Eventually the  
pimps and drug dealers notice that the doctors and lawyers  
have switched from Cadillac to Lexus, and do the same.Apple is an interesting counterexample to the general  
American trend. If you want to buy a nice CD player, you'll  
probably buy a Japanese one. But if you want to buy an  
MP3 player, you'll probably buy an iPod. What happened?  
Why doesn't Sony dominate MP3 players? Because Apple is  
in the consumer electronics business now, and unlike  
other American companies, they're obsessed with good design.   
Or more precisely, their CEO is.I just got an iPod, and it's not just nice. It's   
surprisingly nice. For it to surprise me, it must be  
satisfying expectations I didn't know I had. No focus  
group is going to discover those. Only a great   
designer can.Cars aren't the worst thing we make in America.  
Where the just-do-it model fails most dramatically is in our cities-- or  
rather, exurbs.  
If real estate developers operated on a large enough scale, if  
they built whole towns, market forces would compel  
them to build towns that didn't suck. But they only build a  
couple office buildings or suburban streets at a time, and the  
result is so depressing that the inhabitants consider it a great  
treat to fly to Europe and spend a couple weeks living what  
is, for people there, just everyday life. [1]But the just-do-it model does have advantages. It seems the clear  
winner for generating wealth and technical innovations  
(which are practically the same thing). I think speed is the reason.  
It's hard to create wealth by making a commodity. The  
real value is in things that are new, and if you want to  
be the first to make something, it helps to work fast.  
For better or worse, the just-do-it model is fast,  
whether you're Dan Bricklin writing the prototype of VisiCalc in  
a weekend, or a real estate developer  
building a block of shoddy condos in a month.If I had to choose between the just-do-it model and the  
careful model, I'd probably choose just-do-it.  
But do we have to choose? Could we have it both ways?  
Could Americans have nice  
places to live without undermining the impatient, individualistic spirit  
that makes us good at software? Could other countries  
introduce more individualism into their technology companies  
and research labs without having it metastasize as strip malls?  
I'm optimistic. It's harder to  
say about other countries, but in the US, at least, I think   
we can have both.Apple is an encouraging example. They've managed to preserve  
enough of the impatient, hackerly spirit you need to write  
software. And yet when  
you pick up a new Apple laptop, well, it doesn't  
seem American. It's too perfect. It seems as if it  
must have been made by a Swedish or a Japanese company.In many technologies, version 2 has higher resolution. Why  
not in design generally? I think we'll gradually see  
national characters superseded  
by occupational characters: hackers in Japan will be allowed  
to behave with a willfulness   
that would now seem unJapanese,  
and products in America will be designed with an  
insistence on taste that would now seem unAmerican.  
Perhaps the most successful countries, in the future, will be  
those most willing to ignore what are now considered  
national characters, and do each kind of work in the way  
that works best. Race you.Notes[1] Japanese cities are ugly too, but for different reasons.  
Japan is prone to earthquakes, so buildings are traditionally  
seen as temporary; there is no grand tradition of city planning  
like the one Europeans inherited from Rome. The other cause is  
the notoriously corrupt relationship between the government  
and construction companies.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Barry Eisler, Sarah Harlin,  
Shiro Kawai, Jessica Livingston, Jackie McDonough, Robert Morris,   
and Eric Raymond  
for reading drafts of this.American GothicThe John Rain Books

# It's Charisma, Stupid

November 2004, corrected June 2006Occam's razor says we should prefer the simpler of two explanations.  
I begin by reminding readers of this principle because I'm about  
to propose a theory that will offend both liberals and conservatives.  
But Occam's razor means, in effect, that if you want to disagree  
with it, you have a hell of a coincidence to explain.Theory: In US presidential elections, the more   
charismatic candidate wins.People who write about politics, whether on the left or the right,  
have a consistent bias: they take politics seriously. When one  
candidate beats another they look for political explanations. The  
country is shifting to the left, or the right. And that sort of  
shift can certainly be the result of a presidential election, which  
makes it easy to believe it was the cause.But when I think about why I voted for Clinton over the first George  
Bush, it wasn't because I was shifting to the left. Clinton just  
seemed more dynamic. He seemed to want the job more. Bush seemed  
old and tired. I suspect it was the same for a lot of voters.Clinton didn't represent any national shift leftward.  
[1]  
He was  
just more charismatic than George Bush or (God help us) Bob Dole.  
In 2000 we practically got a controlled experiment to prove it:  
Gore had Clinton's policies, but not his charisma, and he suffered  
proportionally.   
[2]  
Same story in 2004. Kerry was smarter and more  
articulate than Bush, but rather a stiff. And Kerry lost.As I looked further back, I kept finding the same pattern.   
Pundits said Carter beat Ford  
because the country distrusted the Republicans after Watergate.  
And yet it also happened that Carter was famous for his big grin  
and folksy ways, and Ford for being a boring klutz. Four years  
later, pundits said the country had lurched to the right. But  
Reagan, a former actor, also happened to be even more charismatic  
than Carter (whose grin was somewhat less cheery after four stressful  
years in office). In 1984 the charisma gap between Reagan and  
Mondale was like that between Clinton and Dole, with similar results.  
The first George Bush managed to win in 1988, though he would later  
be vanquished by one of the most charismatic presidents ever, because  
in 1988 he was up against the notoriously uncharismatic  
Michael Dukakis.These are the elections I remember personally, but apparently the  
same pattern played out in 1964 and 1972. The most recent  
counterexample appears to be 1968, when Nixon beat the more charismatic Hubert  
Humphrey. But when you examine that election, it tends to support  
the charisma theory more than contradict it. As Joe McGinnis  
recounts in his famous book The Selling of the President 1968,  
Nixon knew he had less charisma than Humphrey, and thus simply  
refused to debate him on TV. He knew he couldn't afford to let the  
two of them be seen side by side.Now a candidate probably couldn't get away with refusing to debate.  
But in 1968 the custom of televised debates was still evolving. In  
effect, Nixon won in 1968 because voters were never allowed to see  
the real Nixon. All they saw were carefully scripted campaign  
spots.Oddly enough, the most recent true counterexample is probably 1960.  
Though this election is usually given as an example of the power  
of TV, Kennedy apparently would not have won without fraud by party  
machines in Illinois and Texas. But TV was still young in 1960;  
only 87% of households had it.  
[3]  
Undoubtedly TV helped Kennedy,  
so historians are correct in regarding this election as a  
watershed. TV required a new kind of candidate. There would be no  
more Calvin Coolidges.The charisma theory may also explain why Democrats tend to lose  
presidential elections. The core of the Democrats' ideology seems  
to be a belief in government. Perhaps this tends to attract people  
who are earnest, but dull. Dukakis, Gore, and Kerry were so similar  
in that respect that they might have been brothers. Good thing for  
the Democrats that their screen lets through an occasional Clinton,  
even if some scandal results.   
[4]One would like to believe elections are won and lost on issues, if  
only fake ones like Willie Horton. And yet, if they are, we have  
a remarkable coincidence to explain. In every presidential election  
since TV became widespread, the apparently more charismatic candidate  
has won. Surprising, isn't it, that voters' opinions on the issues  
have lined up with charisma for 11 elections in a row?The political commentators who come up with shifts to the left or  
right in their morning-after analyses are like the financial reporters  
stuck writing stories day after day about the random fluctuations  
of the stock market. Day ends, market closes up or down, reporter  
looks for good or bad news respectively, and writes that the market  
was up on news of Intel's earnings, or down on fears of instability  
in the Middle East. Suppose we could somehow feed these reporters  
false information about market closes, but give them all the other  
news intact. Does anyone believe they would notice the anomaly,  
and not simply write that stocks were up (or down) on whatever good  
(or bad) news there was that day? That they would say, hey, wait  
a minute, how can stocks be up with all this unrest in the Middle  
East?I'm not saying that issues don't matter to voters. Of course they  
do. But the major parties know so well which issues matter how  
much to how many voters, and adjust their message so precisely in  
response, that they tend to split the difference on the issues,  
leaving the election to be decided by the one factor they can't  
control: charisma.If the Democrats had been running a candidate as charismatic as  
Clinton in the 2004 election, he'd have won. And we'd be reading  
that the election was a referendum on the war in Iraq, instead of  
that the Democrats are out of touch with evangelical Christians in  
middle America.During the 1992 election, the Clinton campaign staff had a big sign  
in their office saying "It's the economy, stupid." Perhaps it was  
even simpler than they thought.PostscriptOpinions seem to be divided about the charisma theory. Some say  
it's impossible, others say it's obvious. This seems a good sign.  
Perhaps it's in the sweet spot midway between.As for it being impossible, I reply: here's the data; here's the  
theory; theory explains data 100%. To a scientist, at least, that  
means it deserves attention, however implausible it seems.You can't believe voters are so superficial that they just choose  
the most charismatic guy? My theory doesn't require that. I'm not  
proposing that charisma is the only factor, just that it's the only  
one left after the efforts of the two parties cancel one  
another out.As for the theory being obvious, as far as I know, no one has  
proposed it before. Election forecasters are proud when they can  
achieve the same results with much more complicated models.Finally, to the people who say that the theory is probably true,  
but rather depressing: it's not so bad as it seems. The phenomenon  
is like a pricing anomaly; once people realize it's there, it will  
disappear. Once both parties realize it's a waste of time to  
nominate uncharismatic candidates, they'll tend to nominate only  
the most charismatic ones. And if the candidates are equally  
charismatic, charisma will cancel out, and elections will be decided  
on issues, as political commentators like to think they are now.Notes[1]  
As Clinton himself discovered to his surprise when, in one of  
his first acts as president, he tried to shift the military leftward.  
After a bruising fight he escaped with a face-saving compromise.[2]  
True, Gore won the popular vote. But politicians know the electoral  
vote decides the election, so that's what they campaign for. If Bush  
had been campaigning for the popular vote he would presumably have  
got more of it. (Thanks to judgmentalist for this point.)[3]  
Source: Nielsen Media Research. Of the remaining 13%, 11 didn't  
have TV because they couldn't afford it. I'd argue that the missing  
11% were probably also the 11% most susceptible to charisma.[4]  
One implication of this theory is that parties shouldn't be too  
quick to reject candidates with skeletons in their closets.  
Charismatic candidates will tend to have more skeletons than squeaky  
clean dullards, but in practice that doesn't seem to lose elections.  
The current Bush, for example, probably did more drugs in his  
twenties than any preceding president, and yet managed to get elected  
with a base of evangelical Christians. All you have to do is say  
you've reformed, and stonewall about the details.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Maria Daniels, Jessica Livingston,  
Jackie McDonough, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this, and  
to Eric Raymond for pointing out that I was wrong about 1968.  
  
  
Comment on this essay.What Charisma IsPolitics and the Art of ActingJapanese Translation

# Bradley's Ghost

November 2004  
A lot of people are writing now about   
why Kerry lost. Here I want to  
examine a more specific question: why were the exit polls so   
wrong?In Ohio, which Kerry ultimately  
lost 49-51, exit polls gave him a 52-48 victory. And this wasn't just  
random error. In every swing state they overestimated the Kerry vote.  
In Florida, which Bush ultimately won 52-47, exit polls predicted  
a dead heat.(These are not early numbers. They're from about midnight eastern time,   
long after polls closed in Ohio and Florida. And yet by the  
next afternoon the exit poll numbers online corresponded to the returns.   
The only way I can imagine this happening is if those in  
charge of the exit polls cooked the books after seeing the actual  
returns. But that's another issue.)What happened? The source of the problem may be a variant of  
the Bradley Effect.   
This term  
was invented after Tom Bradley, the black mayor of Los Angeles,   
lost an election for governor of California despite a comfortable  
lead in the polls. Apparently voters were afraid to say   
they planned to vote against him, lest their motives be  
(perhaps correctly) suspected.It seems likely that something similar happened in exit polls this year.  
In theory, exit polls ought to be very accurate.   
You're not asking people what they would do. You're  
asking what they just did.How can you get errors asking that? Because some people don't  
respond. To get a truly random sample, pollsters ask, say, every  
20th person leaving the polling place who they voted for. But not  
everyone wants to answer. And the pollsters can't simply ignore  
those who won't, or their sample isn't random anymore. So what  
they do, apparently, is note down the age and race and sex of the  
person, and guess from that who they voted for.This works so long as there is no correlation between who people  
vote for and whether they're willing to talk about it. But this  
year there may have been. It may be that a significant number of   
those who voted for  
Bush didn't want to say so.Why not? Because people in the US are more conservative than they're  
willing to admit. The values of the elite in this country, at least  
at the moment, are NPR values. The average person, as I think both  
Republicans and Democrats would agree, is more socially conservative.   
But while some openly flaunt the fact that they don't share the  
opinions of the elite, others feel a little nervous about it, as   
if they had bad table manners.For example, according to current NPR values, you   
can't say anything that might be   
perceived as disparaging towards homosexuals. To do   
so is "homophobic." And yet a large number of Americans are deeply  
religious, and the Bible is quite explicit on the subject of  
homosexuality. What are they to do? I think what many do is keep   
their opinions, but keep them to themselves.They know what they believe, but they also know what they're supposed  
to believe.  
And so when a stranger (for example, a pollster) asks  
them their opinion about something like gay marriage, they will not  
always say what they really think.When the values of the elite are liberal, polls will tend to  
underestimate the conservativeness of ordinary voters. This seems  
to me the leading theory to explain why the exit polls were so   
far off this year. NPR values   
said one ought to vote for Kerry. So all the people who voted for  
Kerry felt virtuous for doing so, and were eager to tell pollsters  
they had. No one who voted for Kerry did it as an act of quiet  
defiance.Support for a Woman PresidentJapanese Translation  
  
If you liked this, you may also like  
Hackers & Painters.

# A Version 1.0

October 2004  
As E. B. White said, "good writing is rewriting." I didn't  
realize this when I was in school. In writing, as in math and   
science, they only show you the finished product.  
You don't see all the false starts. This gives students a  
misleading view of how things get made.Part of the reason it happens is that writers don't want   
people to see their mistakes. But I'm willing to let people  
see an early draft if it will show how much you have  
to rewrite to beat an essay into shape.Below is the oldest version I can find of  
The Age of the Essay   
(probably the second or third day), with  
text that ultimately survived in   
red and text that later  
got deleted in gray.  
There seem to be several categories of cuts: things I got wrong,  
things that seem like bragging, flames,  
digressions, stretches of awkward prose, and unnecessary words.I discarded more from the beginning. That's  
not surprising; it takes a while to hit your stride. There  
are more digressions at the start, because I'm not sure where  
I'm heading.The amount of cutting is about average. I probably write  
three to four words for every one that appears in the final  
version of an essay.(Before anyone gets mad at me for opinions expressed here, remember  
that anything you see here that's not in the final version is obviously  
something I chose not to publish, often because I disagree  
with it.)  
Recently a friend said that what he liked about  
my essays was that they weren't written the way  
we'd been taught to write essays in school. You  
remember: topic sentence, introductory paragraph,  
supporting paragraphs, conclusion. It hadn't  
occurred to me till then that those horrible things  
we had to write in school were even connected to  
what I was doing now. But sure enough, I thought,  
they did call them "essays," didn't they?Well, they're not. Those things you have to write  
in school are not only not essays, they're one of the  
most pointless of all the pointless hoops you have  
to jump through in school. And I worry that they  
not only teach students the wrong things about writing,  
but put them off writing entirely.So I'm going to give the other side of the story: what  
an essay really is, and how you write one. Or at least,  
how I write one. Students be forewarned: if you actually write  
the kind of essay I describe, you'll probably get bad  
grades. But knowing how it's really done should  
at least help you to understand the feeling of futility  
you have when you're writing the things they tell you to.  
The most obvious difference between real essays and  
the things one has to write in school is that real  
essays are not exclusively about English literature.  
It's a fine thing for schools to  
  
teach students how to  
write. But for some bizarre reason (actually, a very specific bizarre  
reason that I'll explain in a moment),  
  
the teaching of  
writing has gotten mixed together with the study  
of literature. And so all over the country, students are  
writing not about how a baseball team with a small budget   
might compete with the Yankees, or the role of color in  
fashion, or what constitutes a good dessert, but about  
symbolism in Dickens.With obvious   
results. Only a few people really  
  
care about  
symbolism in Dickens. The teacher doesn't.  
The students don't. Most of the people who've had to write PhD  
disserations about Dickens don't. And certainly  
  
Dickens himself would be more interested in an essay  
about color or baseball.How did things get this way? To answer that we have to go back  
almost a thousand years. Between about 500 and 1000, life was  
not very good in Europe. The term "dark ages" is presently  
out of fashion as too judgemental (the period wasn't dark;   
it was just different), but if this label didn't already  
exist, it would seem an inspired metaphor. What little  
original thought there was took place in lulls between  
constant wars and had something of the character of  
the thoughts of parents with a new baby.  
The most amusing thing written during this  
period, Liudprand of Cremona's Embassy to Constantinople, is,  
I suspect, mostly inadvertantly so.Around 1000 Europe began to catch its breath.  
And once they  
had the luxury of curiosity, one of the first things they discovered  
was what we call "the classics."  
Imagine if we were visited   
by aliens. If they could even get here they'd presumably know a  
few things we don't. Immediately Alien Studies would become  
the most dynamic field of scholarship: instead of painstakingly  
discovering things for ourselves, we could simply suck up  
everything they'd discovered. So it was in Europe in 1200.  
When classical texts began to circulate in Europe, they contained  
not just new answers, but new questions. (If anyone proved  
a theorem in christian Europe before 1200, for example, there  
is no record of it.)For a couple centuries, some of the most important work  
being done was intellectual archaelogy. Those were also  
the centuries during which schools were first established.  
And since reading ancient texts was the essence of what  
scholars did then, it became the basis of the curriculum.By 1700, someone who wanted to learn about  
physics didn't need to start by mastering Greek in order to read Aristotle. But schools  
change slower than scholarship: the study of  
ancient texts  
had such prestige that it remained the backbone of   
education  
until the late 19th century. By then it was merely a tradition.  
It did serve some purposes: reading a foreign language was difficult,  
and thus taught discipline, or at least, kept students busy;  
it introduced students to  
cultures quite different from their own; and its very uselessness  
made it function (like white gloves) as a social bulwark.  
But it certainly wasn't  
true, and hadn't been true for centuries, that students were  
serving apprenticeships in the hottest area of scholarship.Classical scholarship had also changed. In the early era, philology  
actually mattered. The texts that filtered into Europe were  
all corrupted to some degree by the errors of translators and  
copyists. Scholars had to figure out what Aristotle said  
before they could figure out what he meant. But by the modern  
era such questions were answered as well as they were ever  
going to be. And so the study of ancient texts became less  
about ancientness and more about texts.The time was then ripe for the question: if the study of  
ancient texts is a valid field for scholarship, why not modern  
texts? The answer, of course, is that the raison d'etre  
of classical scholarship was a kind of intellectual archaelogy that  
does not need to be done in the case of contemporary authors.  
But for obvious reasons no one wanted to give that answer.  
The archaeological work being mostly done, it implied that  
the people studying the classics were, if not wasting their  
time, at least working on problems of minor importance.And so began the study of modern literature. There was some  
initial resistance, but it didn't last long.  
The limiting  
reagent in the growth of university departments is what  
parents will let undergraduates study. If parents will let  
their children major in x, the rest follows straightforwardly.  
There will be jobs teaching x, and professors to fill them.  
The professors will establish scholarly journals and publish  
one another's papers. Universities with x departments will  
subscribe to the journals. Graduate students who want jobs  
as professors of x will write dissertations about it. It may  
take a good long while for the more prestigious universities  
to cave in and establish departments in cheesier xes, but  
at the other end of the scale there are so many universities  
competing to attract students that the mere establishment of  
a discipline requires little more than the desire to do it.High schools imitate universities.  
And so once university  
English departments were established in the late nineteenth century,  
the 'riting component of the 3 Rs   
was morphed into English.  
With the bizarre consequence that high school students now  
had to write about English literature-- to write, without  
even realizing it, imitations of whatever  
English professors had been publishing in their journals a  
few decades before. It's no wonder if this seems to the  
student a pointless exercise, because we're now three steps  
removed from real work: the students are imitating English  
professors, who are imitating classical scholars, who are  
merely the inheritors of a tradition growing out of what  
was, 700 years ago, fascinating and urgently needed work.Perhaps high schools should drop English and just teach writing.  
The valuable part of English classes is learning to write, and  
that could be taught better by itself. Students learn better  
when they're interested in what they're doing, and it's hard  
to imagine a topic less interesting than symbolism in Dickens.  
Most of the people who write about that sort of thing professionally  
are not really interested in it. (Though indeed, it's been a  
while since they were writing about symbolism; now they're  
writing about gender.)I have no illusions about how eagerly this suggestion will   
be adopted. Public schools probably couldn't stop teaching  
English even if they wanted to; they're probably required to by  
law. But here's a related suggestion that goes with the grain  
instead of against it: that universities establish a  
writing major. Many of the students who now major in English  
would major in writing if they could, and most would  
be better off.It will be argued that it is a good thing for students to be  
exposed to their literary heritage. Certainly. But is that  
more important than that they learn to write well? And are  
English classes even the place to do it? After all,  
the average public high school student gets zero exposure to   
his artistic heritage. No disaster results.  
The people who are interested in art learn about it for  
themselves, and those who aren't don't. I find that American  
adults are no better or worse informed about literature than  
art, despite the fact that they spent years studying literature  
in high school and no time at all studying art. Which presumably  
means that what they're taught in school is rounding error   
compared to what they pick up on their own.Indeed, English classes may even be harmful. In my case they  
were effectively aversion therapy. Want to make someone dislike  
a book? Force him to read it and write an essay about it.  
And make the topic so intellectually bogus that you  
could not, if asked, explain why one ought to write about it.  
I love to read more than anything, but by the end of high school  
I never read the books we were assigned. I was so disgusted with  
what we were doing that it became a point of honor  
with me to write nonsense at least as good at the other students'  
without having more than glanced over the book to learn the names  
of the characters and a few random events in it.I hoped this might be fixed in college, but I found the same  
problem there. It was not the teachers. It was English.   
We were supposed to read novels and write essays about them.  
About what, and why? That no one seemed to be able to explain.  
Eventually by trial and error I found that what the teacher   
wanted us to do was pretend that the story had really taken  
place, and to analyze based on what the characters said and did (the  
subtler clues, the better) what their motives must have been.  
One got extra credit for motives having to do with class,  
as I suspect one must now for those involving gender and   
sexuality. I learned how to churn out such stuff well enough  
to get an A, but I never took another English class.And the books we did these disgusting things to, like those  
we mishandled in high school, I find still have black marks  
against them in my mind. The one saving grace was that   
English courses tend to favor pompous, dull writers like  
Henry James, who deserve black marks against their names anyway.  
One of the principles the IRS uses in deciding whether to  
allow deductions is that, if something is fun, it isn't work.  
Fields that are intellectually unsure of themselves rely on  
a similar principle. Reading P.G. Wodehouse or Evelyn Waugh or  
Raymond Chandler is too obviously pleasing to seem like  
serious work, as reading Shakespeare would have been before   
English evolved enough to make it an effort to understand him. [sh]  
And so good writers (just you wait and see who's still in  
print in 300 years) are less likely to have readers turned   
against them by clumsy, self-appointed tour guides.  
The other big difference between a real essay and the   
things  
they make you write in school is that a real essay doesn't   
take a position and then defend it. That principle,  
like the idea that we ought to be writing about literature,   
turns out to be another intellectual hangover of long  
forgotten origins. It's often mistakenly believed that  
medieval universities were mostly seminaries. In fact they  
were more law schools. And at least in our tradition  
lawyers are advocates: they are  
trained to be able to  
take  
either side of an argument and make as good a case for it   
as they can. Whether or not this is a good idea (in the case of prosecutors,  
it probably isn't), it tended to pervade  
the atmosphere of  
early universities. After the lecture the most common form  
of discussion was the disputation. This idea  
is at least  
nominally preserved in our present-day thesis defense-- indeed,  
in the very word thesis. Most people treat the words   
thesis  
and dissertation as interchangeable, but originally, at least,  
a thesis was a position one took and the dissertation was  
the argument by which one defended it.I'm not complaining that we blur these two words together.  
As far as I'm concerned, the sooner we lose the original  
sense of the word thesis, the better. For many, perhaps most,   
graduate students, it is stuffing a square peg into a round  
hole to try to recast one's work as a single thesis. And  
as for the disputation, that seems clearly a net lose.  
Arguing two sides of a case may be a necessary evil in a  
legal dispute, but it's not the best way to get at the truth,  
as I think lawyers would be the first to admit.  
And yet this principle is built into the very structure of   
the essays  
they teach you to write in high school. The topic  
sentence is your thesis, chosen in advance, the supporting   
paragraphs the blows you strike in the conflict, and the  
conclusion--- uh, what it the conclusion? I was never sure   
about that in high school. If your thesis was well expressed,  
what need was there to restate it? In theory it seemed that  
the conclusion of a really good essay ought not to need to   
say any more than QED.  
But when you understand the origins  
of this sort of "essay", you can see where the  
conclusion comes from. It's the concluding remarks to the   
jury.  
What other alternative is there? To answer that  
we have to  
reach back into history again, though this time not so far.  
To Michel de Montaigne, inventor of the essay.  
He was  
doing something quite different from what a  
lawyer does,  
and  
the difference is embodied in the name. Essayer is the French  
verb meaning "to try" (the cousin of our word assay),  
  
and an "essai" is an effort.  
An essay is something you  
write in order  
to figure something out.Figure out what? You don't know yet. And so you can't begin with a  
thesis, because you don't have one, and may never have   
one. An essay doesn't begin with a statement, but with a   
question. In a real essay, you don't take a position and  
defend it. You see a door that's ajar, and you open it and  
walk in to see what's inside.If all you want to do is figure things out, why do you need  
to write anything, though? Why not just sit and think? Well,  
there precisely is Montaigne's great discovery. Expressing  
ideas helps to form them. Indeed, helps is far too weak a  
word. 90%  
of what ends up in my essays was stuff  
I only  
thought of when I sat down to write them. That's why I  
write them.So there's another difference between essays and  
the things  
you have to write in school. In school  
  
you are, in theory,  
explaining yourself to someone else. In the best case---if  
you're really organized---you're just writing it down.  
In a real essay you're writing for yourself. You're  
thinking out loud.But not quite. Just as inviting people over forces you to  
clean up your apartment, writing something that you know  
  
other people will read forces you to think well. So it  
does matter to have an audience. The things I've written  
just for myself are no good. Indeed, they're bad in  
a particular way:  
they tend to peter out. When I run into  
difficulties, I notice that I  
tend to conclude with a few vague  
questions and then drift off to get a cup of tea.This seems a common problem.  
It's practically the standard  
ending in blog entries--- with the addition of a "heh" or an   
emoticon, prompted by the all too accurate sense that  
something is missing.And indeed, a lot of  
published essays peter out in this  
same way.  
Particularly the sort written by the staff writers of newsmagazines. Outside writers tend to supply  
editorials of the defend-a-position variety, which  
make a beeline toward a rousing (and  
foreordained) conclusion. But the staff writers feel  
obliged to write something more  
balanced, which in  
practice ends up meaning blurry.  
Since they're  
writing for a popular magazine, they start with the  
most radioactively controversial questions, from which  
(because they're writing for a popular magazine)  
they then proceed to recoil from  
in terror.  
Gay marriage, for or  
against? This group says one thing. That group says  
another. One thing is certain: the question is a  
complex one. (But don't get mad at us. We didn't  
draw any conclusions.)Questions aren't enough. An essay has to come up with answers.  
They don't always, of course. Sometimes you start with a   
promising question and get nowhere. But those you don't  
publish. Those are like experiments that get inconclusive  
results. Something you publish ought to tell the reader   
something he didn't already know.  
But what you tell him doesn't matter, so long as   
it's interesting. I'm sometimes accused of meandering.  
In defend-a-position writing that would be a flaw.  
There you're not concerned with truth. You already  
know where you're going, and you want to go straight there,  
blustering through obstacles, and hand-waving  
your way across swampy ground. But that's not what  
you're trying to do in an essay. An essay is supposed to  
be a search for truth. It would be suspicious if it didn't  
meander.The Meander is a river in Asia Minor (aka  
Turkey).  
As you might expect, it winds all over the place.  
But does it  
do this out of frivolity? Quite the opposite.  
Like all rivers, it's rigorously following the laws of physics.  
The path it has discovered,  
winding as it is, represents  
the most economical route to the sea.The river's algorithm is simple. At each step, flow down.  
For the essayist this translates to: flow interesting.  
Of all the places to go next, choose  
whichever seems  
most interesting.I'm pushing this metaphor a bit. An essayist  
can't have  
quite as little foresight as a river. In fact what you do  
(or what I do) is somewhere between a river and a roman  
road-builder. I have a general idea of the direction  
I want to go in, and  
I choose the next topic with that in mind. This essay is  
about writing, so I do occasionally yank it back in that  
direction, but it is not all the sort of essay I  
thought I was going to write about writing.Note too that hill-climbing (which is what this algorithm is  
called) can get you in trouble.  
Sometimes, just  
like a river,  
you  
run up against a blank wall. What  
I do then is just   
what the river does: backtrack.  
At one point in this essay  
I found that after following a certain thread I ran out  
of ideas. I had to go back n  
paragraphs and start over  
in another direction. For illustrative purposes I've left  
the abandoned branch as a footnote.  
Err on the side of the river. An essay is not a reference  
work. It's not something you read looking for a specific  
answer, and feel cheated if you don't find it. I'd much  
rather read an essay that went off in an unexpected but  
interesting direction than one that plodded dutifully along  
a prescribed course.So what's interesting? For me, interesting means surprise.  
Design, as Matz  
has said, should follow the principle of  
least surprise.  
A button that looks like it will make a  
machine stop should make it stop, not speed up. Essays  
should do the opposite. Essays should aim for maximum  
surprise.I was afraid of flying for a long time and could only travel  
vicariously. When friends came back from faraway places,  
it wasn't just out of politeness that I asked them about  
their trip.  
I really wanted to know. And I found that  
the best way to get information out of them was to ask  
what surprised them. How was the place different from what  
they expected? This is an extremely useful question.  
You can ask it of even  
the most unobservant people, and it will  
extract information they didn't even know they were  
recording. Indeed, you can ask it in real time. Now when I go somewhere  
new, I make a note of what surprises me about it. Sometimes I  
even make a conscious effort to visualize the place beforehand,  
so I'll have a detailed image to diff with reality.  
Surprises are facts  
you didn't already   
know.  
But they're  
more than that. They're facts  
that contradict things you  
thought you knew. And so they're the most valuable sort of  
fact you can get. They're like a food that's not merely  
healthy, but counteracts the unhealthy effects of things  
you've already eaten.  
How do you find surprises? Well, therein lies half  
the work of essay writing. (The other half is expressing  
yourself well.) You can at least  
use yourself as a  
proxy for the reader. You should only write about things  
you've thought about a lot. And anything you come across  
that surprises you, who've thought about the topic a lot,  
will probably surprise most readers.For example, in a recent essay I pointed out that because  
you can only judge computer programmers by working with  
them, no one knows in programming who the heroes should  
be.  
I  
certainly  
didn't realize this when I started writing  
the   
essay, and even now I find it kind of weird. That's  
what you're looking for.So if you want to write essays, you need two ingredients:  
you need  
a few topics that you think about a lot, and you  
need some ability to ferret out the unexpected.What should you think about? My guess is that it  
doesn't matter. Almost everything is  
interesting if you get deeply  
enough into it. The one possible exception  
are  
things  
like working in fast food, which  
have deliberately had all  
the variation sucked out of them.  
In retrospect, was there  
anything interesting about working in Baskin-Robbins?  
Well, it was interesting to notice  
how important color was  
to the customers. Kids a certain age would point into  
the case and say that they wanted yellow. Did they want  
French Vanilla or Lemon? They would just look at you  
blankly. They wanted yellow. And then there was the  
mystery of why the perennial favorite Pralines n' Cream  
was so appealing. I'm inclined now to  
think it was the salt.  
And the mystery of why Passion Fruit tasted so disgusting.  
People would order it because of the name, and were always  
disappointed. It should have been called In-sink-erator  
Fruit.  
And there was  
the difference in the way fathers and  
mothers bought ice cream for their kids.  
Fathers tended to  
adopt the attitude of  
benevolent kings bestowing largesse,  
and mothers that of  
harried bureaucrats,  
giving in to  
pressure against their better judgement.  
So, yes, there does seem to be material, even in  
fast food.What about the other half, ferreting out the unexpected?  
That may require some natural ability. I've noticed for  
a long time that I'm pathologically observant. ....[That was as far as I'd gotten at the time.]Notes[sh] In Shakespeare's own time, serious writing meant theological  
discourses, not the bawdy plays acted over on the other   
side of the river among the bear gardens and whorehouses.The other extreme, the work that seems formidable from the moment  
it's created (indeed, is deliberately intended to be)  
is represented by Milton. Like the Aeneid, Paradise Lost is a  
rock imitating a butterfly that happened to get fossilized.  
Even Samuel Johnson seems to have balked at this, on the one   
hand paying Milton the compliment of an extensive biography,  
and on the other writing of Paradise Lost that "none who read it  
ever wished it longer."

# What the Bubble Got Right

September 2004(This essay is derived from an invited talk at ICFP 2004.)I had a front row seat for the Internet Bubble,  
because I worked at Yahoo during 1998 and 1999. One day,  
when the stock was trading around $200, I sat down and calculated  
what I thought the price should be. The   
answer I got was $12. I went to  
the next cubicle and told my friend Trevor. "Twelve!" he said.  
He tried to sound indignant, but he didn't quite manage it. He  
knew as well as I did that our valuation was crazy.Yahoo was a special case. It was not just our price to earnings  
ratio that was bogus. Half our earnings were too. Not in  
the Enron way, of course. The finance guys seemed  
scrupulous about reporting earnings. What made our  
earnings bogus was that Yahoo was, in effect, the center of  
a Ponzi scheme. Investors looked at Yahoo's earnings  
and said to themselves, here is proof that Internet companies can make  
money. So they invested in new  
startups that promised to be the next Yahoo. And as soon as these startups  
got the money, what did they do with it?  
Buy millions of dollars worth of advertising on Yahoo to promote  
their brand. Result: a capital investment in a startup this  
quarter shows up as Yahoo earnings next quarter—stimulating  
another round of investments in startups.As in a Ponzi scheme, what seemed to be the returns of this system  
were simply the latest round of investments in it.  
What made it not a Ponzi scheme was that it was unintentional.   
At least, I think it was. The venture capital business is pretty incestuous,  
and there were presumably people in a position, if not to create  
this situation, to realize what was happening and to milk it.A year later the game was up. Starting in January 2000, Yahoo's  
stock price began to crash, ultimately losing 95% of its  
value.Notice, though, that even with all the fat trimmed off its market  
cap, Yahoo was still worth a lot. Even at the morning-after  
valuations of March and April 2001, the people at Yahoo had managed  
to create a company worth about $8 billion in just six years.The fact is, despite all the nonsense we heard  
during the Bubble about the "new economy," there was a  
core of truth. You need  
that to get a really big bubble: you need to have something  
solid at the center, so that even smart people are sucked in.  
(Isaac Newton and Jonathan Swift both lost money  
in the South Sea Bubble of 1720.)Now the pendulum has swung the other way. Now anything that  
became fashionable during the Bubble is ipso facto unfashionable.  
But that's a mistake—an even bigger mistake than believing  
what everyone was saying in 1999. Over the long term,  
what the Bubble got right will be more important than what  
it got wrong.1. Retail VCAfter the excesses of the Bubble, it's now  
considered dubious to take companies public before they have earnings.  
But there is nothing intrinsically wrong with  
that idea. Taking a company public at an early stage is simply  
retail VC: instead of going to venture capital firms for the last round of  
funding, you go to the public markets.By the end of the Bubble, companies going public with no  
earnings were being derided as "concept stocks," as if it  
were inherently stupid to invest in them.  
But investing in concepts isn't stupid; it's what VCs do,  
and the best of them are far from stupid.The stock of a company that doesn't yet have earnings is   
worth something.  
It may take a while for the market to learn  
how to value such companies, just as it had to learn to  
value common stocks in the early 20th century. But markets  
are good at solving that kind of problem. I wouldn't be  
surprised if the market ultimately did a better  
job than VCs do now.Going public early will not be the right plan  
for every company.  
And it can of course be  
disruptive—by distracting the management, or by making the early  
employees suddenly rich. But just as the market will learn  
how to value startups, startups will learn how to minimize  
the damage of going public.2. The InternetThe Internet genuinely is a big deal. That was one reason  
even smart people were fooled by the Bubble. Obviously   
it was going to have a huge effect. Enough of an effect to  
triple the value of Nasdaq companies in two years? No, as it  
turned out. But it was hard to say for certain at the time. [1]The same thing happened during the Mississippi and South Sea Bubbles.  
What drove them was the invention of organized public finance  
(the South Sea Company, despite its name, was really a competitor  
of the Bank of England). And that did turn out to be  
a big deal, in the long run.Recognizing an important trend turns out to be easier than   
figuring out how to profit from it. The mistake  
investors always seem to make is to take the trend too literally.  
Since the Internet was the big new thing, investors supposed  
that the more Internettish the company, the better. Hence  
such parodies as Pets.Com.In fact most of the money to be made from big trends is made  
indirectly. It was not the railroads themselves that   
made the most money during the railroad boom, but the companies  
on either side, like Carnegie's steelworks, which made the rails,  
and Standard Oil, which used railroads to get oil to the East Coast,  
where it could be shipped to Europe.I think the Internet will have great effects,  
and that what we've seen so far is nothing compared to what's  
coming. But most of the winners will only indirectly be  
Internet companies; for every Google there will be ten  
JetBlues.3. ChoicesWhy will the Internet have great effects? The general   
argument is that new forms of communication always do. They happen  
rarely (till industrial times there were just speech, writing, and printing),  
but when they do, they always cause a big splash.The specific argument, or one of them, is the Internet gives us   
more choices. In the "old" economy,  
the high cost of presenting information to people meant they  
had only a narrow range of options to choose from. The tiny,  
expensive pipeline to consumers was tellingly named "the channel."  
Control the channel and you  
could feed them what you wanted, on your terms. And it  
was not just big corporations that depended  
on this principle. So, in their way, did  
labor unions, the traditional news media,  
and the art and literary establishments.  
Winning depended not on doing good work, but on gaining control  
of some bottleneck.There are signs that this is changing.  
Google has over 82 million unique users a month and  
annual revenues of about three billion dollars. [2]  
And yet have you ever seen  
a Google ad?  
Something is going on here.Admittedly, Google is an extreme case. It's very easy for  
people to switch to a new search engine. It costs little  
effort and no money to try a new one, and it's easy to  
see if the results are better. And so Google doesn't have  
to advertise. In a business like theirs, being the best is  
enough.The exciting thing about the Internet is that it's  
shifting everything in that direction.  
The hard part, if you want to win by making the best stuff,  
is the beginning. Eventually everyone  
will learn by word of mouth that you're the best,  
but how do you survive to that point? And it is in this crucial  
stage that the Internet has the most effect. First, the  
Internet lets anyone find you at almost zero cost.  
Second, it dramatically speeds up the rate at which  
reputation spreads by word of mouth. Together these mean that in many  
fields the rule will be: Build it, and they will come.  
Make something great and put it online.  
That is a big change from the recipe for winning in the  
past century.4. YouthThe aspect of the Internet Bubble that the press seemed most  
taken with was the youth of some of the startup founders.  
This too is a trend that will last.  
There is a huge standard deviation among 26 year olds. Some  
are fit only for entry level jobs, but others are  
ready to rule the world if they can find someone to handle  
the paperwork for them.A 26 year old may not be very good at managing people or  
dealing with the SEC. Those require experience.  
But those are also commodities, which can be handed off to  
some lieutenant. The most important quality in a CEO is his  
vision for the company's future. What will they build next?  
And in that department, there are 26 year olds who can  
compete with anyone.In 1970 a company president meant someone in his fifties, at  
least. If he had technologists working for him, they were   
treated like a racing stable: prized, but not powerful. But   
as technology has grown more important, the power of nerds  
has grown to reflect it. Now it's not enough for a CEO to  
have someone smart he can ask about technical matters. Increasingly,  
he has to be that person himself.As always, business has clung to old forms. VCs still seem  
to want to install a legitimate-looking   
talking head as the CEO. But increasingly the founders of  
the company are the real powers, and the grey-headed man  
installed by the VCs more like a  
music group's manager than a general.5. InformalityIn New York, the Bubble had dramatic consequences:  
suits went out of fashion. They made one seem old. So in  
1998 powerful New York types were suddenly wearing  
open-necked shirts and khakis and oval wire-rimmed glasses,  
just like guys in Santa Clara.The pendulum has swung back a bit, driven in part by a panicked  
reaction by the clothing industry. But I'm betting on the  
open-necked shirts. And this is not as frivolous a question  
as it might seem. Clothes are important, as all nerds can sense,  
though they may not realize it consciously.If you're a nerd, you can understand how important clothes are  
by asking yourself how you'd feel about a company  
that made you wear a suit and tie to work. The idea sounds  
horrible, doesn't it? In fact, horrible far out of proportion  
to the mere discomfort of wearing such clothes. A company that  
made programmers wear suits would have something deeply wrong  
with it.And what would be wrong would be that how one presented oneself  
counted more than the quality of one's ideas. That's  
the problem with formality. Dressing up is not so much bad in  
itself. The problem is the receptor it binds to: dressing  
up is inevitably a substitute  
for good ideas. It is no coincidence that technically  
inept business types are known as "suits."Nerds don't just happen to dress informally. They do it too  
consistently. Consciously or not, they dress informally as  
a prophylactic measure against stupidity.6. NerdsClothing is only the most visible battleground in the war  
against formality. Nerds tend to eschew formality of any sort.  
They're not impressed by one's job title, for example,  
or any of the other appurtenances of authority.Indeed, that's practically the definition of a nerd. I found  
myself talking recently to someone from Hollywood who was planning  
a show about nerds. I thought it would be useful if I  
explained what a nerd was. What I came up with was: someone who  
doesn't expend any effort on marketing himself.A nerd, in other words, is someone who concentrates on substance.  
So what's the connection between nerds and technology? Roughly  
that you can't fool mother nature. In technical matters, you  
have to get the right answers. If your software miscalculates  
the path of a space probe, you can't finesse your way out of  
trouble by saying that your code is patriotic, or avant-garde,  
or any of the other dodges people use in nontechnical  
fields.And as technology becomes increasingly important in the  
economy, nerd culture is   
rising with it. Nerds are already  
a lot cooler than they were when I was a kid. When I was in  
college in the mid-1980s, "nerd" was still an insult. People  
who majored in computer science generally tried to conceal it.  
Now women ask me where they can meet nerds. (The answer that  
springs to mind is "Usenix," but that would be like drinking  
from a firehose.)I have no illusions about why nerd culture is becoming  
more accepted. It's not because people are  
realizing that substance is more important than marketing.  
It's because the nerds are getting   
rich. But that is not going  
to change.7. OptionsWhat makes the nerds rich, usually, is stock options. Now there  
are moves afoot to make it harder for companies to grant   
options. To the extent there's some genuine accounting abuse   
going on, by all means correct it. But don't kill the golden   
goose. Equity is the fuel that drives technical innovation.Options are a good idea because (a) they're fair, and (b) they  
work. Someone who goes to work for a company is (one hopes)   
adding to its value, and it's only fair to give them a share  
of it. And as a purely practical measure, people work a lot  
harder when they have options. I've seen that first hand.The fact that a few crooks during the Bubble robbed their  
companies by granting themselves options doesn't mean options  
are a bad idea. During the railroad boom, some executives  
enriched themselves by selling watered stock—by issuing more  
shares than they said were outstanding. But that doesn't   
make common stock a bad idea. Crooks just use whatever  
means are available.If there is a problem with options, it's that they reward  
slightly the wrong thing. Not surprisingly, people do what you  
pay them to. If you pay them by the hour, they'll work a lot of  
hours. If you pay them by the volume of work done, they'll  
get a lot of work done (but only as you defined work).  
And if you pay them to raise the  
stock price, which is what options amount to, they'll raise  
the stock price.But that's not quite what you want. What you want is to  
increase the actual value of the company, not its market cap.  
Over time the two inevitably meet, but not always as quickly  
as options vest. Which means options tempt employees, if  
only unconsciously, to "pump and dump"—to do things  
that will make the company seem valuable.  
I found that when I was at Yahoo, I couldn't help thinking,   
"how will this sound to investors?" when I should have been  
thinking "is this a good idea?"So maybe the standard option deal needs to be tweaked slightly.  
Maybe options should be replaced with something tied more  
directly to earnings. It's still early days.8. StartupsWhat made the options valuable, for the most part, is  
that they were options on the stock of   
startups. Startups   
were not of course a creation of the Bubble, but they  
were more visible during the Bubble than ever before.One thing most people did learn about for the first time  
during the Bubble was the startup  
created with the intention of selling it.  
Originally a  
startup meant a small company that hoped to grow into a  
big one. But increasingly startups are evolving into a  
vehicle for developing technology on spec.As I wrote in  
Hackers & Painters, employees seem to be most  
productive when they're paid in proportion to the wealth  
they generate. And the advantage of a startup—indeed,   
almost its raison d'etre—is that it offers something  
otherwise impossible to obtain: a way of measuring that.In many businesses, it just makes more sense for companies  
to get technology by buying startups rather than developing   
it in house. You pay more, but there is less risk,  
and risk is what big companies don't want. It makes the  
guys developing the technology more accountable, because they  
only get paid if they build the winner. And you end up   
with better technology, created faster, because things are  
made in the innovative atmosphere of startups instead of   
the bureaucratic atmosphere of big companies.Our startup, Viaweb, was built to be sold. We were open  
with investors about that from the start. And we were   
careful to create something that could slot easily into a  
larger company. That is the pattern for the future.9. CaliforniaThe Bubble was a California phenomenon. When I showed up  
in Silicon Valley in 1998, I felt like an immigrant from  
Eastern Europe arriving in America in 1900. Everyone  
was so cheerful and healthy and rich. It seemed a new  
and improved world.The press, ever eager to exaggerate small trends, now gives   
one the impression that Silicon Valley is a ghost town.  
Not at all. When I drive down 101 from the airport,  
I still feel a buzz of energy, as if there were a giant  
transformer nearby. Real estate is still more expensive  
than just about anywhere else in the country. The people   
still look healthy, and the weather is still fabulous.  
The future is there.  
(I say "there" because I moved back to the East Coast after  
Yahoo. I still wonder if this was a smart idea.)What makes the Bay Area superior is the attitude of the  
people. I notice that when I come home to Boston.  
The first thing I see when I walk out of the airline terminal  
is the fat, grumpy guy in  
charge of the taxi line. I brace myself for rudeness:  
remember, you're back on the East Coast now.The atmosphere varies from city to city, and fragile  
organisms like startups are exceedingly sensitive to such variation.  
If it hadn't already been hijacked as a new euphemism  
for liberal, the word to describe the atmosphere in  
the Bay Area would be "progressive." People there are trying  
to build the future.  
Boston has MIT and Harvard, but it also has a lot of  
truculent, unionized employees like the police who  
recently held the Democratic National Convention for   
ransom, and a lot of people trying to be  
 Thurston Howell.  
Two sides of an obsolete coin.Silicon Valley may not be the next Paris or London, but it  
is at least the next Chicago. For the next fifty years,   
that's where new wealth will come from.10. ProductivityDuring the Bubble, optimistic analysts used to justify high  
price to earnings ratios by saying that technology was going   
to increase productivity dramatically. They were wrong about  
the specific companies, but not so wrong about the underlying  
principle. I think one of the big trends we'll see in the  
coming century is a huge increase in productivity.Or more precisely, a huge increase in variation in  
productivity. Technology is a lever. It doesn't add;   
it multiplies. If the present range of productivity is   
0 to 100, introducing a multiple of 10 increases the range  
from 0 to 1000.One upshot of which is that the companies of the future may  
be surprisingly small. I sometimes daydream about how big  
you could grow a company (in revenues) without ever having  
more than ten people. What would happen if you outsourced  
everything except product development? If you tried this experiment,  
I think you'd be surprised at how far you could get.   
As Fred Brooks pointed out, small groups are  
intrinsically more productive, because the  
internal friction in a group grows as the  
square of its size.Till quite recently, running a major company  
meant managing an army of workers. Our standards about how  
many employees a company should have are still influenced by  
old patterns. Startups are perforce small, because they can't  
afford to hire a lot of people. But I think it's a big mistake for  
companies to loosen their belts as revenues increase. The  
question is not whether you can afford the extra salaries.   
Can you afford the loss in productivity that comes from making  
the company bigger?The prospect of technological leverage will of course raise the  
specter of unemployment. I'm surprised people still worry about  
this.  
After centuries of supposedly job-killing innovations,  
the number of jobs is within ten percent of the number of people  
who want them. This can't be a coincidence. There must be some  
kind of balancing mechanism.What's NewWhen one looks over these trends, is there any overall theme?  
There does seem to be: that in the coming century, good ideas  
will count for more. That 26  
year olds with good ideas will increasingly have an edge over 50  
year olds with powerful connections. That doing good work will  
matter more than dressing up—or advertising, which is the  
same thing for companies. That people  
will be rewarded a bit more in proportion to the value of what  
they create.If so, this is good news indeed.  
Good ideas always tend to win eventually. The problem is,  
it can take a very long time.  
It took decades for relativity to be accepted, and the  
greater part of a century to establish that central planning didn't work.  
So even a small increase in the  
rate at which good ideas win would be a momentous  
change—big enough, probably, to justify a name like  
the "new economy."Notes[1] Actually it's hard to say now. As Jeremy Siegel points  
out, if the value of a stock is its future earnings, you   
can't tell if it was overvalued till you see what the earnings  
turn out to be. While certain famous Internet stocks were  
almost certainly overvalued in 1999, it is still hard to say for sure  
whether, e.g., the Nasdaq index was.Siegel, Jeremy J. "What Is an Asset Price Bubble? An  
Operational Definition." European Financial Management,  
9:1, 2003.[2] The number of users comes from a 6/03 Nielsen  
study quoted on Google's site. (You'd think they'd have  
something more recent.) The revenue estimate is based on  
revenues of $1.35 billion for the first half of 2004, as  
reported in their IPO filing.Thanks to Chris Anderson, Trevor Blackwell, Sarah Harlin, Jessica  
Livingston, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of this.The Long TailRussian TranslationJapanese Translation

# The Age of the Essay

September 2004Remember the essays you had to write in high school?  
Topic sentence, introductory paragraph,  
supporting paragraphs, conclusion. The conclusion being,  
say, that Ahab in Moby Dick was a Christ-like figure.Oy. So I'm going to try to give the other side of the  
story: what an essay really is, and how you write one.  
Or at least, how I write one.ModsThe most obvious difference between real essays and  
the things one has to write in school is that real  
essays are not exclusively about English literature.  
Certainly schools should teach students how to  
write. But due to a series of historical accidents  
the teaching of  
writing has gotten mixed together with the study  
of literature. And so all over the country students are  
writing not about how a baseball team with a small budget  
might compete with the Yankees, or the role of color in  
fashion, or what constitutes a good dessert, but about  
symbolism in Dickens.With the result that writing is made to seem boring and  
pointless. Who cares about symbolism in Dickens?  
Dickens himself would be more interested in an essay  
about color or baseball.How did things get this way? To answer that we have to go back  
almost a thousand years. Around 1100, Europe at last began to  
catch its breath after centuries of chaos, and once they  
had the luxury of curiosity they rediscovered  
what we call "the classics." The effect was rather as if  
we were visited by beings from another solar system.  
These earlier civilizations were so much more sophisticated  
that for the next several centuries the main work of  
European scholars, in almost every field, was to assimilate  
what they knew.During this period the study of ancient texts acquired great  
prestige. It seemed the essence of what scholars did. As  
European scholarship gained momentum it became less and less important;  
by 1350  
someone who wanted to learn about science could find better  
teachers than Aristotle in his own era. [1]  
But schools change slower than scholarship. In the  
19th century the study of ancient texts was still the backbone  
of the curriculum.The time was then ripe for the question: if the study of  
ancient texts is a valid field for scholarship, why not modern  
texts? The answer, of course, is that the original raison d'etre  
of classical scholarship was a kind of intellectual archaeology that  
does not need to be done in the case of contemporary authors.  
But for obvious reasons no one wanted to give that answer.  
The archaeological work being mostly done, it implied that  
those studying the classics were, if not wasting their  
time, at least working on problems of minor importance.And so began the study of modern literature. There was a good  
deal of resistance at first.  
The first courses in English literature  
seem to have been offered by the newer colleges, particularly  
American ones. Dartmouth, the University of Vermont, Amherst,  
and University College, London  
taught English literature in the 1820s.  
  
But Harvard didn't have a professor of English literature until  
1876, and Oxford not till 1885. (Oxford had a chair of Chinese before  
it had one of English.) [2]What tipped the scales, at least in the US, seems to have  
been the idea that professors should do research as well  
as teach. This idea (along with the PhD, the department, and  
indeed the whole concept of the modern university) was imported  
from Germany in the late 19th century. Beginning at  
Johns Hopkins in 1876, the new model spread rapidly.Writing was one of the casualties. Colleges had long taught  
English composition. But how do you do research on composition?  
The professors who taught math could be required to do original  
math, the professors who taught history could be required to  
write scholarly articles about history, but what about the   
professors who taught rhetoric or composition? What should they  
do research on? The closest thing seemed to be English literature. [3]And so in the late 19th century the teaching of writing was inherited  
by English professors. This had two drawbacks:  
(a) an expert on literature need not himself be a good writer,  
any more than an art historian has to be a good painter, and (b)  
the subject of writing now tends to be literature, since that's  
what the professor is interested in.High schools imitate universities. The seeds of our miserable  
high school experiences were sown in 1892, when  
the National Education Association  
"formally recommended that literature  
and composition be unified in the high school course." [4]  
The 'riting component of the 3 Rs then morphed into English,  
with the bizarre consequence that high school students now  
had to write about English literature-- to write, without  
even realizing it, imitations of whatever  
English professors had been publishing in their journals a   
few decades before.It's no wonder if this seems to the  
student a pointless exercise, because we're now three steps  
removed from real work: the students are imitating English  
professors, who are imitating classical scholars, who are  
merely the inheritors of a tradition growing out of what  
was, 700 years ago, fascinating and urgently needed work.No DefenseThe other big difference between a real essay and the things  
they make you write in school is that a real essay doesn't  
take a position and then defend it. That principle,  
like the idea that we ought to be writing about literature,  
turns out to be another intellectual hangover of long  
forgotten origins.It's often mistakenly believed that  
medieval universities were mostly seminaries. In fact they  
were more law schools. And at least in our tradition  
lawyers are advocates, trained to take  
either side of an argument and make as good a case for it  
as they can.  
Whether cause or effect, this spirit pervaded  
early universities. The study of rhetoric, the art of arguing  
persuasively, was a third of the undergraduate curriculum. [5]  
And after the lecture the most common form  
of discussion was the disputation. This is at least  
nominally preserved in our present-day thesis defense:  
most people treat the words thesis  
and dissertation as interchangeable, but originally, at least,  
a thesis was a position one took and the dissertation was  
the argument by which one defended it.Defending a position may be a necessary evil in a  
legal dispute, but it's not the best way to get at the truth,  
as I think lawyers would be the first to admit. It's not  
just that you miss subtleties this way.  
The real problem is that you can't change the question.And yet this principle is built into the very structure of  
the things they teach you to write in high school. The topic   
sentence is your thesis, chosen in advance, the supporting  
paragraphs the blows you strike in the conflict, and the  
conclusion-- uh, what is the conclusion? I was never sure  
about that in high school. It seemed as if we were just  
supposed to restate what we said in the first paragraph,  
but in different enough words that no one could tell.  
Why bother?  
But when you understand the origins  
of this sort of "essay," you can see where the  
conclusion comes from. It's the concluding remarks to the   
jury.Good writing should be convincing, certainly, but it  
should be convincing because you got the right answers,  
not because you did a good job of arguing. When I give a   
draft of an essay to friends, there are two things  
I want to know: which parts bore them, and which seem   
unconvincing. The boring bits can usually be fixed by   
cutting. But I don't try to fix the unconvincing bits by  
arguing more cleverly. I need to talk the matter over.At the very least I must have explained something badly. In  
that case, in the course of the conversation I'll be forced  
to come up a with a clearer explanation, which I can just  
incorporate in the essay. More often than not I have  
to change what I was saying as well.  
But the aim is never to be convincing per se.  
As the reader gets smarter, convincing and true become identical,  
so if I can convince smart readers I must be near the truth.The sort of writing that attempts to persuade may be  
a valid (or at least inevitable) form, but it's historically  
inaccurate to call it an essay. An essay is   
something else.TryingTo understand what a real essay is, we have to  
reach back into history again, though this time not so far.  
To Michel de Montaigne, who in 1580 published a book of  
what he called "essais." He was  
doing something quite different from what lawyers do, and  
the difference is embodied in the name. Essayer is the French  
verb meaning "to try"  
and an essai is an attempt. An essay is something you  
write to try to figure something out.Figure out what? You don't know yet. And so you can't begin with a  
thesis, because you don't have one, and may never have  
one. An essay doesn't begin with a statement, but with a  
question. In a real essay, you don't take a position and  
defend it. You notice a door that's ajar, and you open it and  
walk in to see what's inside.If all you want to do is figure things out, why do you need  
to write anything, though? Why not just sit and think? Well,  
there precisely is Montaigne's great discovery. Expressing   
ideas helps to form them. Indeed, helps is far too weak a  
word. Most of what ends up in my essays I only  
thought of when I sat down to write them. That's why I   
write them.In the things you write in school you are, in theory,  
merely explaining yourself to the reader.  
In a real essay you're writing for yourself.  
You're thinking out loud.But not quite.  
Just as inviting people over forces you to  
clean up your apartment, writing something that  
other people will read forces you to think well. So it  
does matter to have an audience. The things I've written  
just for myself are no good.  
They tend to peter out. When I run into  
difficulties, I find I conclude with a few vague  
questions and then drift off to get a cup of tea.Many published essays peter out in the same way.  
Particularly the sort written by the staff writers   
of newsmagazines. Outside writers tend to supply  
editorials of the defend-a-position variety, which  
make a beeline toward a rousing (and  
foreordained) conclusion. But the staff writers feel  
obliged to write something "balanced."  
Since they're writing for a popular magazine, they start with the  
most radioactively controversial questions, from which-- because  
they're writing for a popular magazine-- they  
then proceed to recoil in terror.  
Abortion, for or against?  
This group says one thing. That group says  
another. One thing is certain: the question is a  
complex one. (But don't get mad at us. We didn't  
draw any conclusions.)The RiverQuestions aren't enough. An essay has to come up with answers.  
They don't always, of course. Sometimes you start with a  
promising question and get nowhere. But those you don't   
publish. Those are like experiments that get inconclusive  
results. An essay you publish ought to tell the reader   
something he didn't already know.But what you tell him doesn't matter, so long as   
it's interesting. I'm sometimes accused of meandering.  
In defend-a-position writing that would be a flaw.  
There you're not concerned with truth. You already  
know where you're going, and you want to go straight there,  
blustering through obstacles, and hand-waving  
your way across swampy ground. But that's not what  
you're trying to do in an essay. An essay is supposed to  
be a search for truth. It would be suspicious if it didn't  
meander.The Meander (aka Menderes) is a river in Turkey.  
As you might expect, it winds all over the place.  
But it doesn't do this out of frivolity.  
The path it has discovered is the most  
economical route to the sea. [6]The river's algorithm is simple. At each step, flow down.  
For the essayist this translates to: flow interesting.   
Of all the places to go next, choose the most interesting.  
One can't have quite as little foresight as a river. I always  
know generally what I want to write about.  
But not the  
specific conclusions I want to reach; from paragraph to  
paragraph I let the ideas take their course.This doesn't always work. Sometimes, like a river,  
one runs up against a wall. Then I do the same thing the river does:  
backtrack. At one point in this essay  
I found that after following a certain thread I ran out  
of ideas. I had to go back seven paragraphs and start over  
in another direction.Fundamentally an essay is a train of thought-- but a cleaned-up  
train of thought, as dialogue is cleaned-up conversation.  
Real thought, like real conversation, is full of false starts.  
It would be exhausting to read. You need to   
cut and fill to  
emphasize the central thread, like an  
illustrator inking over a pencil drawing. But don't  
change so much that you lose the spontaneity of the original.Err on the side of the river. An essay is not a reference  
work. It's not something you read looking for a specific  
answer, and feel cheated if you don't find it. I'd much  
rather read an essay that went off in an unexpected but  
interesting direction than one that plodded dutifully along  
a prescribed course.SurpriseSo what's interesting? For me, interesting means surprise.  
Interfaces, as Geoffrey James has said, should follow the principle of  
least astonishment. A button that looks like it will make a  
machine stop should make it stop, not speed up. Essays   
should do the opposite. Essays should aim for maximum  
surprise.I was afraid of flying for a long time and could only travel  
vicariously. When friends came back from faraway places,  
it wasn't just out of politeness that I asked  
what they saw. I really wanted to know. And I found  
the best way to get information out of them was to ask  
what surprised them. How was the place different from what  
they expected? This is an extremely useful question.  
You can ask it of the most unobservant people, and it will   
extract information they didn't even know they were  
recording.Surprises are things that you not only didn't know, but that  
contradict things you  
thought you knew. And so they're the most valuable sort of  
fact you can get. They're like a food that's not merely  
healthy, but counteracts the unhealthy effects of things  
you've already eaten.How do you find surprises? Well, therein lies half  
the work of essay writing. (The other half is expressing  
yourself well.) The trick is to use yourself as a  
proxy for the reader. You should only write about things  
you've thought about a lot. And anything you come across  
that surprises you, who've thought about the topic a lot,  
will probably surprise most readers.For example, in a recent   
essay I pointed out that because  
you can only judge computer programmers by working with  
them, no one knows who the best programmers are overall.  
I didn't realize this when I began  
that essay, and even now I find it kind of weird. That's  
what you're looking for.So if you want to write essays, you need two ingredients:  
a few topics you've thought about a lot, and  
some ability to ferret out the unexpected.What should you think about? My guess is that it  
doesn't matter-- that anything can be interesting if you get deeply  
enough into it. One possible exception might be things  
that have deliberately had all the variation sucked out of them,  
like working in fast food. In retrospect, was there  
anything interesting about working at Baskin-Robbins?  
Well, it was interesting how important color was  
to the customers. Kids a certain age would point into  
the case and say that they wanted yellow. Did they want   
French Vanilla or Lemon? They would just look at you   
blankly. They wanted yellow. And then there was the   
mystery of why the perennial favorite Pralines 'n' Cream   
was so appealing. (I think now it was the salt.)  
  
And the difference in the way fathers and  
mothers bought ice cream for their kids: the fathers  
like benevolent kings bestowing largesse, the mothers  
harried, giving in to pressure.  
So, yes, there does seem to be some material even in  
fast food.I didn't notice those things at the time, though. At sixteen  
I was about as observant as a lump of rock. I can see more now in  
the fragments of memory I preserve of that age than I could see  
at the time from having it all happening live, right in front of me.ObservationSo the ability to ferret out the unexpected must not merely be an  
inborn one. It must be something you can learn.  
How do you learn it?To some extent it's like learning history.  
When you first read  
history, it's just a whirl of names  
and dates.   
Nothing seems to stick. But the more you learn, the more hooks you have  
for new facts to stick onto-- which means  
you accumulate knowledge at an exponential rate. Once you  
remember that Normans conquered  
England in 1066, it will catch your attention when you hear  
that other Normans conquered southern Italy at about the same time.  
Which will make you wonder about Normandy, and take note  
when a third book mentions that Normans  
were not, like most of what is now  
called France, tribes that flowed in as the Roman empire collapsed,  
but Vikings (norman = north man) who arrived  
four centuries later in 911. Which makes  
it easier to remember that Dublin was also established by  
Vikings in the 840s. Etc, etc squared.Collecting surprises is a similar process.  
The more anomalies you've seen, the more easily you'll notice  
new ones. Which means, oddly enough, that as you grow older,  
life should become more and more surprising. When I was a  
kid, I used to think adults had it all figured out.  
I had it backwards. Kids are the ones who have it all figured   
out. They're just mistaken.When it comes to surprises, the rich get richer. But  
(as with wealth) there  
may be habits of mind that will help the process along. It's  
good to have a habit of asking questions, especially questions  
beginning with Why.  
But not in the random way that three year  
olds ask why. There are an infinite number of questions.  
How do you find the fruitful ones?I find it especially  
useful to ask why about things that seem wrong.  
For example, why should there be a connection between  
humor and misfortune? Why do we find it funny when a  
character, even one we like, slips on a banana peel?  
There's a whole essay's worth of surprises there for sure.If you want to notice things that seem wrong, you'll find a  
degree of skepticism helpful. I take it as an axiom  
that we're only achieving 1% of what we could.  
This helps counteract the rule that gets beaten into our  
heads as children: that things are the way they are because  
that is how things have to be.  
For example, everyone I've talked to while writing this essay   
felt the same about  
English classes-- that the whole process seemed pointless.  
But none of us had the balls at the time to hypothesize that  
it was, in fact, all a mistake.  
We all thought there was just something we weren't getting.I have a hunch you want to pay attention not just to things  
that seem wrong, but things that seem wrong in a humorous way.   
I'm always pleased when I see someone laugh as they  
read a draft of an essay. But why should I be? I'm aiming  
for good ideas. Why should good ideas be funny?  
The connection may be surprise.  
Surprises make us laugh, and surprises are what  
one wants to deliver.I write down things that surprise me in notebooks. I never  
actually get around to reading them and using  
what I've written, but I do tend to  
reproduce the same thoughts later. So the main value  
of notebooks may be what writing things down leaves in your  
head.People trying to be cool will find themselves at a disadvantage  
when collecting surprises. To be surprised is to be mistaken.  
And the essence of cool, as any fourteen year old could tell  
you, is nil admirari. When you're mistaken, don't  
dwell on it; just act like nothing's wrong and maybe no one  
will notice.One of the keys to coolness is to avoid situations where  
inexperience may make you look foolish.   
If you want to find surprises you should do the opposite.  
Study lots of different things,  
because some of the most interesting surprises are unexpected  
connections between different fields. For example,   
jam, bacon, pickles, and cheese, which are among the most pleasing  
of foods, were all originally intended as methods of preservation.  
And so were books and paintings.Whatever you study, include history-- but social and economic  
history, not political history. History seems to me so important  
that it's misleading to treat it as a mere field of study.  
Another way to describe it is all the data we have so far.Among other things, studying history gives one confidence that  
there are good ideas waiting to be discovered right under our noses.  
Swords evolved during the Bronze Age out of daggers, which  
(like their flint predecessors) had a hilt separate from the  
blade. Because swords are longer  
the hilts kept breaking off. But it took five hundred years  
before someone thought of casting hilt and blade as one  
piece.DisobedienceAbove all, make a habit of paying  
attention to things you're not supposed to, either because   
they're "inappropriate,"   
or not important, or not what you're  
supposed to be working on. If you're curious about something,  
trust your instincts.  
Follow the threads that attract your  
attention. If there's something you're really interested  
in, you'll find they have an uncanny way of leading back to  
it anyway, just as the conversation of people who are especially  
proud of something always tends to lead back to it.For example, I've always been fascinated by comb-overs, especially  
the extreme sort that  
make a man look as if he's wearing a beret made of his own hair.  
Surely this is a lowly sort of thing to be interested in-- the  
sort of superficial quizzing  
best left to teenage girls. And yet there is something underneath.  
The key question, I realized, is how does the comber-over not  
see how odd he looks?  
And the answer is that he got to look that way incrementally.  
What began as combing his hair a little carefully over a  
thin patch has gradually, over 20 years, grown into a monstrosity.  
Gradualness is very powerful. And that power can be  
used for constructive purposes too: just as you can trick  
yourself into looking like a freak, you can trick yourself into  
creating something so grand that you would never have dared to  
plan such a thing. Indeed, this is just how most good  
software gets created. You start by writing a stripped-down  
kernel (how hard can it be?) and gradually it grows  
into a complete operating system. Hence the next leap: could  
you do the same thing in painting, or in a novel?See what you can extract from a frivolous question?  
If there's one piece of advice I would give about writing essays,  
it would be: don't do as you're told.  
Don't believe what you're supposed to.  
Don't write the  
essay readers expect; one learns nothing from  
what one expects.  
And  
don't write the way they taught you to in school.The most important sort of disobedience is to write  
essays at all. Fortunately, this sort of disobedience shows  
signs of becoming   
rampant.   
It used to be that only a tiny  
number of officially approved writers were allowed to  
write essays. Magazines published few of them, and judged  
them less by what they said than who wrote them;  
a magazine might publish a story by an  
unknown writer if it was good enough, but if they published  
an essay on x it had to be by someone who was at least  
forty and whose job title had x in it. Which is a problem,  
because there are a lot of things insiders can't say precisely  
because they're insiders.The Internet is changing that.  
Anyone can publish an essay on the Web, and it gets judged, as any  
writing should, by what it says, not who wrote it.  
Who are you to write about x? You are whatever you wrote.Popular magazines made the period between the spread  
of literacy and the arrival of TV the golden age of the  
short story.  
The Web may well make this the golden age of the essay.  
And that's certainly not something I realized when  
I started writing this.Notes[1] I'm thinking of Oresme (c. 1323-82). But it's hard to pick  
a date, because there was a sudden drop-off in scholarship  
just as Europeans finished assimilating classical science.  
The cause may have been the plague of 1347; the trend in  
scientific progress matches the population curve.[2] Parker, William R. "Where Do College English Departments  
Come From?" College English 28 (1966-67), pp. 339-351.  
Reprinted in Gray, Donald J. (ed). The Department of  
English at Indiana University Bloomington 1868-1970. Indiana  
University Publications.Daniels, Robert V. The University of Vermont: The First  
Two Hundred Years. University of Vermont, 1991.Mueller, Friedrich M. Letter to the Pall Mall  
Gazette. 1886/87. Reprinted in Bacon, Alan (ed).  
The Nineteenth-Century  
History of English Studies. Ashgate, 1998.[3] I'm compressing the story a bit.  
At first  
literature took a back seat to philology, which (a) seemed more   
serious and (b) was popular in Germany, where many of the  
leading scholars of that generation had been trained.In some cases the writing teachers were transformed  
in situ into English professors.  
Francis James Child, who had been Boylston Professor  
of Rhetoric at Harvard since 1851,  
became in 1876 the university's first professor of English.[4] Parker, op. cit., p. 25.[5] The undergraduate curriculum or trivium (whence  
"trivial") consisted of Latin grammar, rhetoric, and logic.   
Candidates for masters' degrees went on to study the  
quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy.  
Together these were the seven liberal arts.The study of rhetoric was inherited directly from Rome, where  
it was considered the most important  
subject. It would not be far from the truth to say that   
education in the classical world  
meant training landowners' sons  
to speak well enough to defend their interests  
in political and legal disputes.[6] Trevor Blackwell points out that this  
isn't strictly true, because the outside   
edges of curves erode faster.  
Thanks to Ken Anderson, Trevor Blackwell, Sarah Harlin, Jessica  
Livingston, Jackie McDonough, and Robert Morris for reading drafts of  
this.Russian TranslationSpanish TranslationJapanese TranslationHungarian TranslationTraditional Chinese Translation  
  
  
If you liked this, you may also like  
Hackers & Painters.

