



# BRAIN DAWDLING

ESSAYS ON FINDING  
UNEXPECTED VALUE  
IN THE EVERYDAY.

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Matt Javanshir



MATT JAVANSHIR

## Brain Dawdling

*Essays on finding unexpected value in the everyday*

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*First edition*

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# Introduction

As kids, we're often criticised for being *dawdlers*. I know I was; I would waste time, wander around idly, and spend much of my life lost in my own thoughts. I had a million questions about a million topics because everything was new and fascinating.

As the years pass and we enter into the machinery of work, this way of thinking is gradually worn away. We're taught that life is all about efficiency, productivity, and constant busyness. We tend to measure success only in ways that we can quantify. We don't stop to think about much. We don't have the time. Yet, along the way, life introduces us to people, places, and experiences that forge a life completely unique to us. We acquire skills, wisdom, stories, and life lessons that connect us all.

This book is my attempt to reconcile the two. Having been in the privileged position of being gifted some time to think, I've produced a collection of essays containing what I call *brain dawdling*, where I meander on the otherwise mundane, produce detailed analyses as a means of introspection, and ruminate on life lessons from everyday oddities. I've written it to slow down, deliberately reflect, and share the time I've spent lost in my own thoughts to uncover the beauty in topics that we rarely stop to dwell on.

For me, this looks like a smorgasbord of geekery: statistics, accounting, data, and science fiction. That's because these are the roads life has taken me down so far. What would yours look like? If you enjoy this, I'd encourage you to consider it. You might be surprised by what you find. And if not, who cares? Everybody else is too busy to notice anyway. Embrace the dawdle.



I

## Dawdling on Memories

*Reflections on kindness, identity, and the small things that shape  
who we are.*



# This Random Act Of Kindness Changed My Life

**T**his is a story about how a random act of kindness from a stranger changed my life.

Back in 2007, I had an interview lined up for a summer internship at an Investment Bank, taking place between my second and third year of University. I'll be honest: I wasn't the type of student who knew exactly what I wanted from a career and where I wanted to work. I was a classically trained pianist, which made me an interesting applicant, I suppose, but I wasn't a straight-A student, and I didn't have a million offers on the table. I was curious and driven to learn (still am!), but not necessarily as a means of a more effective career trajectory.

For whatever reason, I was offered an interview that would introduce me to the world of Operations at Investment Banks. This was a world I had no exposure to and knew next to nothing about. As an Accounting & Finance student in an impending credit crunch, opportunities like this were not exactly being handed out left, right and centre. Another (lesser but relevant) factor is that I would earn enough from the internship that I wouldn't have to spend my final

year working a part-time job at my local supermarket alongside studying, as I had done for the prior couple of years. So it was a big deal to me.

On the morning of the interview, as I was wearing one of the first suits I ever owned, my dad very kindly drove me to the firm's office. Only, we got lost. We got lost, and we were getting late too.

We ended up stopping on a random suburban street to ask a stranger for directions, who happened to be in their front garden working on the lawn. The gentleman explained that we were only a few minutes away from where we were trying to get to, but it was a bit tricky to get there and easy to make a wrong turn. Without skipping a beat, he offered to jump in his car, and have us follow him as he guided us there personally. We took him up on his offer, we found the office, I waved him goodbye from our car, and ultimately, I made it to the interview on time.

I was fortunate enough to be offered that internship. That turned into an offer to join a graduate programme the following year, and I ended up having a 15-year career in the firm, gaining a variety of skills, making some lifelong friends, experiencing different types of roles and getting the opportunity to travel to offices in London, New York and Tokyo, among others. And it was helped along by a single act of kindness from a random stranger whom I never really got to properly thank and will never meet again.

Going slightly out of your way to help someone can profoundly affect the trajectory of their life. It doesn't have to be giving a million dollars, or a mansion, or a bodily organ.

**Life-changing kindness could be as simple as showing someone the way.**

## It's Good To Talk

**T**he ways and means we can communicate with one another in our technological, data-driven world can feel almost limitless. This is a little story that has stuck with me to serve as a reminder not to forget the basics.

Years and years ago, I was at one of my first-ever job interviews. It was a day-long assessment centre. In one of the sessions, I was handed a huge stack of printed emails, told I had fifteen minutes to read through them all, digest what was going on, and opine on a solution to the problem.

I didn't know where to start. The more I read, the more confused I got.

In these emails, different people were replying to different parts of different threads. Hardly anything was consistent or coherent. I didn't understand the acronyms. I didn't understand the problem. I didn't understand why this seemed to span an inordinate amount of time. When my fifteen minutes of fame were up, I resigned myself to the loss and came clean to my assessor:

"I'm going to be honest. I have no idea at all what any of this means. The only thing I can tell you is that, based on their email signatures, they are all based

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in the same office. I'm not sure why this whole thing is even being done over email in the first place and why they didn't just go and talk to each other".

I got the job.

I'm not for a moment saying that there is a single best way to communicate; every situation is unique and people have different needs, abilities and preferences. However, if I'm ever in a situation where the way I'm working isn't...working, then I take a step back and consider simpler alternatives.

**Sometimes, it's just good to talk.**

## Are You Navigating Life like a Video Game NPC?

**A**re you stuck in an endless loop of monotony? Maybe you could get value from a new pathfinding algorithm! Just make sure you're not falling into the trap of giving up that freedom by scrolling into the void.

### What is pathfinding?

Pathfinding is an element of game development that involves creating the pathways that characters (and other things) traverse in a game world. Pathfinding algorithms use nodes and connections to work out ways to travel from point to point in a way that's plausible and efficient. Some are even capable of spicing it up by doing things like dynamic obstacle avoidance, introducing variability through waypoints, selecting a path based on certain criteria, and adaptive learning through multiple iterations.

Have you ever followed a video game Non-Player Character (NPC) around only to find that seem to be walking around from point A to B, stopping, and that's about it? For me, even though I have a little bit of insight into how the

sausage is made, I find that effective NPC behaviour (of which pathfinding is a part) can completely add to my immersion and feeling that I'm actually viewing a window into someone's life. A life that will continue after I stop playing. But seeing a character visit the same couple of locations and do the same couple of things in an endless cycle? It feels inauthentic to life in that regard. And yet, are we not essentially doing this in our own lives?

