

The Hardest Part to Part With...Beta Preview :)

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Table of Contents

[Table of Contents](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Psychological Problems](#)

[Finishing Projects](#)

[Video Games](#)

[The Backpack](#)

[Want to read more?](#)

Introduction

Flash back to the beginning of December, 2011. The year has been a whirlwind. My first start-up failed. My second and third book were released. I became an Android developer. I released more Android apps in less time than anyone, ever. I joined a Google Ventures funded music start-up as their Android lead. I found out the truth about the Android platform (it's not there yet), and about working at start-ups (it's the VC that gets the best deal). And I just found out my significant other wants to move across the country. How I got here, that's fairly common knowledge. How I'll get where I'm going now? That's another story.

Let's back up a tick. My name is Hunter Davis, and I'm a somewhat popular hacker and author of a couple of books. My first one, "Live For Free", did fairly well and still gets me some recurrent income. As technical manuals often are of interest to a smaller audience than prose works, my next two books, "Hacks" and "Build Your Own Distributed Compilation Cluster" were less widely read (but no less interesting for those that did manage to make it through). Life For Free (LFF for short) was a collection of guides and articles I had written on the economics of second-hand and discount markets. The underlying theme of the book was that of my singular goal, to save up enough money to fund a start-up. While I had succeeded in the preparation phase, my start-up, Discursive Labs, did not succeed in the execution phase. This left me roughly one year later (at the beginning of 2011) with limited savings, no job, and no direction.

Luckily, I'm something of an expert on living for free. Rather than jump straight back into the rat race, I thought I'd test the waters and release a couple more books. Months passed, and my second and third book were released to the general public, to limited interest. Deterred, I decided to try a career pivot. Unfortunately, I had no idea where to pivot to. Having been a C++ developer since before graduate school, and having done web technologies (and C++) at Discursive Labs, I felt I had fairly recently covered some pretty significant ground in our field. I was however, always interested in mobile apps (and hacking on mobile platforms, if you'll recall). This all came together when my good friend (and former Discursive Alumni) Mark gave me an Android tablet for my birthday in May. I decided that day to write Android apps.

I knew the switch from C/C++ to Java would be a bumpy one, and I also knew that I work best when I have a goal and people to spur me on. Having read about the software Jedi challenge, wherein a programmer writes an app per day for thirty days, I was intrigued by the concept. Could I do a Jedi challenge as a way to learn the Android platform? Spurred on by a combination of naivety and bravado, I sat down to code. I didn't stop for 60 days. At the end of July 2011, I had written and released 65 apps on the Android app store. A live-blog video of me writing an Android game from scratch went viral during this time, and I started to get noticed. In August 2011 I felt like I had successfully completed my goal, and I jumped back into the job market with both feet.

I landed, somewhat shaky, on the shores of a trending music start-up named Miso Media. As their new Android lead, it was my job to port their existing polyphonic pitch detection algorithms and Fast Fourier Transforms to Android. My second week of the job was spent in San Francisco at the TechCrunch Disrupt 2011 conference. As the newly appointed lead for

the Hackathon tournament, I had a lot riding on the conference. I proposed an augmented-reality drum kit. While an ambitious goal to be sure, we accomplished it. I also won an iPad 2, rocked a dance contest, and the hearts and minds of the conference attendees. A month and a half later, their first and last Android product hit the market, a guitar tuner featuring their proprietary technology. I had ported it from Objective C on the iOS platform to Java on the Android platform. I was the sole Android team member and managed to release it within 60 days of my hire date, a feat I'm still particularly proud of.

What those of you who don't program Android for a living are missing here is that Android's audio stack sucks. Buffer sizes vary across devices, as do the recording rates, bus widths, memory leaks, number of microphones, input delay, output delay, and damn near everything else about audio. Porting a real-time polyphonic tuner and getting it to run in real-time was a herculean feat. I began to receive so many job offers that I had to have Linked-In consolidate them all into a daily digest so they wouldn't overflow my inbox. Unfortunately overcoming these hurdles for pure audio processing can't overcome the touch input delay that occurs on Android devices (300ms average), so with its current incarnation Android will never see a real musical instrument or music teaching app become successful. Knowing this, Google advised Miso to drop Android completely. My title instantly went from "Android Team Lead" to "Web Team Member", and my position devolved into that of a back-end web developer. It is at this time I began to feel my pursuits would be best sought elsewhere, again perhaps in another related field.

My first instinct was to purchase a house. I've always wanted a house of my own, as I'm something of a tinkerer and would love to spend my days inventing in a real garage with space and tools. Unfortunately space and garages are expensive in Los Angeles and they require a great deal of income, like the kind you receive at a job. Undeterred, I set out to become the best back-end web programmer I could be. Though the challenges set before me were of limited interest, I figured I could power through them if I knew the end goal was something I greatly desired (i.e. a garage). I ran the plan by my significant other, who seemed a bit nonplussed. We talked, discussed how our lives were going, and she confessed her long slumbering dream to live elsewhere.