# The Python Paradox

August 2004In a recent talk I said something that upset a lot of  
people: that you could get smarter programmers to work on  
a Python project than you could to work on a Java project.I didn't mean by this that Java programmers are dumb. I  
meant that Python programmers are smart. It's a lot of  
work to learn a new programming language. And people don't  
learn Python because it will get them a job; they learn it  
because they genuinely like to program and aren't satisfied with the languages they  
already know.Which makes them exactly the kind of programmers  
companies should want to hire. Hence what, for lack of a better  
name, I'll call the Python paradox: if a company chooses to write  
its software in a comparatively esoteric language, they'll be able   
to hire better programmers, because they'll attract only those  
who cared enough to learn it. And for   
programmers the paradox is even more pronounced: the language  
to learn, if you want to get a good job, is a language that  
people don't learn merely to get a job.Only a few companies have been smart enough to realize this   
so far. But there is a kind of selection going on here too: they're   
exactly the companies programmers would  
most like to work for. Google, for example. When they   
advertise Java programming jobs, they also want Python experience.A friend of mine who knows nearly all the widely used languages  
uses Python for most of his projects. He says the main reason  
is that he likes the way source code looks. That may seem  
a frivolous reason to choose one language over another.  
But it is not so frivolous as it sounds: when you program,  
you spend more time reading code than writing it.  
You push blobs of source code around the way a sculptor does  
blobs of clay. So a language that makes source code ugly is  
maddening to an exacting programmer, as clay full of lumps  
would be to a sculptor.At the mention of ugly source code, people will of course think  
of Perl. But the superficial ugliness of Perl is not the sort  
I mean. Real ugliness is not harsh-looking  
syntax, but having to build programs out of the wrong  
concepts. Perl may look like a cartoon character swearing,  
but there are   
cases where it surpasses Python conceptually.So far, anyway. Both languages are of course   
moving targets. But they  
share, along with Ruby (and Icon, and Joy, and J, and Lisp,  
and Smalltalk) the fact that  
they're created by, and used by, people who really care about  
programming. And those tend to be the ones who do it well.Turkish TranslationJapanese TranslationPortuguese TranslationItalian TranslationPolish TranslationRomanian TranslationRussian TranslationSpanish TranslationFrench TranslationTelugu Translation  
  
If you liked this, you may also like  
Hackers & Painters.

# Great Hackers

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
July 2004(This essay is derived from a talk at Oscon 2004.)  
A few months ago I finished a new   
book,   
and in reviews I keep  
noticing words like "provocative'' and "controversial.'' To say  
nothing of "idiotic.''I didn't mean to make the book controversial. I was trying to make  
it efficient. I didn't want to waste people's time telling them  
things they already knew. It's more efficient just to give them  
the diffs. But I suppose that's bound to yield an alarming book.EdisonsThere's no controversy about which idea is most controversial:  
the suggestion that variation in wealth might not be as big a  
problem as we think.I didn't say in the book that variation in wealth was in itself a  
good thing. I said in some situations it might be a sign of good  
things. A throbbing headache is not a good thing, but it can be  
a sign of a good thing-- for example, that you're recovering  
consciousness after being hit on the head.Variation in wealth can be a sign of variation in productivity.  
(In a society of one, they're identical.) And that  
is almost certainly a good thing: if your society has no variation  
in productivity, it's probably not because everyone is Thomas  
Edison. It's probably because you have no Thomas Edisons.In a low-tech society you don't see much variation in productivity.  
If you have a tribe of nomads collecting sticks for a fire, how  
much more productive is the best stick gatherer going to be than  
the worst? A factor of two? Whereas when you hand people a complex tool  
like a computer, the variation in what they can do with  
it is enormous.That's not a new idea. Fred Brooks wrote about it in 1974, and  
the study he quoted was published in 1968. But I think he  
underestimated the variation between programmers. He wrote about productivity in lines  
of code: the best programmers can solve a given problem in a tenth  
the time. But what if the problem isn't given? In programming, as  
in many fields, the hard part isn't solving problems, but deciding  
what problems to solve. Imagination is hard to measure, but  
in practice it dominates the kind of productivity that's measured  
in lines of code.Productivity varies in any field, but there are few in which it  
varies so much. The variation between programmers  
is so great that it becomes a difference in kind. I don't  
think this is something intrinsic to programming, though. In every field,  
technology magnifies differences in productivity. I think what's  
happening in programming is just that we have a lot of technological  
leverage. But in every field the lever is getting longer, so the  
variation we see is something that more and more fields will see  
as time goes on. And the success of companies, and countries, will  
depend increasingly on how they deal with it.If variation in productivity increases with technology, then the  
contribution of the most productive individuals will not only be  
disproportionately large, but will actually grow with time. When  
you reach the point where 90% of a group's output is created by 1%  
of its members, you lose big if something (whether Viking raids,  
or central planning) drags their productivity down to the average.If we want to get the most out of them, we need to understand these  
especially productive people. What motivates them? What do they  
need to do their jobs? How do you recognize them? How do you  
get them to come and work for you? And then of course there's the  
question, how do you become one?More than MoneyI know a handful of super-hackers, so I sat down and thought about  
what they have in common. Their defining quality is probably that  
they really love to program. Ordinary programmers write code to pay  
the bills. Great hackers think of it as something they do for fun,  
and which they're delighted to find people will pay them for.Great programmers are sometimes said to be indifferent to money.  
This isn't quite true. It is true that all they really care about  
is doing interesting work. But if you make enough money, you get  
to work on whatever you want, and for that reason hackers are  
attracted by the idea of making really large amounts of money.  
But as long as they still have to show up for work every day, they  
care more about what they do there than how much they get paid for  
it.Economically, this is a fact of the greatest importance, because  
it means you don't have to pay great hackers anything like what  
they're worth. A great programmer might be ten or a hundred times  
as productive as an ordinary one, but he'll consider himself lucky  
to get paid three times as much. As I'll explain later, this is  
partly because great hackers don't know how good they are. But  
it's also because money is not the main thing they want.What do hackers want? Like all craftsmen, hackers like good tools.  
In fact, that's an understatement. Good hackers find it unbearable  
to use bad tools. They'll simply refuse to work on projects with  
the wrong infrastructure.At a startup I once worked for, one of the things pinned up on our  
bulletin board was an ad from IBM. It was a picture of an AS400,  
and the headline read, I think, "hackers despise  
it.'' [1]When you decide what infrastructure to use for a project, you're  
not just making a technical decision. You're also making a social  
decision, and this may be the more important of the two. For  
example, if your company wants to write some software, it might  
seem a prudent choice to write it in Java. But when you choose a  
language, you're also choosing a community. The programmers you'll  
be able to hire to work on a Java project won't be as  
smart as the  
ones you could get to work on a project written in Python.  
And the quality of your hackers probably matters more than the  
language you choose. Though, frankly, the fact that good hackers  
prefer Python to Java should tell you something about the relative  
merits of those languages.Business types prefer the most popular languages because they view  
languages as standards. They don't want to bet the company on  
Betamax. The thing about languages, though, is that they're not  
just standards. If you have to move bits over a network, by all  
means use TCP/IP. But a programming language isn't just a format.  
A programming language is a medium of expression.I've read that Java has just overtaken Cobol as the most popular  
language. As a standard, you couldn't wish for more. But as a  
medium of expression, you could do a lot better. Of all the great  
programmers I can think of, I know of only one who would voluntarily  
program in Java. And of all the great programmers I can think of  
who don't work for Sun, on Java, I know of zero.Great hackers also generally insist on using open source software.  
Not just because it's better, but because it gives them more control.  
Good hackers insist on control. This is part of what makes them  
good hackers: when something's broken, they need to fix it. You  
want them to feel this way about the software they're writing for  
you. You shouldn't be surprised when they feel the same way about  
the operating system.A couple years ago a venture capitalist friend told me about a new  
startup he was involved with. It sounded promising. But the next  
time I talked to him, he said they'd decided to build their software  
on Windows NT, and had just hired a very experienced NT developer  
to be their chief technical officer. When I heard this, I thought,  
these guys are doomed. One, the CTO couldn't be a first rate  
hacker, because to become an eminent NT developer he would have  
had to use NT voluntarily, multiple times, and I couldn't imagine  
a great hacker doing that; and two, even if he was good, he'd have  
a hard time hiring anyone good to work for him if the project had  
to be built on NT. [2]The Final FrontierAfter software, the most important tool to a hacker is probably  
his office. Big companies think the function of office space is to express  
rank. But hackers use their offices for more than that: they  
use their office as a place to think in. And if you're a technology  
company, their thoughts are your product. So making hackers work  
in a noisy, distracting environment is like having a paint factory  
where the air is full of soot.The cartoon strip Dilbert has a lot to say about cubicles, and with  
good reason. All the hackers I know despise them. The mere prospect  
of being interrupted is enough to prevent hackers from working on  
hard problems. If you want to get real work done in an office with  
cubicles, you have two options: work at home, or come in early or  
late or on a weekend, when no one else is there. Don't companies  
realize this is a sign that something is broken? An office  
environment is supposed to be something that helps  
you work, not something you work despite.Companies like Cisco are proud that everyone there has a cubicle,  
even the CEO. But they're not so advanced as they think; obviously  
they still view office space as a badge of rank. Note too that  
Cisco is famous for doing very little product development in house.  
They get new technology by buying the startups that created it-- where  
presumably the hackers did have somewhere quiet to work.One big company that understands what hackers need is Microsoft.  
I once saw a recruiting ad for Microsoft with a big picture of a  
door. Work for us, the premise was, and we'll give you a place to  
work where you can actually get work done. And you know, Microsoft  
is remarkable among big companies in that they are able to develop  
software in house. Not well, perhaps, but well enough.If companies want hackers to be productive, they should look at  
what they do at home. At home, hackers can arrange things themselves  
so they can get the most done. And when they work at home, hackers  
don't work in noisy, open spaces; they work in rooms with doors. They  
work in cosy, neighborhoody places with people around and somewhere  
to walk when they need to mull something over, instead of in glass  
boxes set in acres of parking lots. They have a sofa they can take  
a nap on when they feel tired, instead of sitting in a coma at  
their desk, pretending to work. There's no crew of people with  
vacuum cleaners that roars through every evening during the prime  
hacking hours. There are no meetings or, God forbid, corporate  
retreats or team-building exercises. And when you look at what  
they're doing on that computer, you'll find it reinforces what I  
said earlier about tools. They may have to use Java and Windows  
at work, but at home, where they can choose for themselves, you're  
more likely to find them using Perl and Linux.Indeed, these statistics about Cobol or Java being the most popular  
language can be misleading. What we ought to look at, if we want  
to know what tools are best, is what hackers choose when they can  
choose freely-- that is, in projects of their own. When you ask  
that question, you find that open source operating systems already  
have a dominant market share, and the number one language is probably  
Perl.InterestingAlong with good tools, hackers want interesting projects. What  
makes a project interesting? Well, obviously overtly sexy  
applications like stealth planes or special effects software would  
be interesting to work on. But any application can be interesting  
if it poses novel technical challenges. So it's hard to predict  
which problems hackers will like, because some become  
interesting only when the people working on them discover a new  
kind of solution. Before ITA  
(who wrote the software inside Orbitz),  
the people working on airline fare searches probably thought it  
was one of the most boring applications imaginable. But ITA made  
it interesting by   
redefining the problem in a more ambitious way.I think the same thing happened at Google. When Google was founded,  
the conventional wisdom among the so-called portals was that search  
was boring and unimportant. But the guys at Google didn't think  
search was boring, and that's why they do it so well.This is an area where managers can make a difference. Like a parent  
saying to a child, I bet you can't clean up your whole room in  
ten minutes, a good manager can sometimes redefine a problem as a  
more interesting one. Steve Jobs seems to be particularly good at  
this, in part simply by having high standards. There were a lot  
of small, inexpensive computers before the Mac. He redefined the  
problem as: make one that's beautiful. And that probably drove  
the developers harder than any carrot or stick could.They certainly delivered. When the Mac first appeared, you didn't  
even have to turn it on to know it would be good; you could tell  
from the case. A few weeks ago I was walking along the street in  
Cambridge, and in someone's trash I saw what appeared to be a Mac  
carrying case. I looked inside, and there was a Mac SE. I carried  
it home and plugged it in, and it booted. The happy Macintosh  
face, and then the finder. My God, it was so simple. It was just  
like ... Google.Hackers like to work for people with high standards. But it's not  
enough just to be exacting. You have to insist on the right things.  
Which usually means that you have to be a hacker yourself. I've  
seen occasional articles about how to manage programmers. Really  
there should be two articles: one about what to do if  
you are yourself a programmer, and one about what to do if you're not. And the   
second could probably be condensed into two words: give up.The problem is not so much the day to day management. Really good  
hackers are practically self-managing. The problem is, if you're  
not a hacker, you can't tell who the good hackers are. A similar  
problem explains why American cars are so ugly. I call it the  
design paradox. You might think that you could make your products  
beautiful just by hiring a great designer to design them. But if  
you yourself don't have good taste,   
how are you going to recognize  
a good designer? By definition you can't tell from his portfolio.  
And you can't go by the awards he's won or the jobs he's had,  
because in design, as in most fields, those tend to be driven by  
fashion and schmoozing, with actual ability a distant third.  
There's no way around it: you can't manage a process intended to  
produce beautiful things without knowing what beautiful is. American  
cars are ugly because American car companies are run by people with  
bad taste.Many people in this country think of taste as something elusive,  
or even frivolous. It is neither. To drive design, a manager must  
be the most demanding user of a company's products. And if you  
have really good taste, you can, as Steve Jobs does, make satisfying  
you the kind of problem that good people like to work on.Nasty Little ProblemsIt's pretty easy to say what kinds of problems are not interesting:  
those where instead of solving a few big, clear, problems, you have  
to solve a lot of nasty little ones. One of the worst kinds of  
projects is writing an interface to a piece of software that's  
full of bugs. Another is when you have to customize  
something for an individual client's complex and ill-defined needs.  
To hackers these kinds of projects are the death of a thousand  
cuts.The distinguishing feature of nasty little problems is that you  
don't learn anything from them. Writing a compiler is interesting  
because it teaches you what a compiler is. But writing an interface  
to a buggy piece of software doesn't teach you anything, because the  
bugs are random. [3] So it's not just fastidiousness that makes good  
hackers avoid nasty little problems. It's more a question of  
self-preservation. Working on nasty little problems makes you  
stupid. Good hackers avoid it for the same reason models avoid  
cheeseburgers.Of course some problems inherently have this character. And because  
of supply and demand, they pay especially well. So a company that  
found a way to get great hackers to work on tedious problems would  
be very successful. How would you do it?One place this happens is in startups. At our startup we had   
Robert Morris working as a system administrator. That's like having the  
Rolling Stones play at a bar mitzvah. You can't hire that kind of  
talent. But people will do any amount of drudgery for companies  
of which they're the founders. [4]Bigger companies solve the problem by partitioning the company.  
They get smart people to work for them by establishing a separate  
R&D department where employees don't have to work directly on  
customers' nasty little problems. [5] In this model, the research  
department functions like a mine. They produce new ideas; maybe  
the rest of the company will be able to use them.You may not have to go to this extreme.   
Bottom-up programming  
suggests another way to partition the company: have the smart people  
work as toolmakers. If your company makes software to do x, have  
one group that builds tools for writing software of that type, and  
another that uses these tools to write the applications. This way  
you might be able to get smart people to write 99% of your code,  
but still keep them almost as insulated from users as they would  
be in a traditional research department. The toolmakers would have  
users, but they'd only be the company's own developers. [6]If Microsoft used this approach, their software wouldn't be so full  
of security holes, because the less smart people writing the actual  
applications wouldn't be doing low-level stuff like allocating  
memory. Instead of writing Word directly in C, they'd be plugging  
together big Lego blocks of Word-language. (Duplo, I believe, is  
the technical term.)ClumpingAlong with interesting problems, what good hackers like is other  
good hackers. Great hackers tend to clump together-- sometimes  
spectacularly so, as at Xerox Parc. So you won't attract good  
hackers in linear proportion to how good an environment you create  
for them. The tendency to clump means it's more like the square  
of the environment. So it's winner take all. At any given time,  
there are only about ten or twenty places where hackers most want to  
work, and if you aren't one of them, you won't just have fewer  
great hackers, you'll have zero.Having great hackers is not, by itself, enough to make a company  
successful. It works well for Google and ITA, which are two of  
the hot spots right now, but it didn't help Thinking Machines or  
Xerox. Sun had a good run for a while, but their business model  
is a down elevator. In that situation, even the best hackers can't  
save you.I think, though, that all other things being equal, a company that  
can attract great hackers will have a huge advantage. There are  
people who would disagree with this. When we were making the rounds  
of venture capital firms in the 1990s, several told us that software  
companies didn't win by writing great software, but through brand,  
and dominating channels, and doing the right deals.They really seemed to believe this, and I think I know why. I  
think what a lot of VCs are looking for, at least unconsciously,  
is the next Microsoft. And of course if Microsoft is your model,  
you shouldn't be looking for companies that hope to win by writing  
great software. But VCs are mistaken to look for the next Microsoft,  
because no startup can be the next Microsoft unless some other  
company is prepared to bend over at just the right moment and be  
the next IBM.It's a mistake to use Microsoft as a model, because their whole  
culture derives from that one lucky break. Microsoft is a bad data  
point. If you throw them out, you find that good products do tend  
to win in the market. What VCs should be looking for is the next  
Apple, or the next Google.I think Bill Gates knows this. What worries him about Google is  
not the power of their brand, but the fact that they have  
better hackers. [7]  
RecognitionSo who are the great hackers? How do you know when you meet one?  
That turns out to be very hard. Even hackers can't tell. I'm  
pretty sure now that my friend Trevor Blackwell is a great hacker.  
You may have read on Slashdot how he made his   
own Segway. The  
remarkable thing about this project was that he wrote all the  
software in one day (in Python, incidentally).For Trevor, that's  
par for the course. But when I first met him, I thought he was a  
complete idiot. He was standing in Robert Morris's office babbling  
at him about something or other, and I remember standing behind  
him making frantic gestures at Robert to shoo this nut out of his  
office so we could go to lunch. Robert says he misjudged Trevor  
at first too. Apparently when Robert first met him, Trevor had  
just begun a new scheme that involved writing down everything about  
every aspect of his life on a stack of index cards, which he carried  
with him everywhere. He'd also just arrived from Canada, and had  
a strong Canadian accent and a mullet.The problem is compounded by the fact that hackers, despite their  
reputation for social obliviousness, sometimes put a good deal of  
effort into seeming smart. When I was in grad school I used to  
hang around the MIT AI Lab occasionally. It was kind of intimidating  
at first. Everyone there spoke so fast. But after a while I  
learned the trick of speaking fast. You don't have to think any  
faster; just use twice as many words to say everything. With this amount of noise in the signal, it's hard to tell good  
hackers when you meet them. I can't tell, even now. You also  
can't tell from their resumes. It seems like the only way to judge  
a hacker is to work with him on something.And this is the reason that high-tech areas   
only happen around universities. The active ingredient  
here is not so much the professors as the students. Startups grow up  
around universities because universities bring together promising young  
people and make them work on the same projects. The  
smart ones learn who the other smart ones are, and together  
they cook up new projects of their own.Because you can't tell a great hacker except by working with him,  
hackers themselves can't tell how good they are. This is true to  
a degree in most fields. I've found that people who  
are great at something are not so much convinced of their own  
greatness as mystified at why everyone else seems so incompetent.  
But it's particularly hard for hackers to know how good they are,  
because it's hard to compare their work. This is easier in most  
other fields. In the hundred meters, you know in 10 seconds who's  
fastest. Even in math there seems to be a general consensus about  
which problems are hard to solve, and what constitutes a good  
solution. But hacking is like writing. Who can say which of two  
novels is better? Certainly not the authors.With hackers, at least, other hackers can tell. That's because,  
unlike novelists, hackers collaborate on projects. When you get  
to hit a few difficult problems over the net at someone, you learn  
pretty quickly how hard they hit them back. But hackers can't  
watch themselves at work. So if you ask a great hacker how good  
he is, he's almost certain to reply, I don't know. He's not just  
being modest. He really doesn't know.And none of us know, except about people we've actually worked  
with. Which puts us in a weird situation: we don't know who our  
heroes should be. The hackers who become famous tend to become  
famous by random accidents of PR. Occasionally I need to give an  
example of a great hacker, and I never know who to use. The first  
names that come to mind always tend to be people I know personally,  
but it seems lame to use them. So, I think, maybe I should say  
Richard Stallman, or Linus Torvalds, or Alan Kay, or someone famous  
like that. But I have no idea if these guys are great hackers.  
I've never worked with them on anything.If there is a Michael Jordan of hacking, no one knows, including  
him.CultivationFinally, the question the hackers have all been wondering about:  
how do you become a great hacker? I don't know if it's possible  
to make yourself into one. But it's certainly possible to do things  
that make you stupid, and if you can make yourself stupid, you  
can probably make yourself smart too.The key to being a good hacker may be to work on what you like.  
When I think about the great hackers I know, one thing they have  
in common is the extreme   
difficulty of making them work   
on anything they  
don't want to. I don't know if this is cause or effect; it may be  
both.To do something well you have to love it.   
So to the extent you  
can preserve hacking as something you love, you're likely to do it  
well. Try to keep the sense of wonder you had about programming at  
age 14. If you're worried that your current job is rotting your  
brain, it probably is.The best hackers tend to be smart, of course, but that's true in  
a lot of fields. Is there some quality that's unique to hackers?  
I asked some friends, and the number one thing they mentioned was  
curiosity.   
I'd always supposed that all smart people were curious--  
that curiosity was simply the first derivative of knowledge. But  
apparently hackers are particularly curious, especially about how  
things work. That makes sense, because programs are in effect  
giant descriptions of how things work.Several friends mentioned hackers' ability to concentrate-- their  
ability, as one put it, to "tune out everything outside their own  
heads.'' I've certainly noticed this. And I've heard several   
hackers say that after drinking even half a beer they can't program at  
all. So maybe hacking does require some special ability to focus.  
Perhaps great hackers can load a large amount of context into their  
head, so that when they look at a line of code, they see not just  
that line but the whole program around it. John McPhee  
wrote that Bill Bradley's success as a basketball player was due  
partly to his extraordinary peripheral vision. "Perfect'' eyesight  
means about 47 degrees of vertical peripheral vision. Bill Bradley  
had 70; he could see the basket when he was looking at the floor.  
Maybe great hackers have some similar inborn ability. (I cheat by  
using a very dense language,   
which shrinks the court.)This could explain the disconnect over cubicles. Maybe the people  
in charge of facilities, not having any concentration to shatter,  
have no idea that working in a cubicle feels to a hacker like having  
one's brain in a blender. (Whereas Bill, if the rumors of autism  
are true, knows all too well.)One difference I've noticed between great hackers and smart people  
in general is that hackers are more   
politically incorrect. To the  
extent there is a secret handshake among good hackers, it's when they  
know one another well enough to express opinions that would get  
them stoned to death by the general public. And I can see why  
political incorrectness would be a useful quality in programming.  
Programs are very complex and, at least in the hands of good  
programmers, very fluid. In such situations it's helpful to have  
a habit of questioning assumptions.Can you cultivate these qualities? I don't know. But you can at  
least not repress them. So here is my best shot at a recipe. If  
it is possible to make yourself into a great hacker, the way to do  
it may be to make the following deal with yourself: you never have  
to work on boring projects (unless your family will starve otherwise),  
and in return, you'll never allow yourself to do a half-assed job.  
All the great hackers I know seem to have made that deal, though  
perhaps none of them had any choice in the matter.Notes  
[1] In fairness, I have to say that IBM makes decent hardware. I  
wrote this on an IBM laptop.[2] They did turn out to be doomed. They shut down a few months  
later.[3] I think this is what people mean when they talk  
about the "meaning of life." On the face of it, this seems an   
odd idea. Life isn't an expression; how could it have meaning?  
But it can have a quality that feels a lot like meaning. In a project  
like a compiler, you have to solve a lot of problems, but the problems  
all fall into a pattern, as in a signal. Whereas when the problems  
you have to solve are random, they seem like noise.  
[4] Einstein at one point worked designing refrigerators. (He had equity.)[5] It's hard to say exactly what constitutes research in the  
computer world, but as a first approximation, it's software that  
doesn't have users.I don't think it's publication that makes the best hackers want to work  
in research departments. I think it's mainly not having to have a  
three hour meeting with a product manager about problems integrating  
the Korean version of Word 13.27 with the talking paperclip.[6] Something similar has been happening for a long time in the  
construction industry. When you had a house built a couple hundred  
years ago, the local builders built everything in it. But increasingly  
what builders do is assemble components designed and manufactured  
by someone else. This has, like the arrival of desktop publishing,  
given people the freedom to experiment in disastrous ways, but it  
is certainly more efficient.[7] Google is much more dangerous to Microsoft than Netscape was.  
Probably more dangerous than any other company has ever been. Not  
least because they're determined to fight. On their job listing  
page, they say that one of their "core values'' is "Don't be evil.''  
From a company selling soybean oil or mining equipment, such a  
statement would merely be eccentric. But I think all of us in the  
computer world recognize who that is a declaration of war on.Thanks to Jessica Livingston, Robert Morris, and Sarah Harlin  
for reading earlier versions of this talk.Audio of talkThe Python ParadoxJapanese TranslationRussian TranslationItalian TranslationSpanish Translation  
  
  
  
If you liked this, you may also like  
Hackers & Painters.

# Mind the Gap

May 2004When people care enough about something to do it well, those who  
do it best tend to be far better than everyone else. There's a  
huge gap between Leonardo and second-rate contemporaries like  
Borgognone. You see the same gap between Raymond Chandler and the  
average writer of detective novels. A top-ranked professional chess  
player could play ten thousand games against an ordinary club player  
without losing once.Like chess or painting or writing novels, making money is a very  
specialized skill. But for some reason we treat this skill  
differently. No one complains when a few people surpass all the  
rest at playing chess or writing novels, but when a few people make  
more money than the rest, we get editorials saying this is wrong.Why? The pattern of variation seems no different than for any other  
skill. What causes people to react so strongly when the skill is  
making money?I think there are three reasons we treat making money as different:  
the misleading model of wealth we learn as children; the disreputable  
way in which, till recently, most fortunes were accumulated; and  
the worry that great variations in income are somehow bad for  
society. As far as I can tell, the first is mistaken, the second  
outdated, and the third empirically false. Could it be that, in a  
modern democracy, variation in income is actually a sign of health?The Daddy Model of WealthWhen I was five I thought electricity was created by electric  
sockets. I didn't realize there were power plants out there  
generating it. Likewise, it doesn't occur to most kids that wealth  
is something that has to be generated. It seems to be something  
that flows from parents.Because of the circumstances in which they encounter it, children  
tend to misunderstand wealth. They confuse it with money. They  
think that there is a fixed amount of it. And they think of it as  
something that's distributed by authorities (and so should be  
distributed equally), rather than something that has to be created  
(and might be created unequally).In fact, wealth is not money. Money is just a convenient way of  
trading one form of wealth for another. Wealth is the underlying  
stuff—the goods and services we buy. When you travel to a  
rich or poor country, you don't have to look at people's bank  
accounts to tell which kind you're in. You can see  
wealth—in buildings and streets, in the clothes and the health  
of the people.Where does wealth come from? People make it. This was easier to  
grasp when most people lived on farms, and made many of the things  
they wanted with their own hands. Then you could see in the house,  
the herds, and the granary the wealth that each family created. It  
was obvious then too that the wealth of the world was not a fixed  
quantity that had to be shared out, like slices of a pie. If you  
wanted more wealth, you could make it.This is just as true today, though few of us create wealth directly  
for ourselves (except for a few vestigial domestic tasks). Mostly  
we create wealth for other people in exchange for money, which we  
then trade for the forms of wealth we want.   
[1]Because kids are unable to create wealth, whatever they have has  
to be given to them. And when wealth is something you're given,  
then of course it seems that it should be distributed equally.  
[2]  
As in most families it is. The kids see to that. "Unfair," they  
cry, when one sibling gets more than another.In the real world, you can't keep living off your parents. If you  
want something, you either have to make it, or do something of  
equivalent value for someone else, in order to get them to give you  
enough money to buy it. In the real world, wealth is (except for  
a few specialists like thieves and speculators) something you have  
to create, not something that's distributed by Daddy. And since  
the ability and desire to create it vary from person to person,  
it's not made equally.You get paid by doing or making something people want, and those  
who make more money are often simply better at doing what people  
want. Top actors make a lot more money than B-list actors. The  
B-list actors might be almost as charismatic, but when people go  
to the theater and look at the list of movies playing, they want  
that extra oomph that the big stars have.Doing what people want is not the only way to get money, of course.  
You could also rob banks, or solicit bribes, or establish a monopoly.  
Such tricks account for some variation in wealth, and indeed for  
some of the biggest individual fortunes, but they are not the root  
cause of variation in income. The root cause of variation in income,  
as Occam's Razor implies, is the same as the root cause of variation  
in every other human skill.In the United States, the CEO of a large public company makes about  
100 times as much as the average person.   
[3]  
Basketball players  
make about 128 times as much, and baseball players 72 times as much.  
Editorials quote this kind of statistic with horror. But I have  
no trouble imagining that one person could be 100 times as productive  
as another. In ancient Rome the price of slaves varied by  
a factor of 50 depending on their skills.   
[4]  
And that's without  
considering motivation, or the extra leverage in productivity that  
you can get from modern technology.Editorials about athletes' or CEOs' salaries remind me of early  
Christian writers, arguing from first principles about whether the  
Earth was round, when they could just walk outside and check.  
[5]  
How much someone's work is worth is not a policy question. It's  
something the market already determines."Are they really worth 100 of us?" editorialists ask. Depends on  
what you mean by worth. If you mean worth in the sense of what  
people will pay for their skills, the answer is yes, apparently.A few CEOs' incomes reflect some kind of wrongdoing. But are there  
not others whose incomes really do reflect the wealth they generate?  
Steve Jobs saved a company that was in a terminal decline. And not  
merely in the way a turnaround specialist does, by cutting costs;  
he had to decide what Apple's next products should be. Few others  
could have done it. And regardless of the case with CEOs, it's  
hard to see how anyone could argue that the salaries of professional  
basketball players don't reflect supply and demand.It may seem unlikely in principle that one individual could really  
generate so much more wealth than another. The key to this mystery  
is to revisit that question, are they really worth 100 of us?  
Would a basketball team trade one of their players for 100  
random people? What would Apple's next product look like if you  
replaced Steve Jobs with a committee of 100 random people?   
[6]  
These  
things don't scale linearly. Perhaps the CEO or the professional  
athlete has only ten times (whatever that means) the skill and  
determination of an ordinary person. But it makes all the difference  
that it's concentrated in one individual.When we say that one kind of work is overpaid and another underpaid,  
what are we really saying? In a free market, prices are determined  
by what buyers want. People like baseball more than poetry, so  
baseball players make more than poets. To say that a certain kind  
of work is underpaid is thus identical with saying that people want  
the wrong things.Well, of course people want the wrong things. It seems odd to be  
surprised by that. And it seems even odder to say that it's  
unjust that certain kinds of work are underpaid.   
[7]  
Then  
you're saying that it's unjust that people want the wrong things.  
It's lamentable that people prefer reality TV and corndogs to  
Shakespeare and steamed vegetables, but unjust? That seems like  
saying that blue is heavy, or that up is circular.The appearance of the word "unjust" here is the unmistakable spectral  
signature of the Daddy Model. Why else would this idea occur in  
this odd context? Whereas if the speaker were still operating on  
the Daddy Model, and saw wealth as something that flowed from a  
common source and had to be shared out, rather than something  
generated by doing what other people wanted, this is exactly what  
you'd get on noticing that some people made much more than others.When we talk about "unequal distribution of income," we should  
also ask, where does that income come from?  
[8]  
Who made the wealth  
it represents? Because to the extent that income varies simply  
according to how much wealth people create, the distribution may  
be unequal, but it's hardly unjust.Stealing ItThe second reason we tend to find great disparities of wealth  
alarming is that for most of human history the usual way to accumulate  
a fortune was to steal it: in pastoral societies by cattle raiding;  
in agricultural societies by appropriating others' estates in times  
of war, and taxing them in times of peace.In conflicts, those on the winning side would receive the estates  
confiscated from the losers. In England in the 1060s, when William  
the Conqueror distributed the estates of the defeated Anglo-Saxon  
nobles to his followers, the conflict was military. By the 1530s,  
when Henry VIII distributed the estates of the monasteries to his  
followers, it was mostly political.   
[9]  
But the principle was the  
same. Indeed, the same principle is at work now in Zimbabwe.In more organized societies, like China, the ruler and his officials  
used taxation instead of confiscation. But here too we see the  
same principle: the way to get rich was not to create wealth, but  
to serve a ruler powerful enough to appropriate it.This started to change in Europe with the rise of the middle class.  
Now we think of the middle class as people who are neither rich nor  
poor, but originally they were a distinct group. In a feudal  
society, there are just two classes: a warrior aristocracy, and the  
serfs who work their estates. The middle class were a new, third  
group who lived in towns and supported themselves by manufacturing  
and trade.Starting in the tenth and eleventh centuries, petty nobles and  
former serfs banded together in towns that gradually became powerful  
enough to ignore the local feudal lords.   
[10]  
Like serfs, the middle  
class made a living largely by creating wealth. (In port cities  
like Genoa and Pisa, they also engaged in piracy.) But unlike serfs  
they had an incentive to create a lot of it. Any wealth a serf  
created belonged to his master. There was not much point in making  
more than you could hide. Whereas the independence of the townsmen  
allowed them to keep whatever wealth they created.Once it became possible to get rich by creating wealth, society as  
a whole started to get richer very rapidly. Nearly everything we  
have was created by the middle class. Indeed, the other two classes  
have effectively disappeared in industrial societies, and their  
names been given to either end of the middle class. (In the original  
sense of the word, Bill Gates is middle class.)But it was not till the Industrial Revolution that wealth creation  
definitively replaced corruption as the best way to get rich. In  
England, at least, corruption only became unfashionable (and in  
fact only started to be called "corruption") when there started to  
be other, faster ways to get rich.Seventeenth-century England was much like the third world today,  
in that government office was a recognized route to wealth. The  
great fortunes of that time still derived more from what we would  
now call corruption than from commerce.   
[11]  
By the nineteenth  
century that had changed. There continued to be bribes, as there  
still are everywhere, but politics had by then been left to men who  
were driven more by vanity than greed. Technology had made it  
possible to create wealth faster than you could steal it. The  
prototypical rich man of the nineteenth century was not a courtier  
but an industrialist.With the rise of the middle class, wealth stopped being a zero-sum  
game. Jobs and Wozniak didn't have to make us poor to make themselves  
rich. Quite the opposite: they created things that made our lives  
materially richer. They had to, or we wouldn't have paid for them.But since for most of the world's history the main route to wealth  
was to steal it, we tend to be suspicious of rich people. Idealistic  
undergraduates find their unconsciously preserved child's model of  
wealth confirmed by eminent writers of the past. It is a case of  
the mistaken meeting the outdated."Behind every great fortune, there is a crime," Balzac wrote. Except  
he didn't. What he actually said was that a great fortune with no  
apparent cause was probably due to a crime well enough executed  
that it had been forgotten. If we were talking about Europe in  
1000, or most of the third world today, the standard misquotation  
would be spot on. But Balzac lived in nineteenth-century France,  
where the Industrial Revolution was well advanced. He knew you  
could make a fortune without stealing it. After all, he did himself,  
as a popular novelist.  
[12]Only a few countries (by no coincidence, the richest ones) have  
reached this stage. In most, corruption still has the upper hand.  
In most, the fastest way to get wealth is by stealing it. And so  
when we see increasing differences in income in a rich country,  
there is a tendency to worry that it's sliding back toward becoming  
another Venezuela. I think the opposite is happening. I think  
you're seeing a country a full step ahead of Venezuela.The Lever of TechnologyWill technology increase the gap between rich and poor? It will  
certainly increase the gap between the productive and the unproductive.  
That's the whole point of technology. With a tractor an energetic  
farmer could plow six times as much land in a day as he could with  
a team of horses. But only if he mastered a new kind of farming.I've seen the lever of technology grow visibly in my own time. In  
high school I made money by mowing lawns and scooping ice cream at  
Baskin-Robbins. This was the only kind of work available at the  
time. Now high school kids could write software or design web  
sites. But only some of them will; the rest will still be scooping  
ice cream.I remember very vividly when in 1985 improved technology made it  
possible for me to buy a computer of my own. Within months I was  
using it to make money as a freelance programmer. A few years  
before, I couldn't have done this. A few years before, there was  
no such thing as a freelance programmer. But Apple created  
wealth, in the form of powerful, inexpensive computers, and programmers  
immediately set to work using it to create more.As this example suggests, the rate at which technology increases  
our productive capacity is probably exponential, rather than linear.  
So we should expect to see ever-increasing variation in individual  
productivity as time goes on. Will that increase the gap between  
rich and the poor? Depends which gap you mean.Technology should increase the gap in income, but it seems to  
decrease other gaps. A hundred years ago, the rich led a different  
kind of life from ordinary people. They lived in houses  
full of servants, wore elaborately uncomfortable clothes, and  
travelled about in carriages drawn by teams of horses which themselves  
required their own houses and servants. Now, thanks to technology,  
the rich live more like the average person.Cars are a good example of why. It's possible to buy expensive,  
handmade cars that cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. But there  
is not much point. Companies make more money by building a large  
number of ordinary cars than a small number of expensive ones. So  
a company making a mass-produced car can afford to spend a lot more  
on its design. If you buy a custom-made car, something will always  
be breaking. The only point of buying one now is to advertise that  
you can.Or consider watches. Fifty years ago, by spending a lot of money  
on a watch you could get better performance. When watches had  
mechanical movements, expensive watches kept better time. Not any  
more. Since the invention of the quartz movement, an ordinary Timex  
is more accurate than a Patek Philippe costing hundreds of thousands  
of dollars.  
[13]  
Indeed, as with expensive cars, if you're determined  
to spend a lot of money on a watch, you have to put up with some  
inconvenience to do it: as well as keeping worse time, mechanical  
watches have to be wound.The only thing technology can't cheapen is brand. Which is precisely  
why we hear ever more about it. Brand is the residue left as the  
substantive differences between rich and poor evaporate. But what  
label you have on your stuff is a much smaller matter than having  
it versus not having it. In 1900, if you kept a carriage, no one  
asked what year or brand it was. If you had one, you were rich.  
And if you weren't rich, you took the omnibus or walked. Now even  
the poorest Americans drive cars, and it is only because we're so  
well trained by advertising that we can even recognize the especially  
expensive ones.  
[14]The same pattern has played out in industry after industry. If  
there is enough demand for something, technology will make it cheap  
enough to sell in large volumes, and the mass-produced versions  
will be, if not better, at least more convenient.  
[15]  
And there  
is nothing the rich like more than convenience. The rich people I  
know drive the same cars, wear the same clothes, have the same kind  
of furniture, and eat the same foods as my other friends. Their  
houses are in different neighborhoods, or if in the same neighborhood  
are different sizes, but within them life is similar. The houses  
are made using the same construction techniques and contain much  
the same objects. It's inconvenient to do something expensive and  
custom.The rich spend their time more like everyone else too. Bertie  
Wooster seems long gone. Now, most people who are rich enough not  
to work do anyway. It's not just social pressure that makes them;  
idleness is lonely and demoralizing.Nor do we have the social distinctions there were a hundred years  
ago. The novels and etiquette manuals of that period read now  
like descriptions of some strange tribal society. "With respect  
to the continuance of friendships..." hints Mrs. Beeton's Book  
of Household Management (1880), "it may be found necessary, in  
some cases, for a mistress to relinquish, on assuming the responsibility  
of a household, many of those commenced in the earlier part of her  
life." A woman who married a rich man was expected to drop friends  
who didn't. You'd seem a barbarian if you behaved that way today.  
You'd also have a very boring life. People still tend to segregate  
themselves somewhat, but much more on the basis of education than  
wealth.  
[16]Materially and socially, technology seems to be decreasing the gap  
between the rich and the poor, not increasing it. If Lenin walked  
around the offices of a company like Yahoo or Intel or Cisco, he'd  
think communism had won. Everyone would be wearing the same clothes,  
have the same kind of office (or rather, cubicle) with the same  
furnishings, and address one another by their first names instead  
of by honorifics. Everything would seem exactly as he'd predicted,  
until he looked at their bank accounts. Oops.Is it a problem if technology increases that gap? It doesn't seem  
to be so far. As it increases the gap in income, it seems to  
decrease most other gaps.Alternative to an AxiomOne often hears a policy criticized on the grounds that it would  
increase the income gap between rich and poor. As if it were an  
axiom that this would be bad. It might be true that increased  
variation in income would be bad, but I don't see how we can say  
it's axiomatic.Indeed, it may even be false, in industrial democracies. In a  
society of serfs and warlords, certainly, variation in income is a  
sign of an underlying problem. But serfdom is not the only cause  
of variation in income. A 747 pilot doesn't make 40 times as much  
as a checkout clerk because he is a warlord who somehow holds her  
in thrall. His skills are simply much more valuable.I'd like to propose an alternative idea: that in a modern society,  
increasing variation in income is a sign of health. Technology  
seems to increase the variation in productivity at faster than  
linear rates. If we don't see corresponding variation in income,  
there are three possible explanations: (a) that technical innovation  
has stopped, (b) that the people who would create the most wealth  
aren't doing it, or (c) that they aren't getting paid for it.I think we can safely say that (a) and (b) would be bad. If you  
disagree, try living for a year using only the resources available  
to the average Frankish nobleman in 800, and report back to us.  
(I'll be generous and not send you back to the stone age.)The only option, if you're going to have an increasingly prosperous  
society without increasing variation in income, seems to be (c),  
that people will create a lot of wealth without being paid for it.  
That Jobs and Wozniak, for example, will cheerfully work 20-hour  
days to produce the Apple computer for a society that allows them,  
after taxes, to keep just enough of their income to match what they  
would have made working 9 to 5 at a big company.Will people create wealth if they can't get paid for it? Only if  
it's fun. People will write operating systems for free. But they  
won't install them, or take support calls, or train customers to  
use them. And at least 90% of the work that even the highest tech  
companies do is of this second, unedifying kind.All the unfun kinds of wealth creation slow dramatically in a society  
that confiscates private fortunes. We can confirm this empirically.  
Suppose you hear a strange noise that you think may be due to a  
nearby fan. You turn the fan off, and the noise stops. You turn  
the fan back on, and the noise starts again. Off, quiet. On,  
noise. In the absence of other information, it would seem the noise  
is caused by the fan.At various times and places in history, whether you could accumulate  
a fortune by creating wealth has been turned on and off. Northern  
Italy in 800, off (warlords would steal it). Northern Italy in  
1100, on. Central France in 1100, off (still feudal). England in  
1800, on. England in 1974, off (98% tax on investment income).  
United States in 1974, on. We've even had a twin study: West  
Germany, on; East Germany, off. In every case, the creation of  
wealth seems to appear and disappear like the noise of a fan as you  
switch on and off the prospect of keeping it.There is some momentum involved. It probably takes at least a  
generation to turn people into East Germans (luckily for England).  
But if it were merely a fan we were studying, without all the extra  
baggage that comes from the controversial topic of wealth, no one  
would have any doubt that the fan was causing the noise.If you suppress variations in income, whether by stealing private  
fortunes, as feudal rulers used to do, or by taxing them away, as  
some modern governments have done, the result always seems to be  
the same. Society as a whole ends up poorer.If I had a choice of living in a society where I was materially  
much better off than I am now, but was among the poorest, or in one  
where I was the richest, but much worse off than I am now, I'd take  
the first option. If I had children, it would arguably be immoral  
not to. It's absolute poverty you want to avoid, not relative  
poverty. If, as the evidence so far implies, you have to have one  
or the other in your society, take relative poverty.You need rich people in your society not so much because in spending  
their money they create jobs, but because of what they have to do  
to get rich. I'm not talking about the trickle-down effect  
here. I'm not saying that if you let Henry Ford get rich, he'll  
hire you as a waiter at his next party. I'm saying that he'll make  
you a tractor to replace your horse.Notes[1]  
Part of the reason this subject is so contentious is that some  
of those most vocal on the subject of wealth—university  
students, heirs, professors, politicians, and journalists—have  
the least experience creating it. (This phenomenon will be familiar  
to anyone who has overheard conversations about sports in a bar.)Students are mostly still on the parental dole, and have not stopped  
to think about where that money comes from. Heirs will be on the  
parental dole for life. Professors and politicians live within  
socialist eddies of the economy, at one remove from the creation  
of wealth, and are paid a flat rate regardless of how hard they  
work. And journalists as part of their professional code segregate  
themselves from the revenue-collecting half of the businesses they  
work for (the ad sales department). Many of these people never  
come face to face with the fact that the money they receive represents  
wealth—wealth that, except in the case of journalists, someone  
else created earlier. They live in a world in which income is  
doled out by a central authority according to some abstract notion  
of fairness (or randomly, in the case of heirs), rather than given  
by other people in return for something they wanted, so it may seem  
to them unfair that things don't work the same in the rest of the  
economy.(Some professors do create a great deal of wealth for  
society. But the money they're paid isn't a quid pro quo.  
It's more in the nature of an investment.)[2]  
When one reads about the origins of the Fabian Society, it  
sounds like something cooked up by the high-minded Edwardian  
child-heroes of Edith Nesbit's The Wouldbegoods.[3]  
According to a study by the Corporate Library, the median total  
compensation, including salary, bonus, stock grants, and the exercise  
of stock options, of S&P 500 CEOs in 2002 was $3.65 million.  
According to Sports Illustrated, the average NBA player's  
salary during the 2002-03 season was $4.54 million, and the average  
major league baseball player's salary at the start of the 2003  
season was $2.56 million. According to the Bureau of Labor  
Statistics, the mean annual wage in the US in 2002 was $35,560.[4]  
In the early empire the price of an ordinary adult slave seems  
to have been about 2,000 sestertii (e.g. Horace, Sat. ii.7.43).  
A servant girl cost 600 (Martial vi.66), while Columella (iii.3.8)  
says that a skilled vine-dresser was worth 8,000. A doctor, P.  
Decimus Eros Merula, paid 50,000 sestertii for his freedom (Dessau,  
Inscriptiones 7812). Seneca (Ep. xxvii.7) reports  
that one Calvisius Sabinus paid 100,000 sestertii apiece for slaves  
learned in the Greek classics. Pliny (Hist. Nat. vii.39)  
says that the highest price paid for a slave up to his time was  
700,000 sestertii, for the linguist (and presumably teacher) Daphnis,  
but that this had since been exceeded by actors buying their own  
freedom.Classical Athens saw a similar variation in prices. An ordinary  
laborer was worth about 125 to 150 drachmae. Xenophon (Mem.  
ii.5) mentions prices ranging from 50 to 6,000 drachmae (for the  
manager of a silver mine).For more on the economics of ancient slavery see:Jones, A. H. M., "Slavery in the Ancient World," Economic History  
Review, 2:9 (1956), 185-199, reprinted in Finley, M. I. (ed.),  
Slavery in Classical Antiquity, Heffer, 1964.[5]  
Eratosthenes (276—195 BC) used shadow lengths in different  
cities to estimate the Earth's circumference. He was off by only  
about 2%.[6]  
No, and Windows, respectively.[7]  
One of the biggest divergences between the Daddy Model and  
reality is the valuation of hard work. In the Daddy Model, hard  
work is in itself deserving. In reality, wealth is measured by  
what one delivers, not how much effort it costs. If I paint someone's  
house, the owner shouldn't pay me extra for doing it with a toothbrush.It will seem to someone still implicitly operating on the Daddy  
Model that it is unfair when someone works hard and doesn't get  
paid much. To help clarify the matter, get rid of everyone else  
and put our worker on a desert island, hunting and gathering fruit.  
If he's bad at it he'll work very hard and not end up with much  
food. Is this unfair? Who is being unfair to him?[8]  
Part of the reason for the tenacity of the Daddy Model may be  
the dual meaning of "distribution." When economists talk about  
"distribution of income," they mean statistical distribution. But  
when you use the phrase frequently, you can't help associating it  
with the other sense of the word (as in e.g. "distribution of alms"),  
and thereby subconsciously seeing wealth as something that flows  
from some central tap. The word "regressive" as applied to tax  
rates has a similar effect, at least on me; how can anything  
regressive be good?[9]  
"From the beginning of the reign Thomas Lord Roos was an assiduous  
courtier of the young Henry VIII and was soon to reap the rewards.  
In 1525 he was made a Knight of the Garter and given the Earldom  
of Rutland. In the thirties his support of the breach with Rome,  
his zeal in crushing the Pilgrimage of Grace, and his readiness to  
vote the death-penalty in the succession of spectacular treason  
trials that punctuated Henry's erratic matrimonial progress made  
him an obvious candidate for grants of monastic property."Stone, Lawrence, Family and Fortune: Studies in Aristocratic  
Finance in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, Oxford  
University Press, 1973, p. 166.[10]  
There is archaeological evidence for large settlements earlier,  
but it's hard to say what was happening in them.Hodges, Richard and David Whitehouse, Mohammed, Charlemagne and  
the Origins of Europe, Cornell University Press, 1983.[11]  
William Cecil and his son Robert were each in turn the most  
powerful minister of the crown, and both used their position to  
amass fortunes among the largest of their times. Robert in particular  
took bribery to the point of treason. "As Secretary of State and  
the leading advisor to King James on foreign policy, [he] was a  
special recipient of favour, being offered large bribes by the Dutch  
not to make peace with Spain, and large bribes by Spain to make  
peace." (Stone, op. cit., p. 17.)[12]  
Though Balzac made a lot of money from writing, he was notoriously  
improvident and was troubled by debts all his life.[13]  
A Timex will gain or lose about .5 seconds per day. The most  
accurate mechanical watch, the Patek Philippe 10 Day Tourbillon,  
is rated at -1.5 to +2 seconds. Its retail price is about $220,000.[14]  
If asked to choose which was more expensive, a well-preserved  
1989 Lincoln Town Car ten-passenger limousine ($5,000) or a 2004  
Mercedes S600 sedan ($122,000), the average Edwardian might well  
guess wrong.[15]  
To say anything meaningful about income trends, you have to  
talk about real income, or income as measured in what it can buy.  
But the usual way of calculating real income ignores much of the  
growth in wealth over time, because it depends on a consumer price  
index created by bolting end to end a series of numbers that are  
only locally accurate, and that don't include the prices of new  
inventions until they become so common that their prices stabilize.So while we might think it was very much better to live in a world  
with antibiotics or air travel or an electric power grid than  
without, real income statistics calculated in the usual way will  
prove to us that we are only slightly richer for having these things.Another approach would be to ask, if you were going back to the  
year x in a time machine, how much would you have to spend on trade  
goods to make your fortune? For example, if you were going back  
to 1970 it would certainly be less than $500, because the processing  
power you can get for $500 today would have been worth at least  
$150 million in 1970. The function goes asymptotic fairly quickly,  
because for times over a hundred years or so you could get all you  
needed in present-day trash. In 1800 an empty plastic drink bottle  
with a screw top would have seemed a miracle of workmanship.[16]  
Some will say this amounts to the same thing, because the rich  
have better opportunities for education. That's a valid point. It  
is still possible, to a degree, to buy your kids' way into top  
colleges by sending them to private schools that in effect hack the  
college admissions process.According to a 2002 report by the National Center for Education  
Statistics, about 1.7% of American kids attend private, non-sectarian  
schools. At Princeton, 36% of the class of 2007 came from such  
schools. (Interestingly, the number at Harvard is significantly  
lower, about 28%.) Obviously this is a huge loophole. It does at  
least seem to be closing, not widening.Perhaps the designers of admissions processes should take a lesson  
from the example of computer security, and instead of just assuming  
that their system can't be hacked, measure the degree to which it  
is.Spanish Translation