## Stuck in your ways?

If you've ever commuted to work before, how often do you see the same people at the same points in your respective journeys en route? Look at all the stars that have to consistently align each and every day in our routines for that to happen. What does it tell you about how devoted to our routines we are? I know I am.

I am a devout creature of habit, and routines have been a prominent aspect of my life; I ritualistically make coffee and drink from the same mug every morning. I pretty much eat the same breakfasts and wear the same clothes. When I drove to work, I left at the same time and took exactly the same route. I buy the same groceries from the same place at the same time. When I exercise, I take the same route around the same park.

This is entirely intentional and has been a big help in crafting a minimalist life that I value greatly. Removing decision-making from every little thing in my daily routine allows me to focus more of my mental energy on deeper creative pursuits and quality time, which I value. And to a large extent, it works. But if we applied this to every single aspect of our lives, are we decluttering away the opportunity for spontaneity? Are we letting an autopilot make us miss some interesting and beautiful moments in our day? Is being present the opportunity cost of being efficient?

Your attention, please.

The digital life zeitgeist is awash with talk of dopamine, our relationship with our brain's administration of it, and attention in general. And it's not surprising; social media and modernity in general are obsessed with competing for our attention. It is one of the great currencies of our generation. As Cal Newport writes in *Digital Minimalism*, our personal devices are designed to ping, pop, and little-red-button-notify us by any means necessary, as long as we engage with them. Our minds are numbed to the present moment, so we go looking for those little dopamine hits in our tiny glowing screens. One more check of the app. One more scroll. One more ping.

I think this is relevant to the topic of routines and pathfinding because (for me at least), my device has inserted itself into every quiet part of my life, leaving me with a mental lack and a lack of space to savour little moments. Spontaneity in a well-tuned routine has been usurped by mindlessly checking my phone. It's festered into my days like some kind of dystopian digital fondue oozing all around the marshmallow that is my brain. Every ounce of efficiency from the other aspects of my life has been counterweighed with the fact that I find myself scrolling into the nothingness when I could be doing literally anything else — including just being present. I am working on addressing this, but my experience with minimalism is that it is easier to let something go if you know why you're craving that relief.

For me, it's about expanding and enriching my path. Both figuratively and literally. To not be some kind of boring NPC who sticks to the same routines so they can spend that attention staring into the digital void. Who knows whether a tiny imperceptible change in a daily routine could have a monumental impact on your life and make a seemingly minute moment actually a momentous event, then and into the future, in ways you couldn't possibly have imagined? What if you walked home on the other side of the road? What if you turned left a bit further up than usual? What if you just stood in the queue, looking around at the world, not at a screen? What if you listened to a genre of music

that you never usually would? What if you said yes to that thing you would never usually do? What if you looked up? What if you said hello? Nothing changes if nothing changes.

New year, new meandering.

In *The Pathless Path*, author Paul Millerd takes the path metaphor a step further by distinguishing between the Default path (a life lived according to others' expectations and conventions) and the Pathless path (a life that may be unconventional but is one of intrinsic creative freedom and exploration). This was one of my favourite reads of recent years. It's rare that I read something where I feel as though it's speaking directly to me, but this book came into my life at exactly the right time; I began last year, having moved on from a 15-year career to pursue my own version of whatever a pathless path is to me.

**One thing is for sure: I'm going to allow space in my routine for both the big and little things to happen. For my own path to be a little more meandering. Who knows what could happen?**

## Jog On: The Three Things I Learned From Being In The Bottom 5%.

**P**arkruns are free, weekly Saturday morning 5k running events at the local community level. They are run all over the world. I've only ever done a handful of them — in various places across the UK — and they have always been an entirely positive, wholesome experience. The other day I participated in my local Parkrun after an absence of two years or so. I finished 634th. That put me firmly in the bottom 5%. Rather than hang my head in proverbial shame, drag myself back home, and do my usual go-to and eat my feelings, I wanted to write a little about the three ways I contextualised this to be useful to me going forward.

Maybe you're someone reading this who is struggling to make progress at something and, like me, there are certain things in your life where you repeatedly find yourself in a volatile stop-start cycle of disappointment and determination. If you're the latter: chin up and read on. I don't have all the answers, but I do believe it's in the act of mentally unpacking and articulating these things, of contextualising them to establish clarity, that's going to play a significant role in helping me. Maybe it will help you too.

## #1 – It's not really the bottom 5% of anything.

If I think about this in context and how I've automatically framed it in my head simply by writing "the bottom 5%", I ask myself, is that really true? Yes, I was in the bottom 5% of those who finished the Parkrun in my hometown on that day. Yes, I finished 634th. But what if it was out of a million? Or out of the 650 fastest runners in the world? How about other Cities? Counties? Countries? Species?! Other points in history? Individuals who couldn't run even if they wanted to? Individuals who aren't in the privileged position to take a Saturday morning off to go for a run? Individuals who are in that position but choose not to attend?

I also got notified I was in the top 30 for my age group. When framed that way, it sounds a lot better than finishing 634th, right? But does that mean I actually performed any better? Are there fewer people in my age group participating, or are they just slower than me? When I think about any kind of stats in this context, the bottom x% of anything doesn't really mean a lot and is entirely dependent on the way in which you're thinking about it.

## #2 – I'm running against myself, not others.

Let's say a finishing time of 40:00 is what earned me that illustrious 634th place. If I had run a 5k in half that time but still finished 634th, does that mean I haven't improved? Absolutely not! Focusing on how "well" others are doing relative to me will only act as a recipe for a feeling of inadequacy (or at the other end of the spectrum, inflate my ego). Neither is a genuine perspective I particularly want to engage with. Instead, I focus on whether I'm improving relative to my past efforts, not relative to other people's efforts today.