Boom. That's the sound of my head exploding. Moving across the country is a huge undertaking, and either requires one to outlay a serious amount of cash or alleviate themselves of the majority of their personal belongings. While this is something I've often tried to do myself, my significant other becomes attached to things. Seriously attached. Like, we're still lugging around a foot stool from her childhood home. Could she seriously sell or donate all her belongings and start over somewhere new? Could I? I've driven my motorcycle almost every day since I bought it new thousands of miles and many years ago in a far off state called Indiana. Could I sell it, my car, my moped, my video game consoles, our furniture, and all of our extra things and accoutrements just for the chance at a little adventure? Hell yes I can, and I did. All I needed was a plan. That's what this, my fourth book is all about. This is the tale of how I sold all my things, saved up all my money, and got the hell out of dodge. It wasn't easy, and it wasn't always fun, but it was always interesting.

Psychological Problems

The first step to accepting any big life decision is psychological. You've got to truly accept that your life is going to change and be willing to do drastic things to achieve your goals. Symbolism will play a larger part in this than many of us would like to admit. For me, the symbolic hurdle was my computer junk box. Stashed under my bed in a rollaway, my computer junk box generally held a mass of useful, perfectly logical and sensible computer parts for a young hacker to own... or so I thought. As it turns out, as a species humans are not good at seeing between things. Our minds tend to fill in cracks and incongruities, smoothing over the truth of the matter. My computer junk box was, for the most part, real junk. It's almost 2012 and the computing landscape has changed so drastically from what it was even five years ago, meaning many of the technologies crawling around my box of horrors will never be resurrected from the pit of lost souls. My logic steadied by this knowledge, I set about to make the most profit I could from my junk box.

I started by grabbing a couple of heavy duty shopping bags. The first I marked 'Goodwill', for the items I do not believe have a significant resale value. The second I marked 'Craigslist', for the items I believed could be sold, perhaps in a bulk sale, on Craigslist. Anything going to Goodwill will net a thirty percent return as you can claim it on your taxes at the end of the year. Anything sold on Craigslist will net around a fifty to sixty percent return depending on the age of the item and the size of the market. While going through the bags, I also found a NeatReceipts handheld scanner that sold on eBay for a nice 50 dollar profit.

The goodwill bag ended up containing:

Lots of telephone cables, serial cables, power cables, Kodak Click n Shoot camera batteries, headlamp, 2x Sony speakers, speaker wire, video cables of all kinds, record player parts, camera clip mount,

The Craigslist bag ended up containing:

Atari Flashback 2 console with 2 paddles, 4 port USB 2.0/Firewire hub, 2.5" USB HDD kit, USB floppy drive, Firewire to Firewire-Mini cable, 7-port USB 2.0 hub, 4-port USB 2.0 hub, 5-port 10/100 switch, SuperJoy 3 Famicom joystick, 2.5" SATA to USB adapter, Verizon DSL modem, USB numberpad, mini VGA to VGA adapter, Palm Pilot keypad, stacks of 512MB laptop memory chips, stacks of laptop mini-PCI wireless cards, bag full of SATA power cables, PS2 Eye Toy camera, USB to serial adapter x2, Sony mixer extension cable, PSP to USB adapter x2, Sprint Samsung Upstage phone, USB mini wall charger, IOGEAR 2-computer KVM switch with audio

All told I saved 200 dollars on my taxes. The Craigslist bag never sold, so I took it on in to Goodwill and moved on.

Finishing Projects

Projects. For geeks like me, projects are the milestones by which I measure the passage of time, and my growth within the realm of geekdomshire. Unfortunately, many projects never get finished. Whether it cost too much in time, effort, or just wasn't possible, unfinished projects

hang around our necks like old Jacob Marley's chains. Unfortunately, relief isn't going to be the first feeling you get when you start to go through your projects and get rid of them. No, it's going to be pangs of sadness and twinges of regret for the projects you never got to see through.

I started at the front of my projects closet and decided to clear backwards till I saw wall. The first find in my project archaeological dig was a stack of linksys routers. Back when Mark and I started Discursive Labs we had toyed with using linksys routers as storage routers, compilation nodes, and cluster management tools among many, many other things. Routers have grown in leaps during the past few years though, and the utility of older routers isn't what it used to be. These were the first of the discarded projects to hit the Goodwill bag.

Another Goodwill bag was filling up just with small plastic boxes and containers. One of the oddities of life is just how much people believe nerds need tiny plastic containers. I'd wager than any nerd reading this right now can head to their closet and scope at least ten such containers. What are they meant to hold? Screws? Chips? Who knows. They hit the Goodwill bag at a breakneck speed.

Many items that a typical geek will own are technological in nature, and thus will be replaced quickly by new technology. As such, we tend to lug around the discarded tech with the rest of our belongings. This discarded tech will most likely never be used again, but we spent some measure of money or time on them when we purchased them so it's difficult to let them go. The first real mental hurdle I had was in giving away a USB keyboard I had modified up to work as an Android tablet stand. I had later bought a nice bluetooth android tablet stand and the usb keyboard hadn't gotten any usage since. It hit the Goodwill bag.