# How to Make Wealth

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
May 2004  
(This essay was originally published in Hackers   
& Painters.)  
If you wanted to get rich, how would you do it? I think your best  
bet would be to start or join a startup. That's been a   
reliable way to get rich for hundreds of years. The word "startup"   
dates from the 1960s, but what happens in one is   
very similar to the venture-backed trading voyages of the  
Middle Ages.Startups usually involve technology, so much so that the phrase  
"high-tech startup" is almost redundant. A startup is a small  
company that takes on a hard technical problem.Lots of people get rich knowing nothing more than that.  
You don't have to know physics to be a good pitcher. But  
I think it could give you an edge to understand the underlying principles.  
Why do startups have to be small?   
Will a startup inevitably stop being a startup as it  
grows larger?   
And why do they so often work on  
developing new technology? Why are there so many startups  
selling new drugs or computer software, and none selling corn oil  
or laundry detergent?The PropositionEconomically, you can think of a startup as a way to   
compress your whole working life into a few years. Instead  
of working at a low intensity for forty years, you work as  
hard as you possibly can for four. This pays especially well  
in technology, where you earn a premium for working fast.Here is a brief sketch of the economic proposition. If you're  
a good hacker in your mid twenties, you can  
get a job paying about $80,000 per year. So on average   
such a hacker must be  
able to do at least $80,000 worth of work per year for the   
company just to break even. You could probably  
work twice as many hours as a corporate employee, and if  
you focus you can probably get three times as much done in  
an hour.   
[1]  
You should get another multiple of two, at  
least, by eliminating the drag   
of the pointy-haired middle  
manager who would be your boss in a big company.  
Then there is one more multiple: how much smarter are you  
than your job description expects you to be?  
Suppose another multiple of three. Combine all these multipliers, and I'm  
claiming you could be 36 times more   
productive than you're expected to be in a random corporate  
job.   
[2]  
 If a fairly good hacker is worth $80,000 a year at a   
big company, then a smart  
hacker working very hard without any corporate  
bullshit to slow him down should be able to do work worth about  
$3 million a year.Like all back-of-the-envelope calculations, this one  
has a lot of wiggle room. I wouldn't try to  
defend the actual numbers. But I stand by the   
structure of the calculation. I'm not claiming  
the multiplier is precisely 36, but it is certainly more  
than 10, and probably rarely as high as 100.If $3 million a year seems  
high, remember that we're talking about the limit case:  
the case where you not only have zero leisure time  
but indeed work so hard that you endanger your health.Startups are not magic. They don't change the laws of  
wealth creation. They just represent a point at the far end of the curve.  
There is a conservation law at work here: if  
you want to make a million dollars, you have to endure a   
million dollars' worth of pain.   
For example, one way to  
make a million dollars would be to work for the   
Post Office your whole life, and save every penny of your   
salary. Imagine the stress of working for the Post   
Office for fifty years. In a startup you compress all  
this stress into three or four years. You do tend to get a   
certain   
bulk discount if you buy the economy-size pain,  
but you can't evade the fundamental conservation law.  
If starting a startup were easy, everyone would do it.Millions, not BillionsIf $3 million a year seems high to some people, it will seem  
low to others. Three million?   
How do I get to be a billionaire, like Bill Gates?So let's get Bill Gates out of the way right now. It's not  
a good idea to use famous rich people   
as examples, because the press only   
write about the very richest, and these tend to be outliers.  
Bill Gates is a smart, determined, and hardworking man,  
but you need more than  
that to make as much money as he has. You also need to be  
very lucky.There is a large random  
factor in the success of any company. So the guys you end   
up reading about in the papers are the ones who are very   
smart, totally dedicated, and win the lottery.  
Certainly Bill is smart and dedicated, but Microsoft also   
happens to have been the beneficiary of one of the most spectacular  
blunders in the history of business: the licensing deal for  
DOS. No doubt Bill did   
everything he could to steer IBM into making that blunder,   
and he has done an excellent job of exploiting it, but if  
there had been one person with a brain on IBM's side,  
Microsoft's future would have been very different.  
Microsoft at that stage had little leverage over IBM.  
They were effectively a component supplier. If IBM had   
required an exclusive license, as they should have, Microsoft  
would still have signed the deal. It would still have  
meant a lot of money for them, and IBM  
could easily have gotten an operating system elsewhere.Instead IBM ended up using all its power in the market  
to give Microsoft control of the PC standard. From   
that point, all Microsoft had to do was execute. They  
never had to bet the company on a bold decision. All they  
had to do was play hardball with licensees and copy more  
innovative products reasonably promptly.If IBM hadn't made this mistake, Microsoft would  
still have been a successful company, but it  
could not have grown so big so fast.   
Bill Gates would be rich, but he'd be somewhere  
near the bottom of the Forbes 400 with the other guys his age.There are a lot of ways to get  
rich, and this essay is about only one of them. This  
essay is about how to make money by creating wealth and  
getting paid for it. There are plenty of other ways to   
get money, including chance, speculation, marriage, inheritance,   
theft, extortion, fraud, monopoly,  
graft, lobbying,  
counterfeiting, and prospecting. Most of the greatest fortunes  
have probably involved several of these.The advantage of creating wealth, as a way to get rich,  
is not just that it's more legitimate   
(many of the other methods are now illegal)   
but that it's more  
straightforward. You just have to do something people want.Money Is Not WealthIf you want to create wealth, it will help to understand what it is.   
Wealth is not the same thing as money.   
[3]  
 Wealth is as old as  
human history. Far older, in fact; ants have wealth.   
Money is a comparatively recent invention.Wealth is the fundamental thing. Wealth is stuff we want: food,   
clothes, houses, cars, gadgets, travel to interesting places,  
and so on. You can have wealth without  
having money. If you had a magic machine that  
could on command make you a car or cook you dinner or do your  
laundry, or do anything else you wanted, you wouldn't need money.  
Whereas if you were in the middle of Antarctica, where there is  
nothing to buy, it wouldn't matter how much money you had.Wealth is what you want, not money. But if wealth is the important  
thing, why does everyone talk about making money? It is  
a kind of shorthand: money is a way of moving wealth, and in practice  
they are usually interchangeable. But they are not the same thing,  
and unless you plan to get rich by counterfeiting, talking about  
making money can make it harder to understand how to   
make money.Money is a side effect of specialization.  
In a specialized society, most of the  
things you need, you can't make for yourself. If you want a potato  
or a pencil or a place to live, you have to get it from someone  
else.How do you get the person who grows the potatoes to give you some?  
By giving him something he wants in return. But you can't get  
very far by trading things directly with the people who  
need them. If you make violins, and none of the local  
farmers wants one, how will you eat?The solution societies find, as they get more specialized, is to  
make the trade into a two-step process. Instead of trading violins  
directly for potatoes, you trade violins for, say, silver,   
which you can then trade again for anything else you need. The  
intermediate stuff-- the medium of exchange-- can be anything that's  
rare and portable. Historically metals have been the most common,  
but recently we've been using a medium of exchange, called the dollar,  
that doesn't physically exist. It works as a medium of exchange,  
however, because its rarity   
is guaranteed by the U.S. Government.The advantage of a medium of exchange is that it makes trade work.  
The disadvantage is that it tends to obscure what trade really  
means. People think that what a business does is make money.  
But money is just the intermediate stage-- just  
a shorthand-- for whatever people want.  
What most businesses really do is make   
wealth. They do something people want.   
[4]The Pie FallacyA surprising number of people retain from childhood the idea  
that there is a fixed amount of wealth in the world.   
There is, in any normal family, a fixed amount of money at   
any moment. But that's not the same thing.When wealth is talked about in this context, it is often  
described as a pie. "You can't make the pie larger,"  
say politicians.  
When you're  
talking about the amount of money in one family's bank  
account, or the amount available to a government from one  
year's tax revenue, this is true.   
If one person gets more, someone else has to get less.I can remember believing, as a child, that if a few  
rich people had all the money, it left less for everyone else.  
Many people seem to continue to believe something like this  
well into adulthood. This fallacy is usually there in the   
background when you hear someone talking about how x percent  
of the population have y percent of the wealth. If you plan  
to start a startup, then whether you realize it or not, you're  
planning to disprove the Pie Fallacy.What leads people astray here is the abstraction of  
money. Money is not wealth. It's  
just something we use to move wealth around.  
So although there may be, in certain specific moments (like  
your family, this month) a fixed amount of money available to  
trade with other people for things you want,  
there is not a fixed amount of wealth in the world.   
You can make more wealth. Wealth has been getting created and  
destroyed (but on balance, created) for all of human history.Suppose you own a beat-up old car.   
Instead of sitting on your butt next  
summer, you could spend the time restoring your car to pristine condition.  
In doing so you create wealth. The world is-- and  
you specifically are-- one pristine old car the richer. And not  
just in some metaphorical way. If you sell your car,  
you'll get more for it.In restoring your old car you have made yourself  
richer. You haven't made anyone else poorer. So there is  
obviously not a fixed pie. And in fact, when you look at   
it this way, you wonder why anyone would think there was.   
[5]Kids know, without knowing they know, that they can create  
wealth. If you need to give someone a present and don't  
have any money, you make one. But kids are so bad at making  
things that they consider home-made presents to be a distinct,  
inferior, sort of thing to store-bought ones-- a mere expression  
of the proverbial thought that counts.   
And indeed, the lumpy ashtrays  
we made for our parents did not have much of a resale market.CraftsmenThe people most likely to grasp that wealth can be  
created are the ones who are good at making things, the craftsmen.  
Their hand-made objects become store-bought ones.   
But with the rise of industrialization there are fewer and  
fewer craftsmen. One of the biggest remaining groups is  
computer programmers.A programmer can sit down in front of a computer and  
create wealth. A good piece of software is, in itself,   
a valuable thing.  
There is no manufacturing to confuse the issue. Those  
characters you type   
are a complete, finished product.  
If someone sat down and wrote a web  
browser that didn't suck (a fine idea, by the way), the world  
would be that much richer.  
[5b]Everyone in a company works together to create  
wealth, in the sense of making more things people want.  
Many of the employees (e.g. the people in the mailroom or  
the personnel department) work at one remove from the   
actual making of stuff. Not the programmers. They  
literally think the product, one line at a time.  
And so it's clearer to programmers that wealth is something  
that's made, rather than being distributed, like slices of a  
pie, by some imaginary Daddy.It's also obvious to programmers that there are huge variations  
in the rate at which wealth is created. At Viaweb we had one  
programmer who was a sort of monster of productivity.   
I remember watching what he did one long day and estimating that  
he had added several hundred thousand dollars  
to the market value of the company.   
A great programmer, on a roll, could   
create a million dollars worth of wealth in a couple weeks.  
A mediocre programmer over the same period will generate zero or  
even negative wealth (e.g. by introducing bugs).This is  
why so many of the best programmers are libertarians.  
In our world, you sink or swim, and there are no excuses.  
When those far removed from the creation of wealth-- undergraduates,  
reporters, politicians-- hear  
that the richest 5% of the people have   
half the total wealth, they tend to think injustice!  
An experienced programmer would be more likely to think  
is that all? The top 5% of programmers  
probably write 99% of the good software.Wealth can be created without being sold. Scientists, till  
recently at least, effectively donated the wealth they   
created. We are all richer for knowing about penicillin,  
because we're less likely to die from infections. Wealth  
is whatever people want, and not dying is certainly something  
we want. Hackers often donate their work by   
writing open source software that anyone can use for free.  
I am much the richer for the operating system  
FreeBSD, which I'm running on the computer I'm using now,  
and so is Yahoo, which runs it on all their servers.What a Job IsIn industrialized countries, people belong to one institution or  
another at least until their twenties. After all those years you get  
used to the idea of belonging to a group of people who all get up  
in the morning, go to some set of buildings, and do things that they  
do not, ordinarily, enjoy doing. Belonging to such a group becomes  
part of your identity: name, age, role, institution.  
If you have to introduce yourself, or  
someone else describes you, it will be as something like, John  
Smith, age 10, a student at such and such elementary school, or  
John Smith, age 20, a student at such and such college.When John Smith finishes school he is expected to get a job. And  
what getting a job seems to mean is joining another institution.  
Superficially it's a lot like college. You pick the companies you  
want to work for and apply to join them. If one likes you, you  
become a member of this new group. You get up in the morning and  
go to a new set of buildings, and do things that you do not, ordinarily,  
enjoy doing. There are a few differences: life is not as much fun,  
and you get paid, instead of paying, as you did in college. But  
the similarities feel greater than the differences. John Smith is  
now John Smith, 22, a software developer at such and such corporation.In fact John Smith's  
life has changed more than he realizes. Socially, a company  
looks much like college, but the deeper you go into the  
underlying reality, the more different it gets.What a company does, and has to do if it wants to continue to  
exist, is earn money. And the way most companies make money  
is by creating wealth. Companies can be so specialized that this  
similarity is concealed, but it is not only manufacturing   
companies that create wealth. A big component of wealth is  
location.   
Remember that magic machine that could  
make you cars and cook you dinner and so on? It would not be  
so useful if it delivered your dinner to a random location  
in central Asia.   
If wealth means what people want, companies that move  
things also create wealth. Ditto for  
many other kinds of companies that don't make anything  
physical. Nearly all companies exist to do something people  
want.And that's what you do, as well, when you go to work for a company.  
But here there is another layer that tends to obscure the underlying  
reality. In a company, the work you do is averaged together with  
a lot of other people's.   
You may not even be aware you're doing something people  
want. Your contribution may be indirect. But the company as a  
whole must be giving people something they want, or they won't make  
any money. And if they are paying you x dollars a year, then on  
average you must be contributing at least x dollars a year worth  
of work, or the company will be spending more than it makes,  
and will go out of business.Someone graduating from college thinks, and is told, that he needs  
to get a job, as if the important thing were becoming a member of   
an institution. A more direct way to put it would be: you need to  
start doing something people want. You don't  
need to  
join a company to do that. All a company is is a group of people  
working together to do something people want. It's doing something people  
want that matters, not joining the group.   
[6]For most people the   
best plan probably is to go to work for some existing  
company. But it is a good idea to understand what's happening   
when you do this. A job means doing something people want,  
averaged together with everyone else in that company.Working HarderThat averaging gets to be a problem.  
I think the single biggest problem afflicting large companies is the   
difficulty of assigning a value to each person's work.   
For the most part they punt. In a  
big company you get paid a fairly predictable salary for working   
fairly hard. You're expected not to be obviously incompetent or  
lazy, but you're not expected to devote your whole life to your  
work.It turns out, though, that there are economies of scale in how much of your  
life you devote to your work. In the right kind of business,   
someone who really devoted himself to work could generate ten or  
even a hundred times as much wealth as an average  
employee. A programmer, for example, instead of chugging along  
maintaining and updating an existing piece of software, could write  
a whole new piece of software, and with it create a new source of  
revenue.Companies are not set up to reward people who want to do this.   
You can't go to your boss and say, I'd like to start working ten  
times as hard, so will you please pay me ten times as much? For  
one thing, the official fiction is that you are already working as  
hard as you can. But a more serious problem is that the company  
has no way of measuring the value of your work.Salesmen are an exception. It's easy   
to measure how much revenue they generate, and they're  
usually paid a percentage of it. If a salesman wants to work harder,  
he can just start doing it, and he will automatically  
get paid proportionally more.There is one other job besides sales where big companies can  
hire first-rate people: in the top management jobs.   
And for the same reason: their performance can  
be measured. The top managers are  
held responsible for the performance of the entire company.  
Because an ordinary employee's performance can't usually  
be measured, he is not expected to do  
more than put in a solid effort. Whereas top management, like  
salespeople, have to actually come up with the numbers.  
The CEO of a company that tanks cannot plead that he put in   
a solid effort. If the company does badly, he's done badly.A company that could pay all its employees so straightforwardly   
would be enormously successful. Many employees would work harder  
if they could get paid for it. More importantly,  
such a company would attract people who wanted to work  
especially hard.   
It would crush its competitors.Unfortunately, companies can't pay everyone like salesmen. Salesmen  
work alone. Most employees' work is tangled together. Suppose  
a company makes some kind of consumer gadget. The   
engineers build a reliable gadget with all kinds of new features;  
the industrial designers design a beautiful case for it; and then  
the marketing people convince everyone that  
it's something they've got to have. How do you know how much of the  
gadget's sales are due to each group's efforts? Or, for that  
matter, how much is due to the creators of past gadgets that gave  
the company a reputation for quality? There's no way to   
untangle all their contributions. Even if you could read the minds  
of the consumers, you'd find these factors were all blurred together.If you want to go faster, it's a problem to have your work  
tangled together with a large number of other people's. In a   
large group, your performance is not separately measurable-- and   
the rest of the group slows you down.Measurement and LeverageTo get rich you need to get yourself in a situation with two  
things, measurement and leverage. You need to be in a  
position where your performance can be measured, or there is  
no way to get paid more by doing more. And you have to  
have leverage, in the sense that the decisions you make have   
a big effect.Measurement alone is not enough. An example of a job with  
measurement but not leverage is doing piecework in a  
sweatshop. Your performance is measured and you get paid   
accordingly, but you have no scope for decisions. The only  
decision you get to make is how fast you work, and that  
can probably only increase your earnings by a factor  
of two or three.An example of a job with both measurement and leverage would  
be lead actor in a movie. Your performance can be measured in the  
gross of the movie. And you have leverage in the sense that your  
performance can make or break it.CEOs also have both measurement and leverage. They're measured,  
in that the performance of the company is their performance.  
And they have leverage in that their decisions  
set the whole company moving in one direction or another.I think everyone who gets rich by their own efforts will be  
found to be in a situation with measurement and leverage.   
Everyone I can think of does: CEOs, movie stars,   
hedge fund managers, professional athletes. A good hint to the  
presence of leverage is the possibility of failure.  
Upside must be balanced by downside, so if there is   
big potential for gain there must also be a terrifying  
possibility of loss. CEOs, stars, fund managers, and athletes  
all live with the sword hanging over their heads;  
the moment they start to suck, they're out. If you're in  
a job that feels safe, you are not going to get rich,  
because if there is no danger there is almost certainly no leverage.But you don't have to become a CEO or a movie star to  
be in a situation with measurement and leverage. All you   
need to do is be part of a small group working on a  
hard problem.Smallness = MeasurementIf you can't measure the value of the work done by individual   
employees, you can get close. You can measure the value  
of the work done by small groups.One level at which you can accurately measure the revenue  
generated by employees is at the level of the whole company.   
When the company is small, you are thereby fairly close to   
measuring the contributions of individual employees. A viable  
startup might only have ten employees, which puts you within a  
factor of ten of measuring individual effort.Starting or joining a startup is thus as close as most  
people can get to saying to one's boss, I want to work ten times  
as hard, so please pay me ten times as much. There are two  
differences: you're not saying it to your boss, but directly to the  
customers (for whom your boss is only a proxy after all), and  
you're not doing it individually, but along with a small group  
of other ambitious people.It will, ordinarily, be a group. Except in a few unusual kinds  
of work, like acting or writing books, you can't be a company   
of one person.   
And the people you work with had better be good, because it's their work that  
yours is going to be averaged with.A big company is like a giant galley driven by a thousand rowers.  
Two things keep the speed of the  
galley down. One is that individual rowers don't see any  
result from working harder.   
The other is that, in a group of a  
thousand people, the average rower is likely to be  
pretty average.If you took ten people at random out of the big galley and  
put them in a boat by themselves, they could probably go   
faster. They would have both carrot and stick to motivate   
them. An energetic rower would be encouraged by the thought  
that he could have a visible effect on the speed of  
the boat. And if someone was lazy, the others would be more likely  
to notice and complain.But the real advantage of the ten-man boat shows when   
you take the ten best rowers out of the big galley  
and put them in a boat together. They will have all  
the extra motivation that comes from being in a small group.  
But more importantly, by selecting that small a group  
you can get the best rowers. Each one will be in  
the top 1%. It's a much better deal for them to average   
their work together with a small group of their peers than to   
average it with everyone.That's the real point of startups. Ideally, you are getting  
together with a group of other people who also want to work  
a lot harder, and get paid a lot more, than they would in  
a big company. And because startups tend to get founded   
by self-selecting groups of ambitious people who already   
know one another (at least by reputation), the level of   
measurement is more precise than you get from smallness alone.  
A startup is not merely ten people, but ten people like you.Steve Jobs once said that the success or failure of a startup  
depends on the first ten employees. I agree. If   
anything, it's more like the first five.  
Being small is not, in itself, what makes startups kick butt,   
but rather that small groups can be select.  
You don't want small in the sense of a  
village, but small in the sense of an all-star team.The larger a group, the closer its average member will be to the average  
for the population as a whole. So all other things being  
equal, a very able person in a big company is probably  
getting a bad deal, because his performance is dragged down by  
the overall lower performance of the others. Of course,  
all other things often are not equal: the able person may   
not care about money, or may prefer the stability of a large  
company. But a very able person who does care about money  
will ordinarily do better to go off and work with a small  
group of peers.Technology = LeverageStartups offer anyone a way to be in a situation with  
measurement and leverage.  
They allow measurement because they're small,  
and they offer leverage because they  
make money by inventing new technology.What is technology? It's technique. It's the way   
we all do things. And when  
you discover a new way to do things, its value is multiplied  
by all the people who use it. It is the proverbial fishing  
rod, rather than the fish. That's the difference between a  
startup and a restaurant or a barber shop. You fry eggs or cut   
hair one customer at a time. Whereas if   
you solve a technical problem that a lot of people care about,  
you help everyone who uses your solution.   
That's leverage.If you look at history, it seems that most people  
who got rich by creating wealth did it by developing  
new technology. You just can't fry eggs or cut hair fast enough.  
What made the Florentines rich in 1200   
was the discovery of new techniques for making the high-tech   
product of the time, fine woven cloth. What made the  
Dutch rich in 1600 was the discovery of shipbuilding and  
navigation techniques that enabled them to dominate the seas  
of the Far East.Fortunately there is a natural fit between smallness and  
solving hard problems. The leading edge of technology moves  
fast. Technology that's valuable today could be worthless  
in a couple years. Small companies are more at home in this  
world, because they don't have layers of bureaucracy to  
slow them down.  
Also, technical advances tend to come from unorthodox approaches,  
and small companies are less constrained by convention.Big companies can develop technology. They just can't do it  
quickly. Their size makes them slow and prevents  
them from rewarding employees for the extraordinary  
effort required. So in practice big companies only get to develop   
technology in fields where large capital requirements prevent startups from  
competing with them, like microprocessors, power plants,   
or passenger aircraft. And even in those fields they depend heavily  
on startups for components and ideas.It's obvious that biotech or software startups exist to solve  
hard technical problems, but   
I think it will also be found to be true   
in businesses that don't seem to be about technology. McDonald's,  
for example, grew big by designing a system, the McDonald's   
franchise, that could then be reproduced at will all over the   
face of the earth. A McDonald's franchise is controlled by rules  
so precise that it is practically  
a piece of software. Write once, run everywhere.  
Ditto for Wal-Mart. Sam Walton got rich not by being a   
retailer, but by designing a new kind of store.Use difficulty as a guide not just in selecting the overall  
aim of your company, but also at decision points along the way.  
At Viaweb one of our rules of thumb was run upstairs.  
Suppose you are a little, nimble guy being chased by a big,  
fat, bully. You open a door and find yourself in a   
staircase. Do you go up or down? I say up. The  
bully can probably run downstairs as fast as you can.  
Going upstairs his bulk will be more of a disadvantage.  
Running upstairs is hard for you but even harder for him.What this meant in practice was that we deliberately sought   
hard problems. If there were two features we could add to our  
software, both equally valuable in proportion to their difficulty,  
we'd always take the harder one. Not just because it was   
more valuable, but because it was harder.  
We delighted in forcing bigger, slower competitors  
to follow us over difficult ground.  
Like guerillas, startups prefer the difficult terrain of the  
mountains, where the troops of the central government  
can't follow. I can remember times when we were just  
exhausted after wrestling all day with some horrible technical  
problem. And I'd be delighted, because something that was   
hard for us would be impossible for our competitors.This is not just a good way to run a startup. It's what  
a startup is.  
Venture capitalists know about this and have a phrase for it:  
barriers to entry. If you go to a VC with a new   
idea and ask him to invest in it, one of the first things  
he'll ask is, how hard would this be for someone else to   
develop? That is, how much difficult ground  
have you put between yourself and potential pursuers?   
[7]  
And you had better have a convincing explanation of why   
your technology would be hard to duplicate. Otherwise as  
soon as some big company becomes aware of it, they'll make  
their own, and with their brand name, capital, and  
distribution clout, they'll take away your market overnight.  
You'd be like guerillas caught in the open field by regular  
army forces.One way to put up barriers to entry is through patents.   
But patents may not provide much protection.   
Competitors commonly find ways to work around a patent.  
And if they can't, they   
may simply violate it and invite you to sue them.  
A big company is not afraid to be sued; it's an everyday thing  
for them. They'll make sure that suing them is expensive and  
takes a long time.  
Ever heard of Philo Farnsworth? He invented  
television. The reason you've never  
heard of him is that his company was not the one to make  
money from it.   
[8]  
The company that did was RCA, and  
Farnsworth's reward for his efforts was a decade of  
patent litigation.Here, as so often, the best defense is a good offense. If  
you can develop technology that's simply too hard for  
competitors to duplicate, you don't need to rely on other  
defenses. Start by picking a hard problem, and  
then at every decision point, take the harder choice.   
[9]The Catch(es)If it were simply a matter of working harder than   
an ordinary employee and getting paid proportionately, it would  
obviously be a good deal to start a startup. Up to a point it  
would be more fun. I don't think many people   
like the slow pace of big companies, the interminable meetings,  
the water-cooler conversations, the clueless middle managers,  
and so on.Unfortunately there are a couple catches. One is that you  
can't choose the point on the curve that you want to inhabit.  
You can't decide, for example, that you'd like to work just  
two or three times as hard, and get paid that much more. When  
you're running a startup, your competitors decide how  
hard you work. And they pretty much all make the same decision:  
as hard as you possibly can.The other catch is that the payoff is only on average proportionate  
to your productivity. There is, as I said before, a large  
random multiplier in the success of any company. So in  
practice the deal is not that you're 30 times as productive and get   
paid 30 times as much. It is that you're 30 times as productive,  
and get paid between zero and a thousand times as much.  
If the mean is 30x, the median is probably zero.  
Most startups tank, and not just the dogfood   
portals we all heard about during  
the Internet Bubble. It's common for a startup  
to be developing a genuinely good product, take slightly  
too long to do it, run out of money, and have to shut down.A startup is like a mosquito. A bear can absorb a hit and a crab  
is armored against one, but a mosquito is designed for one thing:  
to score. No energy is wasted on defense. The defense of mosquitos,   
as a species, is that there are a lot of them, but this is little   
consolation to the individual mosquito.Startups, like mosquitos, tend to be an all-or-nothing proposition.  
And you don't generally know which of the two you're going to  
get till the last minute.   
Viaweb came close to tanking several times. Our trajectory  
was like a sine wave. Fortunately we got bought at  
the top of the cycle, but it was damned close. While we were  
visiting Yahoo in California to talk about selling the company  
to them, we had to borrow a conference room to reassure  
an investor who was about to back out of a new round of funding   
that we needed to stay alive.The all-or-nothing aspect of startups was not something we wanted.  
Viaweb's hackers were all extremely risk-averse.  
If there had been some way just to work super hard and get  
paid for it, without having a lottery mixed in, we would have  
been delighted. We would have much preferred a 100% chance of  
$1 million to a 20% chance of $10 million, even though   
theoretically the second is worth twice as much. Unfortunately,  
there is not currently any space in the business world where  
you can get the first deal.The closest you can get is by  
selling your startup in the early stages, giving up upside   
(and risk) for a smaller but guaranteed payoff. We had a   
chance to do this, and stupidly, as we then thought, let it slip by.  
After that we became comically eager to sell.  
For the next year or so,  
if anyone expressed the slightest curiosity about Viaweb  
we would try to sell them the company. But there were no takers,  
so we had to keep going.It would have been a bargain to   
buy us at an early stage, but companies doing acquisitions are not  
looking for bargains. A company big enough to acquire   
startups will be big enough to be fairly conservative, and   
within the company the people in charge of acquisitions will  
be among the more conservative, because they are likely to be  
business school types who joined the company late.   
They would rather overpay for a safe choice. So  
it is easier to sell an established startup, even at a large  
premium, than an early-stage one.Get UsersI think it's a good idea to get bought, if you can. Running a  
business is different from growing one.  
It is just as well to let a big company take over once you reach   
cruising altitude. It's  
also financially wiser, because selling allows you to diversify.  
What would you think of a financial advisor who put all his  
client's assets into one volatile stock?How do you get bought? Mostly by doing the same things   
you'd do if you didn't intend to sell the company. Being   
profitable, for example. But getting bought is also an art  
in its own right, and one that we spent a lot of time trying  
to master.Potential buyers will  
always delay if they can. The hard part about getting  
bought is getting them to act. For most people, the most powerful motivator  
is not the hope of gain, but the fear of loss. For potential  
acquirers, the most powerful motivator is the prospect that   
one of their competitors will buy you. This, as we found,   
causes CEOs to take red-eyes.   
The second biggest is the worry that, if they don't buy you   
now, you'll continue to grow rapidly and will cost more to  
acquire later, or even become a competitor.In both cases, what it all comes down to is users.   
You'd think that a company about to buy you would do a lot of  
research and decide for themselves how valuable your technology  
was. Not at all. What they go by is the number of users you  
have.In effect, acquirers assume the customers know who has the  
best technology. And this is not as stupid as it sounds. Users   
are the only real proof that you've created wealth. Wealth is   
what people want, and if people aren't using your software,  
maybe it's not just because you're bad at marketing. Maybe it's  
because you haven't made what they want.Venture capitalists have a list of danger signs to watch out for.  
Near the top is the company run by techno-weenies who are   
obsessed with solving interesting technical problems, instead  
of making users happy. In a startup, you're not just trying to  
solve problems. You're trying to solve problems that   
users care about.So I think you should make users the test, just as   
acquirers do. Treat a startup as an optimization problem   
in which performance is measured by number of users. As anyone  
who has tried to optimize software knows, the key is measurement.  
When you try to guess where your program is slow, and what would  
make it faster, you almost always guess wrong.Number of users may not be the perfect test, but it will   
be very close. It's what acquirers care about. It's what   
revenues depend on.   
It's what makes competitors unhappy.  
It's what impresses reporters, and potential  
new users. Certainly it's a better test than your a priori  
notions of what problems are important to solve, no matter how  
technically adept you are.Among other things, treating a startup as an optimization  
problem will help you avoid another  
pitfall that VCs worry about, and rightly-- taking a long time  
to develop a product. Now we can recognize this as something  
hackers already know to avoid: premature optimization. Get a version   
1.0 out there as soon as you can. Until you have some users to  
measure, you're optimizing based on guesses.The ball you need to keep your eye on here is the underlying  
principle that wealth is what people want. If you plan to get   
rich by creating wealth, you have to know what people want.   
So few businesses really pay attention to making customers happy.  
How often do you walk into a store, or call a company on the  
phone, with a feeling of dread in the back of your mind?  
When you hear "your call is important to us, please stay on  
the line," do you think, oh good, now everything will be all right?A restaurant can afford to serve the occasional burnt dinner.  
But in technology, you cook one thing and that's what everyone  
eats. So any difference between what people want and what  
you deliver is multiplied.   
You please or annoy  
customers wholesale. The closer you can get to what they want,  
the more wealth you generate.Wealth and PowerMaking wealth is not the only way to get rich. For most of  
human history it has not even been the most common. Until  
a few centuries ago,  
the main sources of wealth were mines, slaves and serfs,  
land, and cattle,  
and the only ways to acquire these rapidly were by inheritance,  
marriage, conquest, or confiscation.   
Naturally wealth had a bad reputation.Two things changed. The first was the rule of law. For most of the world's  
history, if you did somehow accumulate a fortune, the ruler or his   
henchmen   
would find a way to steal it.  
But in medieval Europe something new happened.  
A new class of merchants and manufacturers  
began to collect in towns.   
[10]  
Together they were able to withstand the local feudal  
lord. So   
for the first time in our history, the bullies stopped stealing the  
nerds' lunch money.  
This was naturally a great incentive,  
and possibly indeed the main cause of the second big change,  
industrialization.A great deal has been written about the causes of the Industrial   
Revolution. But surely a necessary, if not sufficient, condition  
was that people who made fortunes be able to enjoy them in peace.  
[11]  
One piece of evidence is what happened to countries  
that tried to return to the old model, like the Soviet  
Union, and to a lesser extent Britain under the labor  
governments of the 1960s and early 1970s. Take away the incentive  
of wealth, and technical innovation grinds to a halt.Remember what a startup is, economically:   
a way of saying, I want to work faster. Instead of accumulating  
money slowly by being paid a regular wage for fifty years, I   
want to get it over with as soon as possible. So governments  
that forbid you to accumulate wealth are in effect decreeing  
that you work slowly. They're willing to let you earn $3 million over  
fifty years, but they're not willing to let you work so hard that  
you can do it in two. They are like  
the corporate boss that you can't go to and say, I want to work  
ten times as hard, so please pay me ten times a much.  
Except this is not a boss you can escape by starting your own  
company.The problem with working slowly is not just that technical  
innovation happens slowly. It's that it tends not to happen at all.  
It's only when you're deliberately looking for hard problems,  
as a way to use speed to the greatest advantage, that you take  
on this kind of project. Developing new technology is a   
pain in the ass. It is, as Edison said, one percent   
inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.   
Without the incentive of wealth, no one wants to do it.  
Engineers will work on sexy projects like fighter planes and moon  
rockets for ordinary salaries, but more mundane technologies  
like light bulbs or semiconductors have to be developed by entrepreneurs.Startups  
are not just something that happened in Silicon Valley in   
the last couple decades. Since it became possible to  
get rich by creating wealth, everyone who has done it has  
used essentially the same recipe: measurement and leverage,  
where measurement comes from working with a small  
group, and leverage from developing new techniques.  
The recipe was the same in Florence in 1200 as it is   
in Santa Clara today.Understanding this may help to answer an important question:  
why Europe grew so powerful.  
Was it something about the geography of   
Europe? Was it that Europeans are somehow racially superior?  
Was it their religion? The answer (or at least  
the proximate cause) may be that the  
Europeans   
rode on the crest of a powerful new idea: allowing those who  
made a lot of money to keep it.Once you're allowed to do that,   
people who want to get rich can do it by generating  
wealth instead of stealing it.  
The resulting technological growth translates not only   
into wealth but into military power. The theory that led to  
the stealth plane was developed by a Soviet mathematician.  
But because the Soviet Union didn't have a computer industry,  
it remained for them a theory;  
they didn't have hardware capable of executing the calculations  
fast enough to design an actual airplane.In that respect the Cold War teaches the same lesson as  
World War II and, for that matter, most wars in recent history.  
Don't let a ruling  
class of warriors and politicians squash the entrepreneurs.  
The same recipe that makes individuals rich  
makes countries powerful. Let the nerds keep their lunch  
money, and you rule the world.Notes[1]  
One valuable thing you tend to get only in startups is  
uninterruptability. Different kinds of  
work have different time quanta. Someone proofreading a  
manuscript  
could probably be interrupted every fifteen minutes  
with little loss of productivity. But the time quantum for  
hacking is very long: it might take an hour just to load  
a problem into your head. So the  
cost of having someone from personnel  
call you about a form you forgot to fill out can be huge.This is why hackers give you such a baleful stare as they  
turn from their screen to answer your question. Inside  
their heads a giant house of cards is tottering.The mere possibility of being interrupted deters hackers  
from starting hard projects. This is why they  
tend to work late at night, and why it's next to impossible  
to write great software in a cubicle (except late at night).One great advantage of startups is that they don't yet have  
any of the people who interrupt you. There is no personnel  
department, and thus no form nor anyone to call you about it.[2]  
Faced with the idea that people working for startups might be  
20 or 30 times as productive as those working for large companies,  
executives at large companies will naturally wonder, how could  
I get the people working for me to do that? The answer is  
simple: pay them to.Internally most companies are run like Communist states.  
If you believe in free markets, why not turn your company into one?Hypothesis: A company will be maximally profitable when each  
employee is paid in proportion to the wealth they generate.[3]  
Until recently even governments sometimes didn't grasp the  
distinction between money and wealth. Adam  
Smith (Wealth of Nations, v:i) mentions several  
that tried to preserve their  
"wealth" by forbidding the export of gold or silver.  
But having more of the medium of exchange would not make  
a country richer; if you have more money chasing the same  
amount of material wealth, the only result is higher prices.[4]  
There are many senses of the word "wealth," not all of  
them material. I'm not trying to make a deep philosophical  
point here about which  
is the true kind. I'm writing about one specific,  
rather technical sense of the word "wealth." What  
people will give you money for.  
This is an interesting sort of wealth to study, because  
it is the kind that prevents you from starving.  
And what people will give you money for depends on them,  
not you.When you're starting a business,  
it's easy to slide into thinking that customers  
want what you do. During the Internet Bubble I talked  
to a woman who, because she liked the outdoors, was  
starting an "outdoor portal." You know what  
kind of business you should start if you like  
the outdoors? One to recover data from crashed hard disks.What's the connection? None at all. Which is precisely my point.  
If you want  
to create wealth (in the narrow technical sense of not  
starving) then you should be especially skeptical about any  
plan that centers on things you like doing.  
That is where your idea of what's valuable is least  
likely to coincide with other people's.[5]  
In the average car restoration you probably do make everyone  
else microscopically poorer, by doing a small amount of damage to  
the environment. While environmental costs should be taken  
into account, they don't  
make wealth a zero-sum game. For example, if you repair  
a machine that's broken because a part has come unscrewed,  
you create wealth with no environmental cost.[5b]  
This essay was written before Firefox.[6]  
Many people feel confused and depressed in  
their early twenties. Life seemed so much more fun in college.  
Well, of course it was. Don't be fooled by the surface similarities.  
You've gone from guest to servant.  
It's possible to have fun in this new world.   
Among other things, you now get to go behind the doors that say  
"authorized personnel only."  
But the change is a shock at first, and all the worse  
if you're not consciously aware of it.[7]  
When VCs asked us how long it would take another startup  
to duplicate our software, we used to reply that they probably  
wouldn't be able to at all. I think this made us seem naive,  
or liars.[8]  
Few technologies have one clear inventor. So as  
a rule, if you know the "inventor" of something  
(the telephone, the assembly line, the airplane,   
the light bulb, the transistor) it is because their  
company made money from it, and the company's PR people worked  
hard to spread the story. If you don't know who invented  
something (the automobile, the television, the computer,  
the jet engine, the laser), it's because other companies  
made all the money.[9]  
This is a good plan for life in general.  
If you have two choices, choose the harder.  
If you're trying to decide whether to go out running or  
sit home and watch TV, go running.  
Probably the reason this trick works so well is that  
when you have two choices and one is harder, the  
only reason you're even considering the other is laziness.  
You know in the back of your mind what's the right thing  
to do, and this trick merely forces you to acknowledge it.[10]  
It is probably no accident that the middle class  
first appeared in northern Italy and the low countries,  
where there were no strong central governments. These two  
regions were the richest of their time and became the twin  
centers from which Renaissance civilization radiated.  
If they no longer play that role, it is because  
other places, like the United States, have been truer to the  
principles they discovered.[11]  
It may indeed be a sufficient condition. But if so, why didn't  
the Industrial Revolution happen earlier? Two possible (and  
not incompatible) answers: (a) It did.   
The Industrial Revolution was one in a series.  
(b) Because in medieval towns, monopolies  
and guild regulations initially slowed the development of new means  
of production.  
  
Comment on this essay.Russian TranslationArabic TranslationSpanish Translation  
  
  
You'll find this essay and 14 others in  
Hackers & Painters.

# The Word "Hacker"

April 2004To the popular press, "hacker" means someone who breaks  
into computers. Among programmers it means a good programmer.  
But the two meanings are connected. To programmers,  
"hacker" connotes mastery in the most literal sense: someone  
who can make a computer do what he wants—whether the computer  
wants to or not.To add to the confusion, the noun "hack" also has two senses. It can  
be either a compliment or an insult. It's called a hack when  
you do something in an ugly way. But when you do something  
so clever that you somehow beat the system, that's also  
called a hack. The word is used more often in the former than  
the latter sense, probably because ugly solutions are more  
common than brilliant ones.Believe it or not, the two senses of "hack" are also  
connected. Ugly and imaginative solutions have something in  
common: they both break the rules. And there is a gradual  
continuum between rule breaking that's merely ugly (using  
duct tape to attach something to your bike) and rule breaking  
that is brilliantly imaginative (discarding Euclidean space).Hacking predates computers. When he  
was working on the Manhattan Project, Richard Feynman used to  
amuse himself by breaking into safes containing secret documents.  
This tradition continues today.  
When we were in grad school, a hacker friend of mine who spent too much  
time around MIT had  
his own lock picking kit.  
(He now runs a hedge fund, a not unrelated enterprise.)It is sometimes hard to explain to authorities why one would  
want to do such things.  
Another friend of mine once got in trouble with the government for  
breaking into computers. This had only recently been declared  
a crime, and the FBI found that their usual investigative  
technique didn't work. Police investigation apparently begins with  
a motive. The usual motives are few: drugs, money, sex,  
revenge. Intellectual curiosity was not one of the motives on  
the FBI's list. Indeed, the whole concept seemed foreign to  
them.Those in authority tend to be annoyed by hackers'  
general attitude of disobedience. But that disobedience is  
a byproduct of the qualities that make them good programmers.  
They may laugh at the CEO when he talks in generic corporate  
newspeech, but they also laugh at someone who tells them  
a certain problem can't be solved.  
Suppress one, and you suppress the other.This attitude is sometimes affected. Sometimes young programmers  
notice the eccentricities of eminent hackers and decide to  
adopt some of their own in order to seem smarter.  
The fake version is not merely  
annoying; the prickly attitude of these posers  
can actually slow the process of innovation.But even factoring in their annoying eccentricities,  
the disobedient attitude of hackers is a net win. I wish its  
advantages were better understood.For example, I suspect people in Hollywood are  
simply mystified by  
hackers' attitudes toward copyrights. They are a perennial  
topic of heated discussion on Slashdot.  
But why should people who program computers  
be so concerned about copyrights, of all things?Partly because some companies use mechanisms to prevent  
copying. Show any hacker a lock and his first thought is  
how to pick it. But there is a deeper reason that  
hackers are alarmed by measures like copyrights and patents.  
They see increasingly aggressive measures to protect  
"intellectual property"  
as a threat to the intellectual  
freedom they need to do their job.  
And they are right.It is by poking about inside current technology that  
hackers get ideas for the next generation. No thanks,  
intellectual homeowners may say, we don't need any  
outside help. But they're wrong.  
The next generation of computer technology has  
often—perhaps more often than not—been developed by outsiders.In 1977 there was no doubt some group within IBM developing  
what they expected to be  
the next generation of business computer. They were mistaken.  
The next generation of business computer was  
being developed on entirely different lines by two long-haired  
guys called Steve in a garage in Los Altos. At about the  
same time, the powers that be  
were cooperating to develop the  
official next generation operating system, Multics.  
But two guys who thought Multics excessively complex went off  
and wrote their own. They gave it a name that  
was a joking reference to Multics: Unix.The latest intellectual property laws impose  
unprecedented restrictions on the sort of poking around that  
leads to new ideas. In the past, a competitor might use patents  
to prevent you from selling a copy of something they  
made, but they couldn't prevent you from  
taking one apart to see how it worked. The latest  
laws make this a crime. How are we  
to develop new technology if we can't study current  
technology to figure out how to improve it?Ironically, hackers have brought this on themselves.  
Computers are responsible for the problem. The control systems  
inside machines used to be physical: gears and levers and cams.  
Increasingly, the brains (and thus the value) of products is  
in software. And by this I mean software in the general sense:  
i.e. data. A song on an LP is physically stamped into the  
plastic. A song on an iPod's disk is merely stored on it.Data is by definition easy to copy. And the Internet  
makes copies easy to distribute. So it is no wonder  
companies are afraid. But, as so often happens, fear has  
clouded their judgement. The government has responded  
with draconian laws to protect intellectual property.  
They probably mean well. But  
they may not realize that such laws will do more harm  
than good.Why are programmers so violently opposed to these laws?  
If I were a legislator, I'd be interested in this  
mystery—for the same reason that, if I were a farmer and suddenly  
heard a lot of squawking coming from my hen house one night,  
I'd want to go out and investigate. Hackers are not stupid,  
and unanimity is very rare in this world.  
So if they're all squawking,   
perhaps there is something amiss.Could it be that such laws, though intended to protect America,  
will actually harm it? Think about it. There is something  
very American about Feynman breaking into safes during  
the Manhattan Project. It's hard to imagine the authorities  
having a sense of humor about such things over  
in Germany at that time. Maybe it's not a coincidence.Hackers are unruly. That is the essence of hacking. And it  
is also the essence of Americanness. It is no accident  
that Silicon Valley  
is in America, and not France, or Germany,  
or England, or Japan. In those countries, people color inside  
the lines.I lived for a while in Florence. But after I'd been there  
a few months I realized that what I'd been unconsciously hoping  
to find there was back in the place I'd just left.  
The reason Florence is famous is that in 1450, it was New York.  
In 1450 it was filled with the kind of turbulent and ambitious  
people you find now in America. (So I went back to America.)It is greatly to America's advantage that it is  
a congenial atmosphere for the right sort of unruliness—that  
it is a home not just for the smart, but for smart-alecks.  
And hackers are invariably smart-alecks. If we had a national  
holiday, it would be April 1st. It says a great deal about  
our work that we use the same word for a brilliant or a  
horribly cheesy solution. When we cook one up we're not  
always 100% sure which kind it is. But as long as it has  
the right sort of wrongness, that's a promising sign.  
It's odd that people  
think of programming as precise and methodical. Computers  
are precise and methodical. Hacking is something you do  
with a gleeful laugh.In our world some of the most characteristic solutions  
are not far removed from practical  
jokes. IBM was no doubt rather surprised by the consequences  
of the licensing deal for DOS, just as the hypothetical  
"adversary" must be when Michael Rabin solves a problem by  
redefining it as one that's easier to solve.Smart-alecks have to develop a keen sense of how much they  
can get away with. And lately hackers   
have sensed a change  
in the atmosphere.  
Lately hackerliness seems rather frowned upon.To hackers the recent contraction in civil liberties seems  
especially ominous. That must also mystify outsiders.   
Why should we care especially about civil  
liberties? Why programmers, more than  
dentists or salesmen or landscapers?Let me put the case in terms a government official would appreciate.  
Civil liberties are not just an ornament, or a quaint  
American tradition. Civil liberties make countries rich.  
If you made a graph of  
GNP per capita vs. civil liberties, you'd notice a definite  
trend. Could civil liberties really be a cause, rather  
than just an effect? I think so. I think a society in which  
people can do and say what they want will also tend to  
be one in which the most efficient solutions win, rather than  
those sponsored by the most influential people.  
Authoritarian countries become corrupt;  
corrupt countries become poor; and poor countries are weak.   
It seems to me there is  
a Laffer curve for government power, just as for  
tax revenues. At least, it seems likely enough that it  
would be stupid to try the experiment and find out. Unlike  
high tax rates, you can't repeal totalitarianism if it  
turns out to be a mistake.This is why hackers worry. The government spying on people doesn't  
literally make programmers write worse code. It just leads  
eventually to a world in which bad ideas win. And because  
this is so important to hackers, they're especially sensitive  
to it. They can sense totalitarianism approaching from a  
distance, as animals can sense an approaching   
thunderstorm.It would be ironic if, as hackers fear, recent measures  
intended to protect national security and intellectual property  
turned out to be a missile aimed right at what makes   
America successful. But it would not be the first time that  
measures taken in an atmosphere of panic had  
the opposite of the intended effect.There is such a thing as Americanness.  
There's nothing like living abroad to teach you that.   
And if you want to know whether something will nurture or squash  
this quality, it would be hard to find a better focus  
group than hackers, because they come closest of any group  
I know to embodying it. Closer, probably, than  
the men running our government,  
who for all their talk of patriotism  
remind me more of Richelieu or Mazarin  
than Thomas Jefferson or George Washington.When you read what the founding fathers had to say for  
themselves, they sound more like hackers.  
"The spirit of resistance to government,"  
Jefferson wrote, "is so valuable on certain occasions, that I wish  
it always to be kept alive."Imagine an American president saying that today.  
Like the remarks of an outspoken old grandmother, the sayings of  
the founding fathers have embarrassed generations of  
their less confident successors. They remind us where we come from.  
They remind us that it is the people who break rules that are  
the source of America's wealth and power.Those in a position to impose rules naturally want them to be  
obeyed. But be careful what you ask for. You might get it.Thanks to Ken Anderson, Trevor Blackwell, Daniel Giffin,   
Sarah Harlin, Shiro Kawai, Jessica Livingston, Matz,   
Jackie McDonough, Robert Morris, Eric Raymond, Guido van Rossum,  
David Weinberger, and  
Steven Wolfram for reading drafts of this essay.  
(The image shows Steves Jobs and Wozniak   
with a "blue box."  
Photo by Margret Wozniak. Reproduced by permission of Steve  
Wozniak.)Portuguese TranslationHebrew TranslationRomanian Translation  
  
You'll find this essay and 14 others in  
Hackers & Painters.

# What You Can't Say

January 2004  
Have you ever seen an old photo of yourself and  
been embarrassed at the way you looked? Did we actually  
dress like that? We did. And we had no idea how  
silly we looked.  
It's the nature of fashion to be invisible, in the  
same way the movement of the earth is invisible to all  
of us riding on it.What scares me is that there are moral fashions too.  
They're just as arbitrary, and just as invisible to most people.  
But they're much more dangerous.  
Fashion is mistaken for good design;   
moral fashion is mistaken for good.  
Dressing oddly gets you laughed at. Violating  
moral fashions can get you fired, ostracized, imprisoned, or  
even killed.If you could travel back in a time machine, one thing  
would be true no matter where you went: you'd have to watch  
what you said.   
Opinions we consider harmless could have   
gotten you in big trouble.  
I've already said at least one thing that would have gotten me in big  
trouble in most of Europe in the seventeenth century,  
and did get Galileo in big trouble when he said  
it  that the earth moves. [1]  
It seems to be a constant throughout history: In every  
period, people believed things that were just ridiculous,  
and believed them so strongly that you would have gotten in  
terrible trouble for saying otherwise.Is our time any different?  
To anyone who has read any amount of history, the answer is  
almost certainly no. It would be a remarkable coincidence if ours  
were the first era to get everything just right.It's tantalizing to think we believe  
things that people in the future will find ridiculous.  
What would someone coming back to visit us in a time machine  
have to be careful not to say?  
That's what I want to study here.  
But  
I want to do more than just shock everyone with  
the heresy du jour. I want to find general  
recipes for discovering what you can't say, in any era.The Conformist TestLet's start with a test:   
Do you have any opinions that you would be reluctant to express  
in front of a group of your peers?If the answer is no,  
you might want to stop and think about that. If everything  
you believe is something you're supposed to believe, could  
that possibly be a coincidence? Odds are it isn't. Odds are  
you just think what you're told.The other alternative would be that you independently considered  
every question and came up with the exact same answers that  
are now considered acceptable. That seems unlikely, because  
you'd also have to make the same mistakes. Mapmakers  
deliberately put slight mistakes in their maps so they can  
tell when someone copies them. If another map has the same  
mistake, that's very convincing evidence.Like every other era in history, our moral map almost certainly  
contains a few mistakes. And anyone who makes the same mistakes  
probably didn't do it by accident. It would be  
like someone claiming they had independently decided in  
1972 that bell-bottom jeans were a good idea.If you believe everything you're supposed to now, how can  
you be sure you wouldn't also have believed everything you  
were supposed to if you had grown up among the plantation  
owners of the pre-Civil War South, or in Germany in the 1930s  or  
among the Mongols in 1200, for that matter? Odds are you  
would have.Back in the era of terms like "well-adjusted," the idea  
seemed to be that there was something wrong with  
you if you thought things you didn't dare say out loud.  
This seems backward. Almost certainly, there  
is something wrong with you if you don't think things  
you don't dare say out loud.TroubleWhat can't we say? One way to find these ideas is simply to look  
at things people do say, and get in trouble for. [2]Of course, we're not just looking for things we can't say.   
We're looking for things we can't say that are true, or at least  
have enough chance of being true that the question  
should remain open. But many of the  
things people get in trouble for saying probably  
do make it over this second, lower threshold. No one  
gets in trouble for saying  
that 2 + 2 is 5, or that people in Pittsburgh are ten feet tall.  
Such obviously false statements might be treated as jokes, or  
at worst as evidence of insanity, but they are not likely to  
make anyone mad. The statements that make people mad are  
the ones they worry might be believed.  
I suspect the statements that make people maddest  
are those they worry might be true.If Galileo had said that people in Padua were ten feet tall,  
he would have been regarded as a harmless eccentric. Saying   
the earth orbited the sun was another matter. The church knew  
this would set people thinking.Certainly, as we look back on the past, this rule of thumb works  
well. A lot of the statements people got in trouble for seem  
harmless now. So it's likely that visitors from the  
future would agree with at least some of the statements that  
get people in trouble today. Do we have no Galileos? Not  
likely.To find them,  
keep track of opinions that get  
people in trouble, and start asking, could this be true?  
Ok, it may be heretical (or whatever modern equivalent), but  
might it also be true?HeresyThis won't get us all the answers, though. What if no one  
happens to have gotten in trouble for a particular idea yet?  
What if some idea would be so radioactively controversial that  
no one would dare express it in public? How can we find these too?Another approach is to follow that word, heresy. In every period  
of history, there seem to have been labels that got applied to   
statements to shoot them down before anyone had a chance to ask  
if they were true or not. "Blasphemy", "sacrilege", and "heresy"  
were such  
labels for a good part of western history, as in more recent times  
"indecent", "improper", and "unamerican" have been. By now these  
labels have lost their sting. They always do.  
By now they're mostly used ironically.  
But in their time,  
they had real force.The word "defeatist", for example, has no particular political  
connotations now.  
But in Germany in 1917 it was a weapon, used by Ludendorff in  
a purge of those who favored a negotiated peace.  
At the start of World War II it was used  
extensively by Churchill and his supporters to silence their  
opponents.  
In 1940, any argument against Churchill's aggressive policy was "defeatist".  
Was it right or wrong? Ideally, no one got far enough to ask  
that.  
We have such labels today, of course, quite a lot of them,  
from the all-purpose "inappropriate" to the dreaded "divisive."  
In any period, it should be easy to figure out what such labels are,  
simply by looking at what people call ideas they disagree  
with besides untrue. When a politician says his opponent is  
mistaken, that's a straightforward criticism, but when he  
attacks a statement as "divisive" or "racially insensitive"  
instead of arguing that it's false, we should start paying  
attention.So another way to figure out which of our taboos future generations  
will laugh at is to start with the  
labels. Take a label  "sexist", for example  and try to think  
of some ideas that would be called that. Then for each ask, might  
this be true?Just start listing ideas at random? Yes, because they  
won't really be random. The ideas that come to mind first  
will be the most plausible ones. They'll be things you've already   
noticed but didn't let yourself think.In 1989 some clever researchers tracked  
the eye movements of radiologists as they scanned chest images for  
signs of lung cancer. [3] They found that even when the radiologists  
missed a cancerous lesion, their eyes had usually paused at the site of it.  
Part of their brain knew there was something there; it just  
didn't percolate all the way up into conscious knowledge.   
I think many interesting heretical thoughts are already mostly   
formed in our minds. If we turn off our self-censorship  
temporarily, those will be the first to emerge.Time and SpaceIf we could look into the future it would be obvious which  
of our taboos they'd laugh at.  
We can't do that, but we can do something almost as good: we can  
look into the past. Another way to figure out what we're  
getting wrong is to look at what used to be acceptable  
and is now unthinkable.Changes between the past and the present sometimes do represent  
progress. In a field like physics,  
if we disagree with past generations it's because we're  
right and they're wrong. But this becomes rapidly less true as   
you move away from the certainty of the hard sciences. By the time  
you get to social questions, many changes are just fashion.  
The age of consent fluctuates like hemlines.We may imagine that we are a great deal smarter and more virtuous than  
past generations, but the more history you read, the less likely  
this seems. People in past times were much like us. Not heroes,  
not barbarians. Whatever their ideas were, they were ideas  
reasonable people could believe.So here is another source of interesting heresies. Diff present  
ideas against those of various past cultures, and see what you   
get. [4]  
Some will be  
shocking by present standards. Ok, fine; but which might also be true?You don't have to look into the past to find big differences.   
In our own time, different societies have wildly varying ideas  
of what's ok and what isn't.  
So you can try diffing other cultures' ideas against ours as well.  
(The best way to do that is to visit them.)  
  
Any idea that's considered harmless in a significant  
percentage of times and places, and yet is taboo in ours,  
is a candidate for something we're mistaken  
about.For example, at the high water mark of political correctness  
in the early 1990s, Harvard distributed to its  
faculty and staff a brochure saying, among other things, that it  
was inappropriate to compliment a colleague or student's  
clothes. No more "nice shirt."  
I think this principle is rare among the world's cultures, past or present.  
There are probably more where it's considered especially  
polite to compliment someone's clothing than where it's considered  
improper.  
  
Odds are this is, in a mild form, an example of one of  
the taboos a visitor from the future would  
have to be careful to avoid if he happened to set his time machine for  
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992. [5]PrigsOf course, if they have time machines in the future they'll  
probably have a separate reference manual just for Cambridge.  
This has always been a fussy place, a town of i dotters and  
t crossers, where you're liable to get both your grammar and   
your ideas corrected in the same conversation. And that  
suggests another way to find taboos. Look for prigs,  
and see what's inside their heads.Kids' heads are repositories of all our taboos.  
It seems fitting to us that kids' ideas should be bright and clean.  
The picture we give them of the world is   
not merely simplified, to suit their developing minds,   
but sanitized as well, to suit our  
ideas of what kids ought to think. [6]You can see this on a small scale in the matter of  
dirty words. A lot of my friends are starting to have children  
now, and they're all trying   
not to use words like  
"fuck" and "shit" within baby's hearing, lest baby start using   
these words too.  
But these  
words are part of the language, and adults use them all the  
time. So parents are giving their kids an inaccurate idea of   
the language by not using  
them. Why do they do this? Because they don't think it's  
fitting that kids should use the whole language. We like  
children to seem innocent. [7]Most adults, likewise, deliberately give kids a misleading  
view of the world.  
One of the most obvious  
examples is Santa Claus. We think it's cute for little kids to  
believe in Santa Claus. I myself think it's cute for little  
kids to believe in Santa Claus. But one wonders, do we tell  
them this stuff for their sake, or for ours?I'm not arguing for or against this idea here. It is probably  
inevitable that parents should want to dress up their kids'  
minds in cute little baby outfits. I'll probably do it myself.  
The important thing for our purposes is that, as a result,  
a well brought-up teenage kid's brain is a more  
or less complete collection of all our taboos  and in mint  
condition, because they're untainted by experience.   
Whatever we think that will later turn out to be ridiculous,   
it's almost certainly inside that head.How do we get at these ideas? By the following thought experiment.  
Imagine a kind of latter-day Conrad character  
who has worked for a time as a mercenary in Africa, for a time  
as a doctor in Nepal, for a time as the manager of a  
nightclub in Miami. The specifics don't matter  just  
someone who has  
seen a lot. Now imagine comparing what's inside this guy's head  
with what's inside the head  
of a well-behaved sixteen year old girl from  
the suburbs. What does he think that  
would shock her?  
He knows the world; she knows, or at least embodies, present  
taboos. Subtract one from the other, and the result is what  
we can't say.  
MechanismI can think of one more way to figure out what we can't  
say: to look at how taboos are created. How do moral  
fashions arise, and why are they adopted?  
If we can understand this mechanism, we  
may be able to see it at work in our own time.Moral fashions don't seem to be created the way ordinary  
fashions are. Ordinary fashions seem to arise by accident when  
everyone imitates the whim of some influential person.  
The fashion for broad-toed shoes in  
late fifteenth century Europe began because Charles VIII of  
France had six toes on one foot. The fashion for the  
name Gary began when the actor Frank Cooper adopted the name  
of a tough mill town in Indiana. Moral fashions more often  
seem to be created deliberately. When there's something we  
can't say, it's often because some group doesn't want us to.The prohibition will be strongest when the group is nervous.   
The irony of Galileo's situation was that he got in trouble  
for repeating Copernicus's ideas. Copernicus himself didn't.  
In fact, Copernicus was a canon of a cathedral, and dedicated his  
book to the pope. But by Galileo's time the church was in  
the throes of the Counter-Reformation and was much more  
worried about unorthodox ideas.To launch a taboo, a group has to be poised halfway between  
weakness and power. A confident group doesn't need taboos  
to protect it. It's not considered improper to  
make disparaging remarks about Americans, or the English.  
And yet a group has to be powerful enough to enforce a  
taboo. Coprophiles, as of this writing, don't seem to be  
numerous or energetic enough to have had their  
interests promoted to a lifestyle.I suspect the biggest source of moral taboos will turn out to  
be power struggles in which one side only barely has  
the upper hand. That's where you'll find a group  
powerful enough to enforce taboos, but weak enough to need them.Most struggles, whatever they're really about, will be cast  
as struggles between competing ideas.  
The English Reformation was at bottom a struggle for wealth and power,  
but it ended up being  
cast as a struggle to preserve the souls  
of Englishmen from the corrupting influence of Rome.  
It's easier to get people to fight for an idea.  
And whichever side wins, their  
ideas will also be considered to have triumphed, as if God  
wanted to signal his agreement by selecting that side as the victor.We often like to think of World War II as a triumph  
of freedom over totalitarianism. We conveniently forget that  
the Soviet Union was also one of the winners.I'm not saying that struggles are never about ideas,  
just that they will always be made to seem to be about  
ideas, whether they are or not. And just as there is nothing  
so unfashionable as the last, discarded fashion, there is  
nothing so wrong as the principles of the most recently  
defeated opponent.  
  
Representational art is only now  
recovering from the approval of both Hitler and Stalin. [8]Although moral fashions tend to arise from different sources  
than fashions in clothing, the mechanism of their adoption seems  
much the same. The early adopters will be driven by ambition:  
self-consciously cool people who want to distinguish themselves  
from the common herd. As the fashion becomes established they'll  
be joined by a second, much larger group, driven by fear. [9] This  
second group adopt the fashion not because they want to stand  
out but because they are afraid of standing out.So if you want to figure out what we can't say, look at the  
machinery of fashion and try to predict what it would make  
unsayable. What groups are powerful but nervous, and what  
ideas would they like to suppress? What ideas were tarnished by  
association when they ended up on the losing side of a recent  
struggle? If a self-consciously cool person wanted to differentiate  
himself from preceding fashions (e.g. from his parents),   
which of their ideas would he tend to reject?  
What are conventional-minded people afraid of saying?This technique won't find us all the things we can't say.  
I can think of some that aren't the result of  
any recent struggle. Many of our taboos are rooted  
deep in the past. But this approach, combined with the  
preceding four, will turn up a good number of unthinkable  
ideas.WhySome would ask, why would one want to do this? Why deliberately  
go poking around among nasty, disreputable ideas? Why look   
under rocks?I do it, first of all, for the same reason I did look under  
rocks as a kid: plain curiosity. And I'm especially curious about  
anything that's forbidden. Let me see and decide for myself.Second, I do it because I don't like the idea of being mistaken.  
If, like other eras, we believe things that will later seem ridiculous,  
I want to know what they are so that I, at least, can avoid  
believing them.Third, I do it because it's good for the brain. To do good work  
you need a brain that can go anywhere. And you especially need a  
brain that's in the habit of going where it's not supposed to.Great work tends to grow out of ideas  
that others have overlooked, and no idea is so overlooked as one that's  
unthinkable.  
Natural selection, for example.  
It's so simple. Why didn't anyone think of it before? Well,  
that is all too obvious. Darwin himself was careful to tiptoe  
around the implications of his theory. He wanted to spend his  
time thinking about biology, not arguing with people who accused  
him of being an atheist.In the sciences, especially, it's a great advantage to be able to  
question assumptions.  
The m.o. of scientists, or at least of the  
good ones, is precisely that: look for places where  
conventional wisdom is broken, and then try to pry apart the  
cracks and see what's underneath. That's where new theories come  
from.A good scientist, in other words, does not merely ignore  
conventional wisdom, but makes a special effort to break it.  
Scientists go looking for trouble.  
This should be the m.o. of any scholar, but   
scientists seem much more willing to look under rocks. [10]Why? It could  
be that the scientists are simply smarter; most physicists could,  
if necessary, make it through a PhD program in French literature,  
but few professors of French literature could make it through  
a PhD program in physics. Or it could be because it's clearer  
in the sciences whether theories are true or false, and this  
makes scientists bolder. (Or it could be that, because it's  
clearer in the sciences whether theories are true or false, you  
have to be smart to get jobs as a scientist, rather than just a  
good politician.)Whatever the reason, there seems a clear correlation between  
intelligence and willingness to consider shocking ideas.  
This isn't just because smart people actively work to find holes in  
conventional thinking. I think conventions also have  
less hold over them to start with.  
You can see that in the  
way they dress.It's not only in the sciences that heresy pays off.  
In any competitive field, you can  
win big by seeing things that others daren't.   
And in every  
field there are probably heresies few dare utter. Within  
the US car industry there is a lot of hand-wringing now  
about declining market share.  
Yet the cause is so obvious that any observant outsider could  
explain it in a second: they make bad cars. And they have for  
so long that by now the US car brands are antibrands  something  
you'd buy a car despite, not because of. Cadillac stopped  
being the Cadillac of cars in about 1970. And yet I suspect  
no one dares say this. [11] Otherwise these companies would have  
tried to fix the problem.Training yourself to think unthinkable thoughts has advantages  
beyond the thoughts themselves. It's like stretching.  
When you stretch before running, you put your body into positions  
much more extreme  
than any it will assume during the run.  
If you can think things  
so outside the box that they'd make people's hair stand on end,  
you'll have no trouble with the small trips outside the box that  
people call innovative.Pensieri StrettiWhen you find something you can't say, what do you do with it?  
My advice is, don't say it. Or at least, pick your battles.Suppose in the future there is a movement to ban  
the color yellow. Proposals to paint anything yellow are  
denounced as "yellowist", as is anyone suspected of liking the   
color. People who like orange are tolerated but viewed with  
suspicion. Suppose you realize there is nothing  
wrong with yellow. If you go around saying this, you'll be  
denounced as a yellowist too, and you'll find yourself having a   
lot of arguments with anti-yellowists.  
If your aim in life is to rehabilitate the color yellow, that may  
be what you want.  
But if you're mostly interested in  
other questions, being labelled as a yellowist will just be  
a distraction. Argue with idiots, and you become an idiot.The most important thing is to be able to think what you  
want, not to say what you want. And if you feel you have to  
say everything you think, it may inhibit you from thinking   
improper thoughts. I think it's better to follow the opposite  
policy. Draw a sharp line between your thoughts and your  
speech. Inside your head, anything is allowed.  
Within my head I make a point of encouraging the most outrageous  
thoughts I can imagine.   
But, as in  
a secret society, nothing that happens within the building  
should be told to outsiders. The first rule of Fight  
Club is, you do not talk about Fight Club.When Milton was going to visit Italy in the 1630s,  
Sir Henry Wootton, who had been ambassador to Venice, told him  
his motto should be  
"i pensieri stretti & il viso sciolto." Closed thoughts  
and an open face. Smile at everyone, and don't tell them  
what you're thinking. This was wise advice.  
Milton was an argumentative fellow, and the Inquisition  
was a bit restive at that time. But I think the difference   
between Milton's situation and ours is only a matter of  
degree.  
Every era has its heresies, and if you don't get imprisoned for them you  
will at least get in enough trouble that it becomes a complete  
distraction.I admit it seems cowardly to keep quiet.  
When I read about the harassment to which  
the Scientologists subject their critics [12], or that pro-Israel groups  
are "compiling dossiers" on those who speak out against Israeli  
human rights abuses [13], or about people being sued for  
violating the DMCA [14], part of me wants  
to say, "All right, you bastards, bring it on."  
The problem is, there are so many things you can't say.  
If you said them all you'd   
have no time left for your real work.  
You'd have to turn into Noam Chomsky. [15]The trouble with keeping your thoughts secret, though,  
is that you lose the advantages of discussion. Talking  
about an idea leads to more ideas.  
So the optimal plan, if you can manage it,  
is to have a few trusted  
friends you can speak openly to. This is not just a  
way to develop ideas; it's also a good  
rule of thumb for choosing friends. The people  
you can say heretical things to without getting jumped on  
are also the most interesting to know.Viso Sciolto?I don't think we need  
the viso sciolto so much as the pensieri stretti.  
Perhaps the best policy is to make it plain that you don't  
agree with whatever zealotry is current in your time, but  
not to be too specific about what you disagree with. Zealots  
will try to draw you out, but you don't have to answer them.  
If they try to force you to treat a question on their  
terms by asking "are you with us or against us?" you can  
always just answer "neither".Better still, answer "I haven't decided."  
That's what Larry Summers  
did when a group tried to put  
him in this position. Explaining himself later, he said  
"I don't do litmus tests." [16]  
A lot of the  
questions people get hot about are actually quite complicated.  
There is no prize for getting the answer quickly.If the anti-yellowists seem to be getting out of hand and  
you want to fight back, there are ways  
to do it without getting yourself accused of being a  
yellowist. Like skirmishers in  
an ancient army, you want to avoid directly engaging the  
main body of the enemy's troops. Better to harass them  
with arrows from a distance.One way to do this is to ratchet the debate up one level of  
abstraction.  
If you argue against censorship in general, you can avoid being  
accused of whatever heresy is contained  
in the book or film that someone is trying to censor.  
You can attack labels with meta-labels: labels that refer  
to the use of labels to prevent discussion.  
The spread of the term "political correctness" meant the beginning of  
the end of political correctness, because it enabled one to  
attack the phenomenon as a whole without being accused of any  
of the specific heresies it sought to suppress.Another way to counterattack is with metaphor. Arthur Miller  
undermined the House Un-American Activities Committee  
by writing a play, "The Crucible," about the Salem witch trials.  
He never referred directly to the committee and so gave them  
no way to reply.  
What could HUAC do, defend the Salem witch trials? And yet  
Miller's metaphor stuck so well that to this day the activities  
of the committee are often described as a "witch-hunt."Best of all, probably, is humor. Zealots, whatever their   
cause, invariably lack a sense of humor.  
They can't reply in kind to jokes.  
They're as unhappy on the territory of  
humor as a mounted knight on a skating rink.  
Victorian prudishness, for example, seems to have been defeated  
mainly by treating it as a joke. Likewise its reincarnation as  
political correctness.  
"I am glad that I  
managed to write 'The Crucible,'" Arthur Miller wrote,  
"but looking back I have often wished I'd  
had the temperament to do an absurd comedy, which is what the  
situation deserved." [17]ABQA Dutch friend says  
I should use Holland as an example of a tolerant society.  
It's true they have a long tradition of  
comparative open-mindedness. For centuries the low countries were the place  
to go to say things you couldn't say anywhere else,  
and this helped to make the region a center of scholarship and industry  
(which have been closely tied for longer than most people realize).  
Descartes, though claimed by the French, did much of his thinking in  
Holland.And yet, I wonder. The Dutch seem to live their lives up to their  
necks in rules and regulations. There's so much you can't do there;  
is there really nothing  
you can't say?Certainly the fact that they value open-mindedness is no guarantee.  
Who thinks they're not open-minded? Our hypothetical prim miss from  
the suburbs thinks she's open-minded. Hasn't she been  
taught to be? Ask anyone, and they'll say the same thing: they're  
pretty open-minded, though they draw the line at things that are really  
wrong. (Some tribes  
may avoid "wrong" as  
judgemental, and may instead use a more neutral sounding euphemism  
like "negative" or "destructive".)When people are bad at math, they know it, because they get the  
wrong answers on tests. But when people are bad at open-mindedness  
they don't know it. In fact they tend to think the opposite.  
Remember, it's the nature of fashion to be invisible. It wouldn't  
work otherwise. Fashion doesn't  
seem like fashion to someone in the grip of it. It just seems like  
the right thing to do. It's only by looking from a distance that  
we see oscillations in people's idea of the right thing to do, and  
can identify them as fashions.Time gives us such distance for free. Indeed, the arrival of new  
fashions makes old fashions easy to see, because they  
seem so ridiculous by contrast. From one end of a pendulum's  
swing, the other end seems especially far away.To see fashion in your own time, though, requires a conscious effort.  
Without time to give you distance, you have to create distance yourself.  
Instead of being part of the mob, stand  
as far away from it as you can and watch what it's  
doing. And pay especially close attention whenever an idea is being  
suppressed. Web filters for children and employees often ban  
sites containing pornography, violence, and hate speech. What  
counts as pornography and violence? And what, exactly, is  
"hate speech?" This sounds like a phrase out of 1984.Labels like that are probably the biggest external clue.  
If a statement is false,  
that's the worst thing you can say about it. You don't  
need to say that it's heretical. And if it isn't false, it  
shouldn't be suppressed. So when you see statements being  
attacked as x-ist or y-ic (substitute your current values of  
x and y), whether in 1630 or 2030, that's a sure sign that  
something is wrong. When you hear such labels being used,  
ask why.Especially if you hear yourself using them. It's not just  
the mob you need to learn to watch from a distance. You need to be  
able to watch your own thoughts from a distance. That's not  
a radical idea, by the way; it's the main difference between  
children and adults. When a child gets angry because he's  
tired, he doesn't know what's happening. An adult can  
distance himself enough from the  
situation to say "never mind, I'm just tired." I don't  
see why one couldn't, by a similar process, learn to  
recognize and discount the effects of moral fashions.You have to take that extra step if you want to think clearly.  
But it's harder, because now you're working against social customs   
instead of with them. Everyone encourages you to grow up to the   
point where you can discount your own bad moods. Few encourage   
you to continue to the point where you can discount society's bad  
moods.How can you see the wave, when you're the water? Always be  
questioning. That's the only defence. What can't you say? And why?NotesThanks to Sarah Harlin, Trevor Blackwell, Jessica Livingston,  
Robert Morris, Eric Raymond and Bob van der Zwaan for reading drafts of this  
essay, and to Lisa Randall, Jackie McDonough, Ryan Stanley and Joel Rainey   
for conversations about heresy.  
Needless to say they bear no blame for opinions  
expressed in it, and especially for opinions not  
expressed in it.Re: What You Can't SayLabelsJapanese TranslationFrench TranslationGerman TranslationDutch TranslationRomanian TranslationHebrew TranslationTurkish TranslationChinese TranslationButtonsA Civic Duty to AnnoyThe Perils of ObedienceAliens Cause Global WarmingHays CodeStratagem 32Conspiracy TheoriesMark Twain: Corn-pone OpinionsA Blacklist for "Excuse Makers"What You Can't Say Will Hurt You

# Filters that Fight Back

August 2003  
We may be able to improve the accuracy of Bayesian spam filters  
by having them follow links to see what's  
waiting at the other end. Richard Jowsey of  
death2spam now does  
this in borderline cases, and reports that it works well.Why only do it in borderline cases? And why only do it once?As I mentioned in Will Filters Kill Spam?,  
following all the urls in  
a spam would have an amusing side-effect. If popular email clients  
did this in order to filter spam, the spammer's servers  
would take a serious pounding. The more I think about this,  
the better an idea it seems. This isn't just amusing; it  
would be hard to imagine a more perfectly targeted counterattack  
on spammers.So I'd like to suggest an additional feature to those  
working on spam filters: a "punish" mode which,  
if turned on, would spider every url  
in a suspected spam n times, where n could be set by the user. [1]As many people have noted, one of the problems with the  
current email system is that it's too passive. It does  
whatever you tell it. So far all the suggestions for fixing  
the problem seem to involve new protocols. This one   
wouldn't.If widely used, auto-retrieving spam filters would make  
the email system rebound. The huge volume of the  
spam, which has so far worked in the spammer's favor,  
would now work against him, like a branch snapping back in   
his face. Auto-retrieving spam filters would drive the  
spammer's   
costs up,   
and his sales down: his bandwidth usage  
would go through the roof, and his servers would grind to a  
halt under the load, which would make them unavailable  
to the people who would have responded to the spam.Pump out a million emails an hour, get a  
million hits an hour on your servers.  
We would want to ensure that this is only done to  
suspected spams. As a rule, any url sent to millions of  
people is likely to be a spam url, so submitting every http  
request in every email would work fine nearly all the time.  
But there are a few cases where this isn't true: the urls  
at the bottom of mails sent from free email services like  
Yahoo Mail and Hotmail, for example.To protect such sites, and to prevent abuse, auto-retrieval  
should be combined with blacklists of spamvertised sites.  
Only sites on a blacklist would get crawled, and  
sites would be blacklisted  
only after being inspected by humans. The lifetime of a spam  
must be several hours at least, so  
it should be easy to update such a list in time to  
interfere with a spam promoting a new site. [2]High-volume auto-retrieval would only be practical for users  
on high-bandwidth  
connections, but there are enough of those to cause spammers  
serious trouble. Indeed, this solution neatly  
mirrors the problem. The problem with spam is that in  
order to reach a few gullible people the spammer sends   
mail to everyone. The non-gullible recipients  
are merely collateral damage. But the non-gullible majority  
won't stop getting spam until they can stop (or threaten to  
stop) the gullible  
from responding to it. Auto-retrieving spam filters offer  
them a way to do this.Would that kill spam? Not quite. The biggest spammers  
could probably protect their servers against auto-retrieving   
filters. However, the easiest and cheapest way for them  
to do it would be to include working unsubscribe links in   
their mails. And this would be a necessity for smaller fry,  
and for "legitimate" sites that hired spammers to promote  
them. So if auto-retrieving filters became widespread,  
they'd become auto-unsubscribing filters.In this scenario, spam would, like OS crashes, viruses, and  
popups, become one of those plagues that only afflict people  
who don't bother to use the right software.  
Notes[1] Auto-retrieving filters will have to follow redirects,  
and should in some cases (e.g. a page that just says  
"click here") follow more than one level of links.  
Make sure too that  
the http requests are indistinguishable from those of  
popular Web browsers, including the order and referrer.If the response  
doesn't come back within x amount of time, default to  
some fairly high spam probability.Instead of making n constant, it might be a good idea to  
make it a function of the number of spams that have been  
seen mentioning the site. This would add a further level of  
protection against abuse and accidents.[2] The original version of this article used the term  
"whitelist" instead of "blacklist". Though they were  
to work like blacklists, I preferred to call them whitelists  
because it might make them less vulnerable to legal attack.  
This just seems to have confused readers, though.There should probably be multiple blacklists. A single point  
of failure would be vulnerable both to attack and abuse.  
Thanks to Brian Burton, Bill Yerazunis, Dan Giffin,  
Eric Raymond, and Richard Jowsey for reading drafts of this.FFB FAQJapanese TranslationA Perl FFBLycos DDoS@Home