### # 3 – Running doesn't have to be a race.

I can go a step further and even question my second point above. Am I even racing myself? Is this even a race in the traditional sense of the word? Is improvement in finishing time the metric by which I should gauge success? It's competitive if I make it competitive. My perspective is shifting towards just finding the intrinsic value in the simple joy of putting one foot in front of the other. In the moment, it's not a marathon or a sprint. It's putting one foot in front of the other. A lot. Who cares if I'm first, last or even consistent?

All of these extend beyond Parkrun. If I think about this in the context of anything I do in life, I can ask myself the same questions: How do I define, contextualise and frame success for myself? Is each action I take conducive to that success in some way? Am I continuing to feel more satisfied with each new step I take? Am I focusing on the intrinsic value I find in the act of what I'm doing?

**Doing an activity doesn't have to mean I'm competing. There don't have to be winners and losers. The intrinsic enjoyment of the moment-to-moment is enough.**

## 5

# I Tracked My Life for 425 Days. Here Are 5 Things I Learned About Myself

**I** collected 5,525 data points about my life in the hope to geek out with some analysis and glean insights about myself along the way.

What I tracked and why I tracked it.

My time is often spent trying to find a balance between meticulous planning and goal setting, and simply enjoying the moment-to-moment of my day. I've always leaned towards the former, but then at times overcompensated and forced myself to lean into the latter. Neither has been wholly satisfying nor sustainable. I've found that too much of one creates unrealistic expectations, a lack of presence, and a risk of burnout. Too much of the other leaves me without structure, direction, or intention in how I spend my time. So I had the idea to use my love of data analysis to try an introspective experiment about the ways I'm spending my time and how I feel about that.

Between 1st January 2023 and 29th February 2024, I tracked a number of objective and subjective aspects of what I did each day. I also tracked some

things that roughly correspond to areas aligned with my values or to habits I'm trying to form (or change). They are as follows:

- **Mood:** a scale of 1 to 5 based on my personal judgement, ranging from “today was absolutely awful, and it can get in the bin” all the way through “today was an incredible day that I’ll remember for years to come” and everything in between.
- **Description:** A sentence or two about what I did with my day (which I thought would be useful to contextualise when drilling down into outliers and other aspects, etc).
- **Sleep:** My overall sleep quality score is based on my watch’s tracking of deep sleep, REM, and restlessness.
- **Steps:** A step count for the day (again, based on my watch’s tracking).

I also created the following yes/no flags on whether I spent a substantial portion of my day embracing the following:

- **Baking** something from scratch, whether it’s bread, biscuits, cakes... gah, I’m getting peckish now!
- **Solitude.** I’ve found it’s hugely important to prioritise this for my general wellbeing.
- **Reading.** Books, that is. Idly scrolling social media didn’t count.
- **Creating.** i.e. writing, [composing music](#), or working on [Propulsion Games](#).
- **Walking.** i.e. a concerted effort to go for a walk somewhere.
- **Exercise.** Aside from walking, I made a concerted effort to exercise.
- **Gardening.** Spending time in the peace and quiet of maintaining my garden, which I’m fortunate enough to have.
- **Gratitude,** i.e. setting aside some time to reflect on the gratitude I have for the people and circumstances that make my life what it is.

- **Takeaway** - whether I had any takeaway/take-out food that day. This might seem like an odd one to add, but I wanted to track it with the aim of intentionally scheduling in some takeaways throughout the year (if I was fortunate enough to be able to do that), in order to try and not indulge in them sporadically as a result of a bad day/week, and all of the guilt and shame surrounding that.

I did this exercise to amass enough data to perform analysis, spot trends and triggers, and identify outliers, in the hope of gaining insights into my routines and areas I may want to examine more closely.

Here are 5 things I learned about myself.

### #1 – My best days were a balance.

The days I rated the highest were a balance of things, all within the wheelhouse of activities that align with my values. While I had the same number of “best days” as “worst days” in terms of mood, the high ratings were more evenly distributed throughout the period than the low. In fact, the first four days I rated a day 5 out of 5 were in January, April, July, and October. Almost like clockwork!

When I drill into what was driving those ratings, they were almost universally for the same reason: **a balance of the activities that align with my values, and spending some or all of the days having quality time with my family.** If I were to [normalise](#) my mood ratings and total number of activities performed, I would get a correlation of 1, implying that the rating I give a day is directly tethered to the amount of activities that I’m tracking:

I TRACKED MY LIFE FOR 425 DAYS. HERE ARE 5 THINGS I LEARNED...

	nMood	nBaking	nSolitude	nReading	nCreating	nWalking	nExercise	nGardening	nGratitude	nTakeaway	nActivities	nSleep	nPrior/Day Sleep	nSteps
nMood	0.14	0.08	0.07	0.10	0.11	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.32	-0.02	1.00	-0.06	-0.01	0.02
nBaking	0.14	0.03	0.11	-0.06	0.21	-0.02	0.07	0.19	-0.04	0.14	-0.02	-0.14	-0.14	0.09
nSolitude	0.08	0.03	0.28	0.02	0.25	0.14	0.06	0.13	-0.01	0.08	-0.11	0.00	0.00	0.22
nReading	0.07	0.11	0.28	-0.03	0.18	-0.02	0.06	0.13	-0.03	0.07	-0.12	-0.15	-0.15	0.09
nCreating	0.10	-0.06	0.02	-0.03	-0.06	-0.08	-0.06	-0.02	0.07	0.12	0.10	0.00	-0.02	-0.24
nWalking	0.11	0.21	0.25	0.18	-0.08	-0.08	-0.08	0.14	-0.05	0.11	-0.03	-0.02	-0.02	0.44
nExercise	0.06	0.02	0.14	-0.02	-0.06	-0.08	0.01	-0.01	-0.03	0.05	0.06	0.07	0.07	0.35
nGardening	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.06	-0.02	-0.03	0.01	0.04	-0.02	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02
nGratitude	0.32	0.19	0.13	0.13	0.07	0.14	-0.01	0.04	0.08	0.32	-0.06	-0.02	0.00	0.05
nTakeaway	-0.02	-0.04	-0.01	-0.03	0.12	-0.05	-0.03	-0.02	0.06	-0.02	-0.02	0.02	-0.06	-0.06
nActivities	1.00	0.14	0.08	0.07	0.10	0.11	0.06	0.06	0.32	-0.02	-0.06	-0.06	-0.01	0.02
nSleep	-0.06	-0.02	-0.11	-0.12	0.00	-0.03	0.06	0.00	-0.06	0.02	-0.06	-0.06	0.25	-0.02
nPrior/Day Sleep	-0.01	-0.14	0.00	-0.15	-0.02	-0.02	0.07	0.00	-0.02	-0.06	-0.01	0.25	-0.02	0.07
nSteps	0.02	0.09	0.22	0.09	-0.24	0.44	0.35	0.02	0.05	-0.06	0.02	-0.02	0.07	0.07

Correlations based on the normalised values of the items I was tracking.