Another set of items which have become outdated are FRS family walkie-talkies. With the rise of the cell phone, the need for walkie talkies has decreased their effective usefulness to zero. Two sets of walkie talkies were lurking in my closet, they hit the goodwill bag.

Hard drive enclosures used to be the canonical way that nerds would transfer data around. With the flooding in Thailand of last 2011 however, hard drive prices rose dramatically and enclosures lost their usefulness. With tiny thumb drive sizes ballooning and prices crashing, bulky and loud hard drive enclosures no longer make sense. They hit the goodwill bag, as did a stack of USB mice which I hadn't touched in half a decade and an antiquated graphics calculator. Along with a couple hundred feet worth of ethernet cable, my projects closet headed off to the goodwill, and saved me 100 bucks on my taxes.

The Backpack

When considering a cross-country move, it's important to weigh the emotional impact that your move will have. This impact is all the greater because of the difficulty in physically moving your accumulated goods literally across the world. It's likely you'll need to get rid of nearly everything you own. You'll have to prioritize everything you own, and likely trim your belongings down to those that will fit in two suitcases and a carry on bag. This can be emotionally difficult, to say the least. Luckily many types of video games have been preparing future expatriates for this for many years now.

In many role playing and action-adventure games the protagonist has a cache of items stashed in an item queue, commonly known as ‘The Backpack’. This can be used to quite comical effect, as the main character of these games is often shown without a backpack, yet is accepted to be carrying around many large and bulky items (sometimes cartoonishly in their pockets). Yet there’s wisdom to be gleaned from within these backpacks. Just as gamers must prioritize and combine items for maximum space (ahh Tetris...), we may organize our own belongings and pare them down to our own backpack size.

How then, to plan and pare and cause heartbreak and move through it all? One step at a time. For me, physically drawing the two bags and one carry-on bag I could take gave me a wealth of ideas. While you’ll likely need some room for clothes, a great deal of items in today’s technological landscape are completely redundant and unnecessary. Video game consoles may be emulated by powerful laptops, televisions can be replaced by tiny projectors, and book collections of near infinite size may be stored on fingernail sized memory cards. The digitization, not just of our photos and music but of our entire lives has nearly occurred right before our eyes. This makes it easier than ever to pare down to the essential items and move up, on, out, or just away.

Video Games

For most of us, video games play some integral part of our lives. When you’re moving thousands of miles however, you don’t have a lot of room to spare. How then to consolidate a lifetime of gaming into a handbag’s worth of space on a plane? Strategy, and careful planning. The first strategy is digitization. If you can digitize your games, they don’t take up any space. There are a number of trends than make this possible. The first trend is emulation. Even recent consoles such as the Wii, Playstation 2, Nintendo DS, and Playstation Portable may be emulated on laptops of reasonable hardware. What’s more, they can be emulated in high definition, with new features and graphical upgrades that were not possible on the original systems. This takes care of most of your consoles, but what about your high-end consoles like the Playstation 3 and Xbox 360? These cannot currently be emulated, but luckily our second trend deals with that.

The second trend which allows digitization of our gaming artifacts is that of digital distribution. Digital distribution platforms like Steam allow you to purchase and play new high end games without the need for a physical cd or game box. What’s more, a great deal of new releases are today shared between PC, 360, and PS3, so one doesn’t need to feel left out of the gaming culture if they move off the map. If you’re moving to a location with high speed internet, a digital streaming service like OnLive may be in order. Companies like OnLive actually store the game data and renders the graphics at their servers, so end users only need a laptop or tablet device to access their digital gaming collection over the internet. This requires at least 6mbps bandwidth for HD graphics however, so is not an option everywhere.

Another strategy to help consolidate your gaming hardware is miniaturization. If you’ve got a huge stack of PS1 games you love to play, why not convert them to iso format and transfer them to a PSP device to play? Games made for portable formats tend to be region-free, so you can for example play a Nintendo DS game purchased in South America on a DS console purchased in Thailand. Consider trading your large consoles for one of the more newer more

powerful gaming handhelds or tablets. The space savings are tremendous, and the graphics quality on newer gaming devices like the PS Vita and Nintendo 3DS are outstanding and rival consoles. You may find you don't miss your consoles at all.

For me, specifically, I had a long road to travel when consolidating my collection. It had sort of spiraled out of control. I first traded my spare Xbox 360 (yeah, spare, I realize how that sounds...) for a Nintendo 3DS, the newest Nintendo handheld. I then sold my aging PS2 system for 40 bucks with a stack of controllers. As the Wii can be easily emulated, I took my Wii system and 267 games (and many controllers, accessories, mod chips, etc etc) and put it up on Craigslist looking for an iPad or tablet to trade. I then proceeded to put my spare 42" lcd television on Craigslist looking for trades or cash. Knowing Craigslist doesn't always work out, I proceeded to put my PSP-GO, Roku XD, Popcorn Hour, and OnLive micro-console system up for sale on eBay. This was only the beginning.

Want to read more?

Let hunter@hunterdavis.com know you're interested in the publishing of his 4th book.