# Hackers and Painters

May 2003(This essay is derived from a guest lecture at Harvard, which incorporated  
an earlier talk at Northeastern.)When I finished grad school in computer science I went  
to art school to study painting. A lot of people seemed surprised  
that someone interested in computers would also be interested in painting.  
They seemed to think that  
hacking and painting were very different kinds of work-- that  
hacking was cold, precise, and methodical, and that  
painting was the frenzied expression of some primal urge.Both of these images are wrong. Hacking and painting have a  
lot in common. In fact, of all the different types of people I've  
known, hackers and painters are among the most alike.What hackers and painters have in common is that they're  
both makers. Along with composers, architects, and writers,  
what hackers and painters are trying to do is make good things.  
They're not doing research per se, though if in the course of  
trying to make good things they discover some new technique,  
so much the better.I've never liked the term "computer science." The main  
reason I don't like it is that there's no such thing.  
Computer science is a  
grab bag of tenuously related areas thrown together  
by an accident of history, like Yugoslavia.  
At one end you have people who are really mathematicians,  
but call what they're doing computer science so they can get DARPA grants.  
In the middle you have people working on  
something like the natural history of computers-- studying the  
behavior of algorithms for routing data through  
networks, for example. And then at the other extreme you  
have the hackers, who are trying to  
write interesting software, and for whom computers are just a  
medium of expression, as concrete is for architects or  
paint for painters. It's as if  
mathematicians, physicists, and architects all had to be in  
the same department.Sometimes what the hackers do is called "software engineering,"  
but this term is just as misleading.  
Good software designers are no more engineers than architects are.  
The border between architecture and engineering is not sharply  
defined, but it's there.  
It falls between what and how: architects decide what to do,  
and engineers figure out how to do it.What and how should not be kept too separate. You're  
asking for trouble if you try to decide what to do without  
understanding how to do it.  
But hacking can certainly be more than just deciding how to  
implement some spec. At its best, it's creating the spec-- though  
it turns out the best way to do that is to implement it.Perhaps one day  
"computer science" will, like Yugoslavia, get broken up into its  
component parts. That might be a good thing. Especially if it  
meant independence for my native land, hacking.Bundling all these different types of work together in one  
department may be convenient administratively, but it's confusing  
intellectually. That's the other reason I don't like the name  
"computer science." Arguably the people in the middle are doing  
something like an experimental science. But the people at either  
end, the hackers and the mathematicians, are not actually doing science.The mathematicians don't seem bothered by this. They happily  
set to work proving theorems like the other mathematicians  
over in the math department, and probably soon stop noticing  
that the building they work in says ``computer science'' on the  
outside. But for the hackers this label is a problem.  
If what they're doing is called science, it makes them feel they  
ought to be acting scientific.  
So instead of doing what they really want to do, which is   
to design beautiful software, hackers in universities and  
research labs feel they ought to be writing research papers.In the best case, the papers are just a formality. Hackers write  
cool software, and then write a paper about it, and the paper  
becomes a proxy for the achievement represented by the software.  
But often this mismatch causes problems. It's easy to  
drift away from building beautiful things toward building ugly  
things that make more suitable subjects for research papers.Unfortunately, beautiful things don't always make the  
best subjects for papers.  
Number one, research must be original-- and  
as anyone who has written a PhD dissertation knows, the way to  
be sure that you're exploring virgin territory is to to stake  
out a piece of ground that no one wants. Number two, research must be  
substantial-- and awkward systems yield meatier papers,  
because you can write about the obstacles you have to overcome  
in order to get things done. Nothing yields meaty problems like  
starting with the wrong assumptions. Most of AI is an example  
of this rule; if you assume that knowledge can be represented  
as a list of predicate logic expressions whose arguments represent  
abstract concepts, you'll have a lot of  
papers to write about how to make this work. As Ricky Ricardo  
used to say, "Lucy, you got a lot of explaining to do."The way to create something beautiful is often to make subtle  
tweaks to something that already exists, or to combine existing  
ideas in a slightly new way. This kind of work is hard to  
convey in a research paper.So why do universities and research labs continue to judge  
hackers by publications?  
For the same reason that "scholastic aptitude"  
gets measured by simple-minded standardized tests, or  
the productivity of programmers gets measured in lines of code.  
These tests  
are easy to apply, and there is nothing so tempting as an easy test  
that kind of works.Measuring what hackers are actually trying to do, designing  
beautiful software, would be much more difficult. You need  
a good sense of design to judge   
good design. And  
there is no correlation, except possibly  
a negative   
one, between people's ability to recognize good  
design and their confidence that they can.The only external test is time. Over time, beautiful  
things tend to thrive, and ugly  
things tend to get discarded. Unfortunately, the amounts of time  
involved can be longer than human lifetimes. Samuel Johnson  
said it took a hundred years for a writer's reputation to  
converge. You have to wait for the writer's  
influential friends to die, and then for all their followers  
to die.I think hackers just have to resign themselves to having a large random  
component in their reputations. In this they are no different  
from other makers. In fact, they're lucky by comparison.   
The influence of fashion is not nearly so great in hacking as it  
is in painting.There are worse things than having people misunderstand your  
work. A worse danger is that you  
will yourself misunderstand your work. Related fields are  
where you go looking for ideas. If you find yourself in the computer science  
department, there is a natural temptation to believe, for example,  
that hacking is the applied version of what theoretical computer  
science is the theory of. All  
the time I was in graduate school I had an uncomfortable feeling  
in the back of my mind that I ought to know more theory,  
and that it was very remiss of me to have forgotten all that  
stuff within three weeks of the final exam.Now I realize I was  
mistaken. Hackers need to understand the theory of computation  
about as much as painters need to understand paint chemistry.  
You need to know how to calculate time and  
space complexity and about  
Turing completeness. You might also want to remember at  
least the concept of a state machine, in case you have to write  
a parser or a regular expression library. Painters in fact   
have to remember a good deal more about paint chemistry than   
that.I've found that the best sources of ideas  
are not the other fields that have the word "computer" in  
their names, but the other fields inhabited by makers.  
Painting has been a much richer source of ideas than the  
theory of computation.For example, I was taught in college  
that one ought to figure out a program  
completely on paper  
before even going near a computer. I found that I did not  
program this way. I found that I liked to program  
sitting in front of a computer, not a piece of paper. Worse  
still, instead of patiently writing out a complete program  
and assuring myself it was correct, I tended to just spew  
out code that was hopelessly broken, and gradually beat it into  
shape. Debugging, I was taught, was a kind of final pass where  
you caught typos and oversights. The way I worked, it  
seemed like programming consisted of debugging.For a long time I felt bad about this, just as I once  
felt bad that I didn't hold my pencil the way they taught me  
to in elementary school.  
If I had only looked over at  
the other makers, the painters or the architects, I would  
have realized that there was a name for what I was doing:  
sketching. As far as I can tell, the  
way they taught me to program in college was all wrong.  
You should figure out programs as you're writing them,  
just as writers and painters and architects do.Realizing this has real implications for software design.  
It means that a programming language should, above all, be  
malleable. A programming language is for   
thinking of  
programs, not for expressing programs you've already thought  
of. It should be a pencil, not a pen. Static typing would  
be a fine idea if people actually did write programs the way  
they taught me to in college. But that's not how any of the   
hackers I know write programs. We need a language that lets us  
scribble and smudge and smear, not a language where you have  
to sit with a teacup of types balanced on your knee and make  
polite conversation with a strict old aunt of a compiler.While we're on the subject of static typing, identifying with  
the makers will save us from another problem that afflicts  
the sciences: math envy. Everyone in the sciences  
secretly believes that mathematicians are smarter than they are.   
I think mathematicians also believe this. At any rate,  
the result is that scientists tend to make their  
work look as mathematical as possible. In a field like  
physics this probably doesn't do much harm, but the further you  
get from the natural sciences, the more of a problem it  
becomes.A page of formulas just looks so impressive.  
(Tip: for extra impressiveness, use Greek variables.) And  
so there is a great temptation to work on problems you  
can treat formally, rather than problems that are, say,  
important.If hackers identified with other makers, like writers and  
painters, they wouldn't feel tempted to do   
this. Writers and painters don't suffer from math envy.  
They feel as if they're doing something completely unrelated.  
So are hackers, I think.If universities and research labs keep hackers from doing  
the kind of work they want to do,  
perhaps the place for them is in companies.  
Unfortunately, most companies won't let hackers do what they  
want either. Universities and research labs force hackers  
to be scientists, and companies force them to be engineers.I only discovered this myself quite recently. When Yahoo bought  
Viaweb, they asked me what I wanted to do. I had never  
liked the business side very much, and said that I just wanted to  
hack. When I got to Yahoo, I found that what hacking meant  
to them was implementing software, not designing it. Programmers  
were seen as technicians who translated the visions (if  
that is the word) of product managers into code.This seems to be the  
default plan in big companies. They do it because  
it decreases the standard deviation of the outcome.  
Only a small percentage of hackers can actually design software,  
and it's hard for the  
people running a company to pick these out. So instead of  
entrusting the future of the software to  
one brilliant hacker, most companies set things up so that it is  
designed by committee, and the hackers merely  
implement the design.If you want to make money at some point, remember this,  
because this is one of the reasons startups win. Big companies want  
to decrease the standard deviation of design outcomes because they  
want to avoid disasters. But when you damp oscillations, you  
lose the high points as well as the low. This is not a problem for  
big companies, because they don't win by making great  
products. Big companies win by sucking less than other big companies.So if you can figure out a way to get in a  
design war with a company big enough that its software is   
designed by product managers, they'll never be able to keep up  
with you. These opportunities are not easy to find, though.  
It's hard to engage a big company in a design war,  
just as it's hard to engage an opponent inside a castle in hand  
to hand combat. It would be pretty easy to write a better  
word processor than Microsoft Word, for example, but Microsoft,  
within the castle of their operating system monopoly,  
probably wouldn't even notice if you did.The place to fight design wars is in new markets, where no one  
has yet managed to establish any fortifications. That's where  
you can win big by taking the bold approach to design, and  
having the same people both design and implement the product.   
Microsoft themselves did this at the start. So did Apple.  
And Hewlett-Packard. I suspect almost every successful startup  
has.So one way to build great software is to start your own  
startup. There are two problems with this, though. One is  
that in a startup you have to do so much besides write software.  
At Viaweb I considered myself lucky if I  
got to hack a quarter of the time. And the things I had to   
do the other three quarters of the time ranged from tedious  
to terrifying. I have a benchmark for this, because I  
once had to leave a board meeting to have  
some cavities filled. I remember sitting back in the  
dentist's chair, waiting for the drill, and feeling like  
I was on vacation.The other problem with startups is that there is not much  
overlap between the kind of software that makes money and the  
kind that's interesting to write. Programming languages  
are interesting to write, and Microsoft's first product was  
one, in fact, but no one will pay for programming languages  
now. If you want to make money, you tend to be forced to work  
on problems that are too nasty for anyone to solve for free.All makers face this problem. Prices are  
determined by supply and demand, and there is just not as much  
demand for things that are fun to work on as there is for  
things that solve the mundane problems of individual customers.  
Acting in off-Broadway plays just doesn't pay as well as  
wearing a gorilla suit in someone's booth at a  
trade show. Writing novels doesn't pay as well as writing  
ad copy for garbage disposals.  
And hacking programming languages doesn't pay as well  
as figuring out how to connect some company's  
legacy database to their Web server.I think the answer to this problem, in the case of software,  
is a concept known to nearly all makers: the day job.  
This phrase began with musicians, who  
perform at night. More generally, it means that you have one  
kind of work you do for money, and another for love.Nearly all makers have day jobs early in their careers.  
Painters and writers notoriously do. If you're lucky  
you can get a day job that's closely  
related to your real work. Musicians often  
seem to work in record stores. A hacker working on some  
programming language or operating system might likewise be able to  
get a day job using it. [1]When I say that the answer is for hackers to have day jobs,   
and work on beautiful software on the side, I'm not proposing  
this as a new idea. This is what open-source hacking is all   
about. What I'm saying is that open-source is probably the right  
model, because it has been independently confirmed by all the   
other makers.It seems surprising to me that any employer would be reluctant  
to let hackers work on open-source projects.  
At Viaweb, we would have been reluctant to hire anyone  
who didn't. When we interviewed  
programmers, the main  
thing we cared about was what kind of software they  
wrote in their spare time.  
You can't do anything really well unless  
you love it, and if you love to hack you'll inevitably  
be working on projects of your own. [2]Because hackers are makers rather than scientists,  
the right place to look for metaphors is not in the  
sciences, but among other kinds of makers. What else can painting  
teach us about hacking?One thing we can learn, or at least confirm, from the  
example of painting is how to learn to hack. You learn to  
paint mostly by doing it.  
Ditto for hacking. Most hackers don't learn to hack by  
taking college courses in programming. They learn to hack  
by writing programs of their own at age thirteen. Even in   
college classes, you learn to hack mostly by hacking. [3]Because painters leave a trail of work behind them, you  
can watch them learn by doing. If you look at the work  
of a painter in chronological order, you'll find that each   
painting builds on things that have been learned in previous  
ones. When there's something in  
a painting that works very well, you can usually find version   
1 of it in a smaller form in some earlier painting.I think most makers work this way. Writers and architects seem  
to as well. Maybe it would be good for hackers  
to act more like painters, and regularly start over from scratch,  
instead of continuing to work for years on one project, and  
trying to incorporate all their later ideas as revisions.The fact that hackers learn to hack by doing it is another  
sign of how different hacking is from the sciences. Scientists  
don't learn science by doing it, but by doing labs and problem sets.  
Scientists start out doing work that's perfect, in the sense  
that they're just trying to reproduce work someone else has   
already done for them.  
Eventually, they get  
to the point where they can do original work.  
Whereas hackers, from the start, are doing original work; it's  
just very bad. So hackers start original, and get good, and  
scientists start good, and get original.  
The other way makers learn is from examples.  
For a painter, a museum is a reference library of techniques.  
For hundreds of years it has been part of the traditional  
education of painters to copy the works of the great masters,  
because copying forces you to look closely  
at the way a painting is made.Writers do this too.  
Benjamin Franklin learned to write by summarizing the points   
in the essays of Addison and Steele and then trying to  
reproduce them. Raymond Chandler did the same thing  
with detective stories.Hackers, likewise, can learn to program by looking at   
good programs-- not just at what they do, but the source  
code too. One of the less publicized benefits  
of the open-source movement is that it has made it easier  
to learn to program. When I learned to program, we had to rely  
mostly on examples in books. The one big chunk of  
code available then was Unix, but even this was not   
open source. Most of the people who read the source  
read it in illicit photocopies of John Lions' book, which  
though written in 1977 was not allowed to be published  
until 1996.Another example we can take from painting is the way that  
paintings are created by gradual refinement. Paintings usually  
begin with a sketch.  
Gradually the details get filled in.  
But it is not merely a process of filling in. Sometimes   
the original plans turn out to be mistaken.  
Countless paintings,  
when you look at them in xrays, turn out to have limbs that  
have been moved or facial features that have been readjusted.Here's a case where we can learn from painting. I think hacking  
should work this way too. It's unrealistic  
to expect that the specifications for a program will be  
perfect. You're  
better off if you admit this up front, and write programs in  
a way that allows specifications to change on the fly.(The structure of large companies makes this hard for them  
to do, so here is another place where startups have an advantage.)Everyone by now presumably knows about the danger of premature  
optimization. I think we should be just as worried about  
premature design-- deciding too early what  
a program should do.The right tools can help us avoid  
this danger.  
A good programming language should, like oil paint, make it  
easy to change your mind. Dynamic typing is a win here because  
you don't have to  
commit to specific data representations up front.  
But the key to flexibility, I think, is to make the language  
very abstract.  
The easiest program to change is one that's very short.  
This sounds like a paradox, but a great painting  
has to be better than it has to be.  
For example, when Leonardo  
painted the portrait of Ginevra de Benci  
in the National Gallery, he put a juniper bush behind her head.  
In it he carefully  
painted each individual leaf. Many painters might have thought,  
this is just something to put in the background to frame  
her head. No one will look that closely at it.Not Leonardo. How hard he worked on part of a painting didn't  
depend at all on how closely he expected anyone to look at it.  
He was like Michael Jordan. Relentless.Relentlessness wins because, in the aggregate, unseen details  
become visible.  
When people walk by the portrait of Ginevra de Benci,  
their attention is often immediately arrested by it,  
even before they look at the label and notice that it says  
Leonardo da Vinci. All those unseen details combine to produce  
something that's just stunning, like a thousand barely audible  
voices all singing in tune.Great software, likewise, requires a fanatical devotion to  
beauty. If you look inside good software, you find that  
parts no one is ever supposed to see are beautiful too.  
I'm not claiming I write great software, but I  
know that when it comes to code I behave in a way that would  
make me eligible for prescription drugs if I approached everyday  
life the same way.  
It drives me crazy to see code that's badly indented,  
or that uses ugly variable names.If a hacker were a mere implementor, turning a spec into code, then  
he could just work his way through it from one end to the other like  
someone digging a ditch. But if the hacker is a creator, we have  
to take inspiration into account.In hacking, like painting,  
work comes in cycles. Sometimes you get excited about some  
new project and you want to work sixteen hours a day on it.   
Other times nothing seems interesting.To do good work you have to take these cycles into  
account, because they're affected by how you react to them.  
When you're driving a  
car with a manual transmission on a hill, you have to back off  
the clutch sometimes to avoid stalling. Backing  
off can likewise prevent ambition from stalling.  
In both painting and hacking there are some  
tasks that are terrifyingly ambitious, and others that are  
comfortingly routine. It's a good idea to save some easy  
tasks for moments when you would otherwise stall.In hacking, this can literally mean saving up bugs.  
I like debugging: it's the  
one time that hacking is as straightforward as   
people think it is. You have a  
totally constrained problem, and all you have to do is solve  
it. Your program is supposed to do x. Instead it does y.  
Where does it go wrong? You know you're going to win  
in the end. It's as relaxing as painting a wall.The example of painting can teach us not only how to manage our  
own work, but how to work together. A lot of the  
great art of the past is the work of multiple hands, though  
there may only be one name on the wall next to it in the  
museum. Leonardo was an apprentice in the workshop of  
Verrocchio and painted one of the angels in his Baptism of  
Christ. This sort of thing was the rule, not the exception.  
Michelangelo was considered especially dedicated for insisting  
on painting all the figures on the ceiling of the Sistine  
Chapel himself.As far as I know, when painters worked together on a painting,  
they never worked on the same parts. It was common  
for the master to paint the principal figures and for assistants  
to paint the others and the background. But you never had  
one guy painting over the work of another.I think this is the right model for collaboration in software  
too. Don't push it too far. When a piece of code is  
being hacked by three or four different people, no one of whom  
really owns it, it will end up being like a common-room. It will  
tend to feel bleak and abandoned, and accumulate cruft.  
The right  
way to collaborate, I think, is to divide projects into sharply  
defined modules, each with a definite owner, and with interfaces  
between them that are as carefully designed and, if possible,  
as articulated as programming languages.Like painting, most software is intended for  
a human audience. And so hackers, like painters, must have  
empathy to do really great work. You have to be able to see  
things from the user's point of view.When I was a kid I was always being told to look at things from  
someone else's point of view. What this always meant in  
practice was to do what someone else wanted, instead of what  
I wanted. This of course gave empathy a bad name, and I made a  
point of not cultivating it.Boy, was I wrong. It turns out that looking at things from   
other people's point of view is practically the secret of  
success. It doesn't necessarily mean being self-sacrificing.  
Far from it. Understanding how someone else sees things  
doesn't imply that you'll act in his interest; in some  
situations-- in war, for example-- you want to do exactly  
the opposite. [4]Most makers make things for a human audience.  
And to engage an audience you have to understand what they need.  
Nearly all the greatest paintings are paintings of people,  
for example, because people are what people are interested in.Empathy is probably the single most important difference  
between a good hacker and a great one. Some hackers  
are quite smart, but when it comes to empathy are  
practically solipsists. It's hard for such   
people to design great software [5], because they can't  
see things from the user's point of view.One way to tell how good people are at empathy is to watch  
them explain a technical question to someone without a technical  
background. We probably all know people who, though otherwise smart,  
are just comically bad at this. If someone asks them at  
a dinner party what a programming language is, they'll  
say something like ``Oh, a high-level language is what  
the compiler uses as input to generate object code.''  
High-level language? Compiler? Object code? Someone who   
doesn't know what a programming language is obviously doesn't  
know what these things are, either.Part of what software has to do is explain itself. So to   
write good software you have to understand how little users   
understand.  
They're going to walk up to the software with no preparation, and  
it had better do what they guess it will, because they're  
not going to read the manual. The best system I've ever seen   
in this respect was the original Macintosh, in 1985.  
It did what software almost never does: it just worked. [6]Source code, too, should explain itself. If I could get people to  
remember just one quote about programming, it would be the  
one at the beginning of Structure and Interpretation of Computer  
Programs.  
  
Programs should be written for people to read, and  
only incidentally for machines to execute.  
  
You need to have   
empathy not just for your users, but for your readers. It's in   
your interest, because you'll be one of them.  
Many a hacker has written a program only to  
find on returning to it six months later that he has no idea   
how it works. I know several people who've sworn off Perl after  
such experiences. [7]Lack of empathy is associated with intelligence, to the point  
that there is even something of a fashion for it in some places.  
But I don't think there's any correlation.  
You can do well in math and  
the natural sciences without having to learn empathy, and people in these  
fields tend to be smart, so the two qualities have come to be  
associated. But there are plenty of dumb people who are bad at  
empathy too. Just listen to the people who call in with questions on  
talk shows. They ask whatever it is they're asking in  
such a roundabout way  
that the hosts often have to rephrase the question for them.So, if hacking works like painting and writing, is it as cool?  
After all, you only get one life.  
You might as well spend it working on something great.Unfortunately, the question is hard to answer. There is always  
a big time lag in prestige. It's like light from a distant star.  
Painting has prestige now because of great work people did five hundred  
years ago. At the time, no one thought  
these paintings were as important as we do today. It would have  
seemed very odd to people at the time that Federico da Montefeltro,  
the Duke of Urbino, would one day be known mostly as the guy  
with the strange nose in a painting   
by Piero della Francesca.So while I admit that hacking doesn't seem as cool as painting now,  
we should remember that painting itself didn't seem as cool in  
its glory days as it does now.What we can say with some confidence is that these are the glory  
days of hacking. In most fields the great work is done early on.  
The paintings made between 1430 and 1500 are still unsurpassed.  
Shakespeare appeared just as professional theater was being born,  
  
and pushed the medium  
so far that every playwright since has had to live in his shadow.  
Albrecht Durer did the same thing with engraving, and Jane Austen  
with the novel.Over and over we see the same pattern. A new medium appears, and  
people are so excited about it that they explore most of its  
possibilities in the first couple generations. Hacking seems  
to be in this phase now.Painting was not, in Leonardo's time, as cool as his work  
helped make it.  
How cool hacking turns out to be will depend on what we can  
do with this new medium.   
  
Notes[1] The greatest damage that photography has done  
to painting may be the fact that it killed the best day job.  
Most of the great painters in history supported  
themselves by painting portraits. [2] I've been told that Microsoft discourages  
employees from contributing to open-source projects, even in  
their spare time.  
But so many of the best hackers work on open-source  
projects now that the main effect of this policy may be  
to ensure that they won't be able to hire any first-rate  
programmers.[3] What you learn about programming in college is much like  
what you learn about books or clothes or dating: what bad taste you  
had in high school.[4] Here's an example of applied empathy.  
At Viaweb, if we couldn't decide between two alternatives, we'd  
ask, what would our competitors hate most? At one point a  
competitor added a feature to their software that was basically  
useless, but since it was one of few they had that we didn't, they  
made much of it in the trade press.  
We could have tried to explain that the feature was useless,  
but we decided it would annoy our competitor more if we  
just implemented it ourselves, so we hacked together our own  
version that afternoon.[5] Except text editors and compilers. Hackers don't need empathy to  
design these, because they are themselves typical users.[6] Well, almost. They overshot the available RAM somewhat,  
causing much inconvenient disk swapping, but this could be fixed  
within a few months by buying an additional disk drive.[7] The way to make programs easy to read is not to  
stuff them with comments. I would take Abelson and Sussman's  
quote a step further. Programming languages should be designed  
to express algorithms, and only incidentally to tell computers  
how to execute them. A good programming language  
ought to be better for explaining software than English.  
You should only  
need comments when there is some kind of kludge you need to warn  
readers about, just as on a road there are only  
arrows on parts with unexpectedly sharp curves.  
Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Robert Morris, Dan Giffin, and Lisa  
Randall for reading drafts of this, and to Henry Leitner  
and Larry Finkelstein for inviting me to speak.Japanese TranslationSpanish TranslationGerman TranslationPortuguese TranslationCzech TranslationWhy Good Design Comes from Bad DesignKnuth: Computer Programming as an Art  
  
  
You'll find this essay and 14 others in  
Hackers & Painters.

# If Lisp is So Great

May 2003If Lisp is so great, why don't more people use it? I was   
asked this question by a student in the audience at a   
talk I gave recently. Not for the first time, either.In languages, as in so many things, there's not much   
correlation between popularity and quality. Why does   
John Grisham (King of Torts sales rank, 44) outsell  
Jane Austen (Pride and Prejudice sales rank, 6191)?  
Would even Grisham claim that it's because he's a better  
writer?Here's the first sentence of Pride and Prejudice:  
  
It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man   
in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a  
wife.  
  
"It is a truth universally acknowledged?" Long words for  
the first sentence of a love story.Like Jane Austen, Lisp looks hard. Its syntax, or lack  
of syntax, makes it look completely unlike   
the languages  
most people are used to. Before I learned Lisp, I was afraid  
of it too. I recently came across a notebook from 1983  
in which I'd written:  
  
I suppose I should learn Lisp, but it seems so foreign.  
  
Fortunately, I was 19 at the time and not too resistant to learning  
new things. I was so ignorant that learning  
almost anything meant learning new things.People frightened by Lisp make up other reasons for not  
using it. The standard  
excuse, back when C was the default language, was that Lisp  
was too slow. Now that Lisp dialects are among  
the faster  
languages available, that excuse has gone away.  
Now the standard excuse is openly circular: that other languages  
are more popular.(Beware of such reasoning. It gets you Windows.)Popularity is always self-perpetuating, but it's especially  
so in programming languages. More libraries  
get written for popular languages, which makes them still  
more popular. Programs often have to work with existing programs,  
and this is easier if they're written in the same language,  
so languages spread from program to program like a virus.  
And managers prefer popular languages, because they give them   
more leverage over developers, who can more easily be replaced.Indeed, if programming languages were all more or less equivalent,  
there would be little justification for using any but the most  
popular. But they aren't all equivalent, not by a long  
shot. And that's why less popular languages, like Jane Austen's   
novels, continue to survive at all. When everyone else is reading   
the latest John Grisham novel, there will always be a few people   
reading Jane Austen instead.Japanese TranslationRomanian TranslationSpanish Translation

# The Hundred-Year Language

April 2003(This essay is derived from a keynote talk at PyCon 2003.)It's hard to predict what  
life will be like in a hundred years. There are only a few  
things we can say with certainty. We know that everyone will  
drive flying cars,  
that zoning laws will be relaxed to allow buildings  
hundreds of stories tall, that it will be dark most of the  
time, and that women will all be trained in the martial arts.   
Here I want to zoom in on one detail of this  
picture. What kind of programming language will they use to  
write the software controlling those flying cars?This is worth thinking about not so  
much because we'll actually get to use these languages as because,  
if we're lucky, we'll use languages on the path from this  
point to that.I think that, like species, languages will form evolutionary trees,  
with dead-ends branching off all over. We can see this  
happening already.  
Cobol, for all its sometime popularity, does not seem to have any  
intellectual descendants. It is an evolutionary dead-end-- a  
Neanderthal language.I predict a similar fate for Java. People  
sometimes send me mail saying, "How can you say that Java  
won't turn out to be a successful language? It's already  
a successful language." And I admit that it is, if you  
measure success by shelf space taken up by books on it  
(particularly individual books on it), or by  
the number of undergrads who believe they have to  
learn it to get a job. When I say Java won't  
turn out to be a successful language, I mean something more  
specific: that Java  
will turn out to be an evolutionary dead-end, like Cobol.This is just a guess. I may be wrong. My point here is not to dis Java,  
but to raise the issue of evolutionary  
trees and get people asking, where on the tree is language X?  
The reason to ask this question isn't just so that  
our ghosts can say, in a  
hundred years, I told you so. It's because staying close to   
the main branches is a useful heuristic for finding languages that will  
be good to program in now.At any given time, you're probably happiest on  
the main branches of an evolutionary tree.  
Even when there were still plenty of Neanderthals,   
it must have sucked to be one. The  
Cro-Magnons would have been constantly coming over and  
beating you up and stealing your food.The reason I want to  
know what languages will be like in a hundred years is so that  
I know what branch of the tree to bet on now.The evolution of languages differs from the evolution of species  
because branches can converge. The Fortran branch, for example,  
seems to be merging with the descendants  
of Algol. In theory this is possible for species too, but it's  
not likely to have happened to any bigger than a cell.Convergence  
is more likely for languages partly because the space of  
possibilities is smaller, and partly because mutations  
are not random. Language designers deliberately incorporate  
ideas from other languages.It's especially useful for language designers to think  
about where the evolution of programming languages is likely  
to lead, because they can steer accordingly.   
In that case, "stay on a main branch" becomes more than a  
way to choose a good language.  
It becomes a heuristic for making the right decisions about  
language design.Any programming language can be divided into  
two parts: some set of fundamental operators that play the role  
of axioms, and the rest of the language, which could in principle  
be written in terms of these fundamental operators.I think the fundamental operators are the most important factor in a  
language's long term survival. The rest you can change. It's  
like the rule that in buying a house you should consider  
location first of all. Everything else you can fix later, but you  
can't fix the location.I think it's important not just that the axioms be well chosen,   
but that there be few of them. Mathematicians have always felt   
this way about axioms-- the fewer, the better-- and I think they're  
onto something.At the very least, it has to be a useful exercise to look closely  
at the core of a language to see if there are any axioms that  
could be weeded out. I've found in my long career as a slob that  
cruft breeds cruft, and I've seen this happen in software as  
well as under beds and in the corners of rooms.I have a hunch that  
the main branches of the evolutionary tree pass through the languages  
that have the smallest, cleanest cores.  
The more of a language you can write in itself,  
the better.Of course, I'm making a big assumption in even asking what  
programming languages will be like in a hundred years.  
Will we even be writing programs in a hundred years? Won't  
we just tell computers what we want them to do?There hasn't been a lot of progress in that department  
so far.  
My guess is that a hundred years from now people will  
still tell computers what to do using programs we would recognize  
as such. There may be tasks that we  
solve now by writing programs and which in a hundred years  
you won't have to write programs to solve, but I think  
there will still be a good deal of  
programming of the type that we do today.It may seem presumptuous to think anyone can predict what  
any technology will look like in a hundred years. But  
remember that we already have almost fifty years of history behind us.  
Looking forward a hundred years is a graspable idea  
when we consider how slowly languages have evolved in the  
past fifty.Languages evolve slowly because they're not really technologies.  
Languages are notation. A program is a formal description of   
the problem you want a computer to solve for you. So the rate  
of evolution in programming languages is more like the  
rate of evolution in mathematical notation than, say,  
transportation or communications.  
Mathematical notation does evolve, but not with the giant  
leaps you see in technology.Whatever computers are made of in a hundred years, it seems   
safe to predict they will be much faster than  
they are now. If Moore's Law continues to put out, they will be 74  
quintillion (73,786,976,294,838,206,464) times faster. That's kind of  
hard to imagine. And indeed, the most likely prediction in the  
speed department may be that Moore's Law will stop working.  
Anything that is supposed to double every eighteen months seems  
likely to run up against some kind of fundamental limit eventually.  
But I have no trouble believing that computers will be very much  
faster. Even if they only end up being a paltry million  
times faster, that should change the ground rules for programming  
languages substantially. Among other things, there  
will be more room for what  
would now be considered slow languages, meaning languages  
that don't yield very efficient code.And yet some applications will still demand speed.  
Some of the problems we want to solve with  
computers are created by computers; for example, the  
rate at which you have to process video images depends  
on the rate at which another computer can  
generate them. And there is another class of problems  
which inherently have an unlimited capacity to soak up cycles:  
image rendering, cryptography, simulations.If some applications can be increasingly inefficient while  
others continue to demand all the speed the hardware can  
deliver, faster computers will mean that languages have  
to cover an ever wider range of efficiencies. We've seen  
this happening already. Current implementations of some  
popular new languages are shockingly wasteful by the  
standards of previous decades.This isn't just something that happens with programming  
languages. It's a general historical trend. As technologies improve,  
each generation can do things that the previous generation  
would have considered wasteful. People thirty years ago would  
be astonished at how casually we make long distance phone calls.  
People a hundred years ago would be even more astonished that   
a package would one day travel from Boston to New York via Memphis.I can already tell you what's going to happen to all those extra  
cycles that faster hardware is going to give us in the   
next hundred years. They're nearly all going to be wasted.I learned to program when computer power was scarce.  
I can remember taking all the spaces out of my Basic programs  
so they would fit into the memory of a 4K TRS-80. The  
thought of all this stupendously inefficient software  
burning up cycles doing the same thing over and over seems  
kind of gross to me. But I think my intuitions here are wrong. I'm  
like someone who grew up poor, and can't bear to spend money  
even for something important, like going to the doctor.Some kinds of waste really are disgusting. SUVs, for example, would  
arguably be gross even if they ran on a fuel which would never  
run out and generated no pollution. SUVs are gross because they're  
the solution to a gross problem. (How to make minivans look more  
masculine.)  
But not all waste is bad. Now that we have the infrastructure  
to support it, counting the minutes of your long-distance  
calls starts to seem niggling. If you have the  
resources, it's more elegant to think of all phone calls as  
one kind of thing, no matter where the other person is.There's good waste, and bad waste. I'm interested  
in good waste-- the kind where, by spending more, we can get   
simpler designs. How will we take advantage of the opportunities  
to waste cycles that we'll get from new, faster hardware?The desire for speed is so deeply engrained in us, with   
our puny computers, that it will take a conscious effort  
to overcome it. In language design, we should be consciously seeking out  
situations where we can trade efficiency for even the  
smallest increase in convenience.Most data structures exist because of speed. For example,  
many languages today have both strings and lists. Semantically, strings  
are more or less a subset of lists in which the elements are  
characters. So why do you need a separate data type?  
You don't, really. Strings only  
exist for efficiency. But it's lame to clutter up the semantics  
of the language with hacks to make programs run faster.  
Having strings in a language seems to be a case of  
premature optimization.If we think of the core of a language as a set of axioms,   
surely it's gross to have additional axioms that add no expressive  
power, simply for the sake of efficiency. Efficiency is  
important, but I don't think that's the right way to get it.The right way to solve that problem, I think, is to separate  
the meaning of a program from the implementation details.   
Instead of having both lists and strings, have just lists,  
with some way to give the compiler optimization advice that   
will allow it to lay out strings as contiguous bytes if  
necessary.Since speed doesn't matter in most of a program, you won't  
ordinarily need to bother with  
this sort of micromanagement.  
This will be more and more true as computers get faster.Saying less about implementation should also make programs  
more flexible.  
Specifications change while a program is being written, and this is not  
only inevitable, but desirable.The word "essay" comes  
from the French verb "essayer", which means "to try".  
An essay, in the original sense, is something you  
write to try to figure something out. This happens in  
software too. I think some of the best programs were essays,  
in the sense that the authors didn't know when they started  
exactly what they were trying to write.Lisp hackers already know about the value of being flexible  
with data structures. We tend to write the first version of  
a program so that it does everything with lists. These  
initial versions can be so shockingly inefficient that it  
takes a conscious effort not to think about what they're  
doing, just as, for me at least, eating a steak requires a  
conscious effort not to think where it came from.What programmers in a hundred years will be looking for, most of  
all, is a language where you can throw together an unbelievably  
inefficient version 1 of a program with the least possible  
effort. At least, that's how we'd describe it in present-day  
terms. What they'll say is that they want a language that's  
easy to program in.Inefficient software isn't gross. What's gross is a language  
that makes programmers do needless work. Wasting programmer time  
is the true inefficiency, not wasting machine time. This will  
become ever more clear as computers get faster.I think getting rid of strings is already something we  
could bear to think about. We did it in Arc, and it seems  
to be a win; some operations that would be awkward to  
describe as regular expressions can be described  
easily as recursive functions.How far will this flattening of data structures go? I can think  
of possibilities that shock even me, with my conscientiously broadened  
mind. Will we get rid of arrays, for example? After all, they're  
just a subset of hash tables where the keys are vectors of  
integers. Will we replace hash tables themselves with lists?There are more shocking prospects even than that. The Lisp  
that McCarthy described in 1960, for example, didn't  
have numbers. Logically, you don't need to have a separate notion  
of numbers, because you can represent them as lists: the integer  
n could be represented as a list of n elements. You can do math this  
way. It's just unbearably inefficient.No one actually proposed implementing numbers as lists in  
practice. In fact, McCarthy's 1960 paper was not, at the time,  
intended to be implemented at all. It was a theoretical exercise,  
an attempt to create a more elegant alternative to the Turing  
Machine. When someone did, unexpectedly, take this paper and  
translate it into a working Lisp interpreter, numbers certainly  
weren't represented as lists; they were represented in binary,  
as in every other language.Could a programming language go so far as to get rid of numbers  
as a fundamental data type? I ask this not so much as a serious  
question as as a way to play chicken with the future. It's like  
the hypothetical case of an irresistible force meeting an   
immovable object-- here, an unimaginably inefficient  
implementation meeting unimaginably great resources.  
I don't see why not. The future is pretty long. If there's  
something we can do to decrease the number of axioms in the core  
language, that would seem to be the side to bet on as t approaches  
infinity. If the idea still seems unbearable in a hundred years,  
maybe it won't in a thousand.Just to be clear about this, I'm not proposing that all numerical  
calculations would actually be carried out using lists. I'm proposing  
that the core language, prior to any additional notations about  
implementation, be defined this way. In practice any program  
that wanted to do any amount of math would probably represent  
numbers in binary, but this would be an optimization, not part of  
the core language semantics.Another way to burn up cycles is to have many layers of  
software between the application and the hardware. This too is  
a trend we see happening already: many recent languages are  
compiled into byte code. Bill Woods once told me that,  
as a rule of thumb, each layer of interpretation costs a  
factor of 10 in speed. This extra cost buys you flexibility.The very first version of Arc was an extreme case of this sort  
of multi-level slowness, with corresponding benefits. It  
was a classic "metacircular" interpreter written  
on top of Common Lisp, with a definite family resemblance  
to the eval function defined in McCarthy's original Lisp paper.  
The whole thing was only a couple hundred lines of  
code, so it was very easy to understand and change. The   
Common Lisp we used, CLisp, itself runs on top  
of a byte code interpreter. So here we had two levels of  
interpretation, one of them (the top one) shockingly inefficient,  
and the language was usable. Barely usable, I admit, but  
usable.Writing software as multiple layers is a powerful technique  
even within applications. Bottom-up programming means writing  
a program as a series of layers, each of which serves as a  
language for the one above. This approach tends to yield  
smaller, more flexible programs. It's also the best route to   
that holy grail, reusability. A language is by definition  
reusable. The more  
of your application you can push down into a language for writing  
that type of application, the more of your software will be   
reusable.Somehow the idea of reusability got attached  
to object-oriented programming in the 1980s, and no amount of  
evidence to the contrary seems to be able to shake it free. But  
although some object-oriented software is reusable, what makes  
it reusable is its bottom-upness, not its object-orientedness.  
Consider libraries: they're reusable because they're language,  
whether they're written in an object-oriented style or not.I don't predict the demise of object-oriented programming, by the  
way. Though I don't think it has much to offer good programmers,  
except in certain specialized domains, it is irresistible to   
large organizations. Object-oriented programming  
offers a sustainable way to write spaghetti code. It lets you accrete  
programs as a series of patches.  
  
Large organizations  
always tend to develop software this way, and I expect this  
to be as true in a hundred years as it is today.  
As long as we're talking about the future, we had better  
talk about parallel computation, because that's where this   
idea seems to live. That is, no matter when you're talking, parallel  
computation seems to be something that is going to happen  
in the future.Will the future ever catch up with it? People have been  
talking about parallel computation as something imminent   
for at least 20  
years, and it hasn't affected programming practice much so far.  
Or hasn't it? Already  
chip designers have to think about it, and so must  
people trying to write systems software on multi-cpu computers.The real question is, how far up the ladder of abstraction will  
parallelism go?  
In a hundred years will it affect even application programmers? Or  
will it be something that compiler writers think about, but  
which is usually invisible in the source code of applications?One thing that does seem likely is that most opportunities for  
parallelism will be wasted. This is a special case of my more   
general prediction that most of the extra computer power we're  
given will go to waste. I expect that, as with the stupendous  
speed of the underlying hardware, parallelism will be something  
that is available if you ask for it explicitly, but ordinarily  
not used. This implies that the kind of parallelism we have in  
a hundred years will not, except in special applications, be  
massive parallelism. I expect for  
ordinary programmers it will be more like being able to fork off  
processes that all end up running in parallel.And this will, like asking for specific implementations of data  
structures, be something that you do fairly late in the life of a  
program, when you try to optimize it. Version 1s will ordinarily  
ignore any advantages to be got from parallel computation, just  
as they will ignore advantages to be got from specific representations  
of data.Except in special kinds of applications, parallelism won't  
pervade the programs that are written in a hundred years. It would be  
premature optimization if it did.How many programming languages will there  
be in a hundred years? There seem to be a huge number of new  
programming languages lately. Part of the reason is that  
faster hardware has allowed programmers to make different  
tradeoffs between speed and convenience, depending on the  
application. If this is a real trend, the hardware we'll   
have in a hundred years should only increase it.And yet there may be only a few widely-used languages in a  
hundred years. Part of the reason I say this  
is optimism: it seems that, if you did a really good job,  
you could make a language that was ideal for writing a   
slow version 1, and yet with the right optimization advice  
to the compiler, would also yield very fast code when necessary.  
So, since I'm optimistic, I'm going to predict that despite  
the huge gap they'll have between acceptable and maximal  
efficiency, programmers in a hundred years will have languages   
that can span most of it.As this gap widens, profilers will become increasingly important.  
Little attention is paid to profiling now. Many people still  
seem to believe that the way to get fast applications is to  
write compilers that generate fast code. As the gap between   
acceptable and maximal performance widens, it will become  
increasingly clear that the way to get fast applications is   
to have a good guide from one to the other.When I say there may only be a few languages, I'm not including  
domain-specific "little languages". I think such embedded languages  
are a great idea, and I expect them to proliferate. But I expect  
them to be written as thin enough skins that users can see  
the general-purpose language underneath.Who will design the languages of the future? One of the most exciting  
trends in the last ten years has been the rise of open-source   
languages like Perl, Python, and Ruby.  
Language design is being taken over by hackers. The results  
so far are messy, but encouraging. There are some stunningly   
novel ideas in Perl, for example. Many are stunningly bad, but  
that's always true of ambitious efforts. At its current rate  
of mutation, God knows what Perl might evolve into in a hundred  
years.It's not true that those who can't do, teach (some of the best  
hackers I know are professors), but it is true that there are a  
lot of things that those who teach can't do. Research imposes  
constraining caste restrictions. In any academic  
field there are topics that are ok to work on and others that  
aren't. Unfortunately the distinction between acceptable and  
forbidden topics is usually based on how intellectual  
the work sounds when described in research papers, rather than  
how important it is for getting good results. The extreme case  
is probably literature; people studying literature rarely   
say anything that would be of the slightest use to those  
producing it.Though the situation is better in the sciences,  
the overlap between the kind of work you're allowed to do and the  
kind of work that yields good languages is distressingly small.  
(Olin Shivers has grumbled eloquently  
about this.) For example, types seem to be an inexhaustible source  
of research papers, despite the fact that static typing  
seems to preclude true macros-- without which, in my opinion, no  
language is worth using.The trend is not merely toward languages being developed  
as open-source projects rather than "research", but toward  
languages being designed by the application programmers who need  
to use them, rather than by compiler writers. This seems a good  
trend and I expect it to continue.  
Unlike physics in a hundred years, which is almost necessarily  
impossible to predict, I think it may be possible in principle  
to design a language now that would appeal to users in a hundred  
years.One way to design a language is to just write down the program  
you'd like to be able to write, regardless of whether there   
is a compiler that can translate it or hardware that can run it.  
When you do this you can assume unlimited resources. It seems  
like we ought to be able to imagine unlimited resources as well  
today as in a hundred years.What program would one like to write? Whatever is least work.  
Except not quite: whatever would be least work if your ideas about  
programming weren't already influenced by the languages you're   
currently used to. Such influence can be so pervasive that   
it takes a great effort to overcome it. You'd think it would  
be obvious to creatures as lazy as us how to express a program  
with the least effort. In fact, our ideas about what's possible  
tend to be so limited by whatever language we think in that  
easier formulations of programs seem very surprising. They're  
something you have to discover, not something you naturally  
sink into.One helpful trick here  
is to use the length of the program as an approximation for  
how much work it is to write. Not the length in characters,  
of course, but the length in distinct syntactic elements-- basically,  
the size of the parse tree. It may not be quite true that  
the shortest program is the least work to write, but it's  
close enough that you're better off aiming for the solid  
target of brevity than the fuzzy, nearby one of least work.  
Then the algorithm for language design becomes: look at a program  
and ask, is there any way to write this that's shorter?In practice, writing programs in an imaginary hundred-year  
language will work to varying degrees depending  
on how close you are to the core. Sort routines you can  
write now. But it would be  
hard to predict now what kinds of libraries might be needed in  
a hundred years. Presumably many libraries will be for domains that  
don't even exist yet. If SETI@home works, for example, we'll   
need libraries for communicating with aliens. Unless of course  
they are sufficiently advanced that they already communicate  
in XML.At the other extreme, I think you might be able to design the  
core language today. In fact, some might argue that it was already  
mostly designed in 1958.If the hundred year language were available today, would we  
want to program in it? One way to answer this question is to  
look back. If present-day programming languages had been available  
in 1960, would anyone have wanted to use them?In some ways, the answer is no. Languages today assume  
infrastructure that didn't exist in 1960. For example, a language  
in which indentation is significant, like Python, would not  
work very well on printer terminals. But putting such problems  
aside-- assuming, for example, that programs were all just  
written on paper-- would programmers of the 1960s have liked  
writing programs in the languages we use now?I think so.  
Some of the less imaginative ones,  
who had artifacts of early languages built into their ideas of   
what a program was, might have had trouble. (How can you manipulate  
data without doing pointer arithmetic? How can you implement   
flow charts without gotos?) But I think the smartest programmers  
would have had no trouble making the most of present-day  
languages, if they'd had them.If we had the hundred-year language now, it would at least make a  
great pseudocode. What about using it to write software?   
Since the hundred-year language  
will need to generate fast code for some applications, presumably  
it could generate code efficient enough to run acceptably well  
on our hardware. We might have to give more optimization advice  
than users in a hundred years, but it still might be a net win.Now we have two ideas that, if you combine them, suggest interesting  
possibilities: (1) the hundred-year language could, in principle, be  
designed today, and (2) such a language, if it existed, might be good to  
program in today. When you see these ideas laid out like that,  
it's hard not to think, why not try writing the hundred-year language  
now?When you're working on language design, I think it is good to  
have such a target and to keep it consciously in mind. When you  
learn to drive, one of the principles they teach you is to  
align the car not by lining up the hood with the stripes painted  
on the road, but by aiming at some point in the distance. Even  
if all you care about is what happens in the next ten feet, this  
is the right answer. I  
think we can and should do the same thing with programming languages.  
NotesI believe Lisp Machine Lisp was the first language to embody  
the principle that declarations (except those of dynamic variables)  
were merely optimization advice,  
and would not change the meaning of a correct program. Common Lisp  
seems to have been the first to state this explicitly.Thanks to Trevor Blackwell, Robert Morris, and Dan Giffin for  
reading drafts of this, and to Guido van Rossum, Jeremy Hylton, and the  
rest of the Python crew for inviting me to speak at PyCon.  
  
  
You'll find this essay and 14 others in  
Hackers & Painters.

# Why Nerds are Unpopular

February 2003When we were in junior high school, my friend Rich and I made a map  
of the school lunch tables according to popularity. This was easy  
to do, because kids only ate lunch with others of about the same  
popularity. We graded them from A to E. A tables were full of  
football players and cheerleaders and so on. E tables contained the  
kids with mild cases of Down's Syndrome, what in the language of  
the time we called "retards."We sat at a D table, as low as you could get without looking  
physically different. We were not being especially candid to grade  
ourselves as D. It would have taken a deliberate lie to say otherwise.  
Everyone in the school knew exactly how popular everyone else was,  
including us.My stock gradually rose during high school. Puberty finally arrived;  
I became a decent soccer player; I started a scandalous underground  
newspaper. So I've seen a good part of the popularity landscape.I know a lot of people who were nerds in school, and they all tell  
the same story: there is a strong correlation between being smart  
and being a nerd, and an even stronger inverse correlation between  
being a nerd and being popular. Being smart seems to make you  
unpopular.Why? To someone in school now, that may seem an odd question to  
ask. The mere fact is so overwhelming that it may seem strange to  
imagine that it could be any other way. But it could. Being smart  
doesn't make you an outcast in elementary school. Nor does it harm  
you in the real world. Nor, as far as I can tell, is the problem  
so bad in most other countries. But in a typical American secondary  
school, being smart is likely to make your life difficult. Why?  
The key to this mystery is to rephrase the question slightly. Why  
don't smart kids make themselves popular? If they're so smart, why  
don't they figure out how popularity works and beat the system,  
just as they do for standardized tests?One argument says that this would be impossible, that the smart  
kids are unpopular because the other kids envy them for being smart,  
and nothing they could do could make them popular. I wish. If the  
other kids in junior high school envied me, they did a great job  
of concealing it. And in any case, if being smart were really an  
enviable quality, the girls would have broken ranks. The guys that  
guys envy, girls like.In the schools I went to, being smart just didn't matter much. Kids  
didn't admire it or despise it. All other things being equal, they  
would have preferred to be on the smart side of average rather than the  
dumb side, but intelligence counted far less than, say, physical  
appearance, charisma, or athletic ability.So if intelligence in itself is not a factor in popularity, why are  
smart kids so consistently unpopular? The answer, I think, is that  
they don't really want to be popular.If someone had told me that at the time, I would have laughed at  
him. Being unpopular in school makes kids miserable, some of them  
so miserable that they commit suicide. Telling me that I didn't  
want to be popular would have seemed like telling someone dying of  
thirst in a desert that he didn't want a glass of water. Of course  
I wanted to be popular.But in fact I didn't, not enough. There was something else I wanted  
more: to be smart. Not simply to do well in school, though that  
counted for something, but to design beautiful rockets, or to write  
well, or to understand how to program computers. In general, to  
make great things.At the time I never tried to separate my wants and weigh them  
against one another. If I had, I would have seen that being smart  
was more important. If someone had offered me the chance to be  
the most popular kid in school, but only at the price of being of  
average intelligence (humor me here), I wouldn't have taken it.Much as they suffer from their unpopularity, I don't think many  
nerds would. To them the thought of average intelligence is unbearable.  
But most kids would take that deal. For half of them, it would be  
a step up. Even for someone in the eightieth percentile (assuming,  
as everyone seemed to then, that intelligence is a scalar), who  
wouldn't drop thirty points in exchange for being loved and admired  
by everyone?And that, I think, is the root of the problem. Nerds serve two  
masters. They want to be popular, certainly, but they want even  
more to be smart. And popularity is not something you can do in  
your spare time, not in the fiercely competitive environment of an  
American secondary school.  
Alberti, arguably the archetype of the Renaissance Man, writes that  
"no art, however minor, demands less than total dedication if you  
want to excel in it."  
I wonder if anyone in the world works harder  
at anything than American school kids work at popularity. Navy SEALs  
and neurosurgery residents seem slackers by comparison. They  
occasionally take vacations; some even have hobbies. An American  
teenager may work at being popular every waking hour, 365 days a  
year.I don't mean to suggest they do this consciously. Some of them truly  
are little Machiavellis, but what I really mean here is that teenagers  
are always on duty as conformists.For example, teenage kids pay a great deal of attention to clothes.  
They don't consciously dress to be popular. They dress to look good.  
But to who? To the other kids. Other kids' opinions become their  
definition of right, not just for clothes, but for almost everything  
they do, right down to the way they walk. And so every effort they  
make to do things "right" is also, consciously or not, an effort  
to be more popular.Nerds don't realize this. They don't realize that it takes work to  
be popular. In general, people outside some very demanding field  
don't realize the extent to which success depends on constant (though  
often unconscious) effort. For example, most people seem to consider  
the ability to draw as some kind of innate quality, like being tall.  
In fact, most people who "can draw" like drawing, and have spent  
many hours doing it; that's why they're good at it. Likewise, popular  
isn't just something you are or you aren't, but something you make  
yourself.The main reason nerds are unpopular is that they have other things  
to think about. Their attention is drawn to books or the natural  
world, not fashions and parties. They're like someone trying to  
play soccer while balancing a glass of water on his head. Other  
players who can focus their whole attention on the game beat them  
effortlessly, and wonder why they seem so incapable.Even if nerds cared as much as other kids about popularity, being  
popular would be more work for them. The popular kids learned to  
be popular, and to want to be popular, the same way the nerds learned  
to be smart, and to want to be smart: from their parents. While the  
nerds were being trained to get the right answers, the popular kids  
were being trained to please.  
So far I've been finessing the relationship between smart and nerd,  
using them as if they were interchangeable. In fact it's only the  
context that makes them so. A nerd is someone who isn't socially  
adept enough. But "enough" depends on where you are. In a typical  
American school, standards for coolness are so high (or at least,  
so specific) that you don't have to be especially awkward to look  
awkward by comparison.Few smart kids can spare the attention that popularity requires.  
Unless they also happen to be good-looking, natural athletes, or  
siblings of popular kids, they'll tend to become nerds. And that's  
why smart people's lives are worst between, say, the ages of eleven  
and seventeen. Life at that age revolves far more around popularity  
than before or after.Before that, kids' lives are dominated by their parents, not by  
other kids. Kids do care what their peers think in elementary school,  
but this isn't their whole life, as it later becomes.Around the age of eleven, though, kids seem to start treating their  
family as a day job. They create a new world among themselves, and  
standing in this world is what matters, not standing in their family.  
Indeed, being in trouble in their family can win them points in the  
world they care about.The problem is, the world these kids create for themselves is at  
first a very crude one. If you leave a bunch of eleven-year-olds  
to their own devices, what you get is Lord of the Flies. Like  
a lot of American kids, I read this book in school. Presumably it  
was not a coincidence. Presumably someone wanted to point out to  
us that we were savages, and that we had made ourselves a cruel and  
stupid world. This was too subtle for me. While the book seemed  
entirely believable, I didn't get the additional message. I wish  
they had just told us outright that we were savages and our world  
was stupid.  
Nerds would find their unpopularity more bearable if it merely  
caused them to be ignored. Unfortunately, to be unpopular in school  
is to be actively persecuted.Why? Once again, anyone currently in school might think this a  
strange question to ask. How could things be any other way? But  
they could be. Adults don't normally persecute nerds. Why do teenage  
kids do it?Partly because teenagers are still half children, and many  
children are just intrinsically cruel. Some torture nerds for the  
same reason they pull the legs off spiders. Before you develop a  
conscience, torture is amusing.Another reason kids persecute nerds is to make themselves feel  
better. When you tread water, you lift yourself up by pushing water  
down. Likewise, in any social hierarchy, people unsure of their own  
position will try to emphasize it by maltreating those they think  
rank below. I've read that this is why poor whites in the United  
States are the group most hostile to blacks.But I think the main reason other kids persecute nerds is that it's  
part of the mechanism of popularity. Popularity is only partially  
about individual attractiveness. It's much more about alliances.  
To become more popular, you need to be constantly doing things that  
bring you close to other popular people, and nothing brings people  
closer than a common enemy.Like a politician who wants to distract voters from bad times at  
home, you can create an enemy if there isn't a real one. By singling  
out and persecuting a nerd, a group of kids from higher in the  
hierarchy create bonds between themselves. Attacking an outsider  
makes them all insiders. This is why the worst cases of bullying  
happen with groups. Ask any nerd: you get much worse treatment from  
a group of kids than from any individual bully, however sadistic.If it's any consolation to the nerds, it's nothing personal. The  
group of kids who band together to pick on you are doing the same  
thing, and for the same reason, as a bunch of guys who get together  
to go hunting. They don't actually hate you. They just need something  
to chase.Because they're at the bottom of the scale, nerds are a safe target  
for the entire school. If I remember correctly, the most popular  
kids don't persecute nerds; they don't need to stoop to such things.  
Most of the persecution comes from kids lower down, the nervous  
middle classes.The trouble is, there are a lot of them. The distribution of  
popularity is not a pyramid, but tapers at the bottom like a pear.  
The least popular group is quite small. (I believe we were the only  
D table in our cafeteria map.) So there are more people who want  
to pick on nerds than there are nerds.As well as gaining points by distancing oneself from unpopular kids,  
one loses points by being close to them. A woman I know says that  
in high school she liked nerds, but was afraid to be seen talking  
to them because the other girls would make fun of her. Unpopularity  
is a communicable disease; kids too nice to pick on nerds will still  
ostracize them in self-defense.It's no wonder, then, that smart kids tend to be unhappy in middle  
school and high school. Their other interests leave them little  
attention to spare for popularity, and since popularity resembles  
a zero-sum game, this in turn makes them targets for the whole  
school. And the strange thing is, this nightmare scenario happens  
without any conscious malice, merely because of the shape of the  
situation.  
For me the worst stretch was junior high, when kid culture was new  
and harsh, and the specialization that would later gradually separate  
the smarter kids had barely begun. Nearly everyone I've talked to  
agrees: the nadir is somewhere between eleven and fourteen.In our school it was eighth grade, which was ages twelve and thirteen  
for me. There was a brief sensation that year when one of our  
teachers overheard a group of girls waiting for the school bus, and  
was so shocked that the next day she devoted the whole class to an  
eloquent plea not to be so cruel to one another.It didn't have any noticeable effect. What struck me at the time  
was that she was surprised. You mean she doesn't know the kind of  
things they say to one another? You mean this isn't normal?It's important to realize that, no, the adults don't know what the  
kids are doing to one another. They know, in the abstract, that  
kids are monstrously cruel to one another, just as we know in the  
abstract that people get tortured in poorer countries. But, like  
us, they don't like to dwell on this depressing fact, and they don't  
see evidence of specific abuses unless they go looking for it.Public school teachers are in much the same position as prison  
wardens. Wardens' main concern is to keep the prisoners on the  
premises. They also need to keep them fed, and as far as possible  
prevent them from killing one another. Beyond that, they want to  
have as little to do with the prisoners as possible, so they leave  
them to create whatever social organization they want. From what  
I've read, the society that the prisoners create is warped, savage,  
and pervasive, and it is no fun to be at the bottom of it.In outline, it was the same at the schools I went to. The most  
important thing was to stay on the premises. While there, the  
authorities fed you, prevented overt violence, and made some effort  
to teach you something. But beyond that they didn't want to have  
too much to do with the kids. Like prison wardens, the teachers  
mostly left us to ourselves. And, like prisoners, the culture we  
created was barbaric.  
Why is the real world more hospitable to nerds? It might seem that  
the answer is simply that it's populated by adults, who are too  
mature to pick on one another. But I don't think this is true.  
Adults in prison certainly pick on one another. And so, apparently,  
do society wives; in some parts of Manhattan, life for women sounds  
like a continuation of high school, with all the same petty intrigues.I think the important thing about the real world is not that it's  
populated by adults, but that it's very large, and the things you  
do have real effects. That's what school, prison, and ladies-who-lunch  
all lack. The inhabitants of all those worlds are trapped in little  
bubbles where nothing they do can have more than a local effect.  
Naturally these societies degenerate into savagery. They have no  
function for their form to follow.When the things you do have real effects, it's no longer enough  
just to be pleasing. It starts to be important to get the right  
answers, and that's where nerds show to advantage. Bill Gates will  
of course come to mind. Though notoriously lacking in social skills,  
he gets the right answers, at least as measured in revenue.The other thing that's different about the real world is that it's  
much larger. In a large enough pool, even the smallest minorities  
can achieve a critical mass if they clump together. Out in the real  
world, nerds collect in certain places and form their own societies  
where intelligence is the most important thing. Sometimes the current  
even starts to flow in the other direction: sometimes, particularly  
in university math and science departments, nerds deliberately  
exaggerate their awkwardness in order to seem smarter. John Nash  
so admired Norbert Wiener that he adopted his habit of touching the  
wall as he walked down a corridor.  
As a thirteen-year-old kid, I didn't have much more experience of  
the world than what I saw immediately around me. The warped little  
world we lived in was, I thought, the world. The world seemed cruel  
and boring, and I'm not sure which was worse.Because I didn't fit into this world, I thought that something must  
be wrong with me. I didn't realize that the reason we nerds didn't  
fit in was that in some ways  
we were a step ahead. We were already thinking about  
the kind of things that matter in the real world, instead of spending  
all our time playing an exacting but mostly pointless game like the  
others.We were a bit like an adult would be if he were thrust back into  
middle school. He wouldn't know the right clothes to wear, the right  
music to like, the right slang to use. He'd seem to the kids a  
complete alien. The thing is, he'd know enough not to care what  
they thought. We had no such confidence.A lot of people seem to think it's good for smart kids to be thrown  
together with "normal" kids at this stage of their lives. Perhaps.  
But in at least some cases the reason the nerds don't fit in really  
is that everyone else is crazy. I remember sitting in the audience  
at a "pep rally" at my high school, watching as the cheerleaders  
threw an effigy of an opposing player into the audience to be torn  
to pieces. I felt like an explorer witnessing some bizarre tribal  
ritual.  
If I could go back and give my thirteen year old self some advice,  
the main thing I'd tell him would be to stick his head up and look  
around. I didn't really grasp it at the time, but the whole world  
we lived in was as fake as a Twinkie. Not just school, but the  
entire town. Why do people move to suburbia? To have kids! So no  
wonder it seemed boring and sterile. The whole place was a giant  
nursery, an artificial town created explicitly for the purpose of  
breeding children.Where I grew up, it felt as if there was nowhere to go, and nothing  
to do. This was no accident. Suburbs are deliberately designed to  
exclude the outside world, because it contains things that could  
endanger children.And as for the schools, they were just holding pens within this  
fake world. Officially the purpose of schools is to teach kids. In  
fact their primary purpose is to keep kids locked up in one  
place for a big chunk of the day so adults can get things done. And  
I have no problem with this: in a specialized industrial society,  
it would be a disaster to have kids running around loose.What bothers me is not that the kids are kept in prisons, but that  
(a) they aren't told about it, and (b) the prisons are run mostly  
by the inmates. Kids are sent off to spend six years memorizing  
meaningless facts in a world ruled by a caste of giants who run  
after an oblong brown ball, as if this were the most natural thing  
in the world. And if they balk at this surreal cocktail, they're  
called misfits.  
Life in this twisted world is stressful for the kids. And not just  
for the nerds. Like any war, it's damaging even to the winners.Adults can't avoid seeing that teenage kids are tormented. So why  
don't they do something about it? Because they blame it on puberty.  
The reason kids are so unhappy, adults tell themselves, is that  
monstrous new chemicals, hormones, are now coursing through their  
bloodstream and messing up everything. There's nothing wrong with  
the system; it's just inevitable that kids will be miserable at  
that age.This idea is so pervasive that even the kids believe it, which  
probably doesn't help. Someone who thinks his feet naturally hurt  
is not going to stop to consider the possibility that he is wearing  
the wrong size shoes.I'm suspicious of this theory that thirteen-year-old kids are  
intrinsically messed up. If it's physiological, it should be  
universal. Are Mongol nomads all nihilists at thirteen? I've read  
a lot of history, and I have not seen a single reference  
to this supposedly universal fact before the twentieth century.  
Teenage apprentices in the Renaissance seem to have been cheerful  
and eager. They got in fights and played tricks on one another of  
course (Michelangelo had his nose broken by a bully), but they  
weren't crazy.As far as I can tell, the concept of the hormone-crazed teenager  
is coeval with suburbia. I don't think this is a coincidence. I  
think teenagers are driven crazy by the life they're made to lead.  
Teenage apprentices in the Renaissance were working dogs. Teenagers  
now are neurotic lapdogs. Their craziness is the craziness of the  
idle everywhere.  
When I was in school, suicide was a constant topic among the smarter  
kids. No one I knew did it, but several planned to, and  
some may have tried. Mostly this was just a pose. Like other  
teenagers, we loved the dramatic, and suicide seemed very dramatic.  
But partly it was because our lives were at times genuinely miserable.Bullying was only part of the problem. Another problem, and possibly  
an even worse one, was that we never had anything real to work on.  
Humans like to work; in most of the world, your work is your identity.  
And all the work we did was   
pointless, or seemed so at the time.At best it was practice for real work we might do far in the future,  
so far that we didn't even know at the time what we were practicing  
for. More often it was just an arbitrary series of hoops to jump  
through, words without content designed mainly for testability.  
(The three main causes of the Civil War were....  
Test: List the three main causes of the Civil War.)And there was no way to opt out. The adults had agreed among  
themselves that this was to be the route to college. The only way  
to escape this empty life was to submit to it.  
Teenage kids used to have a more active role in society. In  
pre-industrial times, they were all apprentices of one sort or  
another, whether in shops or on farms or even on warships. They  
weren't left to create their own societies. They were junior members  
of adult societies.Teenagers seem to have respected adults more then, because  
the adults were the visible experts in the skills they were trying  
to learn. Now most kids have little idea what their parents do in  
their distant offices, and see no connection (indeed, there is  
precious little) between schoolwork and the work they'll do as  
adults.And if teenagers respected adults more, adults also had more use  
for teenagers. After a couple years' training, an apprentice could  
be a real help. Even the newest apprentice could be made to carry  
messages or sweep the workshop.Now adults have no immediate use for teenagers. They would be in  
the way in an office. So they drop them off at school on their way  
to work, much as they might drop the dog off at a kennel if they   
were going away for the weekend.What happened? We're up against a hard one here. The cause of this  
problem is the same as the cause of so many present ills: specialization.  
As jobs become more specialized, we have to train longer for them.  
Kids in pre-industrial times started working at about 14 at  
the latest; kids on farms, where most people lived, began far   
earlier. Now kids who go to college don't start working full-time   
till 21 or 22. With some degrees, like MDs and PhDs, you may not  
finish your training till 30.Teenagers now are useless, except as cheap labor in industries like  
fast food, which evolved to exploit precisely this fact. In almost  
any other kind of work, they'd be a net loss. But they're also too   
young to be left unsupervised. Someone has to watch over them, and  
the most efficient way to do this is to collect them together in  
one place. Then a few adults can watch all of them.If you stop there, what you're describing is literally a prison,  
albeit a part-time one. The problem is, many schools practically  
do stop there. The stated purpose of schools is to educate the kids.  
But there is no external pressure to do this well. And so most  
schools do such a bad job of teaching that the kids don't really  
take it seriously-- not even the smart kids. Much of the time we  
were all, students and teachers both, just going through the motions.In my high school French class we were supposed to read Hugo's Les  
Miserables. I don't think any of us knew French well enough to make  
our way through this enormous book. Like the rest of the class, I   
just skimmed the Cliff's Notes. When we were given a test on the  
book, I noticed that the questions sounded odd. They were full of   
long words that our teacher wouldn't have used. Where had these   
questions come from? From the Cliff's Notes, it turned out. The   
teacher was using them too. We were all just pretending.There are certainly great public school teachers. The energy and   
imagination of my fourth grade teacher, Mr. Mihalko, made that   
year something his students still talk about, thirty years later.  
But teachers like him were individuals swimming  
upstream. They couldn't fix the system.  
In almost any group of people you'll find hierarchy.  
When groups of adults form in the real world, it's generally for   
some common purpose, and the leaders end up being those who are best  
at it. The problem with most schools is, they have no purpose.   
But hierarchy there must be.  
And so the kids make one out of nothing.We have a phrase to describe what happens when rankings have to be  
created without any meaningful criteria. We say that the situation  
degenerates into a popularity contest. And that's exactly what  
happens in most American schools.  
Instead of depending on some real test, one's rank  
depends mostly on one's ability to increase one's rank. It's  
like the court of Louis XIV. There is no external opponent, so the  
kids become one another's opponents.When there is some real external test of skill, it isn't painful  
to be at the bottom of the hierarchy. A rookie on a football team  
doesn't resent the skill of the veteran; he hopes to be like him  
one day and is happy to have the chance to learn from him.  
The veteran may in turn feel a sense of  
noblesse oblige.  
And most importantly, their status depends on how well they  
do against opponents, not on whether they can push the other down.Court hierarchies are another thing entirely. This type of society  
debases anyone who enters it. There is neither admiration at the   
bottom, nor noblesse oblige at the top. It's kill or be killed.This is the sort of society that gets created  
in American  
secondary schools. And it happens because these schools have no  
real purpose beyond keeping the kids all in one place for a certain  
number of hours each day. What I didn't realize at the time, and  
in fact didn't realize till very recently, is that the twin horrors  
of school life, the cruelty and the boredom, both have the same   
cause.  
The mediocrity of American public schools has worse consequences  
than just making kids unhappy for six years. It breeds a rebelliousness  
that actively drives kids away from the things they're supposed to  
be learning.Like many nerds, probably, it was years after high school before I  
could bring myself to read anything we'd been assigned then.  
And I lost more than books. I mistrusted words like "character" and   
"integrity" because they had been so debased by adults. As they  
were used then, these words all seemed to mean the same thing:  
obedience. The kids who got praised for these qualities tended to   
be at best dull-witted prize bulls, and at worst facile schmoozers.  
If that was what character and integrity were, I wanted no part of  
them.The word I most misunderstood was "tact." As used by adults, it  
seemed to mean keeping your mouth shut.  
I assumed it was derived from the same root as  
"tacit" and "taciturn," and that it literally meant being quiet. I  
vowed that I would never be tactful; they were never going to shut  
me up. In fact, it's derived from the same root as "tactile," and  
what it means is to have a deft touch. Tactful is the opposite of  
clumsy. I don't think I learned this until college.Nerds aren't the only losers in the popularity rat race. Nerds are  
unpopular because they're distracted. There are other kids who  
deliberately opt out because they're so disgusted with the whole   
process.Teenage kids, even rebels, don't like to be alone, so when kids opt  
out of the system, they tend to do it as a group. At the schools I  
went to, the focus of rebellion was drug use, specifically marijuana.  
The kids in this tribe wore black concert t-shirts and were called  
"freaks."Freaks and nerds were allies, and there was a good deal of overlap  
between them. Freaks were on the whole smarter than other kids,  
though never studying (or at least never appearing to) was an   
important tribal value. I was more in the nerd camp, but I was  
friends with a lot of freaks.They used drugs, at least at first, for the social bonds they  
created. It was something to do together, and because the drugs   
were illegal, it was a shared badge of rebellion.I'm not claiming that bad schools are the whole reason kids get  
into trouble with drugs. After a while, drugs have their own momentum.  
No doubt some of the freaks ultimately used drugs to escape from   
other problems-- trouble at home, for example. But, in my school  
at least, the reason most kids started using drugs was rebellion.  
Fourteen-year-olds didn't start smoking pot because they'd heard  
it would help them forget their problems. They started because they  
wanted to join a different tribe.Misrule breeds rebellion; this is not a new idea. And yet the  
authorities still for the most part act as if drugs were themselves  
the cause of the problem.  
The real problem is the emptiness of school life. We won't see  
solutions till adults realize that. The adults who  
may realize it first are the ones who were themselves nerds in   
school. Do you want your kids to be as unhappy in eighth grade as  
you were? I wouldn't. Well, then, is there anything we can do to  
fix things? Almost certainly. There is nothing inevitable about the  
current system. It has come about mostly by default.Adults, though, are busy. Showing up for school plays is one thing.  
Taking on the educational bureaucracy is another. Perhaps a few  
will have the energy to try to change things. I suspect the hardest   
part is realizing that you can.Nerds still in school should not hold their breath. Maybe one day  
a heavily armed force of adults will show up in helicopters to   
rescue you, but they probably won't be coming this month. Any   
immediate improvement in nerds' lives is probably going to have to  
come from the nerds themselves.Merely understanding the situation they're in should make it less   
painful. Nerds aren't losers. They're just playing a different game,  
and a game much closer to the one played in the real world. Adults  
know this. It's hard to find successful adults now who don't claim  
to have been nerds in high school.It's important for nerds to realize, too, that school is not life.  
School is a strange, artificial thing, half sterile and half feral.  
It's all-encompassing, like life, but it isn't the real thing. It's  
only temporary, and if you look, you can see beyond it even while  
you're still in it.If life seems awful to kids, it's neither because hormones are   
turning you all into monsters (as your parents believe), nor because  
life actually is awful (as you believe). It's because the adults,  
who no longer have any economic use for you, have abandoned you to  
spend years cooped up together with nothing real to do. Any society  
of that type is awful to live in.  
You don't have  
to look any further to explain why teenage kids are unhappy.I've said some harsh things in this essay, but really the thesis  
is an optimistic one-- that several problems we take for granted  
are in fact not insoluble after all. Teenage kids are not inherently  
unhappy monsters. That should be encouraging news to kids and adults  
both.  
Thanks to Sarah Harlin, Trevor Blackwell, Robert Morris,  
Eric Raymond, and Jackie Weicker for reading drafts of this essay,  
and Maria Daniels for scanning photos.Re: Why Nerds are UnpopularGateway High School, 1981Japanese TranslationFrench TranslationMy War With BrianButtonsPortuguese TranslationSpanish Translation