In addition, there is a positive correlation between my mood and setting aside a moment each day to practice gratitude.

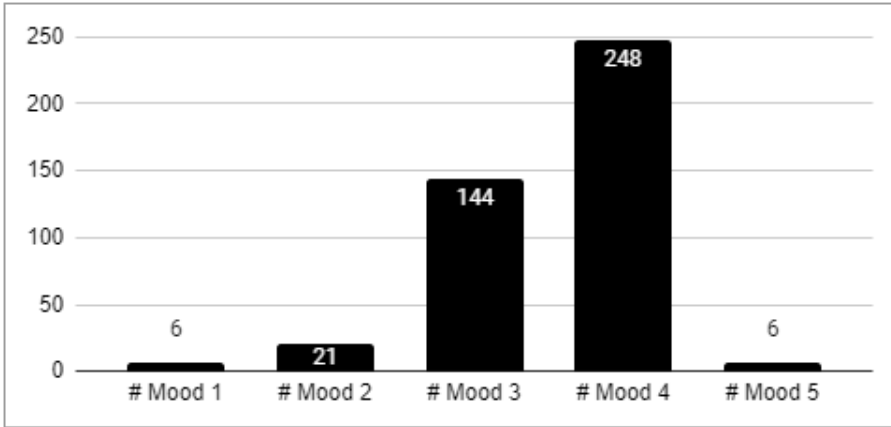
I’m not necessarily implying causality with these things. But thinking about it, if I’m able to spend time walking, creating, gardening and baking all in the same day — it means there hasn’t been a family emergency or some other obligation taking me away from an otherwise peaceful day where I had planned to do the very things I’m tracking. And vice versa. So it makes sense.

*As an aside, I can also see a weak negative correlation of -0.24 between time spent on creative endeavours and the number of steps I take. Until I can find a way to write music while walking, I think that will continue! I suppose a treadmill on a laptop could be an alternative. Or just a healthy balance of both!*

## #2 — My worst days were out of my control.

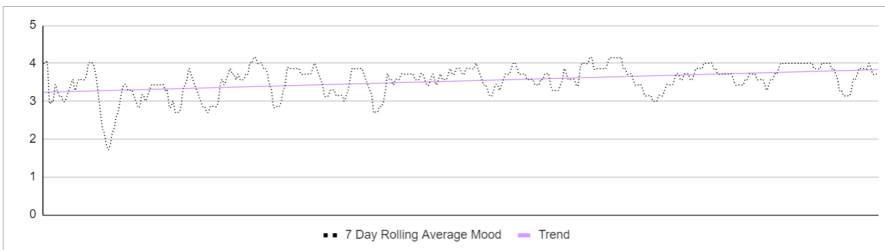
I didn’t rate many days the lowest I could, but when I did, it tended to be for similar reasons. My average mood across all of the days was 3.5 out of 5. That doesn’t really tell me a lot, but the distribution is a little more interesting to me:

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*Positive vibes creating a negative skew!*

I had recorded exactly as many lowest-mood days as highest-mood days, both representing less than 3% of the total recorded days. In fact, 92% of my days were rated at a 3 or 4. To me, that's a fairly consistent positive outlook for such an inexact science. But drilling down into those lower-mood "1's and 2's" (27 of all 425 days), they were driven by 17 in the first 3 months, and the rest in the remaining 11 months. So, firstly, they were overwhelmingly in the first quarter of 2023. If I look at the trend over the period, I can see the initial few months being lower before the 7-day rolling average climbs up over the period:



*7-Day Rolling Average Mood and Trend*

When I look at the reasons for those ratings, they basically boil down to dealing with the illness of various family members. Looking back, it was a particularly tumultuous time. While I acknowledge that we cannot change what happens to us, only our response to it, and that ultimately it's not about me, that is often easier said than done in the heat of the moment, and my mood ratings clearly reflected that.

### #3—The process was its own reward.

The high-level data reaffirmed the routines I already knew I had. But the real value of doing this was the act of sitting down each evening and writing through what I had done and how I felt about it. Not only was it interesting to look back and read, but it also made me pause and intentionally reflect on what I had done well and what I wanted to improve in the near future. In a way, this wasn't actually a new revelation; only a confirmation that I can see some of my routines manifested in the data.

When it came to the actual headline numbers themselves, there were fewer surprising insights overall. If you asked me about this period of my life without looking at the data, I could have told you what a typical week had looked like for me. **Mondays** in the office, going for a walk at lunch and seeing friends for dinner in the evening. **Tuesdays** working from home. **Wednesdays** spent with my youngest daughter, going for extra-long walks in the hope that it coincides with a nap (for her!), then spending the afternoon with both of my daughters after school. **Thursdays** in the office, going for a walk at lunch. **Fridays** spent working on [Orbitect](#) in our little but mighty team over at [Propulsion Games](#). **Weekends** with family. The only exception is the first few months, when my youngest daughter was just a few months old, and all semblance of normality and routine had been thrown out of the window. I am thankful that I was able to take shared parental leave during this time because it was a whirlwind to say the least. Here is a breakdown by day of the week:

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Totals	#	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Average Mood (Mean)	3.5	3.5	3.6	3.5	3.4	3.6	3.6	3.6
Average Sleep (Mean)	75	78	78	74	73	76	74	74
Average Steps (Mean)	8018	7178	8328	7032	10231	8771	5798	8765
Average Sleep (Median)	78	79	80	78	76	79	76	77
Average Steps (Median)	7956	6796	8380	6885	10255	8927	5746	7910
Average Activities	1.3	1.2	1.3	1.3	1.6	1.4	1.4	1.2
# Mood 1	6	2	1	1	0	0	1	1
# Mood 2	21	1	2	2	7	3	1	5
# Mood 3	144	26	20	22	22	20	20	14
# Mood 4	248	29	36	36	32	37	38	40
# Mood 5	6	3	2	0	0	1	0	0
# Baking	100	17	8	10	23	12	7	23
# Solitude	49	5	10	6	8	10	2	8
# Reading	63	10	11	9	11	8	4	10
# Creating	120	9	15	24	10	16	48	1
# Walking	84	7	15	10	27	21	1	3
# Exercise	10	0	1	2	1	1	0	5
# Gardening	32	9	3	4	3	0	3	10
# Gratitude	93	14	12	11	15	14	14	13
# Takeaway	19	3	3	1	0	2	9	1

*Tracking my routines for 425 days —breakdown by Weekday.*

And I can see some of this represented in the data: my step count was notably higher on Wednesdays. My step count was notably lower on Fridays. My days spent on “Creative pursuits” were notably higher on Fridays. I did a bit more baking on Wednesdays (when time permitted!)

### #4—Expectations going in did not always play out.

There were a few trends I was expecting to see in the data, but I didn’t see them. Firstly, a **bad sleep score didn’t result in a worse mood rating**. When my sleep score was below 50, my average mood was rated at 3.6. In fact, there was only one day when I rated my mood 2 (and none at 1). This is true when I look at the lowest 7-day average sleep scores, too. As important as sleep is, I would have thought that a bad night’s sleep would have been a bigger determinant of mood. Apparently not. Secondly, **Takeaways didn’t precede or result in a worse mood rating**. I had 19 throughout the 14 months—fairly evenly spaced out. So, every three weeks or so. Like with sleep, my average mood on those days was 3.5—which is in line with the overall picture. Finally, **I did not exercise nearly as much as I thought I did**. Aside from walking, I

have apparently recorded only 14 exercise sessions. That's an average of once a month over the period and significantly less than I would have guessed. I knew that I had prioritised walking this year, but I was shocked at how little I had prioritised other forms of exercise. This is something I intend to change as a result of this analysis!

#### #5 – This is only ever part of the story.

The title of this chapter is a bit tongue-in-cheek because it's impossible to track the multi-faceted complexity that comprises your entire life. It's true that what you track becomes a part of your priorities and even arguably your worldview — to quote Peter Drucker: *“What gets measured gets done”*, but this cannot be applied to measuring the totality of a person's life. Even if I tried, there are a million things I could track that may be insightful to my days and contribute to a meaningful life for me, but I haven't tracked them. Things like meaningful conversations, writing, charitable endeavours, my weight, drinking water, the weather, time spent playing video games, and time spent just being present. At the end of the day, your view of the world, your view of success, and your view of your life overall can be shaped by what you choose to measure and analyse. But it can never tell the whole story of your life.

**Overall, this exercise taught me the importance of finding balance, accepting what I can't control, and being intentional about what I choose to pay attention to.**

## 6

# 6 Reasons Why Being an Accountant Changed My Outlook On Life

**B**eing an accountant is often thrown around like some kind of pejorative and rally-cry against boringness. Having previously spent a nearly a decade as a qualified accountant and even longer in accounting based/adjacent roles, this always perplexed me. I'm not going to claim that it's an occupation comparable to astronauts, rock stars or indie video game composers, but do the folks making these bold claims even know what it is accountants do? This isn't professional advice (or *any* kind of advice really), but let me explain 6 reasons why my time as an accountant changed my outlook on life.

#1 - Life is full of trade-offs.

Financial transactions are predicated on the tenet that every action has a corresponding equal and opposite reaction. Newton's Third Law, folks. But in a ledger. In double-entry booking (essentially the accounting-esque method of recording transactions) each and every transaction has two sides ("credit" and "debit") that relate to either revenue, expenses, capital, assets or

liabilities. Every single transaction will have a debit (which increases expenses and assets) and a corresponding equal and opposite credit (which increases revenue, liabilities and capital) and vice versa. For example:

- A sale of £10 (credit to revenue) paid in cash will result in a £10 increase in your bank balance (debit to assets).
- Spending £3 of your hard earned cash on a delicious cup of coffee is a debit to expenses, and reduces your bank balance accordingly (credit to assets). This is a confusing example because “crediting your account” literally means the opposite in everyday speak. But I digress.
- Let’s say you’re a potato salesman. Buying £500 worth of tatties on credit from your supplier will increase your inventory (debit to assets) and also increase your creditor balance (credit to liabilities) by the same amount.

The Balance Sheet, a pillar of financial reporting in the Accounting world, is the ultimate reflection of this. Literally showing how the accumulated transactions balance to show Assets equalling Liabilities less Capital. This fact is a life lesson for me because I’m reminds that everything can be seen from two perspectives. An action and a corresponding reaction, diametrically complimenting one another. It reminds me of the opportunity costs of my own choices. It reminds me that saying yes to something means I’ve said no to something else. It reminds me of potatoes.

## #2 – If it matters to you, then it matters.

Mistakes, errors, and things not aligning perfectly with one another are a fact of life. But does that really matter to you? Accountancy has a principle called *materiality* to deal with these situations. Under this principle, if an accounting discrepancy would change the direction or decision making of people relying on the accounts, then it is deemed material and needs to be disclosed and resolved. If not, then it is deemed *immaterial*.

That's not to say tiny amounts don't matter. In context, it may matter incredibly. Is the impact of a discrepancy that it changes the profitability of your accounting period? Does it affect whether or not you invest more time and effort into a certain strategy? Does it have some bearing on your obligations or reputation? If so, then it matters. But spending inordinate amounts of time, attention, and life on making sure every last thing reconciles to the penny — even when the impact of such a correction is unimportant or non-existent, simply doesn't make sense. The life lesson for me here is that things will go wrong in life, and I have to be intentional about what I choose to care about. Otherwise I will tie myself in knots chasing a perfection which doesn't exist.

