

Invention is Drudgery



"You've got boring at 11:00, pointless at 1:00,
and interminable at 3:00."

Edison spent 18 months on the drudgery of trial and error to produce the first workable light, which lasted only 13 hours before the carbon fiber filament would burn out. He then spent another 18 months on the drudgery of trial and error before discovering that a carbonized bamboo filament would last 100x longer, and finally the light-bulb was born.

Isn't this true in all walks of life, not only engineering? Musicians spend almost all their time practicing in spaces (in)sufficiently isolated from other humans, landing gigs with a slurry of begging and assurance, transporting and setting up stages, and hardest of all, getting more than four people to show up.

In the audience, we enjoy the show, blind to the hundred hours of toil backing each visible hour of glory.

Having skipped to the last page of other peoples' book, we forget that they took the journey of the whole book. So we feel bad about ourselves when we're only on Chapter Four, having already toiled quite a lot thank you very much for asking, and when exactly are we going to get to the good part?

All we seem to do is drudgery—fixing the bugs that we were sure our unit tests proved couldn't exist, tying off the loose ends of development that never stop arriving, planning and estimating and communicating and post-morteming, taking the wrong path and backtracking, planning the launch and the training and the positioning and the alpha testers, and losing five hours solving a problem that on another day with different luck might have taken five minutes.

It's hard, it sucks, and sometimes the finish line isn't clear enough to still be compelled to do it, day after day. A book has a clear end; products don't. It's often unclear whether it's smarter to continue or to quit.²

So sometimes, we quit. We quit the job thinking wrongly that the next company will be so much better. We quit the startup because it's apparently not working. We just get tired, and why shouldn't we be tired and why shouldn't we quit? Life's too short and all that.

But that means the ones who eventually succeed, are the ones who plod through the 5,999 filaments that didn't work, put in the 10,000 hours to become a master, and fight through the overwhelming pile of challenges and drudgery that is always required to create something great.

Afterwards, when you're panting from exhaustion and laughing because it finally worked, you'll be able to look back and say, "I really *did* something."

And that's the cue for others to dismiss it as mostly luck.³ The most annoying part is: They're not altogether wrong.

Maybe it's crazy to do all this for a fleeting feeling of accomplishment. On the other hand, maybe it's the meaning of life.

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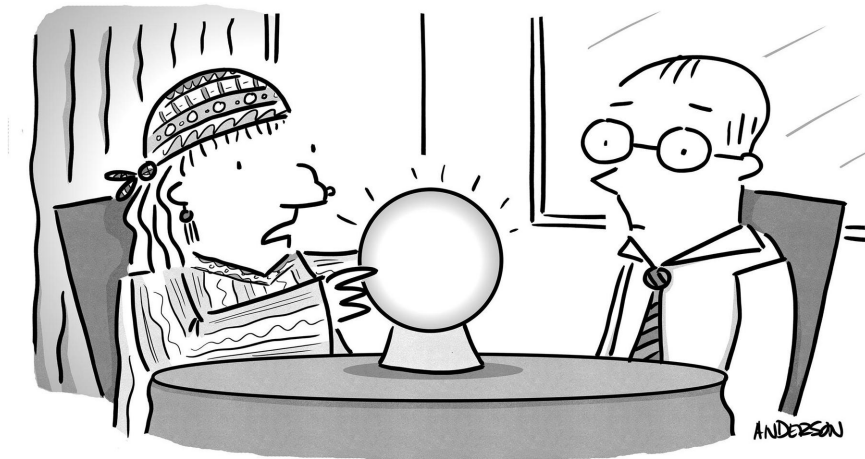
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"Nope, nothing interesting in any of your previous lives either. You're consistent, I'll give you that."