# Better Bayesian Filtering

January 2003(This article was given as a talk at the 2003 Spam Conference.  
It describes the work I've done to improve the performance of  
the algorithm described in A Plan for Spam,  
and what I plan to do in the future.)The first discovery I'd like to present here is an algorithm for  
lazy evaluation of research papers. Just  
write whatever you want and don't cite any previous work, and  
indignant readers will send you references to all the papers you  
should have cited. I discovered this algorithm  
after ``A Plan for Spam'' [1] was on Slashdot.Spam filtering is a subset of text classification,  
which is a well established field, but the first papers about  
Bayesian  
spam filtering per se seem to have been two  
given at the same conference in 1998,  
one by Pantel and Lin [2],  
and another by a group from  
Microsoft Research [3].When I heard about this work I was a bit surprised. If  
people had been onto Bayesian filtering four years ago,  
why wasn't everyone using it?  
When I read the papers I found out why. Pantel and Lin's filter was the  
more effective of the two, but it  
only caught 92% of spam, with 1.16% false positives.When I tried writing a Bayesian spam filter,  
it caught 99.5% of spam with less than .03% false  
positives [4].  
It's always alarming when two people  
trying the same experiment get widely divergent results.  
It's especially alarming here because those two sets of numbers  
might yield opposite conclusions.  
Different users have different requirements, but I think for  
many people a filtering rate of 92% with 1.16% false positives means  
that filtering is not an acceptable solution, whereas  
99.5% with less than .03% false positives means that it is.So why did we get such different numbers?  
I haven't tried to reproduce Pantel and Lin's results, but  
from reading the paper I see five things that probably account  
for the difference.One is simply that they trained their filter on very little  
data: 160 spam and 466 nonspam mails.  
Filter performance should still be climbing with data  
sets that small. So their numbers may not even be an accurate  
measure of the performance of their algorithm, let alone of  
Bayesian spam filtering in general.But I think the most important difference is probably  
that they ignored message headers. To anyone who has worked  
on spam filters, this will seem a perverse decision.  
And yet in the very first filters I tried writing, I ignored the  
headers too. Why? Because I wanted to keep the problem neat.  
I didn't know much about mail headers then, and they seemed to me  
full of random stuff. There is a lesson here for filter  
writers: don't ignore data. You'd think this lesson would  
be too obvious to mention, but I've had to learn it several times.Third, Pantel and Lin stemmed the tokens, meaning they reduced e.g. both  
``mailing'' and ``mailed'' to the root ``mail''. They may  
have felt they were forced to do this by the small size  
of their corpus, but if so this is a kind of premature   
optimization.Fourth, they calculated probabilities differently.  
They used all the tokens, whereas I only  
use the 15 most significant. If you use all the tokens  
you'll tend to miss longer spams, the type where someone tells you their life  
story up to the point where they got rich from some multilevel  
marketing scheme. And such an algorithm  
would be easy for spammers to spoof: just add a big  
chunk of random text to counterbalance the spam terms.Finally, they didn't bias against false positives.  
I think  
any spam filtering algorithm ought to have a convenient  
knob you can twist to decrease the  
false positive rate at the expense of the filtering rate.  
I do this by counting the occurrences  
of tokens in the nonspam corpus double.   
I don't think it's a good idea to treat spam filtering as  
a straight text classification problem. You can use  
text classification techniques, but solutions can and should  
reflect the fact that the text is email, and spam  
in particular. Email is not just text; it has structure.  
Spam filtering is not just classification, because  
false positives are so much worse than false negatives  
that you should treat them as a different kind of error.  
And the source of error is not just random variation, but  
a live human spammer working actively to defeat your filter.TokensAnother project I heard about  
after the Slashdot article was Bill Yerazunis'   
CRM114 [5].  
This is the counterexample to the design principle I  
just mentioned. It's a straight text classifier,  
but such a stunningly effective one that it manages to filter  
spam almost perfectly without even knowing that's  
what it's doing.Once I understood how CRM114 worked, it seemed  
inevitable that I would eventually have to move from filtering based  
on single words to an approach like this. But first, I thought,  
I'll see how far I can get with single words. And the answer is,  
surprisingly far.Mostly I've been working on smarter tokenization. On  
current spam, I've been able to achieve filtering rates that  
approach CRM114's. These techniques are mostly orthogonal to Bill's;  
an optimal solution might incorporate both.``A Plan for Spam'' uses a very simple  
definition of a token. Letters, digits, dashes, apostrophes,  
and dollar signs are constituent characters, and everything  
else is a token separator. I also ignored case.Now I have a more complicated definition of a token:  
  
 Case is preserved. Exclamation points are constituent characters. Periods and commas are constituents if they occur  
 between two digits. This lets me get ip addresses  
 and prices intact. A price range like $20-25 yields two tokens,  
 $20 and $25. Tokens that occur within the  
 To, From, Subject, and Return-Path lines, or within urls,  
 get marked accordingly. E.g. ``foo'' in the Subject line  
 becomes ``Subject\*foo''. (The asterisk could  
 be any character you don't allow as a constituent.)  
  
Such measures increase the filter's vocabulary, which  
makes it more discriminating. For example, in the current  
filter, ``free'' in the Subject line  
has a spam probability of 98%, whereas the same token  
in the body has a spam probability of only 65%.Here are some of the current probabilities [6]:  
Subject\*FREE 0.9999  
free!! 0.9999  
To\*free 0.9998  
Subject\*free 0.9782  
free! 0.9199  
Free 0.9198  
Url\*free 0.9091  
FREE 0.8747  
From\*free 0.7636  
free 0.6546  
  
In the Plan for Spam filter, all these tokens would have had the  
same probability, .7602. That filter recognized about 23,000  
tokens. The current one recognizes about 187,000.The disadvantage of having a larger universe of tokens  
is that there is more  
chance of misses.  
Spreading your corpus out over more tokens  
has the same effect as making it smaller.  
If you consider exclamation points as  
constituents, for example, then you could end up  
not having a spam probability for free with seven exclamation  
points, even though you know that free with just two   
exclamation points has a probability of 99.99%.One solution to this is what I call degeneration. If you  
can't find an exact match for a token,  
treat it as if it were a less specific  
version. I consider terminal exclamation  
points, uppercase letters, and occurring in one of the  
five marked contexts as making a token more specific.  
For example, if I don't find a probability for  
``Subject\*free!'', I look for probabilities for  
``Subject\*free'', ``free!'', and ``free'', and take whichever one  
is farthest from .5.Here are the alternatives [7]  
considered if the filter sees ``FREE!!!'' in the  
Subject line and doesn't have a probability for it.  
Subject\*Free!!!  
Subject\*free!!!  
Subject\*FREE!  
Subject\*Free!  
Subject\*free!  
Subject\*FREE  
Subject\*Free  
Subject\*free  
FREE!!!  
Free!!!  
free!!!  
FREE!  
Free!  
free!  
FREE  
Free  
free   
  
If you do this, be sure to consider versions with initial  
caps as well as all uppercase and all lowercase. Spams  
tend to have more sentences in imperative mood, and in  
those the first word is a verb. So verbs with initial caps  
have higher spam probabilities than they would in all   
lowercase. In my filter, the spam probability of ``Act''  
is 98% and for ``act'' only 62%.If you increase your filter's vocabulary, you can end up  
counting the same word multiple times, according to your old  
definition of ``same''.  
Logically, they're not the  
same token anymore. But if this still bothers you, let  
me add from experience that the words you seem to be  
counting multiple times tend to be exactly the ones you'd  
want to.Another effect of a larger vocabulary is that when you  
look at an incoming mail you find more interesting tokens,  
meaning those with probabilities far from .5. I use the  
15 most interesting to decide if mail is spam.  
But you can run into a problem when you use a fixed number  
like this. If you find a lot of maximally interesting tokens,  
the result can end up being decided by whatever random factor  
determines the ordering of equally interesting tokens.  
One way to deal with this is to treat some  
as more interesting than others.For example, the  
token ``dalco'' occurs 3 times in my spam corpus and never  
in my legitimate corpus. The token ``Url\*optmails''  
(meaning ``optmails'' within a url) occurs 1223 times.  
And yet, as I used to calculate probabilities for tokens,  
both would have the same spam probability, the threshold of .99.That doesn't feel right. There are theoretical  
arguments for giving these two tokens substantially different  
probabilities (Pantel and Lin do), but I haven't tried that yet.  
It does seem at least that if we find more than 15 tokens  
that only occur in one corpus or the other, we ought to  
give priority to the ones that occur a lot. So now  
there are two threshold values. For tokens that occur only  
in the spam corpus, the probability is .9999 if they  
occur more than 10 times and .9998 otherwise. Ditto  
at the other end of the scale for tokens found  
only in the legitimate corpus.I may later scale token probabilities substantially,  
but this tiny amount of scaling at least ensures that   
tokens get sorted the right way.Another possibility would be to consider not  
just 15 tokens, but all the tokens over a certain  
threshold of interestingness. Steven Hauser does this  
in his statistical spam filter [8].  
If you use a threshold, make it very high, or  
spammers could spoof you by packing messages with  
more innocent words.Finally, what should one do  
about html? I've tried the whole spectrum of options, from  
ignoring it to parsing it all. Ignoring html is a bad idea,  
because it's full of useful spam signs. But if you parse   
it all, your filter might degenerate into a mere html   
recognizer. The most effective approach  
seems to be the middle course, to notice some tokens but not  
others. I look at a, img, and font tags, and ignore the  
rest. Links and images you should certainly look at, because  
they contain urls.I could probably be smarter about dealing with html, but I  
don't think it's worth putting a lot of time into this.  
Spams full of html are easy to filter. The smarter  
spammers already avoid it. So  
performance in the future should not depend much on how  
you deal with html.PerformanceBetween December 10 2002 and January 10 2003 I got about  
1750 spams.   
Of these, 4 got through. That's a filtering  
rate of about 99.75%.Two of the four spams I missed got through because they  
happened to use words that occur often in my legitimate  
email.The third was one of those that exploit  
an insecure cgi script to send mail to third parties.  
They're hard to filter based just  
on the content because the headers are innocent and   
they're careful about the words they use. Even so I can  
usually catch them. This one squeaked by with a  
probability of .88, just under the threshold of .9.Of course, looking at multiple token sequences  
would catch it easily. ``Below is the result of  
your feedback form'' is an instant giveaway.The fourth spam was what I call  
a spam-of-the-future, because this is what I expect spam to  
evolve into: some completely neutral  
text followed by a url. In this case it was was from  
someone saying they had finally finished their homepage  
and would I go look at it. (The page was of course an   
ad for a porn site.)If the spammers are careful about the headers and use a  
fresh url, there is nothing in spam-of-the-future for filters  
to notice. We can of course counter by sending a  
crawler to look at the page. But that might not be necessary.  
The response rate for spam-of-the-future must  
be low, or everyone would be doing it.  
If it's low enough,  
it won't pay for spammers to send it, and we won't   
have to work too hard on filtering it.Now for the really shocking news: during that same one-month  
period I got three false positives.In a way it's  
a relief to get some false positives. When I wrote ``A Plan  
for Spam'' I hadn't had any, and I didn't know what they'd  
be like. Now that I've had a few, I'm relieved to find  
they're not as bad as I feared.  
False positives yielded by statistical  
filters turn out to be mails that sound a lot like spam, and  
these tend to be the ones you would least mind missing [9].Two of the false positives were newsletters  
from companies I've bought things from. I never  
asked to receive them, so arguably they  
were spams, but I count them as false positives because  
I hadn't been deleting them as spams before. The reason  
the filters caught them was that both companies in   
January switched to commercial email senders  
instead of sending the mails from their own servers,   
and both the headers and the bodies became much spammier.The third false positive was a bad one, though. It was   
from someone in Egypt and written in all uppercase. This was  
a direct result of making tokens case sensitive; the Plan  
for Spam filter wouldn't have caught it.It's hard to say what the overall false positive rate is,  
because we're up in the noise, statistically.  
Anyone who has worked on filters (at least, effective filters) will  
be aware of this problem.  
With some emails it's  
hard to say whether they're spam or not, and these are  
the ones you end up looking at when you get filters   
really tight. For example, so far the filter has  
caught two emails that were sent to my address because  
of a typo, and one sent to me in the belief that I was   
someone else. Arguably, these are neither my spam  
nor my nonspam mail.Another false positive was from a vice president at Virtumundo.  
I wrote to them pretending to be a customer,  
and since the reply came back through Virtumundo's   
mail servers it had the most incriminating  
headers imaginable. Arguably this isn't a real false  
positive either, but a sort of Heisenberg uncertainty  
effect: I only got it because I was writing about spam   
filtering.Not counting these, I've had a total of five false positives  
so far, out of about 7740 legitimate emails, a rate of .06%.  
The other two were a notice that something I bought  
was back-ordered, and a party reminder from Evite.I don't think this number can be trusted, partly  
because the sample is so small, and partly because  
I think I can fix the filter not to catch  
some of these.False positives seem to me a different kind of error from  
false negatives.  
Filtering rate is a measure of performance. False  
positives I consider more like bugs. I approach improving the  
filtering rate as optimization, and decreasing false  
positives as debugging.So these five false positives are my bug list. For example,   
the mail from Egypt got nailed because the uppercase text  
made it look to the filter like a Nigerian spam.  
This really is kind of a bug. As with  
html, the email being all uppercase is really conceptually one  
feature, not one for each word. I need to handle case in a  
more sophisticated way.So what to make of this .06%? Not much, I think. You could  
treat it as an upper bound, bearing in mind the small sample size.  
But at this stage it is more a measure of the bugs  
in my implementation than some intrinsic false positive rate  
of Bayesian filtering.FutureWhat next? Filtering is an optimization problem,  
and the key to optimization is profiling. Don't  
try to guess where your code is slow, because you'll  
guess wrong. Look at where your code is slow,  
and fix that. In filtering, this translates to:   
look at the spams you miss, and figure out what you  
could have done to catch them.For example, spammers are now working aggressively to   
evade filters, and one of the things they're doing is  
breaking up and misspelling words to prevent filters from  
recognizing them. But working on this is not my first  
priority, because I still have no trouble catching these  
spams [10].There are two kinds of spams I currently do  
have trouble with.  
One is the type that pretends to be an email from   
a woman inviting you to go chat with her or see her profile on a dating  
site. These get through because they're the one type of  
sales pitch you can make without using sales talk. They use  
the same vocabulary as ordinary email.The other kind of spams I have trouble filtering are those  
from companies in e.g. Bulgaria offering contract programming   
services. These get through because I'm a programmer too, and  
the spams are full of the same words as my real mail.I'll probably focus on the personal ad type first. I think if  
I look closer I'll be able to find statistical differences  
between these and my real mail. The style of writing is  
certainly different, though it may take multiword filtering  
to catch that.  
Also, I notice they tend to repeat the url,  
and someone including a url in a legitimate mail wouldn't do that [11].The outsourcing type are going to be hard to catch. Even if   
you sent a crawler to the site, you wouldn't find a smoking  
statistical gun.  
Maybe the only answer is a central list of  
domains advertised in spams [12]. But there can't be that  
many of this type of mail. If the only  
spams left were unsolicited offers of contract programming  
services from Bulgaria, we could all probably move on to  
working on something else.Will statistical filtering actually get us to that point?  
I don't know. Right now, for me personally, spam is  
not a problem. But spammers haven't yet made a serious  
effort to spoof statistical filters. What will happen when they do?I'm not optimistic about filters that work at the  
network level [13].  
When there is a static obstacle worth getting past, spammers  
are pretty efficient at getting past it. There  
is already a company called Assurance Systems that will  
run your mail through Spamassassin and tell you whether   
it will get filtered out.Network-level filters won't be completely useless.  
They may be enough to kill all the "opt-in"  
spam, meaning spam from companies like Virtumundo and  
Equalamail who claim that they're really running opt-in lists.  
You can filter those based just on the headers, no  
matter what they say in the body. But anyone willing to  
falsify headers or use open relays, presumably including  
most porn spammers, should be able to get some message past  
network-level filters if they want to. (By no means the  
message they'd like to send though, which is something.)The kind of filters I'm optimistic about are ones that  
calculate probabilities based on each individual user's mail.  
These can be much more effective, not only in  
avoiding false positives, but in filtering too: for example,  
finding the recipient's email address base-64 encoded anywhere in  
a message is a very good spam indicator.But the real advantage of individual filters is that they'll all be  
different. If everyone's filters have different probabilities,  
it will make the spammers' optimization loop, what programmers  
would call their edit-compile-test cycle, appallingly slow.   
Instead of just tweaking a spam till it gets through a copy of  
some filter they have on their desktop, they'll have to do a  
test mailing for each tweak. It would be like programming in  
a language without an interactive toplevel,   
and I wouldn't wish that  
on anyone.Notes[1]  
Paul Graham. ``A Plan for Spam.'' August 2002.  
http://paulgraham.com/spam.html.Probabilities in this algorithm are  
calculated using a degenerate case of Bayes' Rule. There are  
two simplifying assumptions: that the probabilities  
of features (i.e. words) are independent, and that we know  
nothing about the prior probability of an email being  
spam.The first assumption is widespread in text classification.  
Algorithms that use it are called ``naive Bayesian.''The second assumption I made because the proportion of spam in  
my incoming mail fluctuated so much from day to day (indeed,  
from hour to hour) that the overall prior ratio seemed  
worthless as a predictor. If you assume that P(spam) and  
P(nonspam) are both .5, they cancel out and you can  
remove them from the formula.If you were doing Bayesian filtering in a situation where   
the ratio of spam to nonspam was consistently very high or  
(especially) very low, you could probably improve filter  
performance by incorporating prior probabilities. To do  
this right you'd have to track ratios by time of day, because  
spam and legitimate mail volume both have distinct daily  
patterns.[2]  
Patrick Pantel and Dekang Lin. ``SpamCop-- A Spam  
Classification & Organization Program.'' Proceedings of AAAI-98  
Workshop on Learning for Text Categorization.[3]  
Mehran Sahami, Susan Dumais, David Heckerman and Eric Horvitz.  
``A Bayesian Approach to Filtering Junk E-Mail.'' Proceedings of AAAI-98  
Workshop on Learning for Text Categorization.[4] At the time I had zero false positives out of about 4,000   
legitimate emails. If the next legitimate email was  
a false positive, this would give us .03%. These false positive  
rates are untrustworthy, as I explain later. I quote  
a number here only to emphasize that whatever the false positive rate  
is, it is less than 1.16%.  
[5] Bill Yerazunis. ``Sparse Binary Polynomial Hash Message  
Filtering and The CRM114 Discriminator.'' Proceedings of 2003  
Spam Conference.[6] In ``A Plan for Spam'' I used thresholds of .99 and .01.  
It seems justifiable to use thresholds proportionate to the  
size of the corpora. Since I now have on the order of 10,000 of each  
type of mail, I use .9999 and .0001.[7] There is a flaw here I should probably fix. Currently,  
when ``Subject\*foo'' degenerates to just ``foo'', what that means is  
you're getting the stats for occurrences of ``foo'' in  
the body or header lines other than those I mark.  
What I should do is keep track of statistics for ``foo''  
overall as well as specific versions, and degenerate from  
``Subject\*foo'' not to ``foo'' but to ``Anywhere\*foo''. Ditto for  
case: I should degenerate from uppercase to any-case, not  
lowercase.It would probably be a win to do this with prices  
too, e.g. to degenerate from ``$129.99'' to ``$--9.99'', ``$--.99'',  
and ``$--''.You could also degenerate from words to their stems,  
but this would probably only improve filtering rates early on   
when you had small corpora.[8] Steven Hauser. ``Statistical Spam Filter Works for Me.''  
http://www.sofbot.com.[9] False positives are not all equal, and we should remember  
this when comparing techniques for stopping spam.  
Whereas many of the false positives caused by filters  
will be near-spams that you wouldn't mind missing,  
false positives caused by blacklists, for example, will be just  
mail from people who chose the wrong ISP. In both  
cases you catch mail that's near spam, but for blacklists nearness  
is physical, and for filters it's textual.  
[10] If spammers get good enough at obscuring tokens   
for this to be a problem, we can respond by simply removing  
whitespace, periods, commas, etc. and using a dictionary to  
pick the words out of the resulting sequence.  
And of course finding words this way that weren't visible in  
the original text would in itself be evidence of spam.Picking out the words won't be trivial. It will require   
more than just reconstructing word boundaries; spammers  
both add (``xHot nPorn cSite'') and omit (``P#rn'') letters.  
Vision research may be useful here, since human vision is  
the limit that such tricks will approach.[11]   
In general, spams are more repetitive than regular email.   
They want to pound that message home. I currently don't  
allow duplicates in the top 15 tokens, because  
you could get a false positive if the sender happens to use  
some bad word multiple times. (In my current filter, ``dick'' has  
a spam probabilty of .9999, but it's also a name.)  
It seems we should at least notice duplication though,  
so I may try allowing up to two of each token, as Brian Burton does in  
SpamProbe.[12] This is what approaches like Brightmail's will  
degenerate into once spammers are pushed into using mad-lib  
techniques to generate everything else in the message.[13]  
It's sometimes argued that we should be working on filtering  
at the network level, because it is more efficient. What people  
usually mean when they say this is: we currently filter at the  
network level, and we don't want to start over from scratch.  
But you can't dictate the problem to fit your solution.Historically, scarce-resource arguments have been the losing  
side in debates about software design.  
People only tend to use them to justify choices  
(inaction in particular) made for other reasons.Thanks to Sarah Harlin, Trevor Blackwell, and  
Dan Giffin for reading drafts of this paper, and to Dan again  
for most of the infrastructure that this filter runs on.Related:A Plan for SpamPlan for Spam FAQ2003 Spam Conference ProceedingsJapanese TranslationChinese TranslationTest of These Suggestions

# Design and Research

January 2003(This article is derived from a keynote talk at the fall 2002 meeting  
of NEPLS.)Visitors to this country are often surprised to find that  
Americans like to begin a conversation by asking "what do you do?"  
I've never liked this question. I've rarely had a  
neat answer to it. But I think I have finally solved the problem.  
Now, when someone asks me what I do, I look them straight  
in the eye and say "I'm designing a   
new dialect of Lisp."   
I recommend this answer to anyone who doesn't like being asked what  
they do. The conversation will turn immediately to other topics.I don't consider myself to be doing research on programming languages.  
I'm just designing one, in the same way that someone might design  
a building or a chair or a new typeface.  
I'm not trying to discover anything new. I just want  
to make a language that will be good to program in. In some ways,  
this assumption makes life a lot easier.The difference between design and research seems to be a question  
of new versus good. Design doesn't have to be new, but it has to   
be good. Research doesn't have to be good, but it has to be new.  
I think these two paths converge at the top: the best design  
surpasses its predecessors by using new ideas, and the best research  
solves problems that are not only new, but actually worth solving.  
So ultimately we're aiming for the same destination, just approaching  
it from different directions.What I'm going to talk about today is what your target looks like  
from the back. What do you do differently when you treat  
programming languages as a design problem instead of a research topic?The biggest difference is that you focus more on the user.  
Design begins by asking, who is this  
for and what do they need from it? A good architect,  
for example, does not begin by creating a design that he then  
imposes on the users, but by studying the intended users and figuring  
out what they need.Notice I said "what they need," not "what they want." I don't mean  
to give the impression that working as a designer means working as   
a sort of short-order cook, making whatever the client tells you  
to. This varies from field to field in the arts, but  
I don't think there is any field in which the best work is done by  
the people who just make exactly what the customers tell them to.The customer is always right in  
the sense that the measure of good design is how well it works  
for the user. If you make a novel that bores everyone, or a chair  
that's horribly uncomfortable to sit in, then you've done a bad  
job, period. It's no defense to say that the novel or the chair   
is designed according to the most advanced theoretical principles.And yet, making what works for the user doesn't mean simply making  
what the user tells you to. Users don't know what all the choices  
are, and are often mistaken about what they really want.The answer to the paradox, I think, is that you have to design  
for the user, but you have to design what the user needs, not simply   
what he says he wants.  
It's much like being a doctor. You can't just treat a patient's  
symptoms. When a patient tells you his symptoms, you have to figure  
out what's actually wrong with him, and treat that.This focus on the user is a kind of axiom from which most of the  
practice of good design can be derived, and around which most design  
issues center.If good design must do what the user needs, who is the user? When  
I say that design must be for users, I don't mean to imply that good   
design aims at some kind of   
lowest common denominator. You can pick any group of users you  
want. If you're designing a tool, for example, you can design it  
for anyone from beginners to experts, and what's good design  
for one group might be bad for another. The point  
is, you have to pick some group of users. I don't think you can  
even talk about good or bad design except with  
reference to some intended user.You're most likely to get good design if the intended users include  
the designer himself. When you design something  
for a group that doesn't include you, it tends to be for people  
you consider to be less sophisticated than you, not more sophisticated.That's a problem, because looking down on the user, however benevolently,  
seems inevitably to corrupt the designer.  
I suspect that very few housing  
projects in the US were designed by architects who expected to live  
in them. You can see the same thing  
in programming languages. C, Lisp, and Smalltalk were created for  
their own designers to use. Cobol, Ada, and Java, were created   
for other people to use.If you think you're designing something for idiots, the odds are  
that you're not designing something good, even for idiots.  
Even if you're designing something for the most sophisticated  
users, though, you're still designing for humans. It's different   
in research. In math you  
don't choose abstractions because they're  
easy for humans to understand; you choose whichever make the  
proof shorter. I think this is true for the sciences generally.  
Scientific ideas are not meant to be ergonomic.Over in the arts, things are very different. Design is  
all about people. The human body is a strange  
thing, but when you're designing a chair,  
that's what you're designing for, and there's no way around it.  
All the arts have to pander to the interests and limitations  
of humans. In painting, for example, all other things being  
equal a painting with people in it will be more interesting than  
one without. It is not merely an accident of history that  
the great paintings of the Renaissance are all full of people.  
If they hadn't been, painting as a medium wouldn't have the prestige  
that it does.Like it or not, programming languages are also for people,  
and I suspect the human brain is just as lumpy and idiosyncratic  
as the human body. Some ideas are easy for people to grasp  
and some aren't. For example, we seem to have a very limited  
capacity for dealing with detail. It's this fact that makes  
programing languages a good idea in the first place; if we  
could handle the detail, we could just program in machine  
language.Remember, too, that languages are not  
primarily a form for finished programs, but something that  
programs have to be developed in. Anyone in the arts could  
tell you that you might want different mediums for the  
two situations. Marble, for example, is a nice, durable  
medium for finished ideas, but a hopelessly inflexible one  
for developing new ideas.A program, like a proof,  
is a pruned version of a tree that in the past has had  
false starts branching off all over it. So the test of  
a language is not simply how clean the finished program looks  
in it, but how clean the path to the finished program was.  
A design choice that gives you elegant finished programs  
may not give you an elegant design process. For example,   
I've written a few macro-defining macros full of nested  
backquotes that look now like little gems, but writing them  
took hours of the ugliest trial and error, and frankly, I'm still  
not entirely sure they're correct.We often act as if the test of a language were how good  
finished programs look in it.  
It seems so convincing when you see the same program  
written in two languages, and one version is much shorter.  
When you approach the problem from the direction of the  
arts, you're less likely to depend on this sort of  
test. You don't want to end up with a programming  
language like marble.For example, it is a huge win in developing software to  
have an interactive toplevel, what in Lisp is called a  
read-eval-print loop. And when you have one this has  
real effects on the design of the language. It would not  
work well for a language where you have to declare  
variables before using them, for example. When you're  
just typing expressions into the toplevel, you want to be   
able to set x to some value and then start doing things  
to x. You don't want to have to declare the type of x  
first. You may dispute either of the premises, but if  
a language has to have a toplevel to be convenient, and  
mandatory type declarations are incompatible with a  
toplevel, then no language that makes type declarations   
mandatory could be convenient to program in.In practice, to get good design you have to get close, and stay  
close, to your users. You have to calibrate your ideas on actual  
users constantly, especially in the beginning. One of the reasons  
Jane Austen's novels are so good is that she read them out loud to  
her family. That's why she never sinks into self-indulgently arty  
descriptions of landscapes,  
or pretentious philosophizing. (The philosophy's there, but it's  
woven into the story instead of being pasted onto it like a label.)  
If you open an average "literary" novel and imagine reading it out loud  
to your friends as something you'd written, you'll feel all too  
keenly what an imposition that kind of thing is upon the reader.In the software world, this idea is known as Worse is Better.  
Actually, there are several ideas mixed together in the concept of  
Worse is Better, which is why people are still arguing about  
whether worse  
is actually better or not. But one of the main ideas in that  
mix is that if you're building something new, you should get a  
prototype in front of users as soon as possible.The alternative approach might be called the Hail Mary strategy.  
Instead of getting a prototype out quickly and gradually refining  
it, you try to create the complete, finished, product in one long  
touchdown pass. As far as I know, this is a  
recipe for disaster. Countless startups destroyed themselves this  
way during the Internet bubble. I've never heard of a case  
where it worked.What people outside the software world may not realize is that  
Worse is Better is found throughout the arts.  
In drawing, for example, the idea was discovered during the  
Renaissance. Now almost every drawing teacher will tell you that  
the right way to get an accurate drawing is not to  
work your way slowly around the contour of an object, because errors will  
accumulate and you'll find at the end that the lines don't meet.  
Instead you should draw a few quick lines in roughly the right place,  
and then gradually refine this initial sketch.In most fields, prototypes  
have traditionally been made out of different materials.  
Typefaces to be cut in metal were initially designed   
with a brush on paper. Statues to be cast in bronze   
were modelled in wax. Patterns to be embroidered on tapestries  
were drawn on paper with ink wash. Buildings to be  
constructed from stone were tested on a smaller scale in wood.What made oil paint so exciting, when it  
first became popular in the fifteenth century, was that you  
could actually make the finished work from the prototype.  
You could make a preliminary drawing if you wanted to, but you  
weren't held to it; you could work out all the details, and  
even make major changes, as you finished the painting.You can do this in software too. A prototype doesn't have to  
be just a model; you can refine it into the finished product.  
I think you should always do this when you can. It lets you  
take advantage of new insights you have along the way. But  
perhaps even more important, it's good for morale.Morale is key in design. I'm surprised people  
don't talk more about it. One of my first  
drawing teachers told me: if you're bored when you're  
drawing something, the drawing will look boring.  
For example, suppose you have to draw a building, and you  
decide to draw each brick individually. You can do this  
if you want, but if you get bored halfway through and start  
making the bricks mechanically instead of observing each one,   
the drawing will look worse than if you had merely suggested  
the bricks.Building something by gradually refining a prototype is good  
for morale because it keeps you engaged. In software, my   
rule is: always have working code. If you're writing  
something that you'll be able to test in an hour, then you  
have the prospect of an immediate reward to motivate you.  
The same is true in the arts, and particularly in oil painting.  
Most painters start with a blurry sketch and gradually  
refine it.  
If you work this way, then in principle  
you never have to end the day with something that actually  
looks unfinished. Indeed, there is even a saying among  
painters: "A painting is never finished, you just stop  
working on it." This idea will be familiar to anyone who  
has worked on software.Morale is another reason that it's hard to design something  
for an unsophisticated user. It's hard to stay interested in  
something you don't like yourself. To make something   
good, you have to be thinking, "wow, this is really great,"  
not "what a piece of shit; those fools will love it."Design means making things for humans. But it's not just the  
user who's human. The designer is human too.Notice all this time I've been talking about "the designer."  
Design usually has to be under the control of a single person to  
be any good. And yet it seems to be possible for several people  
to collaborate on a research project. This seems to  
me one of the most interesting differences between research and  
design.There have been famous instances of collaboration in the arts,  
but most of them seem to have been cases of molecular bonding rather  
than nuclear fusion. In an opera it's common for one person to  
write the libretto and another to write the music. And during the Renaissance,   
journeymen from northern  
Europe were often employed to do the landscapes in the  
backgrounds of Italian paintings. But these aren't true collaborations.  
They're more like examples of Robert Frost's  
"good fences make good neighbors." You can stick instances  
of good design together, but within each individual project,  
one person has to be in control.I'm not saying that good design requires that one person think  
of everything. There's nothing more valuable than the advice  
of someone whose judgement you trust. But after the talking is  
done, the decision about what to do has to rest with one person.Why is it that research can be done by collaborators and   
design can't? This is an interesting question. I don't   
know the answer. Perhaps,  
if design and research converge, the best research is also  
good design, and in fact can't be done by collaborators.  
A lot of the most famous scientists seem to have worked alone.  
But I don't know enough to say whether there  
is a pattern here. It could be simply that many famous scientists  
worked when collaboration was less common.Whatever the story is in the sciences, true collaboration  
seems to be vanishingly rare in the arts. Design by committee is a  
synonym for bad design. Why is that so? Is there some way to  
beat this limitation?I'm inclined to think there isn't-- that good design requires  
a dictator. One reason is that good design has to   
be all of a piece. Design is not just for humans, but  
for individual humans. If a design represents an idea that   
fits in one person's head, then the idea will fit in the user's  
head too.Related:Japanese TranslationTaste for MakersRomanian TranslationSpanish Translation

# A Plan for Spam

Like to build things? Try Hacker  
News.  
  
  
  
  
August 2002(This article describes the spam-filtering techniques  
used in the spamproof web-based mail reader we  
built to exercise Arc. An  
improved algorithm is described in Better  
Bayesian Filtering.)I think it's possible to stop spam, and that   
content-based filters are the way to do it.  
The Achilles heel of the spammers is their message.  
They can circumvent any other barrier you set up. They have so far, at  
least. But they have to deliver their message, whatever it  
is. If we can write software that recognizes their messages,  
there is no way they can get around that.\_ \_ \_To the recipient, spam is easily recognizable. If you hired   
someone to read your mail and discard the spam, they would  
have little trouble doing it. How much do we have  
to do, short of AI, to automate this process?I think we will be able to solve the problem with fairly  
simple algorithms. In fact, I've found that you can filter  
present-day spam acceptably well using nothing more than a  
Bayesian combination of the spam probabilities of individual  
words. Using a slightly tweaked (as described below) Bayesian  
filter, we now miss less than 5 per 1000 spams, with 0 false positives.The statistical approach is not usually the first one people  
try when they write spam filters. Most hackers' first instinct is  
to try to write software that recognizes individual properties of  
spam. You look at spams  
and you think, the gall of these guys to try sending me mail   
that begins "Dear Friend" or has a subject line that's all  
uppercase and ends in eight exclamation points. I can filter  
out that stuff with about one line of code.And so you do,  
and in the beginning it works. A few simple rules will take  
a big bite out of your incoming spam. Merely looking  
for the word "click" will catch 79.7% of the  
emails in my spam corpus, with only 1.2% false positives.I spent about six months writing software that looked for  
individual spam features before I tried the statistical  
approach. What I found was that recognizing that last few  
percent of spams got very hard, and that as I  
made the filters stricter I got more false positives.False positives are innocent emails that get mistakenly  
identified as spams.  
For most users,  
missing legitimate email is  
an order of magnitude worse than receiving spam, so a  
filter that yields false positives is like an acne cure  
that carries a risk of death to the patient.The more spam a user gets, the less  
likely he'll be to notice one innocent mail sitting in his  
spam folder. And strangely enough, the better your spam filters get,  
the more dangerous false positives become, because when the  
filters are really good, users will be more likely to  
ignore everything they catch.I don't know why I avoided trying the statistical approach  
for so long. I think it was because I got addicted to  
trying to identify spam features myself, as if I were playing  
some kind of competitive game with the spammers. (Nonhackers  
don't often realize this, but most hackers are very competitive.)  
When I did try statistical analysis, I  
found immediately that it was much cleverer than I had been.  
It discovered, of course, that terms like "virtumundo" and  
"teens" were good indicators of spam. But it also  
discovered that "per" and "FL" and "ff0000" are good   
indicators of spam. In fact, "ff0000" (html for bright red)  
turns out to be as good an indicator of spam as any   
pornographic term.\_ \_ \_Here's a sketch of how I do statistical filtering. I start  
with one corpus of spam and one of nonspam mail. At the  
moment each one has about 4000 messages in it. I scan  
the entire text, including headers and embedded html  
and javascript, of each message in each corpus.  
I currently consider alphanumeric characters,  
dashes, apostrophes, and dollar signs to be part of tokens,  
and everything else to be a token separator. (There is  
probably room for improvement here.) I ignore tokens that  
are all digits, and I also ignore html comments, not even  
considering them as token separators.I count the number  
of times each token (ignoring case, currently) occurs in  
each corpus. At this stage I end up with two large hash   
tables, one for each corpus, mapping tokens to number  
of occurrences.Next I create a third hash table, this time mapping  
each token to the probability that an email containing it is a spam,  
which I calculate as follows [1]:  
  
(let ((g (\* 2 (or (gethash word good) 0)))  
 (b (or (gethash word bad) 0)))  
 (unless (< (+ g b) 5)  
 (max .01  
 (min .99 (float (/ (min 1 (/ b nbad))  
 (+ (min 1 (/ g ngood))   
 (min 1 (/ b nbad)))))))))  
  
where word is the token whose probability we're  
calculating, good and bad are the hash tables  
I created in the first step, and ngood and nbad  
are the number of nonspam and spam messages respectively.I explained this as code to show a couple of important details.  
I want to bias the probabilities slightly to avoid false  
positives, and by trial and error I've found that a good  
way to do it is to double all the numbers in good.  
This helps to distinguish between words that occasionally  
do occur in legitimate email and words that almost never do.   
I only consider words that occur more than five times in  
total (actually, because of the doubling, occurring three   
times in nonspam mail would be enough). And then there is  
the question of what probability to assign to words that  
occur in one corpus but not the other. Again by trial and   
error I chose .01 and .99. There may be room for tuning  
here, but as the corpus grows such tuning will happen  
automatically anyway.The especially observant will notice that while I consider  
each corpus to be a single long stream of text for purposes  
of counting occurrences, I use the number of emails in  
each, rather than their combined length, as the divisor   
in calculating spam probabilities. This adds another  
slight bias to protect against false positives.When new mail arrives, it is scanned into tokens, and  
the most interesting fifteen tokens, where interesting is   
measured by how far their spam probability is from a  
neutral .5, are used to calculate the probability that  
the mail is spam. If probs  
is a list of the fifteen individual probabilities, you  
calculate the   
combined probability thus:  
  
(let ((prod (apply #'\* probs)))  
 (/ prod (+ prod (apply #'\* (mapcar #'(lambda (x)   
 (- 1 x))  
 probs)))))  
  
One question that arises in  
practice is what probability to assign to a word you've  
never seen, i.e. one that doesn't occur in the hash table  
of word probabilities. I've found, again by trial and  
error, that .4 is a good number to use. If you've never  
seen a word before, it is probably fairly innocent; spam  
words tend to be all too familiar.There are examples of this algorithm being applied to  
actual emails in an appendix at the end.I treat mail as spam if the algorithm above gives it a  
probability of more than .9 of being spam. But in practice  
it would not matter much where I put this threshold, because  
few probabilities end up in the middle of the range.\_ \_ \_One great advantage of the statistical approach is that you  
don't have to read so many spams. Over the past six months,  
I've read literally thousands of spams, and it is really  
kind of demoralizing. Norbert Wiener said if you compete  
with slaves you become a slave, and there is something  
similarly degrading about competing with spammers. To  
recognize individual spam features you have to try to get  
into the mind of the spammer, and frankly I want to spend  
as little time inside the minds of spammers as possible.But the real advantage of the Bayesian approach, of course,  
is that you know what  
you're measuring. Feature-recognizing filters like  
SpamAssassin assign a spam "score" to email. The Bayesian  
approach assigns an actual probability. The problem with  
a "score" is that no one knows what it means. The user  
doesn't know what it means, but worse still, neither does  
the developer of the filter. How many points should an  
email get for having the word "sex" in it? A probability  
can of course be mistaken, but there is little ambiguity  
about what it means, or how evidence should be combined  
to calculate it. Based on my corpus, "sex" indicates  
a .97 probability of the containing email being a spam,  
whereas "sexy" indicates .99 probability.  
And Bayes' Rule, equally unambiguous, says that an email  
containing both words would, in the (unlikely)  
absence of any other evidence, have a 99.97% chance of  
being a spam.Because it is measuring probabilities, the Bayesian approach  
considers all the evidence in the email, both good and bad.  
Words that occur disproportionately rarely  
in spam (like "though" or "tonight" or "apparently")  
contribute as much to decreasing the probability as  
bad words like "unsubscribe" and "opt-in" do to  
increasing it. So an otherwise innocent email that happens  
to include the word "sex" is not going to get tagged as spam.Ideally, of course, the probabilities should be calculated  
individually for each user. I get a lot of email containing  
the word "Lisp", and (so far) no spam that does. So a word  
like that is effectively a kind of password for sending  
mail to me. In my earlier spam-filtering software, the user  
could set up a list of such words and mail containing  
them would automatically get past the filters. On my  
list I put words like "Lisp" and also my zipcode, so  
that (otherwise rather spammy-sounding) receipts from  
online orders would get through. I thought I was being  
very clever, but I found that the Bayesian filter did the  
same thing for me, and moreover discovered of a lot of words I  
hadn't thought of.When I said at the start that our filters let through less than  
5 spams per 1000 with 0 false positives, I'm talking about  
filtering my mail based on a corpus of my mail. But these  
numbers are not misleading, because that is the approach I'm  
advocating: filter each user's mail based on the spam and  
nonspam mail he receives. Essentially, each user should  
have two delete buttons, ordinary delete and delete-as-spam.  
Anything deleted as spam goes into the spam corpus,   
and everything else goes into the nonspam corpus.You could start  
users with a seed filter, but ultimately each user should have  
his own per-word probabilities based on the actual mail he  
receives. This (a) makes the filters more effective, (b) lets  
each user decide their own precise definition of spam,  
and (c) perhaps best of all makes it hard for spammers  
to tune mails to get through the filters. If a lot of the   
brain of the filter is in the individual databases, then   
merely tuning spams to get through the seed filters  
won't guarantee anything about how well they'll get through  
individual users' varying and much more trained filters.Content-based spam filtering is often combined with a whitelist,  
a list of senders whose mail can be accepted with no filtering.  
One easy way to build such a  
whitelist is to keep a list of every address the user has  
ever sent mail to. If a mail reader has a delete-as-spam  
button then you could also add the from address  
of every email the user has deleted as ordinary trash.I'm an advocate of whitelists, but more as a way to save   
computation than as a way to improve filtering. I used to think that  
whitelists would make filtering easier, because you'd  
only have to filter email from people you'd never heard  
from, and someone sending you mail for the first time is  
constrained by convention in what they can say to you.  
Someone you already know might send you an email talking about sex,  
but someone sending you mail for the first time would not   
be likely to. The problem is, people can have more than one   
email address, so a new from-address doesn't guarantee that  
the sender is writing to you for the first time.  
It is not unusual  
for an old friend (especially if he is a hacker) to suddenly  
send you an email with a new from-address, so you can't  
risk false positives by filtering mail from unknown   
addresses especially stringently.In a sense, though, my filters do themselves embody a kind  
of whitelist (and blacklist) because they are based on  
entire messages, including the headers. So to that  
extent they "know" the email addresses of trusted senders  
and even the routes by which mail gets from them to me.   
And they know the same about spam, including the server   
names, mailer versions, and protocols.\_ \_ \_If I thought that I could keep up current rates of spam  
filtering, I would consider this problem solved. But it  
doesn't mean much to be able to filter out most present-day  
spam, because spam evolves.  
Indeed, most   
antispam techniques so far have been like pesticides that  
do nothing more than create a new, resistant strain of bugs.I'm more hopeful about Bayesian filters, because they evolve  
with the spam. So as spammers start using "c0ck"   
instead of "cock" to evade simple-minded spam filters   
based on individual words, Bayesian filters automatically  
notice. Indeed, "c0ck" is far more damning evidence than  
"cock", and Bayesian filters know precisely how much more.Still, anyone who proposes a plan for spam filtering has to  
be able to answer the question: if the spammers knew  
exactly what you were doing,  
how well could they get past you? For example, I think that if  
checksum-based spam filtering becomes a serious obstacle,  
the spammers will just  
switch to mad-lib techniques for generating message bodies.To beat Bayesian filters, it would not be enough for spammers  
to make their emails unique or to stop using individual  
naughty words. They'd have to make their mails indistinguishable  
from your ordinary mail. And this I think would severely  
constrain them. Spam is mostly sales  
pitches, so unless your regular mail is all sales pitches,  
spams will inevitably have a different character. And   
the spammers would also, of course, have to change (and keep   
changing) their whole infrastructure, because otherwise  
the headers would look as bad to the Bayesian filters as ever,  
no matter what they did to the message body. I don't know  
enough about the infrastructure that spammers use to know  
how hard it would be to make the headers look innocent, but  
my guess is that it would be even harder than making the   
message look innocent.Assuming they could solve the problem of the headers,  
the spam of the future will probably look something like  
this:  
  
Hey there. Thought you should check out the following:  
http://www.27meg.com/foo  
  
because that is about as much sales pitch as content-based  
filtering will leave the spammer room to make. (Indeed, it  
will be hard even to get this past filters, because if everything  
else in the email is neutral, the spam probability will hinge on  
the url, and it will take some effort to make that look neutral.)Spammers range from businesses running so-called  
opt-in lists who don't even try to conceal their identities,  
to guys who hijack mail servers to send out spams promoting  
porn sites. If we use filtering to whittle their  
options down to mails like the one above, that should  
pretty much put the spammers on the "legitimate" end of  
the spectrum out of business; they feel obliged  
by various state laws to include boilerplate about why  
their spam is not spam, and how to cancel your  
"subscription," and that kind of text is easy to   
recognize.(I used to think it was naive to believe that stricter laws  
would decrease spam. Now I think that while stricter laws   
may not decrease the amount of spam that spammers send,  
they can certainly help filters to decrease the amount of   
spam that recipients actually see.)All along the spectrum, if you restrict the sales pitches spammers  
can make, you will inevitably tend to put them out of  
business. That word business is an important one to  
remember. The spammers are businessmen. They send spam because  
it works. It works because although the response rate  
is abominably low (at best 15 per million, vs 3000 per  
million for a catalog mailing), the cost, to them, is   
practically nothing. The cost is enormous for the recipients,   
about 5 man-weeks for each million recipients who spend   
a second to delete the spam, but the spammer  
doesn't have to pay that.Sending spam does cost the spammer something, though. [2]  
So the lower we can get the  
response rate-- whether by filtering, or by using filters to force  
spammers to dilute their pitches-- the fewer businesses will find it  
worth their while to send spam.The reason the spammers use the kinds of   
sales  
pitches that they do is to increase response rates.  
This is possibly even more disgusting  
than getting inside the mind of a spammer,  
but let's take a quick look inside the mind of someone  
who responds to a spam. This person is either  
astonishingly credulous or deeply in denial about their   
sexual interests. In either case, repulsive or  
idiotic as the spam seems to us, it is exciting  
to them. The spammers wouldn't say these things if they  
didn't sound exciting. And "thought you  
should check out the following" is just not going to  
have nearly the pull with the spam recipient as  
the kinds of things that spammers say now.  
Result: if it can't contain exciting sales pitches,  
spam becomes less effective as a marketing vehicle,  
and fewer businesses want to use it.That is the big win in the end. I started writing spam  
filtering software because I didn't want have to look at  
the stuff anymore.  
But if we get good enough at filtering  
out spam, it will stop working, and the spammers  
will actually stop sending it.\_ \_ \_Of all the approaches to fighting spam, from software to laws,  
I believe Bayesian filtering will be the single most  
effective. But I also  
think that the more different kinds of antispam efforts  
we undertake, the better, because any measure that  
constrains spammers will tend to make filtering easier.  
And even within the world of content-based filtering, I think  
it will be a good thing if there are many different kinds  
of software being used simultaneously. The more different   
filters there are, the harder it will be for  
spammers to tune spams to get through them.  
Appendix: Examples of FilteringHere is an example of a spam that arrived while I was writing  
this article. The fifteen most interesting words in this spam are:  
  
qvp0045  
indira  
mx-05  
intimail  
$7500  
freeyankeedom  
cdo  
bluefoxmedia  
jpg  
unsecured  
platinum  
3d0  
qves  
7c5  
7c266675  
  
The words are a mix of stuff from the headers and from the  
message body, which is typical of spam. Also typical of spam  
is that every one of these words has a spam probability,  
in my database, of .99. In fact there are more than fifteen words  
with probabilities of .99, and these are just the first  
fifteen seen.Unfortunately that makes this email a boring example of  
the use of Bayes' Rule. To see an interesting variety of  
probabilities we have to look at this actually quite  
atypical spam.The fifteen most interesting words in this spam, with their probabilities,  
are:  
  
madam 0.99  
promotion 0.99  
republic 0.99  
shortest 0.047225013  
mandatory 0.047225013  
standardization 0.07347802  
sorry 0.08221981  
supported 0.09019077  
people's 0.09019077  
enter 0.9075001  
quality 0.8921298  
organization 0.12454646  
investment 0.8568143  
very 0.14758544  
valuable 0.82347786   
  
This time the evidence is a mix of good and bad. A word like   
"shortest" is almost as much evidence for innocence as a  
word like "madam" or "promotion" is for guilt. But still the  
case for guilt is stronger. If you combine these numbers  
according to Bayes' Rule, the resulting probability is .9027."Madam" is obviously from spams beginning  
"Dear Sir or Madam." They're not very common, but the  
word "madam" never occurs in my legitimate email, and  
it's all about the ratio."Republic" scores high because  
it often shows up in Nigerian scam emails, and also occurs once  
or twice in spams referring to Korea and South Africa.  
You might say that it's  
an accident that it thus helps identify this spam. But I've  
found when examining spam probabilities that there are  
a lot of these accidents, and they have an uncanny tendency to  
push things in the right direction rather than the wrong one.  
In this case, it is not entirely a coincidence that the word  
"Republic" occurs in Nigerian scam emails and this spam.  
There is a whole class of dubious business propositions involving  
less developed countries, and these in turn are more likely  
to have names that specify explicitly (because they aren't) that they  
are republics.[3]On the other hand, "enter" is a genuine miss. It occurs  
mostly in unsubscribe instructions, but here is used in a  
completely innocent way. Fortunately the statistical approach is  
fairly robust, and can tolerate quite a lot of misses  
before the results start to be thrown off.For comparison,   
here is an example of that rare bird, a spam that  
gets through the filters. Why? Because by sheer chance it happens  
to be loaded with words that occur in my actual email:  
  
perl 0.01  
python 0.01  
tcl 0.01  
scripting 0.01  
morris 0.01  
graham 0.01491078  
guarantee 0.9762507  
cgi 0.9734398  
paul 0.027040077  
quite 0.030676773  
pop3 0.042199217  
various 0.06080265  
prices 0.9359873  
managed 0.06451222  
difficult 0.071706355  
  
There are a couple pieces of good news here. First, this mail  
probably wouldn't get through the filters of someone who didn't  
happen to specialize in programming languages and have a good  
friend called Morris. For the average user, all the top five words here   
would be neutral and would not contribute to the spam probability.Second, I think filtering based on word pairs   
(see below) might well  
catch this one: "cost effective", "setup fee", "money back" -- pretty  
incriminating stuff. And of course if they continued to spam me  
(or a network I was part of), "Hostex" itself would be  
recognized as a spam term.Finally, here is an innocent email.  
Its fifteen most interesting words are as follows:  
  
continuation 0.01  
describe 0.01  
continuations 0.01  
example 0.033600237  
programming 0.05214485   
i'm 0.055427782  
examples 0.07972858   
color 0.9189189   
localhost 0.09883721  
hi 0.116539136  
california 0.84421706  
same 0.15981844  
spot 0.1654587  
us-ascii 0.16804294  
what 0.19212411  
  
Most of the words here indicate the mail is an innocent one.  
There are two bad smelling words, "color"  
(spammers love colored fonts) and "California"  
(which occurs in testimonials and also in menus in  
forms), but they are not enough to outweigh obviously  
innocent words like "continuation" and "example".It's interesting that "describe" rates as so thoroughly  
innocent. It hasn't occurred in a  
single one of my 4000 spams. The data turns out to be  
full of such surprises. One of the things you learn  
when you analyze spam texts is how  
narrow a subset of the language spammers operate in. It's  
that fact, together with the equally characteristic vocabulary  
of any individual user's mail, that makes Bayesian filtering  
a good bet.Appendix: More IdeasOne idea that I haven't tried yet is to filter based on  
word pairs, or even triples, rather than individual words.  
This should yield a much sharper estimate of the probability.  
For example, in my current database, the word "offers"  
has a probability of .96. If you based the probabilities   
on word pairs, you'd end up with "special offers"  
and "valuable offers" having probabilities of .99  
and, say, "approach offers" (as in "this approach offers")  
having a probability of .1 or less.The reason I haven't done this is that filtering based on  
individual words already works so well. But it does  
mean that there is room to tighten the filters if spam  
gets harder to detect.  
(Curiously, a filter based on word pairs would be  
in effect a Markov-chaining text generator running  
in reverse.)Specific spam features (e.g. not seeing the recipient's  
address in the to: field) do of course have value in   
recognizing spam. They can be considered in this  
algorithm by treating them as virtual words. I'll probably  
do this in future versions, at least for a handful of the  
most egregious spam indicators. Feature-recognizing  
spam filters are right in many details; what they lack  
is an overall discipline for combining evidence.Recognizing nonspam features may be more important than  
recognizing spam features. False positives are such a  
worry that they demand extraordinary measures. I will  
probably in future versions add a second level of testing  
designed specifically to avoid false positives. If a  
mail triggers this second level of filters it will be accepted  
even if its spam probability is above the threshold.I don't expect this second level of filtering to be Bayesian.  
It will inevitably   
be not only ad hoc, but based on guesses, because the number of  
false positives will not tend to be large enough to notice patterns.  
(It is just as well, anyway, if a backup system doesn't rely on the same  
technology as the primary system.)Another thing I may try in the future is to focus extra attention  
on specific parts of the email. For example, about 95% of current  
spam includes the url of a site they want  
you to visit. (The remaining 5% want you to call a phone number,  
reply by email or to a US mail address, or in a few  
cases to buy a certain stock.) The url is in such cases  
practically enough by itself to determine whether the email  
is spam.Domain names differ from the rest of the text in  
a (non-German) email in that they often consist of several  
words stuck together. Though computationally expensive   
in the general case, it might be worth trying to   
decompose them. If a filter has never seen the  
token "xxxporn" before it will have an individual spam  
probability of .4, whereas "xxx" and "porn" individually  
have probabilities (in my corpus) of .9889 and .99  
respectively, and a combined probability of .9998.I expect decomposing domain names to become more  
important as spammers are gradually forced to stop using  
incriminating words in the text of their messages. (A url  
with an ip address is of course an extremely incriminating sign,  
except in the mail of a few sysadmins.)It might be a good idea to have a cooperatively maintained  
list of urls promoted by spammers. We'd need a trust metric  
of the type studied by Raph Levien to prevent malicious  
or incompetent submissions, but if we had such a thing it  
would provide a boost to any filtering software. It would  
also be a convenient basis for boycotts.Another way to test dubious urls would be to send out a  
crawler to look at the site before the user looked at the  
email mentioning it. You could use a Bayesian filter to  
rate the site just as you would an email, and whatever  
was found on the site could be included in calculating  
the probability of the email being a spam. A url that led  
to a redirect would of course be especially suspicious.One cooperative project that I think really would be a good  
idea would be to accumulate a giant corpus of spam. A large,  
clean corpus is the key to making Bayesian filtering work  
well. Bayesian filters could actually use the corpus as  
input. But such a corpus would be useful for other kinds  
of filters too, because it could be used to test them.Creating such a corpus poses some technical problems. We'd  
need trust metrics to prevent malicious or incompetent  
submissions, of course. We'd also need ways of erasing   
personal information (not just to-addresses and ccs, but  
also e.g. the arguments to unsubscribe urls, which often  
encode the to-address) from mails in the corpus. If anyone  
wants to take on this project, it would be a good thing for  
the world.Appendix: Defining SpamI think there is a rough  
consensus on what spam is, but it would be useful to have  
an explicit definition. We'll need to do this if we want to establish  
a central corpus of spam, or even to compare spam filtering  
rates meaningfully.To start with, spam is not unsolicited commercial email.  
If someone in my neighborhood heard that I was looking for an old  
Raleigh three-speed in good condition, and sent me an email  
offering to sell me one, I'd be delighted, and yet this  
email would be both commercial and unsolicited. The  
defining feature of spam (in fact, its raison d'etre)  
is not that it is unsolicited, but that it is automated.It is merely incidental, too, that spam is usually commercial.  
If someone started sending mass email to support some political  
cause, for example, it would be just as much spam as email  
promoting a porn site.I propose we define spam as unsolicited automated email.  
This definition thus includes some email  
that many legal definitions of spam don't. Legal definitions  
of spam, influenced presumably by lobbyists, tend to exclude  
mail sent by companies that have an "existing relationship" with  
the recipient. But buying something from a company, for  
example, does not imply that you have solicited  
ongoing email from them.  
If I order something from an online  
store, and they then send me a stream of spam, it's still  
spam.Companies sending spam often give you a way to "unsubscribe,"  
or ask you to go to their site and change your "account  
preferences" if you want to stop getting spam. This is  
not enough to stop the mail from being spam. Not opting out  
is not the same as opting in. Unless the   
recipient explicitly checked a clearly labelled box (whose  
default was no) asking to receive the email, then it is spam.In some business relationships, you do implicitly solicit  
certain kinds of mail. When you order online, I think you  
implicitly solicit a receipt, and notification when the  
order ships.  
I don't mind when Verisign sends me mail warning that  
a domain name is about to expire (at least, if they are the  
actual   
registrar for it). But when Verisign sends me  
email offering a FREE Guide to Building My  
E-Commerce Web Site, that's spam.  
Notes:[1] The examples in this article are translated  
into Common Lisp for, believe it or not, greater accessibility.  
The application described here is one that we wrote in order to  
test a new Lisp dialect called Arc that is   
not yet released.[2] Currently the lowest rate seems to be about $200 to send a million spams.  
That's very cheap, 1/50th of a cent per spam.  
But filtering out 95%  
of spam, for example, would increase the spammers' cost to reach  
a given audience by a factor of 20. Few can have  
margins big enough to absorb that.[3] As a rule of thumb, the more qualifiers there are before the  
name of a country, the more corrupt the rulers. A  
country called The Socialist People's Democratic Republic  
of X is probably the last place in the world you'd want to live.  
Thanks to Sarah Harlin for reading drafts of this; Daniel Giffin (who is   
also writing the production Arc interpreter) for several good ideas about  
filtering and for creating our mail infrastructure; Robert Morris,  
Trevor Blackwell and Erann Gat for many discussions about spam; Raph   
Levien for advice about trust metrics; and Chip Coldwell   
and Sam Steingold for advice about statistics.  
  
You'll find this essay and 14 others in  
Hackers & Painters.  
  