### #3 – It is what it is.

I do my best to go through life embracing situations as they are, not what I wish they could be or what they appear to be on face value. Accountancy has a concept referred to as *substance over form*. Under this principle, one should account for something based on the complete, relevant and accurate context of the situation, not just merely based on how it has been legally presented. This is to ensure the integrity of the accounts represent the reality of a situation as best as they can. For example, if you have acquired some kind of lease for something and the value and length of that lease is more or less the same as the underlying asset you're leasing, that would be accounted for as your asset, even if you don't legally own it. This is because in *substance* you are gaining from that asset for all of its useful life. It is (hopefully!) playing its role in helping you to gain revenue — for all of its existence — and so from an accounting perspective, it's yours. I think there is a powerful life lesson in this principle.

How many times have you been on either side of an argument because someone has *technically* used the wrong word or phase in order to convey a meaning, even though if you were being compassionate and honest with yourself, you

understood the spirit and meaning of what they were trying to say? Or situations where you may technically be entitled to something or correct about something, but in spirit you feel like a different course of action would be better and more principled for various reasons? Look around. It's substance over form. Everywhere.

#### #4 – Explain yourself.

Explaining technical concepts to a non-technical audience is a life skill. Accounting has a reputation for being all about the numbers, but I think it's more than that. For me, it's also about understanding and conveying situations through narrative. While numbers and their corresponding analyses are paramount (especially if your job is to prepare or verify financial statements), they will also need to be accompanied with a narrative substantiation giving context to them. In Accounting based roles, this could include a variety of things, such as notes to the accounts, audit reports and statements, internal audit work papers, internal reporting and memos, and policies and procedures. Being able to understand a situation and articulate it to others in a clear and concise manner is a wonderful skill that I think we can apply to all walks of life.

#### #5 – Organisation is a super power.

Being punctual. Being prepared. Being proactive. These characteristics will serve you every single time. I'll admit, maybe this one is a bit of a stereotype, but if it is then this is one area where I would be proud to fit the bill. The nature of an accounting based role, with all the transactions, reconciliations and analyses that go with it, is one which requires organisation. It just makes everything so much easier to do. But finding an efficient way of working doesn't just happen. You need to care. You need to establish processes and

refine feedback loops for working more efficiently. You need to proactively seek new problems to try and solve. Without these things, you will tie yourself in knots and drown in spreadsheets. With them, you can learn new things, gain new experiences, and sustainably expand your capabilities beyond even what you thought possible for yourself.

Thanks to prior roles in my career, I was afforded the opportunity to develop my skills in automation, innovation and general process efficiency. Paired with a proactive attitude to problem solving, I think that these skills are excellent bedfellows in any role and life in general. Just as long as you stop to dawdle every once in a while.

## #6 – There is more to life than money.

Accounting and financial statements may articulate things in a financial context, but that's not the whole story. For me, the numerical aspect of accounting is a mechanism to describe situations and scenarios that relate to real life, in a financial context. What you're accounting for are real companies, with real people behind them, with a real product or service on offer, contributing to the real needs and wants of society.

The accounting can show you a snapshot view of the financial health of a company, but there are other factors beyond the page such as the reputation of the firm, the strategic vision of the leadership, the satisfaction of employees and the values they hold themselves to. These things are embedded within the fabric of a firm, and while they are implicitly reflected in their finances, it is opaque if you just go by the numbers in isolation. A financial view is one perspective. It's not the only one. I keep this in mind when making decisions in my own life.

**So before you judge yours or anyone else's profession, have a think about the life lessons it can teach you beneath the surface. Accounting did that for**

## 6 REASONS WHY BEING AN ACCOUNTANT CHANGED MY OUTLOOK ON LIFE

**me.**

## The Secret Power of Rubber Ducks

**W**henever I talk to my software engineering friends about their job, I always learn something new and interesting about problem-solving. Here's one involving a rubber duck!

In software engineering, there is a concept called *Rubberducking*. Named after a story in the book “*The Pragmatic Programmer*”, this is where you attempt to solve a bug in your code by talking about the problem to an inanimate object and harnessing the beauty of natural language to organise and express your thoughts out loud. Line by line. Thought by thought. Through this, it's astounding how often you can spot where the issue is and solve your problem.

I love this concept as a life lesson in and of itself because it doesn't have to be relegated to coding. It could be a DIY project. It could be where to take the next section in a music composition. It could be trying to solve puzzles when launching impossibly difficult rockets in an exhilaratingly stressful video game. It highlights for me that being effective across so many kinds of roles is not about rote memorisation of facts. We're only ever a few keystrokes away from facts (or lies, incidentally—but that's a topic for another day!). It's about problem-solving and ensuring your solution addresses the root cause effectively, sustainably, scalably, and in an understandable way.

Communication and the expression of thought are core components of that, no matter the role.

In fact, the power of vocal expression and communication as a means to solve problems is one of the driving forces of our focus towards co-operative gaming at [Propulsion Games](#)—(though, in fairness, I do not recommend playing solely with a rubber duck as your teammate).

**So the next time you are stuck on something, try telling a rubber duck. You never know how much it could help.**

## History Is Still Here

**H**ere is a story about how a passing comment helped me see that history is everywhere.

In my hometown of Southampton in the UK, despite the widespread destruction caused by the Blitz, there are still plenty of houses that are over a century old (in fact, there's [one in particular](#) from Tudor times, but I digress). To me, and I imagine most people going about their day, they are just people's houses. A coffee shop. Maybe a takeaway. I'd never really stopped to think about how these buildings and others like them have quite literally housed some of the history that has shaped the world today. Here is a story about how a passing comment helped me see that history is still all around us.