  
More Info:Plan for Spam FAQBetter Bayesian FilteringFilters that Fight BackWill Filters Kill Spam?Japanese TranslationSpanish TranslationChinese TranslationProbabilitySpam is DifferentFilters vs. BlacklistsTrust MetricsFiltering ResearchMicrosoft PatentSlashdot ArticleThe Wrong WayLWN: Filter ComparisonCRM114 gets 99.87%

# Revenge of the Nerds

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
May 2002  
  
  
  
"We were after the C++ programmers. We managed to drag a   
lot of them about halfway to Lisp."- Guy Steele, co-author of the Java spec  
  
  
  
  
In the software business there is an ongoing  
struggle between the pointy-headed academics, and another  
equally formidable force, the pointy-haired bosses. Everyone  
knows who the pointy-haired boss is, right? I think most  
people in the technology world not only recognize this  
cartoon character, but know the actual person in their company  
that he is modelled upon.The pointy-haired boss miraculously combines two qualities  
that are common by themselves, but rarely seen together:  
(a) he knows nothing whatsoever about technology, and  
(b) he has very strong opinions about it.Suppose, for example, you need to write a piece of software.  
The pointy-haired boss has no idea how this software  
has to work, and can't tell one programming language from  
another, and yet he knows what language you should write it in.  
Exactly. He thinks you should write it in Java.Why does he think this? Let's  
take a look inside the brain of the pointy-haired boss. What  
he's thinking is something like this. Java is a standard.  
I know it must be, because I read about it in the press all the time.  
Since it is a standard, I won't get in trouble for using it.  
And that also means there will always be lots of Java programmers,  
so if the programmers working for me now quit, as programmers  
working for me mysteriously always do, I can easily replace  
them.Well, this doesn't sound that unreasonable. But it's all  
based on one unspoken assumption, and that assumption  
turns out to be false. The pointy-haired boss believes that all  
programming languages are pretty much equivalent.  
If that were true, he would be right on  
target. If languages are all equivalent, sure, use whatever   
language everyone else is using.But all languages are not equivalent, and I think I can prove  
this to you without even getting into the differences between them.  
If you asked the pointy-haired boss in 1992 what language   
software should be written in, he would have answered with as  
little hesitation as he does today. Software should be   
written in C++. But if languages are all equivalent, why should the  
pointy-haired boss's opinion ever change? In fact, why should  
the developers of Java have even bothered to create a new  
language?Presumably, if you create a new language, it's because you think  
it's better in some way than what people already had. And in fact, Gosling  
makes it clear in the first Java white paper that Java  
was designed to fix some problems with C++.  
So there you have it: languages are not all equivalent.  
If you follow the  
trail through the pointy-haired boss's brain to Java and then  
back through Java's history to its origins, you end up holding  
an idea that contradicts the assumption you started with.So, who's right? James Gosling, or the pointy-haired boss?  
Not surprisingly, Gosling is right. Some languages are better,  
for certain problems, than others. And you know, that raises some  
interesting questions. Java was designed to be better, for certain  
problems, than C++. What problems? When is Java better and   
when is C++? Are there situations where other languages are  
better than either of them?Once you start considering this question, you have opened a  
real can of worms. If the pointy-haired boss had to think  
about the problem in its full complexity, it would make his  
brain explode. As long as he considers all languages   
equivalent, all he has to do is choose the one  
that seems to have the most momentum, and since that is more  
a question of fashion than technology, even he  
can probably get the right answer.  
But if languages vary, he suddenly  
has to solve two simultaneous equations, trying to find  
an optimal balance between two things he knows nothing   
about: the relative suitability of the twenty or so leading  
languages for the problem he needs to solve, and the odds of  
finding programmers, libraries, etc. for each.  
If that's what's on the other side of the door, it  
is no surprise that the pointy-haired boss doesn't want to open it.The disadvantage of believing that all programming languages  
are equivalent is that it's not true. But the advantage is   
that it makes your life a lot simpler.  
And I think that's the main reason the idea is so widespread.  
It is a comfortable idea.We know that Java must be pretty good, because it is the  
cool, new programming language. Or is it? If you look at the world of  
programming languages from a distance, it looks like Java is  
the latest thing. (From far enough away, all you can see is  
the large, flashing billboard paid for by Sun.)  
But if you look at this world  
up close, you find that there are degrees of coolness. Within  
the hacker subculture, there is another language called Perl  
that is considered a lot cooler than Java. Slashdot, for  
example, is generated by Perl. I don't think you would find  
those guys using Java Server Pages. But there is another,  
newer language, called Python, whose users tend to look down on Perl,  
and more waiting in the wings.If you look at these languages in order, Java, Perl, Python,  
you notice an interesting pattern. At least, you notice this  
pattern if you are a Lisp hacker. Each one is progressively   
more like Lisp. Python copies even features  
that many Lisp hackers consider to be mistakes.  
You could translate simple Lisp programs into Python line for line.  
It's 2002, and programming languages have almost caught up   
with 1958.Catching Up with MathWhat I mean is that  
Lisp was first discovered by John McCarthy in 1958,  
and popular programming languages are only now  
catching up with the ideas he developed then.Now, how could that be true? Isn't computer technology something  
that changes very rapidly? I mean, in 1958, computers were  
refrigerator-sized behemoths with the processing power of   
a wristwatch. How could any technology that old even be  
relevant, let alone superior to the latest developments?I'll tell you how. It's because Lisp was not really  
designed to be a programming language, at least not in the sense  
we mean today. What we mean by a programming language is  
something we use to tell a computer what to do. McCarthy  
did eventually intend to develop a programming language in  
this sense, but the Lisp that we actually ended up with was based  
on something separate that he did as a   
theoretical exercise-- an effort  
to define a more convenient alternative to the Turing Machine.  
As McCarthy said later,  
  
Another way to show that Lisp was neater than Turing machines  
was to write a universal Lisp function  
and show that it is briefer and more comprehensible than the  
description of a universal Turing machine.  
This was the Lisp function eval...,   
which computes the value of  
a Lisp expression....  
Writing eval required inventing a notation representing Lisp  
functions as Lisp data, and such a notation  
was devised for the purposes of the paper with no thought that  
it would be used to express Lisp programs in practice.  
  
What happened next was that, some time in late 1958, Steve Russell,  
one of McCarthy's  
grad students, looked at this definition of eval and realized   
that if he translated it into machine language, the result  
would be a Lisp interpreter.This was a big surprise at the time.  
Here is what McCarthy said about it later in an interview:  
  
Steve Russell said, look, why don't I program this eval..., and  
I said to him, ho, ho, you're confusing theory with practice,  
this eval is intended for reading, not for  
computing. But he went ahead and did it. That is, he compiled the eval  
in my paper into [IBM] 704 machine  
code, fixing bugs, and then advertised this as a Lisp interpreter,  
which it certainly was. So at that point Lisp  
had essentially the form that it has today....  
  
Suddenly, in a matter of weeks I think, McCarthy found his theoretical  
exercise transformed into an actual programming language-- and a  
more powerful one than he had intended.So the short explanation of why this 1950s language is not  
obsolete is that it was not technology but math, and  
math doesn't get stale. The right thing to compare Lisp  
to is not 1950s hardware, but, say, the Quicksort  
algorithm, which was discovered in 1960 and is still  
the fastest general-purpose sort.There is one other language still  
surviving from the 1950s, Fortran, and it represents the  
opposite approach to language design. Lisp was a  
piece of theory that unexpectedly got turned into a  
programming language. Fortran was developed intentionally as  
a programming language, but what we would now consider a  
very low-level one.Fortran I, the language that was  
developed in 1956, was a very different animal from present-day  
Fortran. Fortran I was pretty much assembly  
language with math. In some ways it was less  
powerful than more recent assembly languages; there were no   
subroutines, for example, only branches.  
Present-day Fortran is now arguably closer to Lisp than to  
Fortran I.Lisp and Fortran were the trunks of two separate evolutionary trees,   
one rooted in math and one rooted in machine architecture.  
These two trees have been converging ever since.  
Lisp started out powerful, and over the next twenty years  
got fast. So-called mainstream languages started out  
fast, and over the next forty years gradually got more powerful,  
until now the most advanced  
of them are fairly close to Lisp.  
Close, but they are still missing a few things....What Made Lisp DifferentWhen it was first developed, Lisp embodied nine new  
ideas. Some of these we now take for granted, others are  
only seen in more advanced languages, and two are still  
unique to Lisp. The nine ideas are, in order of their  
adoption by the mainstream,  
  
 Conditionals. A conditional is an if-then-else  
construct. We take these for granted now, but Fortran I  
didn't have them. It had only a conditional goto  
closely based on the underlying machine instruction. A function type. In Lisp, functions are  
a data type just like integers or strings.  
They have a literal representation, can be stored in variables,  
can be passed as arguments, and so on. Recursion. Lisp was the first programming language to  
support it. Dynamic typing. In Lisp, all variables  
are effectively pointers. Values are what  
have types, not variables, and assigning or binding  
variables means copying pointers, not what they point to. Garbage-collection. Programs composed of expressions. Lisp programs are  
trees of expressions, each of which returns a value.  
This is in contrast to Fortran  
and most succeeding languages, which distinguish between  
expressions and statements.It was natural to have this  
distinction in Fortran I because  
you could not nest statements. And  
so while you needed expressions for math to work, there was  
no point in making anything else return a value, because  
there could not be anything waiting for it.This limitation  
went away with the arrival of block-structured languages,  
but by then it was too late. The distinction between  
expressions and statements was entrenched. It spread from  
Fortran into Algol and then to both their descendants. A symbol type. Symbols are effectively pointers to strings  
stored in a hash table. So  
you can test equality by comparing a pointer,  
instead of comparing each character. A notation for code using trees of symbols and constants. The whole language there all the time. There is  
no real distinction between read-time, compile-time, and runtime.  
You can compile or run code while reading, read or run code  
while compiling, and read or compile code at runtime.Running code at read-time lets users reprogram Lisp's syntax;  
running code at compile-time is the basis of macros; compiling  
at runtime is the basis of Lisp's use as an extension  
language in programs like Emacs; and reading at runtime  
enables programs to communicate using s-expressions, an  
idea recently reinvented as XML.  
  
When Lisp first appeared, these ideas were far  
removed from ordinary programming practice, which was  
dictated largely by the hardware available in the late 1950s.  
Over time, the default language, embodied  
in a succession of popular languages, has  
gradually evolved toward Lisp. Ideas 1-5 are now widespread.  
Number 6 is starting to appear in the mainstream.   
Python has a form of 7, though there doesn't seem to be   
any syntax for it.As for number 8, this may be the most interesting of the  
lot. Ideas 8 and 9 only became part of Lisp  
by accident, because Steve Russell implemented  
something McCarthy had never intended to be implemented.  
And yet these ideas turn out to be responsible for  
both Lisp's strange appearance and its most distinctive  
features. Lisp looks strange not so much because  
it has a strange syntax as because it has no syntax;  
you express programs directly in the parse trees that  
get built behind the scenes when other languages are  
parsed, and these trees are made  
of lists, which are Lisp data structures.Expressing the language in its own data structures turns  
out to be a very powerful feature. Ideas 8 and 9  
together mean that you  
can write programs that write programs. That may sound  
like a bizarre idea, but it's an everyday thing in Lisp.   
The most common way to do it is with something called a   
macro.The term "macro" does not mean in Lisp what it means in other  
languages.  
A Lisp macro can be anything from an abbreviation  
to a compiler for a new language.  
If you want to really understand Lisp,  
or just expand your programming horizons, I would   
learn more about macros.Macros (in the Lisp sense) are still, as far as  
I know, unique to Lisp.  
This is partly because in order to have macros you  
probably have to make your language look as strange as  
Lisp. It may also be because if you do add that final  
increment of power, you can no  
longer claim to have invented a new language, but only  
a new dialect of Lisp.I mention this mostly  
as a joke, but it is quite true. If you define  
a language that has car, cdr, cons, quote, cond, atom,  
eq, and  
a notation for functions expressed as lists, then you  
can build all the rest of Lisp out of it. That is in  
fact the defining quality of Lisp: it was in order to  
make this so that McCarthy gave Lisp the shape it has.Where Languages MatterSo suppose Lisp does represent a kind of limit   
that mainstream languages are approaching asymptotically-- does  
that mean you should actually use it to write software?  
How much do you lose by using a less powerful language?  
Isn't it wiser, sometimes, not to be  
at the very edge of innovation?  
And isn't popularity to some extent  
its own justification? Isn't the pointy-haired boss right,  
for example, to want to use a language for which he can easily  
hire programmers?There are, of course, projects where the choice of programming  
language doesn't matter much. As a  
rule, the more demanding the application, the more  
leverage you get from using a powerful language. But  
plenty of projects are not demanding at all.  
Most programming probably consists of writing   
little glue programs, and for   
little glue programs you  
can use any language that you're already  
familiar with and that has good libraries for whatever you  
need to do. If you just need to feed data from one   
Windows app to another, sure, use Visual Basic.You can write little glue programs in Lisp too  
(I use it as a desktop calculator), but the biggest win  
for languages like Lisp is at the other end of  
the spectrum, where you need to write sophisticated  
programs to solve hard problems in the face of fierce competition.  
A good example is the  
airline fare search program that ITA Software licenses to  
Orbitz. These  
guys entered a market already dominated by two big,  
entrenched competitors, Travelocity and Expedia, and   
seem to have just humiliated them technologically.The core of ITA's application is a 200,000 line Common Lisp program  
that searches many orders of magnitude more possibilities  
than their competitors, who apparently  
are still using mainframe-era programming techniques.  
(Though ITA is also in a sense  
using a mainframe-era programming language.)  
I have never seen any of ITA's code, but according to  
one of their top hackers they use a lot of macros,  
and I am not surprised to hear it.Centripetal ForcesI'm not saying there is no cost to using uncommon   
technologies. The pointy-haired boss is not completely  
mistaken to worry about this. But because he doesn't understand  
the risks, he tends to magnify them.I can think of three problems that could arise from using  
less common languages. Your programs might not work well with  
programs written in other languages. You might have fewer  
libraries at your disposal. And you might have trouble  
hiring programmers.How much of a problem is each of these? The importance of  
the first varies depending on whether you have control  
over the whole system. If you're writing software that has  
to run on a remote user's machine on top of a buggy,  
closed operating system (I mention no names), there may be  
advantages to writing your application in the  
same language as the OS.  
But if you control the whole system and  
have the source code of all the parts, as ITA presumably does, you  
can use whatever languages you want. If  
any incompatibility arises, you can fix it yourself.In server-based applications you can  
get away with using the most advanced technologies,  
and I think this is the main  
cause of what Jonathan Erickson calls the "programming language  
renaissance." This is why we even hear about new  
languages like Perl and Python. We're not hearing about these  
languages because people are using them to write Windows  
apps, but because people are using them on servers. And as  
software shifts   
off the desktop and onto servers (a future even  
Microsoft seems resigned to), there will be less  
and less pressure to use middle-of-the-road technologies.As for libraries, their importance also  
depends on the application. For less demanding problems,  
the availability of libraries can outweigh the intrinsic power  
of the language. Where is the breakeven point? Hard to say  
exactly, but wherever it is, it is short of anything you'd  
be likely to call an application. If a company considers  
itself to be in the software business, and they're writing  
an application that will be one of their products,  
then it will probably involve several hackers and take at  
least six months to write. In a project of that  
size, powerful languages probably start to outweigh  
the convenience of pre-existing libraries.The third worry of the pointy-haired boss, the difficulty  
of hiring programmers, I think is a red herring. How many  
hackers do you need to hire, after all? Surely by now we  
all know that software is best developed by teams of less  
than ten people. And you shouldn't have trouble hiring  
hackers on that scale for any language anyone has ever heard  
of. If you can't find ten Lisp hackers, then your company is  
probably based in the wrong city for developing software.In fact, choosing a more powerful language probably decreases the  
size of the team you need, because (a) if you use a more powerful  
language you probably won't need as many hackers,  
and (b) hackers who work in more advanced languages are likely  
to be smarter.I'm not saying that you won't get a lot of pressure to use  
what are perceived as "standard" technologies. At Viaweb  
(now Yahoo Store),  
we raised some eyebrows among VCs and potential acquirers by  
using Lisp. But we also raised eyebrows by using  
generic Intel boxes as servers instead of  
"industrial strength" servers like Suns, for using a  
then-obscure open-source Unix variant called FreeBSD instead  
of a real commercial OS like Windows NT, for ignoring  
a supposed e-commerce standard called   
SET that no one now  
even remembers, and so on.You can't let the suits make technical decisions for you.  
Did it  
alarm some potential acquirers that we used Lisp? Some, slightly,  
but if we hadn't used Lisp, we wouldn't have been  
able to write the software that made them want to buy us.  
What seemed like an anomaly to them was in fact  
cause and effect.If you start a startup, don't design your product to please  
VCs or potential acquirers. Design your product to please  
the users. If you win the users, everything else will  
follow. And if you don't, no one will care  
how comfortingly orthodox your technology choices were.The Cost of Being AverageHow much do you lose by using a less powerful language?   
There is actually some data out there about that.The most convenient measure of power is probably   
code size.  
The point of high-level  
languages is to give you bigger abstractions-- bigger bricks,  
as it were, so you don't need as many to build  
a wall of a given size.  
So the more powerful  
the language, the shorter the program (not simply in  
characters, of course, but in distinct elements).How does a more powerful language enable you to write  
shorter programs? One technique you can use, if the language will  
let you, is something called   
bottom-up programming. Instead of  
simply writing your application in the base language, you  
build on top of the base language a language for writing  
programs like yours, then write your program  
in it. The combined code can be much shorter than if you  
had written your whole program in the base language-- indeed,  
this is how most compression algorithms work.  
A bottom-up program should be easier to modify as well,   
because in many cases the language layer won't have to change  
at all.Code size is important, because the time it takes  
to write a program depends mostly on its length.  
If your program would be three times as long in another  
language, it will take three times as long to write-- and  
you can't get around this by hiring more people, because  
beyond a certain size new hires are actually a net lose.  
Fred Brooks described this phenomenon in his famous  
book The Mythical Man-Month, and everything I've seen  
has tended to confirm what he said.So how much shorter are your programs if you write them in  
Lisp? Most of the numbers I've heard for Lisp  
versus C, for example, have been around 7-10x.  
But a recent article about ITA in   
New  
Architect magazine said that  
"one line of Lisp can replace 20 lines of C," and since  
this article was full of quotes from ITA's president, I  
assume they got this number from ITA. If so then  
we can put some faith in it; ITA's software includes a lot  
of C and C++ as well as Lisp, so they are speaking from  
experience.My guess is that these multiples aren't even constant.  
I think they increase when  
you face harder problems and also when you have smarter  
programmers. A really good hacker can squeeze more  
out of better tools.As one data point on the curve, at any rate,  
if you were to compete with ITA and  
chose to write your software in C, they would be able to develop  
software twenty times faster than you.  
If you spent a year on a new feature, they'd be able to  
duplicate it in less than three weeks. Whereas if they spent  
just three months developing something new, it would be  
five years before you had it too.And you know what? That's the best-case scenario.  
When you talk about code-size ratios, you're implicitly assuming  
that you can actually write the program in the weaker language.  
But in fact there are limits on what programmers can do.  
If you're trying to solve a hard problem with a language that's  
too low-level, you reach a point where there is just too   
much to keep in your head at once.So when I say it would take ITA's imaginary  
competitor five years to duplicate something ITA could  
write in Lisp in three months, I mean five years  
if nothing goes wrong. In fact, the way things work in   
most companies, any  
development project that would take five years is  
likely never to get finished at all.I admit this is an extreme case. ITA's hackers seem to  
be unusually smart, and C is a pretty low-level language.  
But in a competitive market, even a differential of two or  
three to one would  
be enough to guarantee that you'd always be behind.A RecipeThis is the kind of possibility that the pointy-haired boss  
doesn't even want to think about. And so most of them don't.  
Because, you know, when it comes down to it, the pointy-haired  
boss doesn't mind if his company gets their ass kicked, so  
long as no one can prove it's his fault.  
The safest plan for him personally  
is to stick close to the center of the herd.Within large organizations, the phrase used to  
describe this approach is "industry best practice."  
Its purpose is to shield the pointy-haired  
boss from responsibility: if he chooses  
something that is "industry best practice," and the company  
loses, he can't be blamed. He didn't choose, the industry did.I believe this term was originally used to describe  
accounting methods and so on. What it means, roughly,  
is don't do anything weird. And in accounting that's  
probably a good idea. The terms "cutting-edge" and   
"accounting" do not sound good together. But when you import  
this criterion into decisions about technology, you start  
to get the wrong answers.Technology often should be  
cutting-edge. In programming languages, as Erann Gat  
has pointed out, what "industry best practice" actually  
gets you is not the best, but merely the  
average. When a decision causes you to develop software at  
a fraction of the rate of more aggressive competitors,   
"best practice" is a misnomer.  
So here we have two pieces of information that I think are  
very valuable. In fact, I know it from my own experience.  
Number 1, languages vary in power. Number 2, most managers  
deliberately ignore this. Between them, these two facts  
are literally a recipe for making money. ITA is an example  
of this recipe in action.  
If you want to win in a software  
business, just take on the hardest problem you can find,  
use the most powerful language you can get, and wait for  
your competitors' pointy-haired bosses to revert to the mean.  
  
Appendix: PowerAs an illustration of what I mean about the relative power  
of programming languages, consider the following problem.  
We want to write a function that generates accumulators-- a  
function that takes a number n, and  
returns a function that takes another number i and  
returns n incremented by i.(That's incremented by, not plus. An accumulator  
has to accumulate.)In Common Lisp this would be  
  
(defun foo (n)  
 (lambda (i) (incf n i)))  
  
and in Perl 5,  
  
sub foo {   
 my ($n) = @\_;  
 sub {$n += shift}  
}  
  
which has more elements than the Lisp version because  
you have to extract parameters manually in Perl.In Smalltalk the code is slightly longer than in Lisp  
  
foo: n   
 |s|   
 s := n.   
 ^[:i| s := s+i. ]   
  
because although in general lexical variables work, you can't  
do an assignment to a parameter, so you have to create a  
new variable s.In Javascript the example is, again, slightly longer, because   
Javascript retains  
the distinction between statements and  
expressions, so you need explicit return statements  
to return values:  
  
function foo(n) {   
 return function (i) {   
 return n += i } }  
  
(To be fair, Perl also retains  
this distinction, but deals with it in typical Perl fashion  
by letting you omit returns.)If you try to translate the Lisp/Perl/Smalltalk/Javascript code into   
Python you run into some limitations. Because Python  
doesn't fully support lexical variables,  
you have to create a data structure to hold the value of n.  
And although  
Python does have a function data type, there is no  
literal representation for one (unless the body is  
only a single expression) so you need to create a named  
function to return. This is what you end up with:  
  
def foo(n):  
 s = [n]  
 def bar(i):  
 s[0] += i  
 return s[0]   
 return bar  
  
Python users might legitimately ask why they can't  
just write  
  
def foo(n):  
 return lambda i: return n += i  
  
or even  
  
def foo(n):  
 lambda i: n += i  
  
and my guess is that they probably will, one day.  
(But if they don't want to wait for Python to evolve the rest  
of the way into Lisp, they could always just...)  
In OO languages, you can, to a limited extent, simulate  
a closure (a function that refers to variables defined in  
enclosing scopes) by defining a class with one method  
and a field to replace each variable from an enclosing  
scope. This makes the programmer do the kind of code  
analysis that would be done by the compiler in a language  
with full support for lexical scope, and it won't work  
if more than one function refers to the same variable,  
but it is enough in simple cases like this.Python experts seem to agree that this is the  
preferred way to solve the problem in Python, writing  
either  
  
def foo(n):  
 class acc:  
 def \_\_init\_\_(self, s):  
 self.s = s  
 def inc(self, i):  
 self.s += i  
 return self.s  
 return acc(n).inc  
  
or  
  
class foo:  
 def \_\_init\_\_(self, n):  
 self.n = n  
 def \_\_call\_\_(self, i):  
 self.n += i  
 return self.n  
  
I include these because I wouldn't want Python  
advocates to say I was misrepresenting the language,   
but both seem to me more complex than the first   
version. You're doing the same thing, setting up  
a separate place to hold the accumulator; it's just  
a field in an object instead of the head of a list.  
And the use of these special,  
reserved field names, especially \_\_call\_\_, seems  
a bit of a hack.In the rivalry between Perl and Python, the claim of the  
Python hackers seems to be that  
that Python is a more elegant alternative to Perl, but what  
this case shows is that power is the ultimate elegance:  
the Perl program is simpler (has fewer elements), even if the  
syntax is a bit uglier.How about other languages? In the other languages  
mentioned in this talk-- Fortran, C, C++, Java, and  
Visual Basic-- it is not clear whether you can actually  
solve this problem.  
Ken Anderson says that the following code is about as close  
as you can get in Java:  
  
public interface Inttoint {  
 public int call(int i);  
}  
  
  
public static Inttoint foo(final int n) {  
 return new Inttoint() {  
 int s = n;  
 public int call(int i) {  
 s = s + i;  
 return s;  
 }};  
}  
  
This falls short of the spec because it only works for  
integers. After many email exchanges with Java hackers,  
I would say that writing a properly polymorphic version  
that behaves like the preceding examples is somewhere  
between damned awkward and impossible. If anyone wants to  
write one I'd be very curious to see it, but I personally  
have timed out.It's not literally true that you can't solve this  
problem in other languages, of course. The fact  
that all these languages are Turing-equivalent means  
that, strictly speaking, you can write any program in  
any of them. So how would you do it? In the limit case,  
by writing a Lisp  
interpreter in the less powerful language.That sounds like a joke, but it happens so often to  
varying degrees in large programming projects that  
there is a name for the phenomenon, Greenspun's Tenth  
Rule:  
  
 Any sufficiently  
 complicated C or Fortran program contains an ad hoc  
 informally-specified bug-ridden slow implementation of half of  
 Common Lisp.  
  
If you try to solve a  
hard problem, the question is not whether you will use  
a powerful enough language, but whether you will (a)  
use a powerful language, (b) write a de facto interpreter  
for one, or (c) yourself become a human compiler for one.  
We see this already  
begining to happen in the Python example, where we are  
in effect simulating the code that a compiler  
would generate to implement a lexical variable.This practice is not only common, but institutionalized. For example,  
in the OO world you hear a good deal about   
"patterns".  
I wonder if these patterns are not sometimes evidence of case (c),  
the human compiler, at work. When I see patterns in my programs,  
I consider it a sign of trouble. The shape of a program  
should reflect only the problem it needs to solve.  
Any other regularity in the code is a sign, to me at  
least, that I'm using abstractions that aren't powerful  
enough-- often that I'm generating by hand the  
expansions of some macro that I need to write.Notes  
 The IBM 704 CPU was about the size of a refrigerator,  
but a lot heavier. The CPU weighed 3150 pounds,  
and the 4K of RAM was in a separate  
box weighing another 4000 pounds. The  
Sub-Zero 690, one of the largest household refrigerators,  
weighs 656 pounds. Steve Russell also wrote the first (digital) computer  
game, Spacewar, in 1962. If you want to trick a pointy-haired boss into letting you  
write software in Lisp, you could try telling him it's XML. Here is the accumulator generator in other Lisp dialects:  
  
Scheme: (define (foo n)   
 (lambda (i) (set! n (+ n i)) n))  
Goo: (df foo (n) (op incf n \_)))  
Arc: (def foo (n) [++ n \_])  
  
 Erann Gat's sad tale about  
"industry best practice" at JPL inspired me to address  
this generally misapplied phrase. Peter Norvig found that  
16 of the 23 patterns in Design Patterns were   
"invisible  
or simpler" in Lisp. Thanks to the many people who answered my questions about  
various languages and/or read drafts of this, including  
Ken Anderson, Trevor Blackwell, Erann Gat, Dan Giffin, Sarah Harlin,  
Jeremy Hylton, Robert Morris, Peter Norvig, Guy Steele, and Anton  
van Straaten.  
They bear no blame for any opinions expressed.  
Related:Many people have responded to this talk,  
so I have set up an additional page to deal with the issues they have  
raised: Re: Revenge of the Nerds.It also set off an extensive and often useful discussion on the   
LL1  
mailing list. See particularly the mail by Anton van Straaten on semantic  
compression.Some of the mail on LL1 led me to try to go deeper into the subject  
of language power in Succinctness is Power.A larger set of canonical implementations of the accumulator  
generator benchmark are collected together on their own page.Japanese Translation, Spanish  
Translation,   
Chinese Translation  
  
  
You'll find this essay and 14 others in  
Hackers & Painters.

# Succinctness is Power

May 2002  
  
  
  
"The quantity of meaning compressed into a small space by   
algebraic signs, is another circumstance that facilitates   
the reasonings we are accustomed to carry on by their aid."- Charles Babbage, quoted in Iverson's Turing Award Lecture  
  
  
  
In the discussion about issues raised by Revenge   
of the Nerds on the LL1 mailing list, Paul Prescod wrote  
something that stuck in my mind.  
  
Python's goal is regularity and readability, not succinctness.  
  
On the face of it, this seems a rather damning thing to claim about a   
programming language. As far as I can tell, succinctness = power.  
If so, then substituting, we get  
  
Python's goal is regularity and readability, not power.  
  
and this doesn't seem a tradeoff (if it is a tradeoff)  
that you'd want to make.   
It's not far from saying that Python's goal is not to be effective   
as a programming language.Does succinctness = power? This seems to me an important question,  
maybe the most important question for anyone interested in  
language design, and one that it would be useful to confront  
directly. I don't feel sure yet that the answer is a simple yes, but it seems   
a good hypothesis to begin with.HypothesisMy hypothesis is that succinctness is power, or is close enough  
that except in pathological examples you can treat them as   
identical.It seems to me that succinctness is what programming languages are   
for. Computers would be just as happy to be told what to  
do directly in machine language. I think that the main  
reason we take the trouble to develop high-level languages is to  
get leverage, so that we can say (and more importantly, think)  
in 10 lines of a high-level language what would require 1000  
lines of machine language. In other words,  
the main point of high-level languages is to make source code smaller.If smaller source code is the purpose of high-level languages, and  
the power of something is how well it achieves its purpose, then  
the measure of the power of a programming language is how small it  
makes your programs.Conversely, a language that doesn't make your programs small is  
doing a bad job of what programming languages are supposed to  
do, like a knife that doesn't cut well, or printing that's illegible.  
MetricsSmall in what sense though? The most common measure of code size is  
lines of code. But I think that this metric is the most common because  
it is the easiest to measure. I don't think anyone really believes  
it is the true test of the length of a program. Different  
languages have different conventions for how much you should put  
on a line; in C a lot of lines have nothing on them but a delimiter or two.Another easy test is the number of characters in a   
program, but this is not very good either; some languages (Perl,  
for example) just  
use shorter identifiers than others.I think a better measure of the size of a program would be the   
number of elements, where an element is anything that  
would be a distinct node if you drew a tree representing the   
source code. The name of  
a variable or function is an element;   
an integer or a floating-point number is an element;  
a segment of literal text is an element;  
an element of a pattern, or a format directive, is an element;  
a new block is an element. There are borderline cases  
(is -5 two elements or one?) but I think most of them are the  
same for every language, so they don't affect comparisons much.This metric needs fleshing out, and  
it could require interpretation in the case of specific languages,  
but I think it tries to measure the right thing, which is the   
number of parts a program has. I think the tree you'd draw in this  
exercise is what you have to make in your head in order to  
conceive of the program, and so its size is proportionate to the  
amount of work you have to do to write or read it.DesignThis kind of metric would allow us to compare different languages,  
but that is not, at least for me, its main value. The main value  
of the succinctness test is as a guide in designing languages.  
The most useful comparison between languages is between two  
potential variants of the same language. What can I do in the  
language to make programs shorter?If the conceptual load of  
a program is proportionate to its complexity, and a given programmer  
can tolerate a fixed conceptual load, then this is the same as asking,  
what can I do to enable programmers to get the most done? And  
that seems to me identical to asking, how can I design a good  
language?(Incidentally, nothing makes it more patently obvious that the old  
chestnut "all languages are equivalent" is false than designing  
languages. When you are designing a new language, you're constantly  
comparing two languages-- the language if I did x, and if I didn't-- to  
decide which is better. If this were really a meaningless question,  
you might as well flip a coin.)Aiming for succinctness seems a good way to find new ideas.  
If you can do something that makes many  
different programs shorter, it is probably not a coincidence: you have   
probably discovered a useful new abstraction. You might even be  
able to write a program to help by searching  
source code for repeated patterns. Among other languages, those  
with a reputation for succinctness would be the ones to look to for  
new ideas: Forth, Joy, Icon.ComparisonThe first person to write about these issues, as far as I know, was  
Fred Brooks in the Mythical Man Month. He wrote  
that programmers seemed to generate about the same  
amount of code per day regardless of the language.  
When I first read this in my early twenties,  
it was a big surprise to me and seemed to have huge implications.  
It meant that (a) the only way to get software written faster was to  
use a more succinct language, and (b) someone who took the  
trouble to do this could leave competitors who didn't in the dust.Brooks' hypothesis, if it's true, seems to be at the very heart of hacking.  
In the years since, I've paid close attention to any evidence I could  
get on the question, from formal studies to anecdotes about individual  
projects. I have seen nothing to contradict him.I have not yet seen evidence that seemed to me conclusive,  
and I don't expect to. Studies  
like Lutz Prechelt's comparison of programming languages, while  
generating the kind of results I expected, tend to use problems that  
are too short to be meaningful tests. A better test of a language is  
what happens in programs that take a month to write. And the only  
real test, if you believe as I do that the main purpose of a language  
is to be good to think in (rather than just to tell a computer what to  
do once you've thought of it) is what new things you can write in it.  
So any language comparison where  
you have to meet a predefined spec is testing slightly the wrong  
thing.The true test of a language is how well you can discover  
and solve new problems, not  
how well you can use it to solve a problem someone else has  
already formulated. These two are quite different criteria.  
In art, mediums like embroidery and mosaic work well if you  
know beforehand what you want to make, but are absolutely lousy if  
you don't. When you want to discover the image as you make it--  
as you have to do with anything as complex as an image of a  
person, for example-- you need to use a more fluid medium like pencil or  
ink wash or oil paint. And indeed, the way tapestries and mosaics are made in  
practice is to make a painting first, then copy it. (The word  
"cartoon" was originally used to describe a painting intended for  
this purpose).What this means is that we are never likely to have accurate comparisons  
of the relative power of programming languages. We'll have precise  
comparisons, but not accurate ones. In particular, explicit studies  
for the purpose of comparing languages,  
because they will probably use small problems, and will necessarily use  
predefined problems, will tend to underestimate the power of the  
more powerful languages.Reports from the field, though they will necessarily be less precise than  
"scientific" studies, are likely to be more meaningful. For example,   
Ulf Wiger of Ericsson did a   
study that   
concluded that Erlang was 4-10x  
more succinct than C++, and proportionately faster to develop   
software in:  
  
Comparisons between Ericsson-internal development projects indicate  
similar line/hour productivity, including all phases of software development,  
rather independently of which language (Erlang, PLEX, C, C++, or Java)  
was used. What differentiates the different languages then becomes source  
code volume.  
  
 The study also deals explictly with a point that was   
only implicit in Brooks' book (since he measured lines of debugged code):  
programs written in more powerful languages tend to have fewer bugs.  
That becomes an end in itself, possibly more important than programmer  
productivity, in applications like network switches.The Taste TestUltimately, I think you have to go with your gut. What does it feel  
like to program in the language? I think the way to find (or design)  
the best language is to become hypersensitive to how well a language  
lets you think, then choose/design the language that feels best. If  
some language feature is awkward or restricting, don't worry, you'll  
know about it.Such hypersensitivity will come at a cost. You'll find that you can't  
stand programming in clumsy languages. I find it unbearably  
restrictive to program in languages without macros, just as someone used  
to dynamic typing finds it unbearably restrictive to have to go back to  
programming in a language where you have to declare the type of  
every variable, and can't make a list of objects of different types.  
I'm not the only one. I know many Lisp hackers that this has happened  
to. In fact, the most accurate measure of the relative power of programming  
languages might be the percentage of people who know the language  
who will take any job where they get to use that language, regardless  
of the application domain.RestrictivenessI think most hackers know what it means for a language to feel restrictive.  
What's happening when you feel that? I think it's the same feeling  
you get when the street you want to take is blocked off, and you have to  
take a long detour to get where you wanted to go. There is something  
you want to say, and the language won't let you.What's really going on here, I think, is that a restrictive language is  
one that isn't succinct enough. The problem is not simply that you can't  
say what you planned to. It's that the detour the language makes you  
take is longer. Try this thought experiment. Suppose there were  
some program you wanted to write, and the language wouldn't let you  
express it the way you planned to, but instead forced you to write the  
program in some other way that was shorter. For me at least,  
that wouldn't feel very restrictive. It would be like the street you  
wanted to take being blocked off, and the policeman at the   
intersection directing you to a shortcut instead of a detour. Great!I think most (ninety percent?) of   
the feeling of restrictiveness comes from being forced to make the program  
you write in the language longer than one you have in your head.  
Restrictiveness is mostly lack of succinctness.  
So when a language feels restrictive, what that (mostly) means is that it isn't  
succinct enough, and when a language isn't succinct, it will  
feel restrictive.ReadabilityThe quote I began with mentions two other qualities, regularity and  
readability. I'm not sure what regularity is, or what advantage,   
if any, code that is regular and readable has over code that is merely  
readable. But I think I know what is meant by readability, and I think  
it is also related to succinctness.We have to be careful here to distinguish between the readability of  
an individual line of code and the readability of the whole program.  
It's the second that matters. I agree that a line of Basic is likely to be  
more readable than a line of Lisp. But a program written in Basic is  
is going to have more lines than the same program written in  
Lisp (especially once you cross over into Greenspunland). The  
total effort of reading the Basic program will surely be greater.  
  
total effort = effort per line x number of lines  
  
I'm not as sure that readability is directly proportionate to succinctness  
as I am that power is, but certainly succinctness is a factor   
(in the mathematical sense; see equation above) in readability.  
So it may not even be meaningful to say that the goal of a language is  
readability, not succinctness; it could be like saying the goal was readability,  
not readability.What readability-per-line does mean, to the user encountering the language  
for the first time, is that source code will look unthreatening. So  
readability-per-line  
could be a good marketing decision, even if it is a bad design  
decision. It's isomorphic to the very successful technique of letting  
people pay in installments: instead of frightening them with a high  
upfront price, you tell them the low monthly payment. Installment plans  
are a net lose for the buyer, though, as mere readability-per-line probably  
is for the programmer.  
The buyer is going to make a lot of those low, low payments; and   
the programmer is going to read a lot of those individually readable lines.This tradeoff predates programming languages. If you're used to reading  
novels and newspaper articles, your first experience of reading a math  
paper can be dismaying. It could take half an hour to read a single page.   
And yet, I am pretty sure that the notation is not the problem, even though  
it may feel like it is. The math paper is hard to read   
because the ideas are hard. If you expressed the same ideas in prose  
(as mathematicians had to do before they evolved succinct notations),  
they wouldn't be any easier to read, because the paper would grow to the  
size of a book.To What Extent?A number of people have rejected  
the idea that succinctness = power. I think it would be more useful, instead  
of simply arguing that they are the same or aren't, to ask:  
to what extent does succinctness = power?  
Because clearly succinctness is  
a large part of what higher-level languages are for. If it is not all they're  
for, then what else are they for, and how important, relatively, are these  
other functions?I'm not proposing this just to make the debate more civilized. I really  
want to know the answer. When, if ever, is a language too succinct for   
its own good?The hypothesis I began with was that, except in pathological examples,  
I thought succinctness could be considered identical with power. What  
I meant was that in any language anyone would design, they  
would be identical, but that if someone wanted to design a language  
explicitly to disprove this hypothesis, they could probably do it. I'm  
not even sure of that, actually.Languages, not ProgramsWe should be clear that we are talking about the succinctness  
of languages, not of individual programs.  
It certainly is possible for individual programs to be written too densely.I wrote about this in On Lisp. A complex macro  
may have to save many times its own length to be justified. If writing  
some hairy macro could save you ten lines of code every time you use it,  
and the macro is itself ten lines of code, then you get a net saving in  
lines if you use it more than once. But that could still be a bad move,  
because macro definitions are harder to read than ordinary code. You   
might have to use the macro ten or twenty times before it yielded a net  
improvement in readability.I'm sure every language has such tradeoffs (though I suspect the stakes  
get higher as the language gets more powerful). Every programmer must  
have seen code that some clever person has made marginally shorter  
by using dubious programming tricks.So there is no argument about that-- at least, not from me. Individual  
programs can certainly be too succinct for their own good. The question  
is, can a language be? Can a language compel programmers to write  
code that's short (in elements) at the expense of overall readability?One reason it's hard to imagine a language being too succinct is that if  
there were some excessively compact way to phrase something, there would  
probably also be a longer way. For example, if you felt Lisp programs using  
a lot of macros or higher-order functions were too dense, you could, if you  
preferred, write code that was isomorphic to Pascal. If you  
don't want to express factorial in Arc as a call to a higher-order function  
  
(rec zero 1 \* 1-)  
  
you can also write out a recursive definition:  
  
(rfn fact (x) (if (zero x) 1 (\* x (fact (1- x)))))  
  
Though I can't off the top of my head think of any examples, I am interested  
in the question of whether a language could be too succinct. Are there languages   
that force you to write code in a way that is crabbed and incomprehensible?  
If anyone has examples, I would be very interested to see them.(Reminder: What I'm looking for are programs that are very dense according  
to the metric of "elements" sketched above, not merely programs that are  
short because delimiters can be omitted and everything has a one-character name.)  
Japanese TranslationRussian TranslationLutz Prechelt: Comparison of Seven LanguagesErann Gat: Lisp vs. JavaPeter Norvig Tries Prechelt's TestMatthias Felleisen: Expressive Power of LanguagesKragen Sitaker: Redundancy and PowerForthJoyIconJK

# What Languages Fix

Kevin Kelleher suggested an interesting way to compare programming  
languages: to describe each in terms of the problem it  
fixes. The surprising thing is how many, and how well, languages can be  
described this way.  
  
Algol: Assembly language is too low-level.Pascal: Algol doesn't have enough data types.Modula: Pascal is too wimpy for systems programming.  
Simula: Algol isn't good enough at simulations.Smalltalk: Not everything in Simula is an object.Fortran: Assembly language is too low-level.Cobol: Fortran is scary.PL/1: Fortran doesn't have enough data types.Ada: Every existing language is missing something.Basic: Fortran is scary.APL: Fortran isn't good enough at manipulating arrays.J: APL requires its own character set.C: Assembly language is too low-level.C++: C is too low-level.Java: C++ is a kludge. And Microsoft is going to crush us.C#: Java is controlled by Sun.  
Lisp: Turing Machines are an awkward way to describe computation.Scheme: MacLisp is a kludge.T: Scheme has no libraries.Common Lisp: There are too many dialects of Lisp.Dylan: Scheme has no libraries, and Lisp syntax is scary.  
Perl: Shell scripts/awk/sed are not enough like programming languages.Python: Perl is a kludge.Ruby: Perl is a kludge, and Lisp syntax is scary.Prolog: Programming is not enough like logic.  
Japanese TranslationFrench TranslationPortuguese Translation

# Taste for Makers

February 2002  
  
  
  
"...Copernicus'  
aesthetic objections to [equants] provided one essential  
motive for his rejection of the Ptolemaic system...."- Thomas Kuhn, The Copernican Revolution"All of us had been trained by Kelly Johnson and believed  
fanatically in his insistence that an airplane that looked  
beautiful would fly the same way."- Ben Rich, Skunk Works"Beauty is the first test: there is no permanent place in this  
world for ugly mathematics."- G. H. Hardy, A Mathematician's Apology  
  
  
I was talking recently to a friend who teaches  
at MIT. His field is hot now and  
every year he is inundated by applications from  
would-be graduate students. "A lot of them seem smart,"  
he said. "What I can't tell is whether they have any kind  
of taste."Taste. You don't hear that word much now.  
And yet we still need the underlying  
concept, whatever we call it. What my friend meant was  
that he wanted students who were not just good technicians,  
but who could use their technical knowledge to  
design beautiful things.Mathematicians call good work "beautiful,"  
and so, either now or in the past, have  
scientists, engineers, musicians, architects, designers,  
writers, and painters.  
Is it just a coincidence that they used the same word, or is   
there some overlap in what they meant? If there  
is an overlap, can we use one field's discoveries  
about beauty to help us in another?For those of us who design things, these are not just  
theoretical questions. If there is such a thing as  
beauty, we need to be able to recognize it. We need  
good taste to make good things.  
Instead of  
treating beauty as an airy abstraction, to be either blathered  
about or avoided depending on how one feels about airy  
abstractions, let's try considering it as a practical question:  
how do you make good stuff?If you mention taste nowadays, a lot of people will tell  
you that "taste is subjective."  
They believe this because it really feels that  
way to them. When they like something, they have no idea  
why. It could be because it's beautiful, or because their  
mother had one, or because they saw a movie star with one  
in a magazine, or because they know it's expensive.  
Their thoughts are a tangle of unexamined impulses.Most of us are encouraged, as children, to leave this tangle  
unexamined. If you make fun of your little brother for  
coloring people green in his coloring book, your  
mother is likely to tell you something like "you like to  
do it your way and he likes to do it his way."Your mother at this point is not trying to teach you  
important truths about aesthetics. She's trying to get  
the two of you to stop bickering.Like many of the half-truths adults tell us, this one  
contradicts other things they tell us. After dinning  
into you that taste is merely a matter of personal preference,  
they take you to the museum and tell you that you should  
pay attention because Leonardo is a great artist.What goes through the kid's head at this point? What does  
he think "great artist" means? After having been  
told for years that everyone just likes to do  
things their own way, he is  
unlikely to head straight for the conclusion that a great  
artist is someone whose work is better than the others'.  
A far more likely theory, in his Ptolemaic model of  
the universe, is that a great artist is something that's  
good for you, like broccoli, because someone said so in a book.Saying that taste is just personal preference is a good way  
to prevent disputes. The trouble is, it's not true.  
You feel this when you start to design things.Whatever job people do, they naturally want to do better.  
Football players  
like to win games. CEOs like to increase earnings. It's  
a matter of pride, and a real pleasure, to get better at  
your job. But if  
your job is to design things, and there is no such thing  
as beauty, then there is no way to get better at your job.  
If taste is just personal preference, then everyone's is   
already perfect: you like whatever you like, and that's it.As in any job, as you continue to design things, you'll get  
better at it. Your tastes will change. And, like anyone  
who gets better at their job, you'll know you're getting  
better. If so,  
your old tastes were  
not merely different, but worse. Poof goes the axiom that  
taste can't be wrong.Relativism is fashionable at the moment, and that may hamper  
you from thinking about taste, even as yours grows.  
But if you come out of the closet and admit, at least to yourself,  
that there is such a thing as good and bad design, then you  
can start to study good design in detail.  
How has  
your taste changed? When you made mistakes, what  
caused you to make them? What have other people learned about  
design?Once you start to examine the question, it's surprising how  
much different fields' ideas of beauty have in common. The same  
principles of good design crop up again and again.Good design is simple. You hear this from math to  
painting. In math it means that a shorter proof tends to be  
a better one. Where axioms are concerned, especially,  
less is more. It means much the same thing in programming.  
For architects and designers it means that beauty should  
depend on a few carefully chosen structural elements  
rather than a profusion of superficial ornament. (Ornament  
is not in itself bad, only when it's camouflage on insipid  
form.) Similarly, in painting, a  
still life of a few carefully observed and solidly  
modelled objects will tend to be more interesting than a  
stretch of flashy  
but mindlessly repetitive painting of, say, a lace collar.  
In writing it means: say what you mean  
and say it briefly.It seems strange to have to emphasize simplicity.  
You'd think simple would be the default. Ornate  
is more work. But something seems to come over people  
when they try to be creative. Beginning writers adopt   
a pompous tone that doesn't sound anything like the way   
they speak. Designers trying to be artistic resort to  
swooshes and curlicues. Painters discover that they're expressionists.  
It's all evasion.  
Underneath  
the long words or the "expressive" brush strokes, there  
is not much going on, and that's frightening.When you're  
forced to be simple, you're forced to face the real problem.  
When you can't deliver ornament, you have to deliver  
substance.Good design is timeless.  
In math, every proof is timeless unless it contains a mistake.  
So what does Hardy mean when he says there is no permanent   
place for ugly mathematics? He means the same thing Kelly Johnson did:  
if something is ugly, it can't be the best solution. There  
must be a better one, and eventually  
someone will discover it.Aiming at timelessness is a way to make  
yourself find the best answer:  
if you can imagine someone surpassing you, you should do it yourself.  
Some of the greatest masters did this so well that they  
left little room for those who came after.  
Every engraver since Durer has had to live in his shadow.Aiming at timelessness is also a way to evade  
the grip of fashion. Fashions almost by definition  
change with time, so if you can make something that  
will still look good far into the future, then its  
appeal must derive more from merit and less from fashion.Strangely enough, if you want to make something that will   
appeal to future generations, one way to do it is to  
try to appeal to past generations. It's hard to guess what  
the future will be like, but we can be sure it will be  
like the past in caring nothing for present fashions.  
So if you can make something that appeals to people today  
and would also have appealed to people in 1500, there is a good  
chance it will appeal to people in 2500.Good design solves the right problem. The typical  
stove has four burners arranged in a square, and a dial  
to control each. How do you arrange the dials? The  
simplest answer is to put them in a row. But this is a  
simple answer to the wrong question.  
The dials are for humans to use, and if you put them in a row,  
the unlucky human will have to stop and think each time  
about which dial matches which burner. Better to arrange the dials  
in a square like the burners.A lot of bad design is industrious, but misguided.  
In the mid twentieth century there was a vogue for  
setting text in sans-serif fonts.  
These fonts are closer to the pure, underlying letterforms.  
But in text that's not the problem you're trying to solve.   
For legibility it's more important that letters be easy  
to tell apart.  
It may look Victorian, but a Times Roman lowercase g is  
easy to tell from a lowercase y.Problems can be improved as well as solutions.  
In software, an intractable problem can usually be replaced  
by an equivalent one that's easy to solve.  
Physics progressed faster as the problem became  
predicting observable behavior, instead of reconciling it  
with scripture.Good design is suggestive.  
Jane Austen's novels contain almost no  
description; instead of telling you how  
everything looks, she tells her story so well that you   
envision the scene for yourself.  
Likewise, a painting that suggests is usually more engaging  
than one that tells. Everyone makes up their own story about the  
Mona Lisa.In architecture and design, this  
principle means that a building or object should let you   
use it how you want: a good building, for example, will  
serve as a backdrop for whatever life people want to lead in it, instead  
of making them live as if they were executing a program  
written by the architect.In software, it means you should give users a few  
basic elements that they can combine as they wish, like Lego.   
In math it means a proof that  
becomes the basis for a lot of new work is  
preferable to a proof that was difficult,  
but doesn't lead to future discoveries; in the  
sciences generally, citation is considered a rough  
indicator of merit.Good design is often slightly funny. This one  
may not always be true. But Durer's   
engravings  
and Saarinen's   
womb chair and the   
Pantheon and the  
original Porsche 911 all seem  
to me slightly funny. Godel's incompleteness theorem  
seems like a practical joke.I think it's because humor is related to strength.  
To have a sense of humor is to be strong:  
to keep one's sense of humor is to shrug off misfortunes,  
and to lose one's sense of humor is to be wounded by them.  
And so the mark-- or at least the prerogative-- of strength  
is not to take  
oneself too seriously.  
The confident will often, like  
swallows, seem to be making fun of the whole process slightly,  
as Hitchcock does in his films or Bruegel in his paintings-- or  
Shakespeare, for that matter.Good design may not have to be funny, but it's hard to  
imagine something that could be called humorless also being  
good design.Good design is hard. If you look at the people who've  
done great work, one thing they all seem to have in common is that they  
worked very hard. If you're not working hard,  
you're probably wasting your time.Hard problems call for great  
efforts. In math, difficult proofs require ingenious solutions,  
and those tend to be interesting. Ditto in engineering.When you  
have to climb a mountain you toss everything unnecessary  
out of your pack. And so an architect who has to build  
on a difficult site, or a small budget, will find that he  
is forced to produce an elegant design. Fashions and  
flourishes get knocked aside by the difficult business  
of solving the problem at all.Not every kind of hard is good. There is good pain and bad pain.  
You want the kind of pain you get from going running, not the  
kind you get from stepping on a nail.  
A difficult  
problem could be good for a designer, but a fickle client or unreliable  
materials would not be.In art, the highest place has traditionally been given to  
paintings of people. There is something to this tradition,  
and not just because pictures of faces get to press  
buttons in our brains that other pictures don't. We are   
so good at looking at faces that we force anyone who  
draws them to work hard to satisfy us. If you  
draw a tree and you change the angle of a branch  
five degrees, no one will know. When you change the angle  
of someone's eye five degrees, people notice.When Bauhaus designers adopted Sullivan's "form follows function,"  
what they meant was, form should follow function. And  
if function is hard enough, form is forced to follow it,  
because there is no effort to spare for error. Wild animals  
are beautiful because they have hard lives.Good design looks easy. Like great athletes,  
great designers make it look easy. Mostly this is  
an illusion. The easy, conversational tone of good  
writing comes only on the eighth rewrite.In science and engineering, some of the greatest  
discoveries seem so simple that you say to yourself,  
I could have thought of that. The discoverer is  
entitled to reply, why didn't you?Some Leonardo heads are just a few lines. You look  
at them and you think, all you have to do is get eight  
or ten lines in the right place and you've made this beautiful  
portrait. Well, yes, but you have to get them in  
exactly the right place. The slightest error  
will make the whole thing collapse.Line drawings are in fact the most difficult visual  
medium, because they demand near perfection.  
In math terms, they are a closed-form solution; lesser   
artists literally solve the same problems by successive  
approximation. One of the reasons kids give up drawing  
at ten or so is that they decide to start  
drawing like grownups, and one of the first things  
they try is a line drawing of a face. Smack!In most fields the appearance of ease seems to come with  
practice. Perhaps what practice does is train your  
unconscious mind to handle tasks that used to  
require conscious thought. In some cases  
you literally train your body. An expert pianist can  
play notes faster than the brain can send signals to  
his hand.   
Likewise an artist, after a while, can  
make visual perception flow in through his eye and  
out through his hand as automatically as someone tapping his foot to  
a beat.When people talk about being in  
"the zone," I think what they mean is that the  
spinal cord has the situation under control.  
Your spinal cord is less hesitant, and  
it frees conscious thought for the hard problems.  
Good design uses symmetry.  
I think symmetry may just  
be one way to achieve simplicity, but it's important enough  
to be mentioned on its own.  
Nature uses it a lot, which is a good sign.There are two kinds of symmetry, repetition and recursion.  
Recursion means repetition in subelements, like the  
pattern of veins in a leaf.Symmetry is unfashionable in some fields now, in reaction to  
excesses in the past. Architects started consciously  
making buildings asymmetric in Victorian times and by the  
1920s asymmetry was an explicit premise of modernist architecture.  
Even these buildings only tended to be asymmetric  
about major axes, though; there were hundreds of minor symmetries.In writing you find symmetry at every level, from the phrases  
in a sentence to the plot of a novel. You find the same  
in music and art.  
Mosaics (and some Cezannes) get extra visual punch by making  
the whole picture out of the same atoms. Compositional   
symmetry yields some of the most memorable paintings,   
especially when two halves react to one another, as in   
the Creation of Adam or   
American Gothic.In math and engineering, recursion, especially, is a big win.  
Inductive proofs are wonderfully short. In software,  
a problem that can be solved by recursion is nearly always  
best solved that way. The Eiffel Tower looks striking partly  
because it is a recursive solution, a tower on a tower.The danger of symmetry, and repetition especially, is that  
it can be used as a substitute for thought.Good design resembles nature. It's not so much that  
resembling nature is intrinsically good as that nature  
has had a long time to work on the  
problem. It's a good sign when your answer resembles nature's.It's not cheating to copy.  
Few would deny that a story should be like life.  
Working from life is a valuable tool in painting too, though its  
role has often been misunderstood.  
The aim is not simply to make a record.  
The point of painting from life is  
that it gives your mind something to chew on: when your  
eyes are looking at something, your hand will do more  
interesting work.Imitating nature also works in engineering. Boats have  
long had spines and ribs like an animal's ribcage.  
In some cases we may have to wait for better technology:  
early aircraft designers were mistaken to  
design aircraft that looked like birds, because they didn't  
have materials or power sources light enough (the Wrights' engine  
weighed 152 lbs. and  
generated only 12 hp.) or control systems sophisticated  
enough for machines that flew like birds, but I could  
imagine little unmanned reconnaissance planes flying  
like birds in fifty years.Now that we have enough computer power, we can imitate nature's   
method as well as its results. Genetic algorithms may let us  
create things too complex to design in the ordinary  
sense.Good design is redesign. It's rare to get things right  
the first time. Experts expect to throw away some early work.  
They plan for plans to change.It takes confidence to throw work away. You have to be able   
to think, there's more where that came from.   
When people first start drawing, for example,  
they're often reluctant to redo parts that aren't  
right; they feel they've been lucky to get that far,   
and if they try to redo something, it will turn out worse. Instead  
they convince themselves that the drawing is not that bad,  
really-- in fact, maybe they meant it to look that way.Dangerous territory, that; if anything you should  
cultivate dissatisfaction.  
In Leonardo's drawings there are often five  
or six attempts to get a line right.  
The distinctive back of the Porsche  
911 only appeared in the redesign of an awkward   
prototype.  
In Wright's early plans for the   
Guggenheim,  
the right half was a ziggurat; he inverted it to get the  
present shape.Mistakes are natural. Instead of treating them  
as disasters, make them easy to acknowledge and easy to fix.  
Leonardo more or less invented the sketch, as a  
way to make drawing bear a greater weight of exploration.  
Open-source software has fewer bugs because it admits the  
possibility of bugs.It helps to have a medium that makes change easy.  
When oil paint replaced tempera in the fifteenth century,  
it helped  
painters to deal with difficult subjects like the human   
figure because, unlike tempera, oil can be blended and overpainted.  
Good design can copy. Attitudes to copying  
often make a round trip. A novice  
imitates without knowing it; next he tries  
consciously to be original; finally, he decides it's  
more important to be right than original.Unknowing imitation is almost a recipe for bad design.  
If you don't know where your ideas are coming from,  
you're probably imitating an imitator.  
Raphael so pervaded mid-nineteenth century taste that almost   
anyone who tried to draw was imitating him, often at several  
removes.  
It was this, more than Raphael's own work, that bothered  
the Pre-Raphaelites.The ambitious are not content to imitate. The  
second phase in the growth of taste is a conscious  
attempt at originality.I think the  
greatest masters go on to achieve a kind of selflessness.  
They just want to get the right answer, and if part of the  
right answer has already been discovered by someone else,  
that's no reason not to use it.  
They're confident enough to take from anyone without  
feeling that their own vision will be lost in the process.  
Good design is often strange. Some of the very best work  
has an uncanny quality: Euler's   
Formula,   
Bruegel's  
Hunters in the Snow, the   
SR-71, Lisp. They're not just  
beautiful, but strangely beautiful.I'm not sure why. It may just be my own stupidity. A  
can-opener must seem miraculous to a dog. Maybe if I were smart  
enough it would seem the most natural thing in the world that  
ei\*pi = -1. It is after all necessarily true.Most of the qualities I've mentioned are things that can be  
cultivated, but I don't think it works to cultivate strangeness.  
The best you can do is not squash it if it starts to appear.  
Einstein didn't try to make relativity strange.  
He tried to make it true, and the truth turned out to be strange.At an art school where I once studied, the students wanted  
most of all to develop a personal style.  
But if you just try to make good things, you'll   
inevitably do it in a distinctive way, just as each person  
walks in a distinctive way. Michelangelo was not trying  
to paint like Michelangelo. He was just trying to paint  
well; he couldn't help painting like Michelangelo.The only style worth having is the one you can't help.  
And this is especially true for strangeness. There is no  
shortcut to it. The Northwest Passage that the Mannerists,  
the Romantics, and two generations of American high school  
students have searched for does not seem to exist. The  
only way to get there is to go through good and come out  
the other side.  
Good design happens in chunks. The inhabitants  
of fifteenth century Florence included Brunelleschi, Ghiberti,  
Donatello, Masaccio, Filippo Lippi,   
Fra Angelico, Verrocchio, Botticelli, Leonardo, and Michelangelo.  
Milan at the time was as big as Florence.  
How many fifteenth century Milanese artists can you name?Something was happening in Florence in the fifteenth century.  
And it can't have been heredity, because it isn't happening now.  
You have to assume that whatever  
inborn ability Leonardo and Michelangelo had, there were  
people born in Milan with just as much. What happened to  
the Milanese Leonardo?There are roughly a thousand times  
as many people alive in the US right now as lived in  
Florence during the fifteenth century. A thousand Leonardos  
and a thousand Michelangelos walk among us.  
If DNA ruled, we should be greeted daily by artistic  
marvels. We aren't, and the reason is that to make Leonardo  
you need more than his innate ability. You also need Florence   
in 1450.Nothing is more powerful  
than a community of talented people working on related  
problems. Genes count for little by comparison: being a genetic  
Leonardo was not enough to compensate for having been born   
near Milan instead of Florence.  
Today we move around more, but great work still comes  
disproportionately from a few hotspots:  
the Bauhaus, the Manhattan Project, the New Yorker,  
Lockheed's Skunk Works, Xerox Parc.At any given time there are a  
few hot topics and a few groups doing great work on them,  
and it's nearly impossible to do  
good work yourself if you're too far removed from one  
of these centers. You can push or pull these trends  
to some extent, but you can't break away from them.  
(Maybe you can, but the Milanese Leonardo couldn't.)  
Good design is often daring. At every period   
of history, people have believed things that were just   
ridiculous, and believed them so strongly that you risked   
ostracism or even violence by saying otherwise.If our own time were any different, that would be remarkable.  
As far as I can tell it isn't.This problem afflicts not just every  
era, but in some degree every field.  
Much Renaissance art was in its time considered shockingly secular:  
according to Vasari, Botticelli repented and gave up painting, and  
Fra Bartolommeo and Lorenzo di Credi actually burned some of their  
work.  
Einstein's theory of relativity offended many contemporary physicists,  
and was not fully accepted for decades-- in France, not until the  
1950s.Today's experimental error is tomorrow's new theory. If  
you want to discover great new things, then instead of turning  
a blind eye to the places where conventional wisdom and  
truth don't quite meet, you should pay particular attention   
to them.As a practical matter, I think it's easier to see ugliness  
than to imagine beauty. Most of the people who've made beautiful  
things seem to have done it by fixing something that they   
thought ugly. Great work usually seems to happen because someone sees  
something and thinks, I could do better than that. Giotto  
saw traditional Byzantine madonnas painted according to a  
formula that had satisfied everyone for centuries, and to him  
they looked wooden and unnatural.  
Copernicus was so troubled by a hack that all his contemporaries  
could tolerate that he felt there must be a better solution.Intolerance for ugliness is not in itself enough. You have to  
understand a field well before you develop a good nose for  
what needs fixing. You have to do your homework. But as  
you become expert in a field, you'll start to hear little  
voices saying, What a hack! There must be a better way.  
Don't ignore those voices. Cultivate them. The recipe for  
great work is: very exacting taste, plus the ability  
to gratify it.NotesSullivan  
 actually said "form ever follows function," but   
I think the usual misquotation is closer to what modernist  
architects meant.  
Stephen G. Brush, "Why was Relativity Accepted?"  
Phys. Perspect. 1 (1999) 184-214.Japanese TranslationChinese TranslationSlovenian TranslationGerman TranslationInterview: Milton GlaserRussian Translation  
  
You'll find this essay and 14 others in  
Hackers & Painters.

# Why Arc Isn't Especially Object-Oriented

There is a kind of mania for object-oriented programming at the moment, but  
  
some of the smartest programmers I know are some of the least excited about it.My own feeling is that object-oriented  
programming is a useful technique in some  
cases, but it isn't something that has to pervade every program you  
write. You should be able to define new types,  
but you shouldn't have to express every program as the  
definition of new types.I think there are five reasons people like object-oriented   
programming, and three and a half of them are bad:  
 Object-oriented programming is exciting   
if you have a statically-typed language without   
lexical closures or macros. To some degree, it offers a way around these  
limitations. (See Greenspun's Tenth Rule.) Object-oriented programming is popular in big companies,  
because it suits the way they write software. At big companies,  
software tends to be written by large (and frequently changing)   
teams of  
mediocre programmers. Object-oriented programming imposes a  
discipline on these programmers that prevents any one of them  
from doing too much damage. The price is that the resulting  
code is bloated with protocols and full of duplication.   
This is not too high a price for big companies, because their  
software is probably going to be bloated and full of   
duplication anyway. Object-oriented  
programming generates a lot of what looks like work.  
Back in the days of fanfold, there was a type of programmer who  
would only put five or ten lines of code on a page, preceded  
by twenty lines of elaborately formatted comments.   
Object-oriented programming is like crack for these people: it lets  
you incorporate all this scaffolding right into your source  
code. Something that a Lisp hacker might handle by pushing  
a symbol onto a list becomes a whole file of classes and  
methods. So it is a good tool if you want to convince yourself,  
or someone else, that you are doing a lot of work. If a language is itself an object-oriented program, it can  
be extended by users. Well, maybe. Or maybe you can do  
even better by offering the sub-concepts  
of object-oriented programming a la carte. Overloading,   
for example, is not intrinsically tied to classes. We'll see. Object-oriented abstractions map neatly onto the domains  
of certain specific kinds of programs, like simulations and CAD  
systems.   
  
  
I personally have never needed object-oriented abstractions.  
Common Lisp has an enormously powerful object system and I've  
never used it once. I've done a lot of things (e.g. making   
hash tables full of closures) that would have required   
object-oriented techniques to do in wimpier languages, but  
I have never had to use CLOS.Maybe I'm just stupid, or have worked on some limited subset  
of applications. There is a danger in designing a language  
based on one's own experience of programming. But it seems  
more dangerous to put stuff in that you've never needed   
because it's thought to be a good idea.Rees Re: OOSpanish Translation

# What Made Lisp Different

December 2001 (rev. May 2002)  
  
(This article came about in response to some questions on  
the LL1 mailing list. It is now  
incorporated in Revenge of the Nerds.)When McCarthy designed Lisp in the late 1950s, it was  
a radical departure from existing languages,  
the most important of which was Fortran.Lisp embodied nine new ideas:  
1. Conditionals. A conditional is an if-then-else  
construct. We take these for granted now. They were   
invented  
by McCarthy in the course of developing Lisp.   
(Fortran at that time only had a conditional  
goto, closely based on the branch instruction in the   
underlying hardware.) McCarthy, who was on the Algol committee, got  
conditionals into Algol, whence they spread to most other  
languages.2. A function type. In Lisp, functions are first class   
objects-- they're a data type just like integers, strings,  
etc, and have a literal representation, can be stored in variables,  
can be passed as arguments, and so on.3. Recursion. Recursion existed as a mathematical concept  
before Lisp of course, but Lisp was the first programming language to support  
it. (It's arguably implicit in making functions first class  
objects.)4. A new concept of variables. In Lisp, all variables  
are effectively pointers. Values are what  
have types, not variables, and assigning or binding  
variables means copying pointers, not what they point to.5. Garbage-collection.6. Programs composed of expressions. Lisp programs are   
trees of expressions, each of which returns a value.   
(In some Lisps expressions  
can return multiple values.) This is in contrast to Fortran  
and most succeeding languages, which distinguish between  
expressions and statements.It was natural to have this  
distinction in Fortran because (not surprisingly in a language  
where the input format was punched cards) the language was  
line-oriented. You could not nest statements. And  
so while you needed expressions for math to work, there was  
no point in making anything else return a value, because  
there could not be anything waiting for it.This limitation  
went away with the arrival of block-structured languages,  
but by then it was too late. The distinction between  
expressions and statements was entrenched. It spread from   
Fortran into Algol and thence to both their descendants.When a language is made entirely of expressions, you can  
compose expressions however you want. You can say either  
(using Arc syntax)(if foo (= x 1) (= x 2))or(= x (if foo 1 2))7. A symbol type. Symbols differ from strings in that  
you can test equality by comparing a pointer.8. A notation for code using trees of symbols.9. The whole language always available.   
There is  
no real distinction between read-time, compile-time, and runtime.  
You can compile or run code while reading, read or run code  
while compiling, and read or compile code at runtime.Running code at read-time lets users reprogram Lisp's syntax;  
running code at compile-time is the basis of macros; compiling  
at runtime is the basis of Lisp's use as an extension  
language in programs like Emacs; and reading at runtime  
enables programs to communicate using s-expressions, an  
idea recently reinvented as XML.  
When Lisp was first invented, all these ideas were far  
removed from ordinary programming practice, which was  
dictated largely by the hardware available in the late 1950s.Over time, the default language, embodied  
in a succession of popular languages, has  
gradually evolved toward Lisp. 1-5 are now widespread.  
6 is starting to appear in the mainstream.  
Python has a form of 7, though there doesn't seem to be  
any syntax for it.   
8, which (with 9) is what makes Lisp macros  
possible, is so far still unique to Lisp,  
perhaps because (a) it requires those parens, or something   
just as bad, and (b) if you add that final increment of power,   
you can no   
longer claim to have invented a new language, but only  
to have designed a new dialect of Lisp ; -)Though useful to present-day programmers, it's  
strange to describe Lisp in terms of its  
variation from the random expedients other languages  
adopted. That was not, probably, how McCarthy  
thought of it. Lisp wasn't designed to fix the mistakes  
in Fortran; it came about more as the byproduct of an  
attempt to axiomatize computation.Japanese Translation

# The Other Road Ahead

September 2001  
(This article explains why much of the next generation of software  
may be server-based, what that will mean for programmers,  
and why this new kind of software is a great opportunity for startups.  
It's derived from a talk at BBN Labs.)  
In the summer of 1995, my friend Robert Morris and I decided to  
start a startup. The PR campaign leading up to Netscape's IPO was  
running full blast then, and there was a lot of talk in the press  
about online commerce. At the time there might have been thirty  
actual stores on the Web, all made by hand. If there were going  
to be a lot of online stores, there would need to be software for making  
them, so we decided to write some.For the first week or so we intended to make this an ordinary   
desktop application. Then one day we had the idea of making the  
software run on our Web server, using the browser as an  
interface. We tried rewriting the software to work over  
the Web, and it was clear that this was the way to go.  
If we wrote our software to run on the server, it would be a lot easier  
for the users and for us as well.This turned out to be a good plan. Now, as   
Yahoo Store, this  
software is the most popular online store builder, with  
about 14,000 users.When we started Viaweb, hardly anyone understood what we meant when  
we said that the software ran on the server. It was not until  
Hotmail was launched a year later that people started to get it.  
Now everyone knows that this is a valid approach. There is  
a name now for what we were: an Application Service Provider,  
or ASP.I think that a lot of the next generation of software will be  
written on this model. Even Microsoft, who have the most to  
lose, seem to see the inevitablity of moving some things off  
the desktop. If software moves  
off the desktop and onto servers, it will mean a very different  
world for developers. This article describes the surprising  
things we saw, as some of the first visitors to this new world.  
To the extent software does move onto  
servers, what I'm describing here is the future.The Next Thing?When we look back on the desktop software era, I think we'll marvel  
at the inconveniences people put up with, just as we marvel now at  
what early car owners put up with. For the first twenty or thirty  
years, you had to be a car expert to own a car. But cars were such  
a big win that lots of people who weren't car experts wanted to  
have them as well.Computers are in this phase now. When you own a desktop computer,  
you end up learning a lot more than you wanted to know about what's  
happening inside it. But more than half the households in the US  
own one. My mother has a computer that she uses for email and for  
keeping accounts. About a year ago she was alarmed to receive a  
letter from Apple, offering her a discount on a new version of the  
operating system. There's something wrong when a sixty-five year  
old woman who wants to use a computer for email and accounts has  
to think about installing new operating systems. Ordinary users  
shouldn't even know the words "operating system," much less "device  
driver" or "patch."There is now another way to deliver software that will save users  
from becoming system administrators. Web-based applications are  
programs that run on Web servers and use Web pages as the user  
interface. For the average user this new kind of software will be  
easier, cheaper, more mobile, more reliable, and often more powerful  
than desktop software.With Web-based software, most users won't have to think about  
anything except the applications they use. All the messy, changing  
stuff will be sitting on a server somewhere, maintained by the kind  
of people who are good at that kind of thing. And so you won't  
ordinarily need a computer, per se, to use software. All you'll  
need will be something with a keyboard, a screen, and a Web browser.  
Maybe it will have wireless Internet access. Maybe it will also  
be your cell phone. Whatever it is, it will be consumer electronics:  
something that costs about $200, and that people choose mostly  
based on how the case looks. You'll pay more for Internet services  
than you do for the hardware, just as you do now with telephones. [1]It will take about a tenth of a second for a click to get to the  
server and back, so users of heavily interactive software, like  
Photoshop, will still want to have the computations happening on  
the desktop. But if you look at the kind of things most people  
use computers for, a tenth of a second latency would not be a  
problem. My mother doesn't really need a desktop computer, and  
there are a lot of people like her.The Win for UsersNear my house there is a car with a bumper sticker that reads "death  
before inconvenience." Most people, most of the time, will take  
whatever choice requires least work. If Web-based software wins,  
it will be because it's more convenient. And it looks as if it  
will be, for users and developers both.To use a purely Web-based application, all you need is a browser  
connected to the Internet. So you can use a Web-based application  
anywhere. When you install software on your desktop computer, you  
can only use it on that computer. Worse still, your files are  
trapped on that computer. The inconvenience of this model becomes  
more and more evident as people get used to networks.The thin end of the wedge here was Web-based email. Millions of  
people now realize that you should have access to email messages  
no matter where you are. And if you can see your email, why not  
your calendar?   
If you can discuss a document with your colleagues,  
why can't you edit it? Why should any of your data be trapped on  
some computer sitting on a faraway desk?The whole idea of "your computer" is going away, and being replaced  
with "your data." You should be able to get at your data from any  
computer. Or rather, any client, and a client doesn't have to be  
a computer.Clients shouldn't store data; they should be like telephones. In  
fact they may become telephones, or vice versa. And as clients  
get smaller, you have another reason not to keep your data on them:  
something you carry around with you can be lost or stolen. Leaving  
your PDA in a taxi is like a disk crash, except that your data is  
handed to someone else   
instead of being vaporized.With purely Web-based software, neither your data nor the applications  
are kept on the client. So you don't have to install anything to  
use it. And when there's no installation, you don't have to worry  
about installation going wrong. There can't be incompatibilities  
between the application and your operating system, because the  
software doesn't run on your operating system.Because it needs no installation, it will be easy, and common, to  
try Web-based software before you "buy" it. You should expect to  
be able to test-drive any Web-based application for free, just by  
going to the site where it's offered. At Viaweb our whole site  
was like a big arrow pointing users to the test drive.After trying the demo, signing up for the service should require  
nothing more than filling out a brief form (the briefer the better).  
And that should be the last work the user has to do. With Web-based  
software, you should get new releases without paying extra, or  
doing any work, or possibly even knowing about it.Upgrades won't be the big shocks they are now. Over time applications  
will quietly grow more powerful. This will take some effort on  
the part of the developers. They will have to design software so  
that it can be updated without confusing the users. That's a new  
problem, but there are ways to solve it.With Web-based applications, everyone uses the same version, and  
bugs can be fixed as soon as they're discovered. So Web-based  
software should have far fewer bugs than desktop software. At  
Viaweb, I doubt we ever had ten known bugs at any one time. That's  
orders of magnitude better than desktop software.Web-based applications can be used by several people at the same  
time. This is an obvious win for collaborative applications, but  
I bet users will start to want this in most applications once they  
realize it's possible. It will often be useful to let two people  
edit the same document, for example. Viaweb let multiple users  
edit a site simultaneously, more because that was the right way to  
write the software than because we expected users to want to, but  
it turned out that many did.When you use a Web-based application, your data will be safer.  
Disk crashes won't be a thing of the past, but users won't hear  
about them anymore. They'll happen within server farms. And  
companies offering Web-based applications will actually do backups--  
not only because they'll have real system administrators worrying  
about such things, but because an ASP that does lose people's data  
will be in big, big trouble. When people lose their own data in  
a disk crash, they can't get that mad, because they only have  
themselves to be mad at. When a company loses their data for them,  
they'll get a lot madder.Finally, Web-based software should be less vulnerable to viruses.  
If the client doesn't run anything except a browser, there's less  
chance of running viruses, and no data locally to damage. And a  
program that attacked the servers themselves should find them very  
well defended. [2]For users, Web-based software will be less stressful. I think if  
you looked inside the average Windows user you'd find a huge and  
pretty much untapped desire for software meeting that description.  
Unleashed, it could be a powerful force.City of CodeTo developers, the most conspicuous difference between Web-based  
and desktop software is that a Web-based application is not a single  
piece of code. It will be a collection of programs of different  
types rather than a single big binary. And so designing Web-based  
software is like desiging a city rather than a building: as well  
as buildings you need roads, street signs, utilities, police and  
fire departments, and plans for both growth and various kinds of  
disasters.At Viaweb, software included fairly big applications that users  
talked to directly, programs that those programs used, programs  
that ran constantly in the background looking for problems, programs  
that tried to restart things if they broke, programs that ran  
occasionally to compile statistics or build indexes for searches,  
programs we ran explicitly to garbage-collect resources or to move  
or restore data, programs that pretended to be users (to measure  
performance or expose bugs), programs for diagnosing network  
troubles, programs for doing backups, interfaces to outside services,  
software that drove an impressive collection of dials displaying  
real-time server statistics (a hit with visitors, but indispensable  
for us too), modifications (including bug fixes) to open-source  
software, and a great many configuration files and settings. Trevor  
Blackwell wrote a spectacular program for moving stores to new  
servers across the country, without shutting them down, after we  
were bought by Yahoo. Programs paged us, sent faxes and email to  
users, conducted transactions with credit card processors, and  
talked to one another through sockets, pipes, http requests, ssh,  
udp packets, shared memory, and files. Some of Viaweb even consisted  
of the absence of programs, since one of the keys to Unix security  
is not to run unnecessary utilities that people might use to break  
into your servers.It did not end with software. We spent a lot of time thinking  
about server configurations. We built the servers ourselves, from  
components-- partly to save money, and partly to get exactly what  
we wanted. We had to think about whether our upstream ISP had fast  
enough connections to all the backbones. We serially   
dated  
RAID suppliers.But hardware is not just something to worry about. When you control  
it you can do more for users. With a desktop application, you can  
specify certain minimum hardware, but you can't add more. If you  
administer the servers, you can in one step enable all your users  
to page people, or send faxes, or send commands by phone, or process  
credit cards, etc, just by installing the relevant hardware. We  
always looked for new ways to add features with hardware, not just  
because it pleased users, but also as a way to distinguish ourselves  
from competitors who (either because they sold desktop software,  
or resold Web-based applications through ISPs) didn't have direct  
control over the hardware.Because the software in a Web-based application will be a collection  
of programs rather than a single binary, it can be written in any  
number of different languages. When you're writing desktop software,  
you're practically forced to write the application in the same  
language as the underlying operating system-- meaning C and C++.  
And so these languages (especially among nontechnical people like  
managers and VCs) got to be considered as the languages for "serious"  
software development. But that was just an artifact of the way  
desktop software had to be delivered. For server-based software  
you can use any language you want. [3] Today a lot of the top  
hackers are using languages far removed from C and C++: Perl,  
Python, and even Lisp.With server-based software, no one can tell you what language to  
use, because you control the whole system, right down to the  
hardware. Different languages are good for different tasks. You  
can use whichever is best for each. And when you have competitors,  
"you can" means "you must" (we'll return to this later), because  
if you don't take advantage of this possibility, your competitors  
will.Most of our competitors used C and C++, and this made their software  
visibly inferior because (among other things), they had no way  
around the statelessness of CGI scripts. If you were going to  
change something, all the changes had to happen on one page, with  
an Update button at the bottom. As I've written elsewhere, by  
using Lisp, which many people still consider   
a research language,  
we could make the Viaweb editor behave more like desktop software.ReleasesOne of the most important changes in this new world is the way you  
do releases. In the desktop software business, doing a release is  
a huge trauma, in which the whole company sweats and strains to  
push out a single, giant piece of code. Obvious comparisons suggest  
themselves, both to the process and the resulting product.With server-based software, you can make changes almost as you  
would in a program you were writing for yourself. You release  
software as a series of incremental changes instead of an occasional  
big explosion. A typical desktop software company might do one or  
two releases a year. At Viaweb we often did three to five releases  
a day.When you switch to this new model, you realize how much software  
development is affected by the way it is released. Many of the  
nastiest problems you see in the desktop software business are due  
to catastrophic nature of releases.When you release only one new version a year, you tend to deal with  
bugs wholesale. Some time before the release date you assemble a  
new version in which half the code has been torn out and replaced,  
introducing countless bugs. Then a squad of QA people step in and  
start counting them, and the programmers work down the list, fixing  
them. They do not generally get to the end of the list, and indeed,  
no one is sure where the end is. It's like fishing rubble out of  
a pond. You never really know what's happening inside the software.  
At best you end up with a statistical sort of correctness.With server-based software, most of the change is small and  
incremental. That in itself is less likely to introduce bugs. It  
also means you know what to test most carefully when you're about  
to release software: the last thing you changed. You end up with  
a much firmer grip on the code. As a general rule, you do know  
what's happening inside it. You don't have the source code memorized,  
of course, but when you read the source you do it like a pilot  
scanning the instrument panel, not like a detective trying to  
unravel some mystery.Desktop software breeds a certain fatalism about bugs. You know  
that you're shipping something loaded with bugs, and you've even  
set up mechanisms to compensate for it (e.g. patch releases). So  
why worry about a few more? Soon you're releasing whole features  
you know are broken.   
Apple   
did this earlier this year. They felt  
under pressure to release their new OS, whose release date had  
already slipped four times, but some of the software (support for  
CDs and DVDs) wasn't ready. The solution? They released the OS  
without the unfinished parts, and users will have to install them  
later.With Web-based software, you never have to release software before  
it works, and you can release it as soon as it does work.The industry veteran may be thinking, it's a fine-sounding idea to  
say that you never have to release software before it works, but  
what happens when you've promised to deliver a new version of your  
software by a certain date? With Web-based software, you wouldn't  
make such a promise, because there are no versions. Your software  
changes gradually and continuously. Some changes might be bigger  
than others, but the idea of versions just doesn't naturally fit  
onto Web-based software.If anyone remembers Viaweb this might sound odd, because we were  
always announcing new versions. This was done entirely for PR  
purposes. The trade press, we learned, thinks in version numbers.  
They will give you major coverage for a major release, meaning a  
new first digit on the version number, and generally a paragraph  
at most for a point release, meaning a new digit after the decimal  
point.Some of our competitors were offering desktop software and actually  
had version numbers. And for these releases, the mere fact of  
which seemed to us evidence of their backwardness, they would get  
all kinds of publicity. We didn't want to miss out, so we started  
giving version numbers to our software too. When we wanted some  
publicity, we'd make a list of all the features we'd added since  
the last "release," stick a new version number on the software,  
and issue a press release saying that the new version was available  
immediately. Amazingly, no one ever called us on it.By the time we were bought, we had done this three times, so we  
were on Version 4. Version 4.1 if I remember correctly. After  
Viaweb became Yahoo Store, there was no longer such a desperate  
need for publicity, so although the software continued to evolve,  
the whole idea of version numbers was quietly dropped.BugsThe other major technical advantage of Web-based software is that  
you can reproduce most bugs. You have the users' data right there  
on your disk. If someone breaks your software, you don't have to  
try to guess what's going on, as you would with desktop software:  
you should be able to reproduce the error while they're on the  
phone with you. You might even know about it already, if you have  
code for noticing errors built into your application.Web-based software gets used round the clock, so everything you do  
is immediately put through the wringer. Bugs turn up quickly.Software companies are sometimes accused of letting the users debug  
their software. And that is just what I'm advocating. For Web-based  
software it's actually a good plan, because the bugs are fewer and  
transient. When you release software gradually you get far fewer  
bugs to start with. And when you can reproduce errors and release  
changes instantly, you can find and fix most bugs as soon as they  
appear. We never had enough bugs at any one time to bother with  
a formal bug-tracking system.You should test changes before you release them, of course, so no  
major bugs should get released. Those few that inevitably slip  
through will involve borderline cases and will only affect the few  
users that encounter them before someone calls in to complain. As  
long as you fix bugs right away, the net effect, for the average  
user, is far fewer bugs. I doubt the average Viaweb user ever saw  
a bug.Fixing fresh bugs is easier than fixing old ones. It's usually  
fairly quick to find a bug in code you just wrote. When it turns  
up you often know what's wrong before you even look at the source,  
because you were already worrying about it subconsciously. Fixing  
a bug in something you wrote six months ago (the average case if  
you release once a year) is a lot more work. And since you don't  
understand the code as well, you're more likely to fix it in an  
ugly way, or even introduce more bugs. [4]When you catch bugs early, you also get fewer compound bugs.  
Compound bugs are two separate bugs that interact: you trip going  
downstairs, and when you reach for the handrail it comes off in  
your hand. In software this kind of bug is the hardest to find,  
and also tends to have the worst consequences. [5] The traditional  
"break everything and then filter out the bugs" approach inherently  
yields a lot of compound bugs. And software that's released in a  
series of small changes inherently tends not to. The floors are  
constantly being swept clean of any loose objects that might later  
get stuck in something.It helps if you use a technique called functional programming.  
Functional programming means avoiding side-effects. It's something  
you're more likely to see in research papers than commercial  
software, but for Web-based applications it turns out to be really  
useful. It's hard to write entire programs as purely functional  
code, but you can write substantial chunks this way. It makes  
those parts of your software easier to test, because they have no  
state, and that is very convenient in a situation where you are  
constantly making and testing small modifications. I wrote much  
of Viaweb's editor in this style, and we made our scripting language,  
RTML,   
a purely functional language.People from the desktop software business will find this hard to  
credit, but at Viaweb bugs became almost a game. Since most released  
bugs involved borderline cases, the users who encountered them were  
likely to be advanced users, pushing the envelope. Advanced users  
are more forgiving about bugs, especially since you probably  
introduced them in the course of adding some feature they were  
asking for. In fact, because bugs were rare and you had to be  
doing sophisticated things to see them, advanced users were often  
proud to catch one. They would call support in a spirit more of  
triumph than anger, as if they had scored points off us.SupportWhen you can reproduce errors, it changes your approach to customer  
support. At most software companies, support is offered as a way  
to make customers feel better. They're either calling you about  
a known bug, or they're just doing something wrong and you have to  
figure out what. In either case there's not much you can learn  
from them. And so you tend to view support calls as a pain in the  
ass that you want to isolate from your developers as much as  
possible.This was not how things worked at Viaweb. At Viaweb, support was  
free, because we wanted to hear from customers. If someone had a  
problem, we wanted to know about it right away so that we could  
reproduce the error and release a fix.So at Viaweb the developers were always in close contact with  
support. The customer support people were about thirty feet away  
from the programmers, and knew that they could always interrupt  
anything with a report of a genuine bug. We would leave a board  
meeting to fix a serious bug.Our approach to support made everyone happier. The customers were  
delighted. Just imagine how it would feel to call a support line  
and be treated as someone bringing important news. The customer  
support people liked it because it meant they could help the users,  
instead of reading scripts to them. And the programmers liked it  
because they could reproduce bugs instead of just hearing vague  
second-hand reports about them.Our policy of fixing bugs on the fly changed the relationship  
between customer support people and hackers. At most software  
companies, support people are underpaid human shields, and hackers  
are little copies of God the Father, creators of the world. Whatever  
the procedure for reporting bugs, it is likely to be one-directional:  
support people who hear about bugs fill out some form that eventually  
gets passed on (possibly via QA) to programmers, who put it on  
their list of things to do. It was very different at Viaweb.  
Within a minute of hearing about a bug from a customer, the support  
people could be standing next to a programmer hearing him say "Shit,  
you're right, it's a bug." It delighted the support people to hear  
that "you're right" from the hackers. They used to bring us bugs  
with the same expectant air as a cat bringing you a mouse it has  
just killed. It also made them more careful in judging the  
seriousness of a bug, because now their honor was on the line.After we were bought by Yahoo, the customer support people were  
moved far away from the programmers. It was only then that we  
realized that they were effectively QA and to some extent marketing  
as well. In addition to catching bugs, they were the keepers of  
the knowledge of vaguer, buglike things, like features that confused  
users. [6] They were also a kind of proxy focus group; we could  
ask them which of two new features users wanted more, and they were  
always right.MoraleBeing able to release software immediately is a big motivator.  
Often as I was walking to work I would think of some change I wanted  
to make to the software, and do it that day. This worked for bigger  
features as well. Even if something was going to take two weeks  
to write (few projects took longer), I knew I could see the effect  
in the software as soon as it was done.If I'd had to wait a year for the next release, I would have shelved  
most of these ideas, for a while at least. The thing about ideas,  
though, is that they lead to more ideas. Have you ever noticed  
that when you sit down to write something, half the ideas that end  
up in it are ones you thought of while writing it? The same thing  
happens with software. Working to implement one idea gives you  
more ideas. So shelving an idea costs you not only that delay in  
implementing it, but also all the ideas that implementing it would  
have led to. In fact, shelving an idea probably even inhibits new  
ideas: as you start to think of some new feature, you catch sight  
of the shelf and think "but I already have a lot of new things I  
want to do for the next release."What big companies do instead of implementing features is plan  
them. At Viaweb we sometimes ran into trouble on this account.  
Investors and analysts would ask us what we had planned for the  
future. The truthful answer would have been, we didn't have any  
plans. We had general ideas about things we wanted to improve,  
but if we knew how we would have done it already. What were we  
going to do in the next six months? Whatever looked like the biggest  
win. I don't know if I ever dared give this answer, but that was  
the truth. Plans are just another word for ideas on the shelf.  
When we thought of good ideas, we implemented them.At Viaweb, as at many software companies, most code had one definite  
owner. But when you owned something you really owned it: no one  
except the owner of a piece of software had to approve (or even  
know about) a release. There was no protection against breakage  
except the fear of looking like an idiot to one's peers, and that  
was more than enough. I may have given the impression that we just  
blithely plowed forward writing code. We did go fast, but we  
thought very carefully before we released software onto those  
servers. And paying attention is more important to reliability  
than moving slowly. Because he pays close attention, a Navy pilot  
can land a 40,000 lb. aircraft at 140 miles per hour on a pitching  
carrier deck, at night, more safely than the average teenager can  
cut a bagel.This way of writing software is a double-edged sword of course.  
It works a lot better for a small team of good, trusted programmers  
than it would for a big company of mediocre ones, where bad ideas  
are caught by committees instead of the people that had them.Brooks in ReverseFortunately, Web-based software does require fewer programmers.  
I once worked for a medium-sized desktop software company that had  
over 100 people working in engineering as a whole. Only 13 of  
these were in product development. All the rest were working on  
releases, ports, and so on. With Web-based software, all you need  
(at most) are the 13 people, because there are no releases, ports,  
and so on.Viaweb was written by just three people. [7] I was always under  
pressure to hire more, because we wanted to get bought, and we knew  
that buyers would have a hard time paying a high price for a company  
with only three programmers. (Solution: we hired more, but created  
new projects for them.)When you can write software with fewer programmers, it saves you  
more than money. As Fred Brooks pointed out in The Mythical  
Man-Month, adding people to a project tends to slow it down. The  
number of possible connections between developers grows exponentially  
with the size of the group. The larger the group, the more time  
they'll spend in meetings negotiating how their software will work  
together, and the more bugs they'll get from unforeseen interactions.  
Fortunately, this process also works in reverse: as groups get  
smaller, software development gets exponentially more efficient.  
I can't remember the programmers at Viaweb ever having an actual  
meeting. We never had more to say at any one time than we could  
say as we were walking to lunch.If there is a downside here, it is that all the programmers have  
to be to some degree system administrators as well. When you're  
hosting software, someone has to be watching the servers, and in  
practice the only people who can do this properly are the ones who  
wrote the software. At Viaweb our system had so many components  
and changed so frequently that there was no definite border between  
software and infrastructure. Arbitrarily declaring such a border  
would have constrained our design choices. And so although we were  
constantly hoping that one day ("in a couple months") everything  
would be stable enough that we could hire someone whose job was  
just to worry about the servers, it never happened.I don't think it could be any other way, as long as you're still  
actively developing the product. Web-based software is never going  
to be something you write, check in, and go home. It's a live  
thing, running on your servers right now. A bad bug might not just  
crash one user's process; it could crash them all. If a bug in  
your code corrupts some data on disk, you have to fix it. And so  
on. We found that you don't have to watch the servers every minute  
(after the first year or so), but you definitely want to keep an  
eye on things you've changed recently. You don't release code late  
at night and then go home.Watching UsersWith server-based software, you're in closer touch with your code.  
You can also be in closer touch with your users. Intuit is famous  
for introducing themselves to customers at retail stores and asking  
to follow them home. If you've ever watched someone use your  
software for the first time, you know what surprises must have  
awaited them.Software should do what users think it will. But you can't have  
any idea what users will be thinking, believe me, until you watch  
them. And server-based software gives you unprecedented information  
about their behavior. You're not limited to small, artificial  
focus groups. You can see every click made by every user. You  
have to consider carefully what you're going to look at, because  
you don't want to violate users' privacy, but even the most general  
statistical sampling can be very useful.When you have the users on your server, you don't have to rely on  
benchmarks, for example. Benchmarks are simulated users. With  
server-based software, you can watch actual users. To decide what  
to optimize, just log into a server and see what's consuming all  
the CPU. And you know when to stop optimizing too: we eventually  
got the Viaweb editor to the point where it was memory-bound rather  
than CPU-bound, and since there was nothing we could do to decrease  
the size of users' data (well, nothing easy), we knew we might as  
well stop there.Efficiency matters for server-based software, because you're paying  
for the hardware. The number of users you can support per server  
is the divisor of your capital cost, so if you can make your software  
very efficient you can undersell competitors and still make a  
profit. At Viaweb we got the capital cost per user down to about  
$5. It would be less now, probably less than the cost of sending  
them the first month's bill. Hardware is free now, if your software  
is reasonably efficient.Watching users can guide you in design as well as optimization.  
Viaweb had a scripting language called RTML that let advanced users  
define their own page styles. We found that RTML became a kind of  
suggestion box, because users only used it when the predefined page  
styles couldn't do what they wanted. Originally the editor put  
button bars across the page, for example, but after a number of  
users used RTML to put buttons down the left   
side,   
we made that an  
option (in fact the default) in the predefined page styles.Finally, by watching users you can often tell when they're in  
trouble. And since the customer is always right, that's a sign of  
something you need to fix. At Viaweb the key to getting users was  
the online test drive. It was not just a series of slides built  
by marketing people. In our test drive, users actually used the  
software. It took about five minutes, and at the end of it they  
had built a real, working store.  
The test drive was the way we got nearly all our new users. I  
think it will be the same for most Web-based applications. If  
users can get through a test drive successfully, they'll like the  
product. If they get confused or bored, they won't. So anything  
we could do to get more people through the test drive would increase  
our growth rate.I studied click trails of people taking the test drive and found  
that at a certain step they would get confused and click on the  
browser's Back button. (If you try writing Web-based applications,  
you'll find that the Back button becomes one of your most interesting  
philosophical problems.) So I added a message at that point, telling  
users that they were nearly finished, and reminding them not to  
click on the Back button. Another great thing about Web-based  
software is that you get instant feedback from changes: the number  
of people completing the test drive rose immediately from 60% to  
90%. And since the number of new users was a function of the number  
of completed test drives, our revenue growth increased by 50%, just  
from that change.MoneyIn the early 1990s I read an article in which someone said that  
software was a subscription business. At first this seemed a very  
cynical statement. But later I realized that it reflects reality:  
software development is an ongoing process. I think it's cleaner  
if you openly charge subscription fees, instead of forcing people  
to keep buying and installing new versions so that they'll keep  
paying you. And fortunately, subscriptions are the natural way to  
bill for Web-based applications.Hosting applications is an area where companies will play a role  
that is not likely to be filled by freeware. Hosting applications  
is a lot of stress, and has real expenses. No one is going to want  
to do it for free.For companies, Web-based applications are an ideal source of revenue.  
Instead of starting each quarter with a blank slate, you have a  
recurring revenue stream. Because your software evolves gradually,  
you don't have to worry that a new model will flop; there never  
need be a new model, per se, and if you do something to the software  
that users hate, you'll know right away. You have no trouble with  
uncollectable bills; if someone won't pay you can just turn off  
the service. And there is no possibility of piracy.That last "advantage" may turn out to be a problem. Some amount  
of piracy is to the advantage of software companies. If some user  
really would not have bought your software at any price, you haven't  
lost anything if he uses a pirated copy. In fact you gain, because  
he is one more user helping to make your software the standard--  
or who might buy a copy later, when he graduates from high school.When they can, companies like to do something called price  
discrimination, which means charging each customer as much as they  
can afford. [8] Software is particularly suitable for price  
discrimination, because the marginal cost is close to zero. This  
is why some software costs more to run on Suns than on Intel boxes:  
a company that uses Suns is not interested in saving money and can  
safely be charged more. Piracy is effectively the lowest tier of  
price discrimination. I think that software companies understand  
this and deliberately turn a blind eye to some kinds of piracy. [9]   
With server-based software they are going to have to come up with   
some other solution.Web-based software sells well, especially in comparison to desktop  
software, because it's easy to buy. You might think that people  
decide to buy something, and then buy it, as two separate steps.  
That's what I thought before Viaweb, to the extent I thought about  
the question at all. In fact the second step can propagate back  
into the first: if something is hard to buy, people will change  
their mind about whether they wanted it. And vice versa: you'll  
sell more of something when it's easy to buy. I buy more books  
because Amazon exists. Web-based software is just about the easiest  
thing in the world to buy, especially if you have just done an  
online demo. Users should not have to do much more than enter a  
credit card number. (Make them do more at your peril.)  
Sometimes Web-based software is offered through ISPs acting as  
resellers. This is a bad idea. You have to be administering the  
servers, because you need to be constantly improving both hardware  
and software. If you give up direct control of the servers, you  
give up most of the advantages of developing Web-based applications.Several of our competitors shot themselves in the foot this way--  
usually, I think, because they were overrun by suits who were  
excited about this huge potential channel, and didn't realize that  
it would ruin the product they hoped to sell through it. Selling  
Web-based software through ISPs is like selling sushi through  
vending machines.CustomersWho will the customers be? At Viaweb they were initially individuals  
and smaller companies, and I think this will be the rule with  
Web-based applications. These are the users who are ready to try  
new things, partly because they're more flexible, and partly because  
they want the lower costs of new technology.Web-based applications will often be the best thing for big companies  
too (though they'll be slow to realize it). The best intranet is  
the Internet. If a company uses true Web-based applications, the  
software will work better, the servers will be better administered,  
and employees will have access to the system from anywhere.The argument against this approach usually hinges on security: if  
access is easier for employees, it will be for bad guys too. Some  
larger merchants were reluctant to use Viaweb because they thought  
customers' credit card information would be safer on their own  
servers. It was not easy to make this point diplomatically, but  
in fact the data was almost certainly safer in our hands than  
theirs. Who can hire better people to manage security, a technology  
startup whose whole business is running servers, or a clothing  
retailer? Not only did we have better people worrying about  
security, we worried more about it. If someone broke into the  
clothing retailer's servers, it would affect at most one merchant,  
could probably be hushed up, and in the worst case might get one  
person fired. If someone broke into ours, it could affect thousands  
of merchants, would probably end up as news on CNet, and could put  
us out of business.If you want to keep your money safe, do you keep it under your  
mattress at home, or put it in a bank? This argument applies to  
every aspect of server administration: not just security, but  
uptime, bandwidth, load management, backups, etc. Our existence  
depended on doing these things right. Server problems were the  
big no-no for us, like a dangerous toy would be for a toy maker,  
or a salmonella outbreak for a food processor.A big company that uses Web-based applications is to that extent  
outsourcing IT. Drastic as it sounds, I think this is generally  
a good idea. Companies are likely to get better service this way  
than they would from in-house system administrators. System  
administrators can become cranky and unresponsive because they're  
not directly exposed to competitive pressure: a salesman has to  
deal with customers, and a developer has to deal with competitors'  
software, but a system administrator, like an old bachelor, has  
few external forces to keep him in line. [10] At Viaweb we had  
external forces in plenty to keep us in line. The people calling  
us were customers, not just co-workers. If a server got wedged,  
we jumped; just thinking about it gives me a jolt of adrenaline,  
years later.So Web-based applications will ordinarily be the right answer for  
big companies too. They will be the last to realize it, however,  
just as they were with desktop computers. And partly for the same  
reason: it will be worth a lot of money to convince big companies  
that they need something more expensive.There is always a tendency for rich customers to buy expensive  
solutions, even when cheap solutions are better, because the people  
offering expensive solutions can spend more to sell them. At Viaweb  
we were always up against this. We lost several high-end merchants  
to Web consulting firms who convinced them they'd be better off if  
they paid half a million dollars for a custom-made online store on  
their own server. They were, as a rule, not better off, as more  
than one discovered when Christmas shopping season came around and  
loads rose on their server. Viaweb was a lot more sophisticated  
than what most of these merchants got, but we couldn't afford to  
tell them. At $300 a month, we couldn't afford to send a team of  
well-dressed and authoritative-sounding people to make presentations  
to customers.A large part of what big companies pay extra for is the cost of  
selling expensive things to them. (If the Defense Department pays  
a thousand dollars for toilet seats, it's partly because it costs  
a lot to sell toilet seats for a thousand dollars.) And this is  
one reason intranet software will continue to thrive, even though  
it is probably a bad idea. It's simply more expensive. There is  
nothing you can do about this conundrum, so the best plan is to go  
for the smaller customers first. The rest will come in time.Son of ServerRunning software on the server is nothing new. In fact it's the  
old model: mainframe applications are all server-based. If  
server-based software is such a good idea, why did it lose last  
time? Why did desktop computers eclipse mainframes?At first desktop computers didn't look like much of a threat. The  
first users were all hackers-- or hobbyists, as they were called  
then. They liked microcomputers because they were cheap. For the  
first time, you could have your own computer. The phrase "personal  
computer" is part of the language now, but when it was first used  
it had a deliberately audacious sound, like the phrase "personal  
satellite" would today.Why did desktop computers take over? I think it was because they  
had better software. And I think the reason microcomputer software  
was better was that it could be written by small companies.I don't think many people realize how fragile and tentative startups  
are in the earliest stage. Many startups begin almost by accident--  
as a couple guys, either with day jobs or in school, writing a  
prototype of something that might, if it looks promising, turn into  
a company. At this larval stage, any significant obstacle will stop  
the startup dead in its tracks. Writing mainframe software required  
too much commitment up front. Development machines were expensive,  
and because the customers would be big companies, you'd need an  
impressive-looking sales force to sell it to them. Starting a  
startup to write mainframe software would be a much more serious  
undertaking than just hacking something together on your Apple II  
in the evenings. And so you didn't get a lot of startups writing  
mainframe applications.The arrival of desktop computers inspired a lot of new software,  
because writing applications for them seemed an attainable goal to  
larval startups. Development was cheap, and the customers would  
be individual people that you could reach through computer stores  
or even by mail-order.The application that pushed desktop computers out into the mainstream  
was VisiCalc, the   
first spreadsheet. It was written by two guys  
working in an attic, and yet did things no mainframe software could  
do. [11] VisiCalc was such an advance, in its time, that people  
bought Apple IIs just to run it. And this was the beginning of a  
trend: desktop computers won because startups wrote software for  
them.It looks as if server-based software will be good this time around,  
because startups will write it. Computers are so cheap now that  
you can get started, as we did, using a desktop computer as a  
server. Inexpensive processors have eaten the workstation market  
(you rarely even hear the word now) and are most of the way through  
the server market; Yahoo's servers, which deal with loads as high  
as any on the Internet, all have the same inexpensive Intel processors  
that you have in your desktop machine. And once you've written  
the software, all you need to sell it is a Web site. Nearly all  
our users came direct to our site through word of mouth and references  
in the press. [12]Viaweb was a typical larval startup. We were terrified of starting  
a company, and for the first few months comforted ourselves by  
treating the whole thing as an experiment that we might call off  
at any moment. Fortunately, there were few obstacles except  
technical ones. While we were writing the software, our Web server  
was the same desktop machine we used for development, connected to  
the outside world by a dialup line. Our only expenses in that  
phase were food and rent.There is all the more reason for startups to write Web-based software  
now, because writing desktop software has become a lot less fun.  
If you want to write desktop software now you do it on Microsoft's  
terms, calling their APIs and working around their buggy OS. And  
if you manage to write something that takes off, you may find that  
you were merely doing market research for Microsoft.If a company wants to make a platform that startups will build on,  
they have to make it something that hackers themselves will want  
to use. That means it has to be inexpensive and well-designed.  
The Mac was popular with hackers when it first came out, and a lot  
of them wrote software for it. [13] You see this less with Windows,  
because hackers don't use it. The kind of people who are good at  
writing software tend to be running Linux or FreeBSD now.I don't think we would have started a startup to write desktop  
software, because desktop software has to run on Windows, and before  
we could write software for Windows we'd have to use it. The Web   
let us do an end-run around Windows, and deliver software running   
on Unix direct to users through the browser. That is a liberating   
prospect, a lot like the arrival of PCs twenty-five years ago.MicrosoftBack when desktop computers arrived, IBM was the giant that everyone  
was afraid of. It's hard to imagine now, but I remember the feeling  
very well. Now the frightening giant is Microsoft, and I don't  
think they are as blind to the threat facing them as IBM was.  
After all, Microsoft deliberately built their business in IBM's  
blind spot.I mentioned earlier that my mother doesn't really need a desktop  
computer. Most users probably don't. That's a problem for Microsoft,  
and they know it. If applications run on remote servers, no one  
needs Windows. What will Microsoft do? Will they be able to use  
their control of the desktop to prevent, or constrain, this new  
generation of software?My guess is that Microsoft will develop some kind of server/desktop  
hybrid, where the operating system works together with servers they  
control. At a minimum, files will be centrally available for users  
who want that. I don't expect Microsoft to go all the way to the  
extreme of doing the computations on the server, with only a browser  
for a client, if they can avoid it. If you only need a browser for  
a client, you don't need Microsoft on the client, and if Microsoft  
doesn't control the client, they can't push users towards their  
server-based applications.I think Microsoft will have a hard time keeping the genie in the  
bottle. There will be too many different types of clients for them  
to control them all. And if Microsoft's applications only work  
with some clients, competitors will be able to trump them by offering  
applications that work from any client. [14]In a world of Web-based applications, there is no automatic place  
for Microsoft. They may succeed in making themselves a place, but  
I don't think they'll dominate this new world as they did the world  
of desktop applications.It's not so much that a competitor will trip them up as that they  
will trip over themselves. With the rise of Web-based software,  
they will be facing not just technical problems but their own  
wishful thinking. What they need to do is cannibalize their existing  
business, and I can't see them facing that. The same single-mindedness  
that has brought them this far will now be working against them.  
IBM was in exactly the same situation, and they could not master  
it. IBM made a late and half-hearted entry into the microcomputer  
business because they were ambivalent about threatening their cash  
cow, mainframe computing. Microsoft will likewise be hampered by  
wanting to save the desktop. A cash cow can be a damned heavy  
monkey on your back.I'm not saying that no one will dominate server-based applications.  
Someone probably will eventually. But I think that there will be  
a good long period of cheerful chaos, just as there was in the  
early days of microcomputers. That was a good time for startups.  
Lots of small companies flourished, and did it by making cool  
things.Startups but More SoThe classic startup is fast and informal, with few people and little  
money. Those few people work very hard, and technology magnifies  
the effect of the decisions they make. If they win, they win big.In a startup writing Web-based applications, everything you associate  
with startups is taken to an extreme. You can write and launch a  
product with even fewer people and even less money. You have to  
be even faster, and you can get away with being more informal.  
You can literally launch your product as three guys sitting in the  
living room of an apartment, and a server collocated at an ISP.  
We did.Over time the teams have gotten smaller, faster, and more informal.  
In 1960, software development meant a roomful of men with horn  
rimmed glasses and narrow black neckties, industriously writing  
ten lines of code a day on IBM coding forms. In 1980, it was a  
team of eight to ten people wearing jeans to the office and typing  
into vt100s. Now it's a couple of guys sitting in a living room  
with laptops. (And jeans turn out not to be the last word in  
informality.)Startups are stressful, and this, unfortunately, is also taken to  
an extreme with Web-based applications.   
Many software companies, especially at the beginning, have periods  
where the developers slept under their desks and so on. The alarming  
thing about Web-based software is that there is nothing to prevent  
this becoming the default. The stories about sleeping under desks  
usually end: then at last we shipped it and we all went home and  
slept for a week. Web-based software never ships. You can work  
16-hour days for as long as you want to. And because you can, and  
your competitors can, you tend to be forced to. You can, so you  
must. It's Parkinson's Law running in reverse.The worst thing is not the hours but the responsibility. Programmers  
and system administrators traditionally each have their own separate  
worries. Programmers have to worry about bugs, and system  
administrators have to worry about infrastructure. Programmers  
may spend a long day up to their elbows in source code, but at some  
point they get to go home and forget about it. System administrators  
never quite leave the job behind, but when they do get paged at  
4:00 AM, they don't usually have to do anything very complicated.  
With Web-based applications, these two kinds of stress get combined.  
The programmers become system administrators, but without the  
sharply defined limits that ordinarily make the job bearable.At Viaweb we spent the first six months just writing software. We  
worked the usual long hours of an early startup. In a desktop  
software company, this would have been the part where we were  
working hard, but it felt like a vacation compared to the next  
phase, when we took users onto our server. The second biggest  
benefit of selling Viaweb to Yahoo (after the money) was to be able  
to dump ultimate responsibility for the whole thing onto the  
shoulders of a big company.Desktop software forces users to become system administrators.  
Web-based software forces programmers to. There is less stress in  
total, but more for the programmers. That's not necessarily bad  
news. If you're a startup competing with a big company, it's good  
news. [15] Web-based applications offer a straightforward way to  
outwork your competitors. No startup asks for more.Just Good EnoughOne thing that might deter you from writing Web-based applications  
is the lameness of Web pages as a UI. That is a problem, I admit.  
There were a few things we would have really liked to add to  
HTML and HTTP. What matters, though, is that Web pages are just  
good enough.There is a parallel here with the first microcomputers. The  
processors in those machines weren't actually intended to be the  
CPUs of computers. They were designed to be used in things like  
traffic lights. But guys like Ed Roberts, who designed the   
Altair,  
realized that they were just good enough. You could combine one  
of these chips with some memory (256 bytes in the first Altair),  
and front panel switches, and you'd have a working computer. Being  
able to have your own computer was so exciting that there were  
plenty of people who wanted to buy them, however limited.Web pages weren't designed to be a UI for applications, but they're  
just good enough. And for a significant number of users, software  
that you can use from any browser will be enough of a win in itself  
to outweigh any awkwardness in the UI. Maybe you can't write the  
best-looking spreadsheet using HTML, but you can write a spreadsheet  
that several people can use simultaneously from different locations  
without special client software, or that can incorporate live data  
feeds, or that can page you when certain conditions are triggered.  
More importantly, you can write new kinds of applications that  
don't even have names yet. VisiCalc was not merely a microcomputer  
version of a mainframe application, after all-- it was a new type  
of application.Of course, server-based applications don't have to be Web-based.  
You could have some other kind of client. But I'm pretty sure  
that's a bad idea. It would be very convenient if you could assume  
that everyone would install your client-- so convenient that you  
could easily convince yourself that they all would-- but if they  
don't, you're hosed. Because Web-based software assumes nothing  
about the client, it will work anywhere the Web works. That's a  
big advantage already, and the advantage will grow as new Web  
devices proliferate. Users will like you because your software  
just works, and your life will be easier because you won't have to  
tweak it for every new client. [16]I feel like I've watched the evolution of the Web as closely as  
anyone, and I can't predict what's going to happen with clients.  
Convergence is probably coming, but where? I can't pick a winner.  
One thing I can predict is conflict between AOL and Microsoft.  
Whatever Microsoft's .NET turns out to be, it will probably involve  
connecting the desktop to servers. Unless AOL fights back, they  
will either be pushed aside or turned into a pipe between Microsoft  
client and server software. If Microsoft and AOL get into a client  
war, the only thing sure to work on both will be browsing the Web,  
meaning Web-based applications will be the only kind that work  
everywhere.How will it all play out? I don't know. And you don't have to  
know if you bet on Web-based applications. No one can break that  
without breaking browsing. The Web may not be the only way to  
deliver software, but it's one that works now and will continue to  
work for a long time. Web-based applications are cheap to develop,  
and easy for even the smallest startup to deliver. They're a lot  
of work, and of a particularly stressful kind, but that only makes  
the odds better for startups.Why Not?E. B. White was amused to learn from a farmer friend that many  
electrified fences don't have any current running through them.  
The cows apparently learn to stay away from them, and after that  
you don't need the current. "Rise up, cows!" he wrote, "Take your  
liberty while despots snore!"If you're a hacker who has thought of one day starting a startup,  
there are probably two things keeping you from doing it. One is  
that you don't know anything about business. The other is that  
you're afraid of competition. Neither of these fences have any  
current in them.There are only two things you have to know about business: build  
something users love, and make more than you spend. If you get  
these two right, you'll be ahead of most startups. You can figure  
out the rest as you go.You may not at first make more than you spend, but as long as the  
gap is closing fast enough you'll be ok. If you start out underfunded,  
it will at least encourage a habit of frugality. The less you  
spend, the easier it is to make more than you spend. Fortunately,  
it can be very cheap to launch a Web-based application. We launched  
on under $10,000, and it would be even cheaper today. We had to  
spend thousands on a server, and thousands more to get SSL. (The  
only company selling SSL software at the time was Netscape.) Now  
you can rent a much more powerful server, with SSL included, for  
less than we paid for bandwidth alone. You could launch a Web-based  
application now for less than the cost of a fancy office chair.As for building something users love, here are some general tips.  
Start by making something clean and simple that you would want to  
use yourself. Get a version 1.0 out fast, then continue to improve  
the software, listening closely to the users as you do. The customer  
is always right, but different customers are right about different  
things; the least sophisticated users show you what you need to  
simplify and clarify, and the most sophisticated tell you what  
features you need to add. The best thing software can be is easy,  
but the way to do this is to get the defaults right, not to limit  
users' choices. Don't get complacent if your competitors' software  
is lame; the standard to compare your software to is what it could  
be, not what your current competitors happen to have. Use your  
software yourself, all the time. Viaweb was supposed to be an  
online store builder, but we used it to make our own site too.  
Don't listen to marketing people or designers or product managers  
just because of their job titles. If they have good ideas, use  
them, but it's up to you to decide; software has to be designed by  
hackers who understand design, not designers who know a little  
about software. If you can't design software as well as implement  
it, don't start a startup.Now let's talk about competition. What you're afraid of is not  
presumably groups of hackers like you, but actual companies, with  
offices and business plans and salesmen and so on, right? Well,  
they are more afraid of you than you are of them, and they're right.  
It's a lot easier for a couple of hackers to figure out how to rent  
office space or hire sales people than it is for a company of any  
size to get software written. I've been on both sides, and I know.  
When Viaweb was bought by Yahoo, I suddenly found myself working  
for a big company, and it was like trying to run through waist-deep  
water.I don't mean to disparage Yahoo. They had some good hackers, and  
the top management were real butt-kickers. For a big company, they  
were exceptional. But they were still only about a tenth as  
productive as a small startup. No big company can do much better  
than that. What's scary about Microsoft is that a company so  
big can develop software at all. They're like a mountain that  
can walk.Don't be intimidated. You can do as much that Microsoft can't as  
they can do that you can't. And no one can stop you. You don't  
have to ask anyone's permission to develop Web-based applications.  
You don't have to do licensing deals, or get shelf space in retail  
stores, or grovel to have your application bundled with the OS.  
You can deliver software right to the browser, and no one can get  
between you and potential users without preventing them from browsing  
the Web.You may not believe it, but I promise you, Microsoft is scared of  
you. The complacent middle managers may not be, but Bill is,  
because he was you once, back in 1975, the last time a new way of  
delivering software appeared.Notes[1] Realizing that much of the money is in the services, companies  
building lightweight clients have usually tried to combine the  
hardware with an   
online service.   
 This approach has not worked  
well, partly because you need two different kinds of companies to  
build consumer electronics and to run an online service, and partly  
because users hate the idea. Giving away the razor and making  
money on the blades may work for Gillette, but a razor is much  
smaller commitment than a Web terminal. Cell phone handset makers  
are satisfied to sell hardware without trying to capture the service  
revenue as well. That should probably be the model for Internet  
clients too. If someone just sold a nice-looking little box with  
a Web browser that you could use to connect through any ISP, every  
technophobe in the country would buy one.[2] Security always depends more on not screwing up than any design  
decision, but the nature of server-based software will make developers  
pay more attention to not screwing up. Compromising a server could  
cause such damage that ASPs (that want to stay in business) are  
likely to be careful about security.[3] In 1995, when we started Viaweb, Java applets were supposed to  
be the technology everyone was going to use to develop server-based  
applications. Applets seemed to us an old-fashioned idea. Download  
programs to run on the client? Simpler just to go all the way and  
run the programs on the server. We wasted little time  
on applets, but countless other startups must have been lured into  
this tar pit. Few can have escaped alive, or Microsoft could not  
have gotten away with dropping Java in the most recent version of  
Explorer.[4] This point is due to Trevor Blackwell, who adds "the cost of  
writing software goes up more than linearly with its size. Perhaps  
this is mainly due to fixing old bugs, and the cost can be more  
linear if all bugs are found quickly."[5] The hardest kind of bug to find may be a variant of compound  
bug where one bug happens to compensate for another. When you fix  
one bug, the other becomes visible. But it will seem as if the  
fix is at fault, since that was the last thing you changed.[6] Within Viaweb we once had a contest to describe the worst thing  
about our software. Two customer support people tied for first  
prize with entries I still shiver to recall. We fixed both problems  
immediately.[7] Robert Morris wrote the ordering system, which shoppers used  
to place orders. Trevor Blackwell wrote the image generator and  
the manager, which merchants used to retrieve orders, view statistics,  
and configure domain names etc. I wrote the editor, which merchants  
used to build their sites. The ordering system and image generator  
were written in C and C++, the manager mostly in Perl, and the editor  
in Lisp.[8] Price discrimination is so pervasive (how often have you heard  
a retailer claim that their buying power meant lower prices for  
you?) that I was surprised to find it was outlawed in the U.S. by  
the Robinson-Patman Act of 1936. This law does not appear to be  
vigorously enforced.[9] In No Logo, Naomi Klein says that clothing brands favored by  
"urban youth" do not try too hard to prevent shoplifting because  
in their target market the shoplifters are also the fashion leaders.[10] Companies often wonder what to outsource and what not to.  
One possible answer: outsource any job that's not directly exposed  
to competitive pressure, because outsourcing it will thereby expose  
it to competitive pressure.[11] The two guys were Dan Bricklin and Bob Frankston. Dan wrote  
a prototype in Basic in a couple days, then over the course of the  
next year they worked together (mostly at night) to make a more  
powerful version written in 6502 machine language. Dan was at  
Harvard Business School at the time and Bob nominally had a day  
job writing software. "There was no great risk in doing a business,"  
Bob wrote, "If it failed it failed. No big deal."[12] It's not quite as easy as I make it sound. It took a painfully  
long time for word of mouth to get going, and we did not start to  
get a lot of press coverage until we hired a   
PR firm   
(admittedly  
the best in the business) for $16,000 per month. However, it was  
true that the only significant channel was our own Web site.[13] If the Mac was so great, why did it lose? Cost, again.  
Microsoft concentrated on the software business, and unleashed a  
swarm of cheap component suppliers on Apple hardware. It did not  
help, either, that suits took over during a critical period.[14] One thing that would help Web-based applications, and help  
keep the next generation of software from being overshadowed by  
Microsoft, would be a good open-source browser. Mozilla is  
open-source but seems to have suffered from having been corporate  
software for so long. A small, fast browser that was actively  
maintained would be a great thing in itself, and would probably  
also encourage companies to build little Web appliances.Among other things, a proper open-source browser would cause HTTP  
and HTML to continue to evolve (as e.g. Perl has). It would help  
Web-based applications greatly to be able to distinguish between  
selecting a link and following it; all you'd need to do this would  
be a trivial enhancement of HTTP, to allow multiple urls in a  
request. Cascading menus would also be good.If you want to change the world, write a new Mosaic. Think it's  
too late? In 1998 a lot of people thought it was too late to launch  
a new search engine, but Google proved them wrong. There is always  
room for something new if the current options suck enough. Make  
sure it works on all the free OSes first-- new things start with  
their users.[15] Trevor Blackwell, who probably knows more about this from  
personal experience than anyone, writes:"I would go farther in saying that because server-based software  
is so hard on the programmers, it causes a fundamental economic  
shift away from large companies. It requires the kind of intensity  
and dedication from programmers that they will only be willing to  
provide when it's their own company. Software companies can hire  
skilled people to work in a not-too-demanding environment, and can  
hire unskilled people to endure hardships, but they can't hire  
highly skilled people to bust their asses. Since capital is no  
longer needed, big companies have little to bring to the table."[16] In the original version of this essay, I advised avoiding  
Javascript. That was a good plan in 2001, but Javascript now works.  
Thanks to Sarah Harlin, Trevor Blackwell, Robert Morris, Eric Raymond, Ken Anderson,  
and Dan Giffin for reading drafts of this paper; to Dan Bricklin and  
Bob Frankston for information about VisiCalc; and again to Ken Anderson  
for inviting me to speak at BBN.  
  
You'll find this essay and 14 others in  
Hackers & Painters.  
Some Technical DetailsJapanese TranslationMicrosoft finally agreesGates Email

# The Roots of Lisp

May 2001  
  
(I wrote this article to help myself understand exactly  
what McCarthy discovered. You don't need to know this stuff  
to program in Lisp, but it should be helpful to   
anyone who wants to  
understand the essence of Lisp  both in the sense of its  
origins and its semantic core. The fact that it has such a core  
is one of Lisp's distinguishing features, and the reason why,  
unlike other languages, Lisp has dialects.)In 1960, John   
McCarthy published a remarkable paper in  
which he did for programming something like what Euclid did for  
geometry. He showed how, given a handful of simple  
operators and a notation for functions, you can  
build a whole programming language.  
He called this language Lisp, for "List Processing,"  
because one of his key ideas was to use a simple  
data structure called a list for both  
code and data.It's worth understanding what McCarthy discovered, not  
just as a landmark in the history of computers, but as  
a model for what programming is tending to become in  
our own time. It seems to me that there have been  
two really clean, consistent models of programming so  
far: the C model and the Lisp model.  
These two seem points of high ground, with swampy lowlands  
between them. As computers have grown more powerful,  
the new languages being developed have been moving  
steadily toward the Lisp model. A popular recipe  
for new programming languages in the past 20 years   
has been to take the C model of computing and add to  
it, piecemeal, parts taken from the Lisp model,  
like runtime typing and garbage collection.In this article I'm going to try to explain in the  
simplest possible terms what McCarthy discovered.  
The point is not just to learn about an interesting  
theoretical result someone figured out forty years ago,  
but to show where languages are heading.  
The unusual thing about Lisp  in fact, the defining  
quality of Lisp  is that it can be written in  
itself. To understand what McCarthy meant by this,  
we're going to retrace his steps, with his mathematical  
notation translated into running Common Lisp code.Complete Article (Postscript)What Made Lisp DifferentThe CodeChinese TranslationJapanese TranslationPortuguese TranslationKorean Translation

# Five Questions about Language Design

May 2001  
  
(These are some notes I made  
for a panel discussion on programming language design  
at MIT on May 10, 2001.)1. Programming Languages Are for People.Programming languages  
are how people talk to computers. The computer would be just as  
happy speaking any language that was unambiguous. The reason we  
have high level languages is because people can't deal with  
machine language. The point of programming  
languages is to prevent our poor frail human brains from being   
overwhelmed by a mass of detail.Architects know that some kinds of design problems are more personal  
than others. One of the cleanest, most abstract design problems  
is designing bridges. There your job is largely a matter of spanning  
a given distance with the least material. The other end of the  
spectrum is designing chairs. Chair designers have to spend their  
time thinking about human butts.Software varies in the same way. Designing algorithms for routing  
data through a network is a nice, abstract problem, like designing  
bridges. Whereas designing programming languages is like designing  
chairs: it's all about dealing with human weaknesses.Most of us hate to acknowledge this. Designing systems of great  
mathematical elegance sounds a lot more appealing to most of us  
than pandering to human weaknesses. And there is a role for mathematical  
elegance: some kinds of elegance make programs easier to understand.  
But elegance is not an end in itself.And when I say languages have to be designed to suit human weaknesses,  
I don't mean that languages have to be designed for bad programmers.  
In fact I think you ought to design for the   
best programmers, but  
even the best programmers have limitations. I don't think anyone  
would like programming in a language where all the variables were  
the letter x with integer subscripts.2. Design for Yourself and Your Friends.If you look at the history of programming languages, a lot of the best  
ones were languages designed for their own authors to use, and a  
lot of the worst ones were designed for other people to use.When languages are designed for other people, it's always a specific  
group of other people: people not as smart as the language designer.  
So you get a language that talks down to you. Cobol is the most  
extreme case, but a lot of languages are pervaded by this spirit.It has nothing to do with how abstract the language is. C is pretty  
low-level, but it was designed for its authors to use, and that's  
why hackers like it.The argument for designing languages for bad programmers is that  
there are more bad programmers than good programmers. That may be  
so. But those few good programmers write a disproportionately  
large percentage of the software.I'm interested in the question, how do you design a language that  
the very best hackers will like? I happen to think this is  
identical to the question, how do you design a good programming  
language?, but even if it isn't, it is at least an interesting  
question.3. Give the Programmer as Much Control as Possible.Many languages  
(especially the ones designed for other people) have the attitude  
of a governess: they try to prevent you from  
doing things that they think aren't good for you. I like the   
opposite approach: give the programmer as much  
control as you can.When I first learned Lisp, what I liked most about it was  
that it considered me an equal partner. In the other languages  
I had learned up till then, there was the language and there was my   
program, written in the language, and the two were very separate.  
But in Lisp the functions and macros I wrote were just like those  
that made up the language itself. I could rewrite the language  
if I wanted. It had the same appeal as open-source software.4. Aim for Brevity.Brevity is underestimated and even scorned.  
But if you look into the hearts of hackers, you'll see that they  
really love it. How many times have you heard hackers speak fondly  
of how in, say, APL, they could do amazing things with just a couple  
lines of code? I think anything that really smart people really  
love is worth paying attention to.I think almost anything  
you can do to make programs shorter is good. There should be lots  
of library functions; anything that can be implicit should be;  
the syntax should be terse to a fault; even the names of things  
should be short.And it's not only programs that should be short. The manual should  
be thin as well. A good part of manuals is taken up with clarifications  
and reservations and warnings and special cases. If you force   
yourself to shorten the manual, in the best case you do it by fixing  
the things in the language that required so much explanation.5. Admit What Hacking Is.A lot of people wish that hacking was  
mathematics, or at least something like a natural science. I think  
hacking is more like architecture. Architecture is  
related to physics, in the sense that architects have to design  
buildings that don't fall down, but the actual goal of architects  
is to make great buildings, not to make discoveries about statics.What hackers like to do is make great programs.  
And I think, at least in our own minds, we have to remember that it's  
an admirable thing to write great programs, even when this work   
doesn't translate easily into the conventional intellectual  
currency of research papers. Intellectually, it is just as  
worthwhile to design a language programmers will love as it is to design a  
horrible one that embodies some idea you can publish a paper  
about.1. How to Organize Big Libraries?Libraries are becoming an  
increasingly important component of programming languages. They're  
also getting bigger, and this can be dangerous. If it takes longer  
to find the library function that will do what you want than it  
would take to write it yourself, then all that code is doing nothing  
but make your manual thick. (The Symbolics manuals were a case in   
point.) So I think we will have to work on ways to organize  
libraries. The ideal would be to design them so that the programmer  
could guess what library call would do the right thing.2. Are People Really Scared of Prefix Syntax?This is an open  
problem in the sense that I have wondered about it for years and  
still don't know the answer. Prefix syntax seems perfectly natural  
to me, except possibly for math. But it could be that a lot of   
Lisp's unpopularity is simply due to having an unfamiliar syntax.   
Whether to do anything about it, if it is true, is another question.   
  