I was in the car driving my Nan back from visiting family when we passed a row of houses on a road that we'd passed a million times before. Only this time, my nan gestured at one of them as we drove by and casually said to me: "*...There's the house where Dr King lived.*". Not having a clue who my nan was referring to (the only Dr King I could recall off the top of my head was Martin Luther King Jr, who I was fairly certain hadn't hailed from Southampton), I enquired a bit further. It transpires that through shared local political activities, Dr King was acquainted with my great-grandad, who lived nearby at the time, and

had visited the family home where my nan had grown up. He was also [Horace Maybray Maybray-King, aka Baron Maybray-King](#), a member of Parliament (MP) for Southampton constituencies between the 1950s and 1970s, a life peer, and was the first speaker of the House to have come from the Labour Party. It was just another house. But it also housed a part of history.

It wasn't that it was political. It could have been art, technology, or something else entirely. But it was palpable; I could see it with my own eyes. It was notable to me because it appeared so un-noteworthy. It was somewhere I'd passed a million times before. And while we often associate places with the personal memories we've formed with family and friends, I think we often feel that the people, places, and events that make history happen are elsewhere. By people leading entirely different lives. Something we can learn from but that we aren't necessarily personally connected to. I know I've certainly been guilty of that.

But it's not in some other place. It's our villages, towns, and cities. All around us. People in the past had to live somewhere, and they lived their lives in the same places that we do. I know that, unfortunately, it's not a privilege everyone in the world has, but here in the UK, it rings true for me. That building. That house. That field.

It may seem obvious to many, but it gave me pause for thought. It reminded me of the one singular planet that we share across staggered generations and that even as events fade from living memory, they live on by the mere fact that they are a part of our lives today, whether there is a monument celebrating them or whether it's your nan pointing out a random house on the drive home.

**History is all around us. All we have to do is look.**

## Life Lessons from Science Fiction TV and Movies

**I** love sci-fi. It has fuelled my imagination, connected me with friends, and provided nostalgic escapism. But beyond the geeky stereotypes, the genre is rich in metaphor and life lessons. I've chosen three franchises which have been lifelong companions and reflected on what they've taught me.

### Oh Boy: Learning from Quantum Leap

One of the many reasons I love science fiction (across any media) is that it can be filled with metaphor. This is true for one of my favourite TV shows of all time – Quantum Leap. If you haven't heard of it, it's a science fiction adventure drama that ran from 1989 to 1993. Each episode presents Dr Sam Beckett bouncing around points in history, in the body of an unknown person. He has to perform some kind of task in order to correct history, the completion of which triggers a leap to do it all over again for somebody else in the next episode. Here are three things it taught me about life.

## Trust your intuition.

Sam Beckett was a smart guy as far as protagonists go. He held seven (!) doctorates. While this undoubtedly places him at an advantage in various situations throughout his leaps (even despite the acute memory loss he suffered from leaping) — it was often not his impressive intellect in isolation that saved the day and put right what once went wrong. It was also his intuition. Sam was compassionate, personable, a good listener, versatile, and down-to-earth. It was often these traits that helped him triumph, even in moments when his actions were overwhelmingly likely to fail from a statistical standpoint. It was the combination of intellect and intuition that helped him to prevail.

## Compassion can change the world.

The show was ultimately about how the fabric of our individual lives is interwoven with one another across the world and across time, in ways that we cannot possibly begin to fathom. It was about how having compassion for people – by literally walking in their shoes – can be the gateway to making the world a better place. This is one of the key tenets of the show.

## It's the journey, not the destination.

The entire premise of the show revolves around Sam hoping that each leap will be the leap home. However, due to it being cancelled and in an attempt to wrap up the overall narrative fairly quickly, the final episode of the show is a slightly bizarre and self-referential one that ends with a final title card reading: “Dr Sam Beckett never returned home.” My initial reaction when I watched it was that it had a sad ending. He never returned home?! He was stuck leaping from life to life, forever?! But would this ending have stayed with me had Sam leapt back into his own body, hung up his quantum slippers

and patted himself on the back for a job well done? I don't think so. I've come to appreciate, since then, the poetic beauty of the show's ending. I took it to mean that it was never really about an ultimate destination or an objective resolution. Doing good, changing people's lives, and putting any kind of value out into the world is not some linear one-and-done thing. It's an unending endeavour that has no beginning or end.

## Bodacious Life Lessons From Bill & Ted

Bill & Ted are two most excellent characters in a beloved science fiction comedy franchise spanning three films and branching out into an animated series, comic books, and video games. These best friends time travel through history in a phone booth, all to fulfil their destiny of establishing a utopian society through the power of their rock band, the Wyld Stallions. However, there is more to the franchise than just fun and nostalgia. It's surprisingly insightful. Here are three life lessons I took from Bill & Ted.

### Experience is the greatest teacher.

The first film in the trilogy, *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989), introduces the duo as two clueless high school students on the brink of flunking their history class. Their teacher gives them a final chance to pass: an oral presentation in which they imagine what historical figures would think of life in 1989 San Dimas. They struggle with textbook learning and lament what to do. That's when they are visited by Rufus, a time traveller from the future who reveals that they are destined for greatness. Their band, Wyld Stallions, will unite the world and bring about a utopian society. But first, they need to pass that history class. Rufus lends them a time-travelling phone booth, and the two set off on an incredible journey, travelling through time and meeting the likes of Billy the Kid, Socrates, Abraham Lincoln, Joan of Arc, and Beethoven. Hijinks ensue, excellent adventures are had, and friendships are made. They

enlist their new friends to come and deliver the assignment in person. The subject of history is quite literally brought to life for the entire audience, and Bill & Ted ace their class.

The story is a light-hearted reminder of the power of experience. It could even be considered a lesson in *empiricism* — a philosophical viewpoint that knowledge comes only (or primarily) from sensory experience and empirical evidence. For Bill & Ted, living the history taught them more than memorising it ever could. This is a wonderful reminder to me that diving in and experiencing something for yourself can be a powerful catalyst for learning. Also, San Dimas High School football *rules*.

You are your own hero.