3. What Do You Need for Server-Based Software?  
  
I think a lot of the most exciting new applications that get written  
in the next twenty years will be Web-based applications, meaning  
programs that sit on the server and talk to you through a Web  
browser. And to write these kinds of programs we may need some  
new things.One thing we'll need is support for the new way that server-based   
apps get released. Instead of having one or two big releases a  
year, like desktop software, server-based apps get released as a  
series of small changes. You may have as many as five or ten  
releases a day. And as a rule everyone will always use the latest  
version.You know how you can design programs to be debuggable?  
Well, server-based software likewise has to be designed to be  
changeable. You have to be able to change it easily, or at least  
to know what is a small change and what is a momentous one.Another thing that might turn out to be useful for server based  
software, surprisingly, is continuations. In Web-based software  
you can use something like continuation-passing style to get the  
effect of subroutines in the inherently   
stateless world of a Web  
session. Maybe it would be worthwhile having actual continuations,  
if it was not too expensive.4. What New Abstractions Are Left to Discover?I'm not sure how  
reasonable a hope this is, but one thing I would really love to   
do, personally, is discover a new abstraction-- something that would  
make as much of a difference as having first class functions or  
recursion or even keyword parameters. This may be an impossible  
dream. These things don't get discovered that often. But I am always  
looking.1. You Can Use Whatever Language You Want.Writing application  
programs used to mean writing desktop software. And in desktop  
software there is a big bias toward writing the application in the  
same language as the operating system. And so ten years ago,  
writing software pretty much meant writing software in C.  
Eventually a tradition evolved:  
application programs must not be written in unusual languages.   
And this tradition had so long to develop that nontechnical people  
like managers and venture capitalists also learned it.Server-based software blows away this whole model. With server-based  
software you can use any language you want. Almost nobody understands  
this yet (especially not managers and venture capitalists).  
A few hackers understand it, and that's why we even hear  
about new, indy languages like Perl and Python. We're not hearing  
about Perl and Python because people are using them to write Windows  
apps.What this means for us, as people interested in designing programming  
languages, is that there is now potentially an actual audience for  
our work.2. Speed Comes from Profilers.Language designers, or at least  
language implementors, like to write compilers that generate fast  
code. But I don't think this is what makes languages fast for users.  
Knuth pointed out long ago that speed only matters in a few critical  
bottlenecks. And anyone who's tried it knows that you can't guess  
where these bottlenecks are. Profilers are the answer.Language designers are solving the wrong problem. Users don't need  
benchmarks to run fast. What they need is a language that can show  
them what parts of their own programs need to be rewritten. That's  
where speed comes from in practice. So maybe it would be a net   
win if language implementors took half the time they would  
have spent doing compiler optimizations and spent it writing a  
good profiler instead.3. You Need an Application to Drive the Design of a Language.This may not be an absolute rule, but it seems like the best languages  
all evolved together with some application they were being used to  
write. C was written by people who needed it for systems programming.  
Lisp was developed partly to do symbolic differentiation, and  
McCarthy was so eager to get started that he was writing differentiation  
programs even in the first paper on Lisp, in 1960.It's especially good if your application solves some new problem.  
That will tend to drive your language to have new features that   
programmers need. I personally am interested in writing  
a language that will be good for writing server-based applications.[During the panel, Guy Steele also made this point, with the  
additional suggestion that the application should not consist of  
writing the compiler for your language, unless your language  
happens to be intended for writing compilers.]4. A Language Has to Be Good for Writing Throwaway Programs.You know what a throwaway program is: something you write quickly for  
some limited task. I think if you looked around you'd find that   
a lot of big, serious programs started as throwaway programs. I  
would not be surprised if most programs started as throwaway  
programs. And so if you want to make a language that's good for  
writing software in general, it has to be good for writing throwaway  
programs, because that is the larval stage of most software.5. Syntax Is Connected to Semantics.It's traditional to think of  
syntax and semantics as being completely separate. This will  
sound shocking, but it may be that they aren't.  
I think that what you want in your language may be related  
to how you express it.I was talking recently to Robert Morris, and he pointed out that  
operator overloading is a bigger win in languages with infix  
syntax. In a language with prefix syntax, any function you define  
is effectively an operator. If you want to define a plus for a  
new type of number you've made up, you can just define a new function  
to add them. If you do that in a language with infix syntax,  
there's a big difference in appearance between the use of an  
overloaded operator and a function call.1. New Programming Languages.Back in the 1970s  
it was fashionable to design new programming languages. Recently  
it hasn't been. But I think server-based software will make new   
languages fashionable again. With server-based software, you can  
use any language you want, so if someone does design a language that  
actually seems better than others that are available, there will be  
people who take a risk and use it.2. Time-Sharing.Richard Kelsey gave this as an idea whose time  
has come again in the last panel, and I completely agree with him.  
My guess (and Microsoft's guess, it seems) is that much computing  
will move from the desktop onto remote servers. In other words,   
time-sharing is back. And I think there will need to be support  
for it at the language level. For example, I know that Richard  
and Jonathan Rees have done a lot of work implementing process   
scheduling within Scheme 48.3. Efficiency.Recently it was starting to seem that computers  
were finally fast enough. More and more we were starting to hear  
about byte code, which implies to me at least that we feel we have  
cycles to spare. But I don't think we will, with server-based  
software. Someone is going to have to pay for the servers that  
the software runs on, and the number of users they can support per  
machine will be the divisor of their capital cost.So I think efficiency will matter, at least in computational  
bottlenecks. It will be especially important to do i/o fast,  
because server-based applications do a lot of i/o.It may turn out that byte code is not a win, in the end. Sun and  
Microsoft seem to be facing off in a kind of a battle of the byte  
codes at the moment. But they're doing it because byte code is a  
convenient place to insert themselves into the process, not because  
byte code is in itself a good idea. It may turn out that this  
whole battleground gets bypassed. That would be kind of amusing.1. Clients.This is just a guess, but my guess is that  
the winning model for most applications will be purely server-based.  
Designing software that works on the assumption that everyone will   
have your client is like designing a society on the assumption that  
everyone will just be honest. It would certainly be convenient, but  
you have to assume it will never happen.I think there will be a proliferation of devices that have some  
kind of Web access, and all you'll be able to assume about them is  
that they can support simple html and forms. Will you have a  
browser on your cell phone? Will there be a phone in your palm   
pilot? Will your blackberry get a bigger screen? Will you be able  
to browse the Web on your gameboy? Your watch? I don't know.   
And I don't have to know if I bet on  
everything just being on the server. It's  
just so much more robust to have all the   
brains on the server.2. Object-Oriented Programming.I realize this is a  
controversial one, but I don't think object-oriented programming  
is such a big deal. I think it is a fine model for certain kinds  
of applications that need that specific kind of data structure,   
like window systems, simulations, and cad programs. But I don't  
see why it ought to be the model for all programming.I think part of the reason people in big companies like object-oriented  
programming is because it yields a lot of what looks like work.  
Something that might naturally be represented as, say, a list of  
integers, can now be represented as a class with all kinds of  
scaffolding and hustle and bustle.Another attraction of  
object-oriented programming is that methods give you some of the  
effect of first class functions. But this is old news to Lisp  
programmers. When you have actual first class functions, you can  
just use them in whatever way is appropriate to the task at hand,  
instead of forcing everything into a mold of classes and methods.What this means for language design, I think, is that you shouldn't  
build object-oriented programming in too deeply. Maybe the  
answer is to offer more general, underlying stuff, and let people design  
whatever object systems they want as libraries.3. Design by Committee.Having your language designed by a committee is a big pitfall,   
and not just for the reasons everyone knows about. Everyone  
knows that committees tend to yield lumpy, inconsistent designs.   
But I think a greater danger is that they won't take risks.  
When one person is in charge he can take risks  
that a committee would never agree on.Is it necessary to take risks to design a good language though?  
Many people might suspect  
that language design is something where you should stick fairly  
close to the conventional wisdom. I bet this isn't true.  
In everything else people do, reward is proportionate to risk.  
Why should language design be any different?Japanese Translation

# Being Popular

May 2001(This article was written as a kind of business plan for a  
new language.  
So it is missing (because it takes for granted) the most important  
feature of a good programming language: very powerful abstractions.)A friend of mine once told an eminent operating systems  
expert that he wanted to design a really good  
programming language. The expert told him that it would be a  
waste of time, that programming languages don't become popular  
or unpopular based on their merits, and so no matter how  
good his language was, no one would use it. At least, that  
was what had happened to the language he had designed.What does make a language popular? Do popular  
languages deserve their popularity? Is it worth trying to  
define a good programming language? How would you do it?I think the answers to these questions can be found by looking   
at hackers, and learning what they want. Programming  
languages are for hackers, and a programming language  
is good as a programming language (rather than, say, an  
exercise in denotational semantics or compiler design)  
if and only if hackers like it.1 The Mechanics of PopularityIt's true, certainly, that most people don't choose programming  
languages simply based on their merits. Most programmers are told  
what language to use by someone else. And yet I think the effect  
of such external factors on the popularity of programming languages  
is not as great as it's sometimes thought to be. I think a bigger  
problem is that a hacker's idea of a good programming language is  
not the same as most language designers'.Between the two, the hacker's opinion is the one that matters.  
Programming languages are not theorems. They're tools, designed  
for people, and they have to be designed to suit human strengths  
and weaknesses as much as shoes have to be designed for human feet.  
If a shoe pinches when you put it on, it's a bad shoe, however  
elegant it may be as a piece of sculpture.It may be that the majority of programmers can't tell a good language  
from a bad one. But that's no different with any other tool. It  
doesn't mean that it's a waste of time to try designing a good  
language. Expert hackers   
can tell a good language when they see  
one, and they'll use it. Expert hackers are a tiny minority,  
admittedly, but that tiny minority write all the good software,  
and their influence is such that the rest of the programmers will  
tend to use whatever language they use. Often, indeed, it is not  
merely influence but command: often the expert hackers are the very  
people who, as their bosses or faculty advisors, tell the other  
programmers what language to use.The opinion of expert hackers is not the only force that determines  
the relative popularity of programming languages — legacy software  
(Cobol) and hype (Ada, Java) also play a role — but I think it is  
the most powerful force over the long term. Given an initial critical  
mass and enough time, a programming language probably becomes about  
as popular as it deserves to be. And popularity further separates  
good languages from bad ones, because feedback from real live users  
always leads to improvements. Look at how much any popular language  
has changed during its life. Perl and Fortran are extreme cases,  
but even Lisp has changed a lot. Lisp 1.5 didn't have macros, for  
example; these evolved later, after hackers at MIT had spent a  
couple years using Lisp to write real programs. [1]So whether or not a language has to be good to be popular, I think  
a language has to be popular to be good. And it has to stay popular  
to stay good. The state of the art in programming languages doesn't  
stand still. And yet the Lisps we have today are still pretty much  
what they had at MIT in the mid-1980s, because that's the last time  
Lisp had a sufficiently large and demanding user base.Of course, hackers have to know about a language before they can  
use it. How are they to hear? From other hackers. But there has to  
be some initial group of hackers using the language for others even  
to hear about it. I wonder how large this group has to be; how many  
users make a critical mass? Off the top of my head, I'd say twenty.  
If a language had twenty separate users, meaning twenty users who  
decided on their own to use it, I'd consider it to be real.Getting there can't be easy. I would not be surprised if it is  
harder to get from zero to twenty than from twenty to a thousand.  
The best way to get those initial twenty users is probably to use  
a trojan horse: to give people an application they want, which  
happens to be written in the new language.2 External FactorsLet's start by acknowledging one external factor that does affect  
the popularity of a programming language. To become popular, a  
programming language has to be the scripting language of a popular  
system. Fortran and Cobol were the scripting languages of early  
IBM mainframes. C was the scripting language of Unix, and so, later,  
was Perl. Tcl is the scripting language of Tk. Java and Javascript  
are intended to be the scripting languages of web browsers.Lisp is not a massively popular language because it is not the  
scripting language of a massively popular system. What popularity  
it retains dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, when it was the  
scripting language of MIT. A lot of the great programmers of the  
day were associated with MIT at some point. And in the early 1970s,  
before C, MIT's dialect of Lisp, called MacLisp, was one of the  
only programming languages a serious hacker would want to use.Today Lisp is the scripting language of two moderately popular  
systems, Emacs and Autocad, and for that reason I suspect that most  
of the Lisp programming done today is done in Emacs Lisp or AutoLisp.Programming languages don't exist in isolation. To hack is a  
transitive verb — hackers are usually hacking something — and in  
practice languages are judged relative to whatever they're used to  
hack. So if you want to design a popular language, you either have  
to supply more than a language, or you have to design your language  
to replace the scripting language of some existing system.Common Lisp is unpopular partly because it's an orphan. It did  
originally come with a system to hack: the Lisp Machine. But Lisp  
Machines (along with parallel computers) were steamrollered by the  
increasing power of general purpose processors in the 1980s. Common  
Lisp might have remained popular if it had been a good scripting  
language for Unix. It is, alas, an atrociously bad one.One way to describe this situation is to say that a language isn't  
judged on its own merits. Another view is that a programming language  
really isn't a programming language unless it's also the scripting  
language of something. This only seems unfair if it comes as a  
surprise. I think it's no more unfair than expecting a programming  
language to have, say, an implementation. It's just part of what  
a programming language is.A programming language does need a good implementation, of course,  
and this must be free. Companies will pay for software, but individual  
hackers won't, and it's the hackers you need to attract.A language also needs to have a book about it. The book should be  
thin, well-written, and full of good examples. K&R is the ideal  
here. At the moment I'd almost say that a language has to have a  
book published by O'Reilly. That's becoming the test of mattering  
to hackers.There should be online documentation as well. In fact, the book  
can start as online documentation. But I don't think that physical  
books are outmoded yet. Their format is convenient, and the de  
facto censorship imposed by publishers is a useful if imperfect  
filter. Bookstores are one of the most important places for learning  
about new languages.3 BrevityGiven that you can supply the three things any language needs — a  
free implementation, a book, and something to hack — how do you  
make a language that hackers will like?One thing hackers like is brevity. Hackers are lazy, in the same  
way that mathematicians and modernist architects are lazy: they  
hate anything extraneous. It would not be far from the truth to  
say that a hacker about to write a program decides what language  
to use, at least subconsciously, based on the total number of  
characters he'll have to type. If this isn't precisely how hackers  
think, a language designer would do well to act as if it were.It is a mistake to try to baby the user with long-winded expressions  
that are meant to resemble English. Cobol is notorious for this  
flaw. A hacker would consider being asked to writeadd x to y giving zinstead ofz = x+yas something between an insult to his intelligence and a sin against  
God.It has sometimes been said that Lisp should use first and rest  
instead of car and cdr, because it would make programs easier to  
read. Maybe for the first couple hours. But a hacker can learn  
quickly enough that car means the first element of a list and cdr  
means the rest. Using first and rest means 50% more typing. And  
they are also different lengths, meaning that the arguments won't  
line up when they're called, as car and cdr often are, in successive  
lines. I've found that it matters a lot how code lines up on the  
page. I can barely read Lisp code when it is set in a variable-width  
font, and friends say this is true for other languages too.Brevity is one place where strongly typed languages lose. All other  
things being equal, no one wants to begin a program with a bunch  
of declarations. Anything that can be implicit, should be.The individual tokens should be short as well. Perl and Common Lisp  
occupy opposite poles on this question. Perl programs can be almost  
cryptically dense, while the names of built-in Common Lisp operators  
are comically long. The designers of Common Lisp probably expected  
users to have text editors that would type these long names for  
them. But the cost of a long name is not just the cost of typing  
it. There is also the cost of reading it, and the cost of the space  
it takes up on your screen.4 HackabilityThere is one thing more important than brevity to a hacker: being  
able to do what you want. In the history of programming languages  
a surprising amount of effort has gone into preventing programmers  
from doing things considered to be improper. This is a dangerously  
presumptuous plan. How can the language designer know what the  
programmer is going to need to do? I think language designers would  
do better to consider their target user to be a genius who will  
need to do things they never anticipated, rather than a bumbler  
who needs to be protected from himself. The bumbler will shoot  
himself in the foot anyway. You may save him from referring to  
variables in another package, but you can't save him from writing  
a badly designed program to solve the wrong problem, and taking  
forever to do it.Good programmers often want to do dangerous and unsavory things.  
By unsavory I mean things that go behind whatever semantic facade  
the language is trying to present: getting hold of the internal  
representation of some high-level abstraction, for example. Hackers  
like to hack, and hacking means getting inside things and second  
guessing the original designer.Let yourself be second guessed. When you make any tool, people use  
it in ways you didn't intend, and this is especially true of a  
highly articulated tool like a programming language. Many a hacker  
will want to tweak your semantic model in a way that you never  
imagined. I say, let them; give the programmer access to as much  
internal stuff as you can without endangering runtime systems like  
the garbage collector.In Common Lisp I have often wanted to iterate through the fields  
of a struct — to comb out references to a deleted object, for example,  
or find fields that are uninitialized. I know the structs are just  
vectors underneath. And yet I can't write a general purpose function  
that I can call on any struct. I can only access the fields by  
name, because that's what a struct is supposed to mean.A hacker may only want to subvert the intended model of things once  
or twice in a big program. But what a difference it makes to be  
able to. And it may be more than a question of just solving a  
problem. There is a kind of pleasure here too. Hackers share the  
surgeon's secret pleasure in poking about in gross innards, the  
teenager's secret pleasure in popping zits. [2] For boys, at least,  
certain kinds of horrors are fascinating. Maxim magazine publishes  
an annual volume of photographs, containing a mix of pin-ups and  
grisly accidents. They know their audience.Historically, Lisp has been good at letting hackers have their way.  
The political correctness of Common Lisp is an aberration. Early  
Lisps let you get your hands on everything. A good deal of that  
spirit is, fortunately, preserved in macros. What a wonderful thing,  
to be able to make arbitrary transformations on the source code.Classic macros are a real hacker's tool — simple, powerful, and  
dangerous. It's so easy to understand what they do: you call a  
function on the macro's arguments, and whatever it returns gets  
inserted in place of the macro call. Hygienic macros embody the  
opposite principle. They try to protect you from understanding what  
they're doing. I have never heard hygienic macros explained in one  
sentence. And they are a classic example of the dangers of deciding  
what programmers are allowed to want. Hygienic macros are intended  
to protect me from variable capture, among other things, but variable  
capture is exactly what I want in some macros.A really good language should be both clean and dirty: cleanly  
designed, with a small core of well understood and highly orthogonal  
operators, but dirty in the sense that it lets hackers have their  
way with it. C is like this. So were the early Lisps. A real hacker's  
language will always have a slightly raffish character.A good programming language should have features that make the kind  
of people who use the phrase "software engineering" shake their  
heads disapprovingly. At the other end of the continuum are languages  
like Ada and Pascal, models of propriety that are good for teaching  
and not much else.5 Throwaway ProgramsTo be attractive to hackers, a language must be good for writing  
the kinds of programs they want to write. And that means, perhaps  
surprisingly, that it has to be good for writing throwaway programs.A throwaway program is a program you write quickly for some limited  
task: a program to automate some system administration task, or  
generate test data for a simulation, or convert data from one format  
to another. The surprising thing about throwaway programs is that,  
like the "temporary" buildings built at so many American universities  
during World War II, they often don't get thrown away. Many evolve  
into real programs, with real features and real users.I have a hunch that the best big programs begin life this way,  
rather than being designed big from the start, like the Hoover Dam.  
It's terrifying to build something big from scratch. When people  
take on a project that's too big, they become overwhelmed. The  
project either gets bogged down, or the result is sterile and  
wooden: a shopping mall rather than a real downtown, Brasilia rather  
than Rome, Ada rather than C.Another way to get a big program is to start with a throwaway  
program and keep improving it. This approach is less daunting, and  
the design of the program benefits from evolution. I think, if one  
looked, that this would turn out to be the way most big programs  
were developed. And those that did evolve this way are probably  
still written in whatever language they were first written in,  
because it's rare for a program to be ported, except for political  
reasons. And so, paradoxically, if you want to make a language that  
is used for big systems, you have to make it good for writing  
throwaway programs, because that's where big systems come from.Perl is a striking example of this idea. It was not only designed  
for writing throwaway programs, but was pretty much a throwaway  
program itself. Perl began life as a collection of utilities for  
generating reports, and only evolved into a programming language  
as the throwaway programs people wrote in it grew larger. It was  
not until Perl 5 (if then) that the language was suitable for  
writing serious programs, and yet it was already massively popular.What makes a language good for throwaway programs? To start with,  
it must be readily available. A throwaway program is something that  
you expect to write in an hour. So the language probably must  
already be installed on the computer you're using. It can't be  
something you have to install before you use it. It has to be there.  
C was there because it came with the operating system. Perl was  
there because it was originally a tool for system administrators,  
and yours had already installed it.Being available means more than being installed, though. An  
interactive language, with a command-line interface, is more  
available than one that you have to compile and run separately. A  
popular programming language should be interactive, and start up  
fast.Another thing you want in a throwaway program is brevity. Brevity  
is always attractive to hackers, and never more so than in a program  
they expect to turn out in an hour.6 LibrariesOf course the ultimate in brevity is to have the program already  
written for you, and merely to call it. And this brings us to what  
I think will be an increasingly important feature of programming  
languages: library functions. Perl wins because it has large  
libraries for manipulating strings. This class of library functions  
are especially important for throwaway programs, which are often  
originally written for converting or extracting data. Many Perl  
programs probably begin as just a couple library calls stuck  
together.I think a lot of the advances that happen in programming languages  
in the next fifty years will have to do with library functions. I  
think future programming languages will have libraries that are as  
carefully designed as the core language. Programming language design  
will not be about whether to make your language strongly or weakly  
typed, or object oriented, or functional, or whatever, but about  
how to design great libraries. The kind of language designers who  
like to think about how to design type systems may shudder at this.  
It's almost like writing applications! Too bad. Languages are for  
programmers, and libraries are what programmers need.It's hard to design good libraries. It's not simply a matter of  
writing a lot of code. Once the libraries get too big, it can  
sometimes take longer to find the function you need than to write  
the code yourself. Libraries need to be designed using a small set  
of orthogonal operators, just like the core language. It ought to  
be possible for the programmer to guess what library call will do  
what he needs.Libraries are one place Common Lisp falls short. There are only  
rudimentary libraries for manipulating strings, and almost none  
for talking to the operating system. For historical reasons, Common  
Lisp tries to pretend that the OS doesn't exist. And because you  
can't talk to the OS, you're unlikely to be able to write a serious  
program using only the built-in operators in Common Lisp. You have  
to use some implementation-specific hacks as well, and in practice  
these tend not to give you everything you want. Hackers would think  
a lot more highly of Lisp if Common Lisp had powerful string  
libraries and good OS support.7 SyntaxCould a language with Lisp's syntax, or more precisely, lack of  
syntax, ever become popular? I don't know the answer to this  
question. I do think that syntax is not the main reason Lisp isn't  
currently popular. Common Lisp has worse problems than unfamiliar  
syntax. I know several programmers who are comfortable with prefix  
syntax and yet use Perl by default, because it has powerful string  
libraries and can talk to the os.There are two possible problems with prefix notation: that it is  
unfamiliar to programmers, and that it is not dense enough. The  
conventional wisdom in the Lisp world is that the first problem is  
the real one. I'm not so sure. Yes, prefix notation makes ordinary  
programmers panic. But I don't think ordinary programmers' opinions  
matter. Languages become popular or unpopular based on what expert  
hackers think of them, and I think expert hackers might be able to  
deal with prefix notation. Perl syntax can be pretty incomprehensible,  
but that has not stood in the way of Perl's popularity. If anything  
it may have helped foster a Perl cult.A more serious problem is the diffuseness of prefix notation. For  
expert hackers, that really is a problem. No one wants to write  
(aref a x y) when they could write a[x,y].In this particular case there is a way to finesse our way out of  
the problem. If we treat data structures as if they were functions  
on indexes, we could write (a x y) instead, which is even shorter  
than the Perl form. Similar tricks may shorten other types of  
expressions.We can get rid of (or make optional) a lot of parentheses by making  
indentation significant. That's how programmers read code anyway:  
when indentation says one thing and delimiters say another, we go  
by the indentation. Treating indentation as significant would  
eliminate this common source of bugs as well as making programs  
shorter.Sometimes infix syntax is easier to read. This is especially true  
for math expressions. I've used Lisp my whole programming life and  
I still don't find prefix math expressions natural. And yet it is  
convenient, especially when you're generating code, to have operators  
that take any number of arguments. So if we do have infix syntax,  
it should probably be implemented as some kind of read-macro.I don't think we should be religiously opposed to introducing syntax  
into Lisp, as long as it translates in a well-understood way into  
underlying s-expressions. There is already a good deal of syntax  
in Lisp. It's not necessarily bad to introduce more, as long as no  
one is forced to use it. In Common Lisp, some delimiters are reserved  
for the language, suggesting that at least some of the designers  
intended to have more syntax in the future.One of the most egregiously unlispy pieces of syntax in Common Lisp  
occurs in format strings; format is a language in its own right,  
and that language is not Lisp. If there were a plan for introducing  
more syntax into Lisp, format specifiers might be able to be included  
in it. It would be a good thing if macros could generate format  
specifiers the way they generate any other kind of code.An eminent Lisp hacker told me that his copy of CLTL falls open to  
the section format. Mine too. This probably indicates room for  
improvement. It may also mean that programs do a lot of I/O.8 EfficiencyA good language, as everyone knows, should generate fast code. But  
in practice I don't think fast code comes primarily from things  
you do in the design of the language. As Knuth pointed out long  
ago, speed only matters in certain critical bottlenecks. And as  
many programmers have observed since, one is very often mistaken  
about where these bottlenecks are.So, in practice, the way to get fast code is to have a very good  
profiler, rather than by, say, making the language strongly typed.  
You don't need to know the type of every argument in every call in  
the program. You do need to be able to declare the types of arguments  
in the bottlenecks. And even more, you need to be able to find out  
where the bottlenecks are.One complaint people have had with Lisp is that it's hard to tell  
what's expensive. This might be true. It might also be inevitable,  
if you want to have a very abstract language. And in any case I  
think good profiling would go a long way toward fixing the problem:  
you'd soon learn what was expensive.Part of the problem here is social. Language designers like to  
write fast compilers. That's how they measure their skill. They  
think of the profiler as an add-on, at best. But in practice a good  
profiler may do more to improve the speed of actual programs written  
in the language than a compiler that generates fast code. Here,  
again, language designers are somewhat out of touch with their  
users. They do a really good job of solving slightly the wrong  
problem.It might be a good idea to have an active profiler — to push  
performance data to the programmer instead of waiting for him to  
come asking for it. For example, the editor could display bottlenecks  
in red when the programmer edits the source code. Another approach  
would be to somehow represent what's happening in running programs.  
This would be an especially big win in server-based applications,  
where you have lots of running programs to look at. An active  
profiler could show graphically what's happening in memory as a  
program's running, or even make sounds that tell what's happening.Sound is a good cue to problems. In one place I worked, we had a  
big board of dials showing what was happening to our web servers.  
The hands were moved by little servomotors that made a slight noise  
when they turned. I couldn't see the board from my desk, but I  
found that I could tell immediately, by the sound, when there was  
a problem with a server.It might even be possible to write a profiler that would automatically  
detect inefficient algorithms. I would not be surprised if certain  
patterns of memory access turned out to be sure signs of bad  
algorithms. If there were a little guy running around inside the  
computer executing our programs, he would probably have as long  
and plaintive a tale to tell about his job as a federal government  
employee. I often have a feeling that I'm sending the processor on  
a lot of wild goose chases, but I've never had a good way to look  
at what it's doing.A number of Lisps now compile into byte code, which is then executed  
by an interpreter. This is usually done to make the implementation  
easier to port, but it could be a useful language feature. It might  
be a good idea to make the byte code an official part of the  
language, and to allow programmers to use inline byte code in  
bottlenecks. Then such optimizations would be portable too.The nature of speed, as perceived by the end-user, may be changing.  
With the rise of server-based applications, more and more programs  
may turn out to be i/o-bound. It will be worth making i/o fast.  
The language can help with straightforward measures like simple,  
fast, formatted output functions, and also with deep structural  
changes like caching and persistent objects.Users are interested in response time. But another kind of efficiency  
will be increasingly important: the number of simultaneous users  
you can support per processor. Many of the interesting applications  
written in the near future will be server-based, and the number of  
users per server is the critical question for anyone hosting such  
applications. In the capital cost of a business offering a server-based  
application, this is the divisor.For years, efficiency hasn't mattered much in most end-user  
applications. Developers have been able to assume that each user  
would have an increasingly powerful processor sitting on their  
desk. And by Parkinson's Law, software has expanded to use the  
resources available. That will change with server-based applications.  
In that world, the hardware and software will be supplied together.  
For companies that offer server-based applications, it will make  
a very big difference to the bottom line how many users they can  
support per server.In some applications, the processor will be the limiting factor,  
and execution speed will be the most important thing to optimize.  
But often memory will be the limit; the number of simultaneous  
users will be determined by the amount of memory you need for each  
user's data. The language can help here too. Good support for  
threads will enable all the users to share a single heap. It may  
also help to have persistent objects and/or language level support  
for lazy loading.9 TimeThe last ingredient a popular language needs is time. No one wants  
to write programs in a language that might go away, as so many  
programming languages do. So most hackers will tend to wait until  
a language has been around for a couple years before even considering  
using it.Inventors of wonderful new things are often surprised to discover  
this, but you need time to get any message through to people. A  
friend of mine rarely does anything the first time someone asks  
him. He knows that people sometimes ask for things that they turn  
out not to want. To avoid wasting his time, he waits till the third  
or fourth time he's asked to do something; by then, whoever's asking  
him may be fairly annoyed, but at least they probably really do  
want whatever they're asking for.Most people have learned to do a similar sort of filtering on new  
things they hear about. They don't even start paying attention  
until they've heard about something ten times. They're perfectly  
justified: the majority of hot new whatevers do turn out to be a  
waste of time, and eventually go away. By delaying learning VRML,  
I avoided having to learn it at all.So anyone who invents something new has to expect to keep repeating  
their message for years before people will start to get it. We  
wrote what was, as far as I know, the first web-server based  
application, and it took us years to get it through to people that  
it didn't have to be downloaded. It wasn't that they were stupid.  
They just had us tuned out.The good news is, simple repetition solves the problem. All you  
have to do is keep telling your story, and eventually people will  
start to hear. It's not when people notice you're there that they  
pay attention; it's when they notice you're still there.It's just as well that it usually takes a while to gain momentum.  
Most technologies evolve a good deal even after they're first  
launched — programming languages especially. Nothing could be better,  
for a new techology, than a few years of being used only by a small  
number of early adopters. Early adopters are sophisticated and  
demanding, and quickly flush out whatever flaws remain in your  
technology. When you only have a few users you can be in close  
contact with all of them. And early adopters are forgiving when  
you improve your system, even if this causes some breakage.There are two ways new technology gets introduced: the organic  
growth method, and the big bang method. The organic growth method  
is exemplified by the classic seat-of-the-pants underfunded garage  
startup. A couple guys, working in obscurity, develop some new  
technology. They launch it with no marketing and initially have  
only a few (fanatically devoted) users. They continue to improve  
the technology, and meanwhile their user base grows by word of  
mouth. Before they know it, they're big.The other approach, the big bang method, is exemplified by the  
VC-backed, heavily marketed startup. They rush to develop a product,  
launch it with great publicity, and immediately (they hope) have  
a large user base.Generally, the garage guys envy the big bang guys. The big bang  
guys are smooth and confident and respected by the VCs. They can  
afford the best of everything, and the PR campaign surrounding the  
launch has the side effect of making them celebrities. The organic  
growth guys, sitting in their garage, feel poor and unloved. And  
yet I think they are often mistaken to feel sorry for themselves.  
Organic growth seems to yield better technology and richer founders  
than the big bang method. If you look at the dominant technologies  
today, you'll find that most of them grew organically.This pattern doesn't only apply to companies. You see it in sponsored  
research too. Multics and Common Lisp were big-bang projects, and  
Unix and MacLisp were organic growth projects.10 Redesign"The best writing is rewriting," wrote E. B. White. Every good  
writer knows this, and it's true for software too. The most important  
part of design is redesign. Programming languages, especially,  
don't get redesigned enough.To write good software you must simultaneously keep two opposing  
ideas in your head. You need the young hacker's naive faith in  
his abilities, and at the same time the veteran's skepticism. You  
have to be able to think   
how hard can it be? with one half of  
your brain while thinking   
it will never work with the other.The trick is to realize that there's no real contradiction here.  
You want to be optimistic and skeptical about two different things.  
You have to be optimistic about the possibility of solving the  
problem, but skeptical about the value of whatever solution you've  
got so far.People who do good work often think that whatever they're working  
on is no good. Others see what they've done and are full of wonder,  
but the creator is full of worry. This pattern is no coincidence:  
it is the worry that made the work good.If you can keep hope and worry balanced, they will drive a project  
forward the same way your two legs drive a bicycle forward. In the  
first phase of the two-cycle innovation engine, you work furiously  
on some problem, inspired by your confidence that you'll be able  
to solve it. In the second phase, you look at what you've done in  
the cold light of morning, and see all its flaws very clearly. But  
as long as your critical spirit doesn't outweigh your hope, you'll  
be able to look at your admittedly incomplete system, and think,  
how hard can it be to get the rest of the way?, thereby continuing  
the cycle.It's tricky to keep the two forces balanced. In young hackers,  
optimism predominates. They produce something, are convinced it's  
great, and never improve it. In old hackers, skepticism predominates,  
and they won't even dare to take on ambitious projects.Anything you can do to keep the redesign cycle going is good. Prose  
can be rewritten over and over until you're happy with it. But  
software, as a rule, doesn't get redesigned enough. Prose has  
readers, but software has users. If a writer rewrites an essay,  
people who read the old version are unlikely to complain that their  
thoughts have been broken by some newly introduced incompatibility.Users are a double-edged sword. They can help you improve your  
language, but they can also deter you from improving it. So choose  
your users carefully, and be slow to grow their number. Having  
users is like optimization: the wise course is to delay it. Also,  
as a general rule, you can at any given time get away with changing  
more than you think. Introducing change is like pulling off a  
bandage: the pain is a memory almost as soon as you feel it.Everyone knows that it's not a good idea to have a language designed  
by a committee. Committees yield bad design. But I think the worst  
danger of committees is that they interfere with redesign. It is  
so much work to introduce changes that no one wants to bother.  
Whatever a committee decides tends to stay that way, even if most  
of the members don't like it.Even a committee of two gets in the way of redesign. This happens  
particularly in the interfaces between pieces of software written  
by two different people. To change the interface both have to agree  
to change it at once. And so interfaces tend not to change at all,  
which is a problem because they tend to be one of the most ad hoc  
parts of any system.One solution here might be to design systems so that interfaces  
are horizontal instead of vertical — so that modules are always  
vertically stacked strata of abstraction. Then the interface will  
tend to be owned by one of them. The lower of two levels will either  
be a language in which the upper is written, in which case the  
lower level will own the interface, or it will be a slave, in which  
case the interface can be dictated by the upper level.11 LispWhat all this implies is that there is hope for a new Lisp. There  
is hope for any language that gives hackers what they want, including  
Lisp. I think we may have made a mistake in thinking that hackers  
are turned off by Lisp's strangeness. This comforting illusion may  
have prevented us from seeing the real problem with Lisp, or at  
least Common Lisp, which is that it sucks for doing what hackers  
want to do. A hacker's language needs powerful libraries and  
something to hack. Common Lisp has neither. A hacker's language is  
terse and hackable. Common Lisp is not.The good news is, it's not Lisp that sucks, but Common Lisp. If we  
can develop a new Lisp that is a real hacker's language, I think  
hackers will use it. They will use whatever language does the job.  
All we have to do is make sure this new Lisp does some important  
job better than other languages.History offers some encouragement. Over time, successive new  
programming languages have taken more and more features from Lisp.  
There is no longer much left to copy before the language you've  
made is Lisp. The latest hot language, Python, is a watered-down  
Lisp with infix syntax and no macros. A new Lisp would be a natural  
step in this progression.I sometimes think that it would be a good marketing trick to call  
it an improved version of Python. That sounds hipper than Lisp. To  
many people, Lisp is a slow AI language with a lot of parentheses.  
Fritz Kunze's official biography carefully avoids mentioning the  
L-word. But my guess is that we shouldn't be afraid to call the  
new Lisp Lisp. Lisp still has a lot of latent respect among the  
very best hackers — the ones who took 6.001 and understood it, for  
example. And those are the users you need to win.In "How to Become a Hacker," Eric Raymond describes Lisp as something  
like Latin or Greek — a language you should learn as an intellectual  
exercise, even though you won't actually use it:  
  
 Lisp is worth learning for the profound enlightenment experience  
 you will have when you finally get it; that experience will make  
 you a better programmer for the rest of your days, even if you  
 never actually use Lisp itself a lot.  
  
If I didn't know Lisp, reading this would set me asking questions.  
A language that would make me a better programmer, if it means  
anything at all, means a language that would be better for programming.  
And that is in fact the implication of what Eric is saying.As long as that idea is still floating around, I think hackers will  
be receptive enough to a new Lisp, even if it is called Lisp. But  
this Lisp must be a hacker's language, like the classic Lisps of  
the 1970s. It must be terse, simple, and hackable. And it must have  
powerful libraries for doing what hackers want to do now.In the matter of libraries I think there is room to beat languages  
like Perl and Python at their own game. A lot of the new applications  
that will need to be written in the coming years will be   
server-based  
applications. There's no reason a new Lisp shouldn't have string  
libraries as good as Perl, and if this new Lisp also had powerful  
libraries for server-based applications, it could be very popular.  
Real hackers won't turn up their noses at a new tool that will let  
them solve hard problems with a few library calls. Remember, hackers  
are lazy.It could be an even bigger win to have core language support for  
server-based applications. For example, explicit support for programs  
with multiple users, or data ownership at the level of type tags.Server-based applications also give us the answer to the question  
of what this new Lisp will be used to hack. It would not hurt to  
make Lisp better as a scripting language for Unix. (It would be  
hard to make it worse.) But I think there are areas where existing  
languages would be easier to beat. I think it might be better to  
follow the model of Tcl, and supply the Lisp together with a complete  
system for supporting server-based applications. Lisp is a natural  
fit for server-based applications. Lexical closures provide a way  
to get the effect of subroutines when the ui is just a series of  
web pages. S-expressions map nicely onto html, and macros are good  
at generating it. There need to be better tools for writing  
server-based applications, and there needs to be a new Lisp, and  
the two would work very well together.12 The Dream LanguageBy way of summary, let's try describing the hacker's dream language.  
The dream language is   
beautiful, clean, and terse. It has an  
interactive toplevel that starts up fast. You can write programs  
to solve common problems with very little code. Nearly all the  
code in any program you write is code that's specific to your  
application. Everything else has been done for you.The syntax of the language is brief to a fault. You never have to  
type an unnecessary character, or even to use the shift key much.Using big abstractions you can write the first version of a program  
very quickly. Later, when you want to optimize, there's a really  
good profiler that tells you where to focus your attention. You  
can make inner loops blindingly fast, even writing inline byte code  
if you need to.There are lots of good examples to learn from, and the language is  
intuitive enough that you can learn how to use it from examples in  
a couple minutes. You don't need to look in the manual much. The  
manual is thin, and has few warnings and qualifications.The language has a small core, and powerful, highly orthogonal  
libraries that are as carefully designed as the core language. The  
libraries all work well together; everything in the language fits  
together like the parts in a fine camera. Nothing is deprecated,  
or retained for compatibility. The source code of all the libraries  
is readily available. It's easy to talk to the operating system  
and to applications written in other languages.The language is built in layers. The higher-level abstractions are  
built in a very transparent way out of lower-level abstractions,  
which you can get hold of if you want.Nothing is hidden from you that doesn't absolutely have to be. The  
language offers abstractions only as a way of saving you work,  
rather than as a way of telling you what to do. In fact, the language  
encourages you to be an equal participant in its design. You can  
change everything about it, including even its syntax, and anything  
you write has, as much as possible, the same status as what comes  
predefined.Notes[1] Macros very close to the modern idea were proposed by Timothy  
Hart in 1964, two years after Lisp 1.5 was released. What was  
missing, initially, were ways to avoid variable capture and multiple  
evaluation; Hart's examples are subject to both.[2] In When the Air Hits Your Brain, neurosurgeon Frank Vertosick  
recounts a conversation in which his chief resident, Gary, talks  
about the difference between surgeons and internists ("fleas"):  
  
 Gary and I ordered a large pizza and found an open booth. The  
 chief lit a cigarette. "Look at those goddamn fleas, jabbering  
 about some disease they'll see once in their lifetimes. That's  
 the trouble with fleas, they only like the bizarre stuff. They  
 hate their bread and butter cases. That's the difference between  
 us and the fucking fleas. See, we love big juicy lumbar disc  
 herniations, but they hate hypertension...."  
  
It's hard to think of a lumbar disc herniation as juicy (except  
literally). And yet I think I know what they mean. I've often had  
a juicy bug to track down. Someone who's not a programmer would  
find it hard to imagine that there could be pleasure in a bug.  
Surely it's better if everything just works. In one way, it is.  
And yet there is undeniably a grim satisfaction in hunting down  
certain sorts of bugs.Postscript VersionArcFive Questions about Language DesignHow to Become a HackerJapanese Translation

# Java's Cover

April 2001This essay developed out of conversations I've had with  
several other programmers about why Java smelled suspicious. It's not  
a critique of Java! It is a case study of hacker's radar.Over time, hackers develop a nose for good (and bad) technology.  
I thought it might be interesting to try and write down what  
made Java seem suspect to me.Some people who've read this think it's an interesting attempt to write about  
something that hasn't been written about before. Others say I  
will get in trouble for appearing to be writing about  
things I don't understand. So, just in  
case it does any good, let me clarify that I'm not writing here  
about Java (which I have never used) but about hacker's radar  
(which I have thought about a lot).The aphorism "you can't tell a book by its cover" originated in  
the times when books were sold in plain cardboard covers, to be  
bound by each purchaser according to his own taste. In those days,  
you couldn't tell a book by its cover. But publishing has advanced  
since then: present-day publishers work hard to make the cover  
something you can tell a book by.I spend a lot of time in bookshops and I feel as if I have by now  
learned to understand everything publishers mean to tell me about  
a book, and perhaps a bit more. The time I haven't spent in  
bookshops I've spent mostly in front of computers, and I feel as  
if I've learned, to some degree, to judge technology by its cover  
as well. It may be just luck, but I've saved myself from a few  
technologies that turned out to be real stinkers.So far, Java seems like a stinker to me. I've never written a Java  
program, never more than glanced over reference books about it,  
but I have a hunch that it won't be a very successful language.  
I may turn out to be mistaken; making predictions about technology  
is a dangerous business. But for what it's worth, as a sort of  
time capsule, here's why I don't like the look of Java:  
1. It has been so energetically hyped. Real standards don't have  
to be promoted. No one had to promote C, or Unix, or HTML. A real  
standard tends to be already established by the time most people  
hear about it. On the hacker radar screen, Perl is as big as Java,  
or bigger, just on the strength of its own merits.2. It's aimed low. In the original Java white paper, Gosling  
explicitly says Java was designed not to be too difficult for  
programmers used to C. It was designed to be another C++: C plus  
a few ideas taken from more advanced languages. Like the creators  
of sitcoms or junk food or package tours, Java's designers were  
consciously designing a product for people not as smart as them.  
Historically, languages designed for other people to use have been  
bad: Cobol, PL/I, Pascal, Ada, C++. The good languages have been  
those that were designed for their own creators: C, Perl, Smalltalk,  
Lisp.3. It has ulterior motives. Someone once said that the world would  
be a better place if people only wrote books because they had  
something to say, rather than because they wanted to write a book.  
Likewise, the reason we hear about Java all the time is not because  
it has something to say about programming languages. We hear about  
Java as part of a plan by Sun to undermine Microsoft.4. No one loves it. C, Perl, Python, Smalltalk, and Lisp programmers  
love their languages. I've never heard anyone say that they loved  
Java.5. People are forced to use it. A lot of the people I know using  
Java are using it because they feel they have to. Either it's  
something they felt they had to do to get funded, or something they  
thought customers would want, or something they were told to do by  
management. These are smart people; if the technology was good,  
they'd have used it voluntarily.6. It has too many cooks. The best programming languages have been  
developed by small groups. Java seems to be run by a committee.  
If it turns out to be a good language, it will be the first time  
in history that a committee has designed a good language.7. It's bureaucratic. From what little I know about Java, there  
seem to be a lot of protocols for doing things. Really good  
languages aren't like that. They let you do what you want and get  
out of the way.8. It's pseudo-hip. Sun now pretends that Java is a grassroots,  
open-source language effort like Perl or Python. This one just  
happens to be controlled by a giant company. So the language is  
likely to have the same drab clunkiness as anything else that comes  
out of a big company.9. It's designed for large organizations. Large organizations have  
different aims from hackers. They want languages that are (believed  
to be) suitable for use by large teams of mediocre programmers--  
languages with features that, like the speed limiters in U-Haul  
trucks, prevent fools from doing too much damage. Hackers don't  
like a language that talks down to them. Hackers just want power.  
Historically, languages designed for large organizations (PL/I,  
Ada) have lost, while hacker languages (C, Perl) have won. The  
reason: today's teenage hacker is tomorrow's CTO.10. The wrong people like it. The programmers I admire most are  
not, on the whole, captivated by Java. Who does like Java? Suits,  
who don't know one language from another, but know that they keep  
hearing about Java in the press; programmers at big companies, who  
are amazed to find that there is something even better than C++;  
and plug-and-chug undergrads, who are ready to like anything that  
might get them a job (will this be on the test?). These people's  
opinions change with every wind.11. Its daddy is in a pinch. Sun's business model is being undermined  
on two fronts. Cheap Intel processors, of the same type used in  
desktop machines, are now more than fast enough for servers. And  
FreeBSD seems to be at least as good an OS for servers as Solaris.  
Sun's advertising implies that you need Sun servers for industrial  
strength applications. If this were true, Yahoo would be first in  
line to buy Suns; but when I worked there, the servers were all  
Intel boxes running FreeBSD. This bodes ill for Sun's future. If  
Sun runs into trouble, they could drag Java down with them.12. The DoD likes it. The Defense Department is encouraging  
developers to use Java. This seems to me the most damning sign of  
all. The Defense Department does a fine (though expensive) job of  
defending the country, but they love plans and procedures and  
protocols. Their culture is the opposite of hacker culture; on  
questions of software they will tend to bet wrong. The last time  
the DoD really liked a programming language, it was Ada.  
Bear in mind, this is not a critique of Java, but a critique of  
its cover. I don't know Java well enough to like it or dislike  
it. This is just an explanation of why I don't find that I'm eager  
to learn it.It may seem cavalier to dismiss a language before you've even tried  
writing programs in it. But this is something all programmers have  
to do. There are too many technologies out there to learn them  
all. You have to learn to judge by outward signs which will be  
worth your time. I have likewise cavalierly dismissed Cobol, Ada,  
Visual Basic, the IBM AS400, VRML, ISO 9000, the SET protocol, VMS,  
Novell Netware, and CORBA, among others. They just smelled wrong.It could be that in Java's case I'm mistaken. It could be that a  
language promoted by one big company to undermine another, designed  
by a committee for a "mainstream" audience, hyped to the skies,  
and beloved of the DoD, happens nonetheless to be a clean, beautiful,  
powerful language that I would love programming in. It could be,  
but it seems very unlikely.Trevor Re: Java's CoverBerners-Lee Re: JavaBeing PopularSun Internal Memo2005: BusinessWeek AgreesJapanese Translation

# Beating the Averages

Want to start a startup? Get funded by  
Y Combinator.  
  
  
  
  
April 2001, rev. April 2003(This article is derived from a talk given at the 2001 Franz  
Developer Symposium.)  
In the summer of 1995, my friend Robert Morris and I  
started a startup called   
Viaweb.   
Our plan was to write  
software that would let end users build online stores.  
What was novel about this software, at the time, was  
that it ran on our server, using ordinary Web pages  
as the interface.A lot of people could have been having this idea at the  
same time, of course, but as far as I know, Viaweb was  
the first Web-based application. It seemed such  
a novel idea to us that we named the company after it:  
Viaweb, because our software worked via the Web,  
instead of running on your desktop computer.Another unusual thing about this software was that it  
was written primarily in a programming language called  
Lisp. It was one of the first big end-user  
applications to be written in Lisp, which up till then  
had been used mostly in universities and research labs. [1]The Secret WeaponEric Raymond has written an essay called "How to Become a Hacker,"  
and in it, among other things, he tells would-be hackers what  
languages they should learn. He suggests starting with Python and  
Java, because they are easy to learn. The serious hacker will also  
want to learn C, in order to hack Unix, and Perl for system  
administration and cgi scripts. Finally, the truly serious hacker  
should consider learning Lisp:  
  
 Lisp is worth learning for the profound enlightenment experience  
 you will have when you finally get it; that experience will make  
 you a better programmer for the rest of your days, even if you  
 never actually use Lisp itself a lot.  
  
This is the same argument you tend to hear for learning Latin. It  
won't get you a job, except perhaps as a classics professor, but  
it will improve your mind, and make you a better writer in languages  
you do want to use, like English.But wait a minute. This metaphor doesn't stretch that far. The  
reason Latin won't get you a job is that no one speaks it. If you  
write in Latin, no one can understand you. But Lisp is a computer  
language, and computers speak whatever language you, the programmer,  
tell them to.So if Lisp makes you a better programmer, like he says, why wouldn't  
you want to use it? If a painter were offered a brush that would  
make him a better painter, it seems to me that he would want to  
use it in all his paintings, wouldn't he? I'm not trying to make  
fun of Eric Raymond here. On the whole, his advice is good. What  
he says about Lisp is pretty much the conventional wisdom. But  
there is a contradiction in the conventional wisdom: Lisp will  
make you a better programmer, and yet you won't use it.Why not? Programming languages are just tools, after all. If Lisp  
really does yield better programs, you should use it. And if it  
doesn't, then who needs it?This is not just a theoretical question. Software is a very  
competitive business, prone to natural monopolies. A company that  
gets software written faster and better will, all other things  
being equal, put its competitors out of business. And when you're  
starting a startup, you feel this very keenly. Startups tend to  
be an all or nothing proposition. You either get rich, or you get  
nothing. In a startup, if you bet on the wrong technology, your  
competitors will crush you.Robert and I both knew Lisp well, and we couldn't see any reason  
not to trust our instincts and go with Lisp. We knew that everyone  
else was writing their software in C++ or Perl. But we also knew  
that that didn't mean anything. If you chose technology that way,  
you'd be running Windows. When you choose technology, you have to  
ignore what other people are doing, and consider only what will  
work the best.This is especially true in a startup. In a big company, you can  
do what all the other big companies are doing. But a startup can't  
do what all the other startups do. I don't think a lot of people  
realize this, even in startups.The average big company grows at about ten percent a year. So if  
you're running a big company and you do everything the way the  
average big company does it, you can expect to do as well as the  
average big company-- that is, to grow about ten percent a year.The same thing will happen if you're running a startup, of course.  
If you do everything the way the average startup does it, you should  
expect average performance. The problem here is, average performance  
means that you'll go out of business. The survival rate for startups  
is way less than fifty percent. So if you're running a startup,  
you had better be doing something odd. If not, you're in trouble.Back in 1995, we knew something that I don't think our competitors  
understood, and few understand even now: when you're writing  
software that only has to run on your own servers, you can use  
any language you want. When you're writing desktop software,  
there's a strong bias toward writing applications in the same  
language as the operating system. Ten years ago, writing applications  
meant writing applications in C. But with Web-based software,  
especially when you have the source code of both the language and  
the operating system, you can use whatever language you want.This new freedom is a double-edged sword, however. Now that you  
can use any language, you have to think about which one to use.  
Companies that try to pretend nothing has changed risk finding that  
their competitors do not.If you can use any language, which do you use? We chose Lisp.  
For one thing, it was obvious that rapid development would be  
important in this market. We were all starting from scratch, so  
a company that could get new features done before its competitors  
would have a big advantage. We knew Lisp was a really good language  
for writing software quickly, and server-based applications magnify  
the effect of rapid development, because you can release software  
the minute it's done.If other companies didn't want to use Lisp, so much the better.  
It might give us a technological edge, and we needed all the help  
we could get. When we started Viaweb, we had no experience in  
business. We didn't know anything about marketing, or hiring  
people, or raising money, or getting customers. Neither of us had  
ever even had what you would call a real job. The only thing we  
were good at was writing software. We hoped that would save us.  
Any advantage we could get in the software department, we would  
take.So you could say that using Lisp was an experiment. Our hypothesis  
was that if we wrote our software in Lisp, we'd be able to get  
features done faster than our competitors, and also to do things  
in our software that they couldn't do. And because Lisp was so  
high-level, we wouldn't need a big development team, so our costs  
would be lower. If this were so, we could offer a better product  
for less money, and still make a profit. We would end up getting  
all the users, and our competitors would get none, and eventually  
go out of business. That was what we hoped would happen, anyway.What were the results of this experiment? Somewhat surprisingly,  
it worked. We eventually had many competitors, on the order of  
twenty to thirty of them, but none of their software could compete  
with ours. We had a wysiwyg online store builder that ran on the  
server and yet felt like a desktop application. Our competitors  
had cgi scripts. And we were always far ahead of them in features.  
Sometimes, in desperation, competitors would try to introduce  
features that we didn't have. But with Lisp our development cycle  
was so fast that we could sometimes duplicate a new feature within  
a day or two of a competitor announcing it in a press release. By  
the time journalists covering the press release got round to calling  
us, we would have the new feature too.It must have seemed to our competitors that we had some kind of  
secret weapon-- that we were decoding their Enigma traffic or  
something. In fact we did have a secret weapon, but it was simpler  
than they realized. No one was leaking news of their features to  
us. We were just able to develop software faster than anyone  
thought possible.When I was about nine I happened to get hold of a copy of The Day  
of the Jackal, by Frederick Forsyth. The main character is an  
assassin who is hired to kill the president of France. The assassin  
has to get past the police to get up to an apartment that overlooks  
the president's route. He walks right by them, dressed up as an  
old man on crutches, and they never suspect him.Our secret weapon was similar. We wrote our software in a weird  
AI language, with a bizarre syntax full of parentheses. For years  
it had annoyed me to hear Lisp described that way. But now it  
worked to our advantage. In business, there is nothing more valuable  
than a technical advantage your competitors don't understand. In  
business, as in war, surprise is worth as much as force.And so, I'm a little embarrassed to say, I never said anything  
publicly about Lisp while we were working on Viaweb. We never  
mentioned it to the press, and if you searched for Lisp on our Web  
site, all you'd find were the titles of two books in my bio. This  
was no accident. A startup should give its competitors as little  
information as possible. If they didn't know what language our  
software was written in, or didn't care, I wanted to keep it that  
way.[2]The people who understood our technology best were the customers.  
They didn't care what language Viaweb was written in either, but  
they noticed that it worked really well. It let them build great  
looking online stores literally in minutes. And so, by word of  
mouth mostly, we got more and more users. By the end of 1996 we  
had about 70 stores online. At the end of 1997 we had 500. Six  
months later, when Yahoo bought us, we had 1070 users. Today, as  
Yahoo Store, this software continues to dominate its market. It's  
one of the more profitable pieces of Yahoo, and the stores built  
with it are the foundation of Yahoo Shopping. I left Yahoo in  
1999, so I don't know exactly how many users they have now, but  
the last I heard there were about 20,000.  
The Blub ParadoxWhat's so great about Lisp? And if Lisp is so great, why doesn't  
everyone use it? These sound like rhetorical questions, but actually  
they have straightforward answers. Lisp is so great not because  
of some magic quality visible only to devotees, but because it is  
simply the most powerful language available. And the reason everyone  
doesn't use it is that programming languages are not merely  
technologies, but habits of mind as well, and nothing changes  
slower. Of course, both these answers need explaining.I'll begin with a shockingly controversial statement: programming  
languages vary in power.Few would dispute, at least, that high level languages are more  
powerful than machine language. Most programmers today would agree  
that you do not, ordinarily, want to program in machine language.  
Instead, you should program in a high-level language, and have a  
compiler translate it into machine language for you. This idea is  
even built into the hardware now: since the 1980s, instruction sets  
have been designed for compilers rather than human programmers.Everyone knows it's a mistake to write your whole program by hand  
in machine language. What's less often understood is that there  
is a more general principle here: that if you have a choice of  
several languages, it is, all other things being equal, a mistake  
to program in anything but the most powerful one. [3]There are many exceptions to this rule. If you're writing a program  
that has to work very closely with a program written in a certain  
language, it might be a good idea to write the new program in the  
same language. If you're writing a program that only has to do  
something very simple, like number crunching or bit manipulation,  
you may as well use a less abstract language, especially since it  
may be slightly faster. And if you're writing a short, throwaway  
program, you may be better off just using whatever language has  
the best library functions for the task. But in general, for  
application software, you want to be using the most powerful  
(reasonably efficient) language you can get, and using anything  
else is a mistake, of exactly the same kind, though possibly in a  
lesser degree, as programming in machine language.You can see that machine language is very low level. But, at least  
as a kind of social convention, high-level languages are often all  
treated as equivalent. They're not. Technically the term "high-level  
language" doesn't mean anything very definite. There's no dividing  
line with machine languages on one side and all the high-level  
languages on the other. Languages fall along a continuum [4] of  
abstractness, from the most powerful all the way down to machine  
languages, which themselves vary in power.Consider Cobol. Cobol is a high-level language, in the sense that  
it gets compiled into machine language. Would anyone seriously  
argue that Cobol is equivalent in power to, say, Python? It's  
probably closer to machine language than Python.Or how about Perl 4? Between Perl 4 and Perl 5, lexical closures  
got added to the language. Most Perl hackers would agree that Perl  
5 is more powerful than Perl 4. But once you've admitted that,  
you've admitted that one high level language can be more powerful  
than another. And it follows inexorably that, except in special  
cases, you ought to use the most powerful you can get.This idea is rarely followed to its conclusion, though. After a  
certain age, programmers rarely switch languages voluntarily.  
Whatever language people happen to be used to, they tend to consider  
just good enough.Programmers get very attached to their favorite languages, and I  
don't want to hurt anyone's feelings, so to explain this point I'm  
going to use a hypothetical language called Blub. Blub falls right  
in the middle of the abstractness continuum. It is not the most  
powerful language, but it is more powerful than Cobol or machine  
language.And in fact, our hypothetical Blub programmer wouldn't use either  
of them. Of course he wouldn't program in machine language. That's  
what compilers are for. And as for Cobol, he doesn't know how  
anyone can get anything done with it. It doesn't even have x (Blub  
feature of your choice).As long as our hypothetical Blub programmer is looking down the  
power continuum, he knows he's looking down. Languages less powerful  
than Blub are obviously less powerful, because they're missing some  
feature he's used to. But when our hypothetical Blub programmer  
looks in the other direction, up the power continuum, he doesn't  
realize he's looking up. What he sees are merely weird languages.  
He probably considers them about equivalent in power to Blub, but  
with all this other hairy stuff thrown in as well. Blub is good  
enough for him, because he thinks in Blub.When we switch to the point of view of a programmer using any of  
the languages higher up the power continuum, however, we find that  
he in turn looks down upon Blub. How can you get anything done in  
Blub? It doesn't even have y.By induction, the only programmers in a position to see all the  
differences in power between the various languages are those who  
understand the most powerful one. (This is probably what Eric  
Raymond meant about Lisp making you a better programmer.) You can't  
trust the opinions of the others, because of the Blub paradox:  
they're satisfied with whatever language they happen to use, because  
it dictates the way they think about programs.I know this from my own experience, as a high school kid writing  
programs in Basic. That language didn't even support recursion.  
It's hard to imagine writing programs without using recursion, but  
I didn't miss it at the time. I thought in Basic. And I was a  
whiz at it. Master of all I surveyed.The five languages that Eric Raymond recommends to hackers fall at  
various points on the power continuum. Where they fall relative  
to one another is a sensitive topic. What I will say is that I  
think Lisp is at the top. And to support this claim I'll tell you  
about one of the things I find missing when I look at the other  
four languages. How can you get anything done in them, I think,  
without macros? [5]Many languages have something called a macro. But Lisp macros are  
unique. And believe it or not, what they do is related to the  
parentheses. The designers of Lisp didn't put all those parentheses  
in the language just to be different. To the Blub programmer, Lisp  
code looks weird. But those parentheses are there for a reason.  
They are the outward evidence of a fundamental difference between  
Lisp and other languages.Lisp code is made out of Lisp data objects. And not in the trivial  
sense that the source files contain characters, and strings are  
one of the data types supported by the language. Lisp code, after  
it's read by the parser, is made of data structures that you can  
traverse.If you understand how compilers work, what's really going on is  
not so much that Lisp has a strange syntax as that Lisp has no  
syntax. You write programs in the parse trees that get generated  
within the compiler when other languages are parsed. But these  
parse trees are fully accessible to your programs. You can write  
programs that manipulate them. In Lisp, these programs are called  
macros. They are programs that write programs.Programs that write programs? When would you ever want to do that?  
Not very often, if you think in Cobol. All the time, if you think  
in Lisp. It would be convenient here if I could give an example  
of a powerful macro, and say there! how about that? But if I did,  
it would just look like gibberish to someone who didn't know Lisp;  
there isn't room here to explain everything you'd need to know to  
understand what it meant. In   
Ansi Common Lisp I tried to move  
things along as fast as I could, and even so I didn't get to macros  
until page 160.But I think I can give a kind of argument that might be convincing.  
The source code of the Viaweb editor was probably about 20-25%  
macros. Macros are harder to write than ordinary Lisp functions,  
and it's considered to be bad style to use them when they're not  
necessary. So every macro in that code is there because it has to  
be. What that means is that at least 20-25% of the code in this  
program is doing things that you can't easily do in any other  
language. However skeptical the Blub programmer might be about my  
claims for the mysterious powers of Lisp, this ought to make him  
curious. We weren't writing this code for our own amusement. We  
were a tiny startup, programming as hard as we could in order to  
put technical barriers between us and our competitors.A suspicious person might begin to wonder if there was some  
correlation here. A big chunk of our code was doing things that  
are very hard to do in other languages. The resulting software  
did things our competitors' software couldn't do. Maybe there was  
some kind of connection. I encourage you to follow that thread.  
There may be more to that old man hobbling along on his crutches  
than meets the eye.Aikido for StartupsBut I don't expect to convince anyone   
(over 25)   
to go out and learn  
Lisp. The purpose of this article is not to change anyone's mind,  
but to reassure people already interested in using Lisp-- people  
who know that Lisp is a powerful language, but worry because it  
isn't widely used. In a competitive situation, that's an advantage.  
Lisp's power is multiplied by the fact that your competitors don't  
get it.If you think of using Lisp in a startup, you shouldn't worry that  
it isn't widely understood. You should hope that it stays that  
way. And it's likely to. It's the nature of programming languages  
to make most people satisfied with whatever they currently use.  
Computer hardware changes so much faster than personal habits that  
programming practice is usually ten to twenty years behind the  
processor. At places like MIT they were writing programs in  
high-level languages in the early 1960s, but many companies continued  
to write code in machine language well into the 1980s. I bet a  
lot of people continued to write machine language until the processor,  
like a bartender eager to close up and go home, finally kicked them  
out by switching to a risc instruction set.Ordinarily technology changes fast. But programming languages are  
different: programming languages are not just technology, but what  
programmers think in. They're half technology and half religion.[6]  
And so the median language, meaning whatever language the median  
programmer uses, moves as slow as an iceberg. Garbage collection,  
introduced by Lisp in about 1960, is now widely considered to be  
a good thing. Runtime typing, ditto, is growing in popularity.  
Lexical closures, introduced by Lisp in the early 1970s, are now,  
just barely, on the radar screen. Macros, introduced by Lisp in the  
mid 1960s, are still terra incognita.Obviously, the median language has enormous momentum. I'm not  
proposing that you can fight this powerful force. What I'm proposing  
is exactly the opposite: that, like a practitioner of Aikido, you  
can use it against your opponents.If you work for a big company, this may not be easy. You will have  
a hard time convincing the pointy-haired boss to let you build  
things in Lisp, when he has just read in the paper that some other  
language is poised, like Ada was twenty years ago, to take over  
the world. But if you work for a startup that doesn't have  
pointy-haired bosses yet, you can, like we did, turn the Blub  
paradox to your advantage: you can use technology that your  
competitors, glued immovably to the median language, will never be  
able to match.If you ever do find yourself working for a startup, here's a handy  
tip for evaluating competitors. Read their job listings. Everything  
else on their site may be stock photos or the prose equivalent,  
but the job listings have to be specific about what they want, or  
they'll get the wrong candidates.During the years we worked on Viaweb I read a lot of job descriptions.  
A new competitor seemed to emerge out of the woodwork every month  
or so. The first thing I would do, after checking to see if they  
had a live online demo, was look at their job listings. After a  
couple years of this I could tell which companies to worry about  
and which not to. The more of an IT flavor the job descriptions  
had, the less dangerous the company was. The safest kind were the  
ones that wanted Oracle experience. You never had to worry about  
those. You were also safe if they said they wanted C++ or Java  
developers. If they wanted Perl or Python programmers, that would  
be a bit frightening-- that's starting to sound like a company  
where the technical side, at least, is run by real hackers. If I  
had ever seen a job posting looking for Lisp hackers, I would have  
been really worried.  
Notes[1] Viaweb at first had two parts: the editor, written in Lisp,  
which people used to build their sites, and the ordering system,  
written in C, which handled orders. The first version was mostly  
Lisp, because the ordering system was small. Later we added two  
more modules, an image generator written in C, and a back-office  
manager written mostly in Perl.In January 2003, Yahoo released a new version of the editor   
written in C++ and Perl. It's hard to say whether the program is no  
longer written in Lisp, though, because to translate this program  
into C++ they literally had to write a Lisp interpreter: the source  
files of all the page-generating templates are still, as far as I  
know, Lisp code. (See Greenspun's Tenth Rule.)[2] Robert Morris says that I didn't need to be secretive, because  
even if our competitors had known we were using Lisp, they wouldn't  
have understood why: "If they were that smart they'd already be  
programming in Lisp."[3] All languages are equally powerful in the sense of being Turing  
equivalent, but that's not the sense of the word programmers care  
about. (No one wants to program a Turing machine.) The kind of  
power programmers care about may not be formally definable, but  
one way to explain it would be to say that it refers to features  
you could only get in the less powerful language by writing an  
interpreter for the more powerful language in it. If language A  
has an operator for removing spaces from strings and language B  
doesn't, that probably doesn't make A more powerful, because you  
can probably write a subroutine to do it in B. But if A supports,  
say, recursion, and B doesn't, that's not likely to be something  
you can fix by writing library functions.[4] Note to nerds: or possibly a lattice, narrowing toward the top;  
it's not the shape that matters here but the idea that there is at  
least a partial order.[5] It is a bit misleading to treat macros as a separate feature.  
In practice their usefulness is greatly enhanced by other Lisp  
features like lexical closures and rest parameters.[6] As a result, comparisons of programming languages either take  
the form of religious wars or undergraduate textbooks so determinedly  
neutral that they're really works of anthropology. People who  
value their peace, or want tenure, avoid the topic. But the question  
is only half a religious one; there is something there worth  
studying, especially if you want to design new languages.More Technical DetailsJapanese TranslationTurkish TranslationUzbek TranslationOrbitz Uses Lisp TooHow To Become A HackerA Scheme StoryItalian Translation  
  
  
You'll find this essay and 14 others in  
Hackers & Painters.

# Lisp for Web-Based Applications

After a link to   
Beating the Averages was posted on slashdot,   
some readers wanted to hear in more detail   
about the specific technical advantages we got from using  
Lisp in Viaweb. For those who are interested,  
here are some excerpts from a talk I gave in April 2001 at  
BBN Labs in Cambridge, MA.BBN Talk Excerpts (ASCII)

# Programming Bottom-Up

1993  
  
(This essay is from the introduction to On Lisp.)  
It's a long-standing principle of programming style that the functional  
elements of a program should not be too large. If some component of a  
program grows beyond the stage where it's readily comprehensible,  
it becomes a mass of complexity which conceals errors as easily  
as a big city conceals fugitives. Such software will be  
hard to read, hard to test, and hard to debug.In accordance with this principle, a large program must be divided  
into pieces, and the larger the program, the more it must be divided.  
How do you divide a program? The traditional approach is  
called top-down design: you say "the purpose of the  
program is to do these seven things, so I divide it into seven major  
subroutines. The first subroutine has to do these four things, so  
it in turn will have four of its own subroutines," and so on.  
This process continues until the whole program has the right level  
of granularity-- each part large enough to do something substantial,  
but small enough to be understood as a single unit.Experienced Lisp programmers divide up their programs differently.  
As well as top-down design, they follow a principle which  
could be called bottom-up design-- changing the language  
to suit the problem.  
In Lisp, you don't just write your program down toward the language,  
you also build the language up toward your program. As you're  
writing a program you may think "I wish Lisp had such-and-such an  
operator." So you go and write it. Afterward  
you realize that using the new operator would simplify the design   
of another part of the program, and so on.  
Language and program evolve together.  
Like the border between two warring states,  
the boundary between language and program is drawn and redrawn,  
until eventually it comes to rest along the mountains and rivers,  
the natural frontiers of your problem.  
In the end your program will look as if the language had been  
designed for it.  
And when language and  
program fit one another well, you end up with code which is  
clear, small, and efficient.  
It's worth emphasizing that bottom-up design doesn't mean  
just writing the same program in a different order. When you  
work bottom-up, you usually end up with a different program.  
Instead of a single, monolithic program,  
you will get a larger language with more abstract operators,   
and a smaller program written in it. Instead of a lintel,  
you'll get an arch.  
In typical code, once you abstract out the parts which are  
merely bookkeeping, what's left is much shorter;  
the higher you build up the language, the less distance you  
will have to travel from the top down to it.  
This brings several advantages:  
 By making the language do more of the work, bottom-up design  
yields programs which are smaller and more agile. A shorter  
program doesn't have to be divided into so many components, and  
fewer components means programs which are easier to read or  
modify. Fewer components also means fewer connections between   
components, and thus less chance for errors there. As  
industrial designers strive to reduce the number of moving parts  
in a machine, experienced Lisp programmers use bottom-up design  
to reduce the size and complexity of their programs. Bottom-up design promotes code re-use.  
When you write two  
or more programs, many of the utilities you wrote for the first  
program will also be useful in the succeeding ones. Once you've   
acquired a large substrate of utilities, writing a new program can  
take only a fraction of the effort it would require if you had to   
start with raw Lisp. Bottom-up design makes programs easier to read.  
  
An instance of this type  
of abstraction asks the reader to understand a general-purpose operator;  
an instance of functional abstraction asks the reader to understand  
a special-purpose subroutine. [1] Because it causes you always to be on the lookout for patterns  
in your code, working bottom-up helps to clarify your ideas about  
the design of your program. If two distant components of a program  
are similar in form, you'll be led to notice the similarity and  
perhaps to redesign the program in a simpler way.  
  
  
Bottom-up design is possible to a certain degree in languages  
other than Lisp. Whenever you see library functions,  
bottom-up design is happening. However, Lisp gives you much broader  
powers in this department, and augmenting the language plays a  
proportionately larger role in Lisp style-- so much so that  
Lisp is not just a different language, but a whole different way  
of programming.It's true that this style of development is better suited to  
programs which can be written by small groups. However, at the  
same time, it extends the limits of what can be done by a small  
group. In The Mythical Man-Month,  
Frederick Brooks  
proposed that the productivity of a group of programmers  
does not grow linearly with its size. As the size of the  
group increases, the productivity of individual programmers  
goes down. The experience of Lisp programming   
suggests a more cheerful way  
to phrase this law: as the size of the group decreases, the  
productivity of individual programmers goes up.  
A small group wins, relatively speaking, simply because it's  
smaller. When a small group also takes advantage of the  
techniques that Lisp makes possible, it can   
win outright.New: Download On Lisp for Free.  
[1] "But no one can read  
the program without understanding all your new utilities."  
To see why such statements are usually mistaken,  
see Section 4.8.

# This Year We Can End the Death Penalty in California

November 2016If you're a California voter, there is an important proposition  
on your ballot this year: Proposition 62, which bans the death  
penalty.When I was younger I used to think the debate about the death  
penalty was about when it's ok to take a human life. Is it ok  
to kill a killer?But that is not the issue here.The real world does not work like the version I was shown on TV growing up. The police   
often arrest the wrong person.  
Defendants' lawyers are often incompetent. And prosecutors  
are often motivated more by publicity than justice.In the real world,   
about 4% of people sentenced to death  
are innocent.  
So this is not about whether it's ok to kill killers. This  
is about whether it's ok to kill innocent people.A child could answer that one for you.This year, in California, you have a chance to end this, by  
voting yes on Proposition 62. But beware, because there is another   
proposition, Proposition 66, whose goal is to make it   
easier to execute people. So yes on 62, no on 66.It's time.

# RSS

Aaron Swartz created a scraped  
feed  
of the essays page.