The second movie in the trilogy, *Bill & Ted's Bogus Journey* (1991) holds a special place in the pantheon of movies that defined my childhood. My brother and I still quote it to this day. The plot unfolds like an Ingmar Bergman fever dream, filled with surprisingly deep-cut film references you wouldn't expect from a 90s sci-fi buddy-comedy sequel.

This time, the focus shifts from time-travel to an exploration of the afterlife and the existence of robot doppelgängers (“good usses” and “bad usses”). And yet, the logical paradoxes remain true once more. For example, when the duo are faced with a seemingly unwinnable situation, they agree to time travel and plant a booby trap *in the past*, in order to aid them in escaping the situation in the present. Their future selves save the day by helping their present selves. It's an interesting twist and a reminder that we have the power to be our own *most triumphant* heroes. It makes me wonder: what would my future self want me to do now in order to help myself out in ways that I can't foresee?

It's not all about you.

The film *Bill & Ted Face the Music* (2020) — released nearly three decades after the last film in the series— finds the duo as middle-aged men. They've raised daughters who, much like their dads, are best friends and obsessed with music. However, over the years, Bill & Ted have struggled to bring about the prophecy of uniting the world through music. A failure that weighs heavily on both of them. They take a leaf out of the book of *Bogus Journey*, by time-travelling to the future to obtain (steal) *the song that will unite the world*, from their future selves, only to come up short, as they seemingly try to sabotage them at every turn. Meanwhile, their daughters also pay homage to the first film by travelling through time to assemble an incredible band featuring Jimi Hendrix, Louis Armstrong, and Mozart.

As the clock runs out, Bill & Ted finally realise the truth: it is not their destiny to unite the world; it's their daughters'. Without hesitation, they step aside, joining the band to support their daughters as they take centre stage, fulfilling a destiny decades in the making. It's a humbling reminder that life isn't always about us. We often think of ourselves as the main characters in our stories. But sometimes an even greater role is to help others achieve something we could never do alone. As the ancient Greek proverb says, “*A society grows great when old men plant trees in whose shade they shall never sit.*”. Ultimately, the story of Bill & Ted was never just about them. And maybe our stories aren't just about us, either.

## Enterprising ideas from Star Trek

A prime example of science fiction's ability to incorporate metaphor is exemplified in the world of Star Trek. Whether it's the stories, the starships, the species or the science, the Star Trek universe offers audiences rich narratives filled with deeper meanings and moral dilemmas. Here are three

instances that live in my head rent-free as stories that not only entertain but also double as wonderful life lessons. Engage.

Communicating effectively is about listening and understanding the context and nuance of another's perspective.

In the episode 'Darmok' (Star Trek: The Next Generation, Season 5, Episode 2), Captain Jean-Luc Picard finds himself trapped in a one-on-one confrontation with Dathon, a Tamarian captain. They are unable to understand one another's language using the famous *universal translator* technology because the Tamarian language consists entirely of allegories with cultural and mythological context; the words themselves technically make sense when converted into English, but in isolation they lack the context to be communicative. So what to do? When Picard listened and observed Dathon's actions, he came to understand that the sentences being spoken were, in fact, allegorical, reflecting the situation the two captains found themselves in then and there, and were inexorably linked to shared narratives and storytelling. Understanding this way of Dathon's thinking helped Picard to communicate with Dathon, such that the two could jointly face the threat of a beast that was hunting them. Although Dathon tragically passes away due to the beast they were fighting together, they at least achieve a shared understanding and enjoy a brief moment of friendship.

Once free of the trap, Picard was able to use his new understanding to communicate with other Tamaraians and explain what happened with Dathon. This new understanding led to the inclusion of a new allegory in the Tamarian language, one relating to the context of Picard and Dathon's exchange of friendship and sacrifice. A conflict had been resolved through listening and a shared understanding, and both sides had grown as a result.

Live your life to the fullest and let go of what you can't control.

In the episode “*The Visitor*” (Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, Season 4, Episode 2), we see an elderly Jake Cisco, a character we usually see as the teenage son of Benjamin Cisco, the captain of Deep Space Nine. Through a series of flashbacks, we see that a warp drive accident causes Benjamin to vanish into subspace, presumed dead. However, a few months later he appears again before vanishing, only to reappear a year later before vanishing once again; with his crew unable to return him back to the normal flow of time. We see Jake go on to achieve his dreams of becoming an author and marrying. When Benjamin unexpectedly reappears in front of Jake years later, Benjamin is elated to see his son living a happy life. However, Jake, consumed by guilt for not dedicating himself to rescuing his father, decides to study subspace mechanics, abandoning his career and his marriage in the process.

Decades later, Jake recreates the circumstances of the initial accident and is reunited with his dad in subspace. However, Benjamin is dismayed to see that his son has set aside his own life goals solely to rescue him. He makes his son promise to find happiness in his life and career once again, a wish that Jake honours. Eventually, Jake dies in the arms of Benjamin, as he (correctly) calculates that dying while in the presence of Benjamin will transport them both to a time before the accident. Benjamin is able to avoid the initial accident with memories intact, and both are able to live their life as if it had never occurred. This episode resonated with me as it showed the literal personification of *sunk cost fallacy*, which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “...*the phenomenon whereby a person is reluctant to abandon a strategy or course of action because they have invested heavily in it, even when it is clear that abandonment would be more beneficial.*” Jake had spent the majority of his life chasing something, the outcome of which he ultimately could not control. While it came from a place of love, he had wasted what really mattered to him in the process.

This left me with the melancholy feeling that, while we wish we could change

certain things in life, especially with those closest to us, it does that love an injustice to forgo everything else in a vain attempt to change a situation that is inherently unchangeable. While love can drive us to incredible lengths, completely neglecting our own lives at the expense of others is not what those loved ones would want for us in the first place. I know my own folks would react the same way as Benjamin when he realised what Jake had sacrificed. As a parent myself, it got me thinking about my own children. I would rather my daughters live fulfilling lives true to themselves, instead of sacrificing the entirety of their own precious time trying to save something they think matters most to me, my life, when, in truth, it's *theirs* that matters more to me.

Be honest with yourself. Even if that's uncomfortable.

In the double episode "*Chain of Command*" (Star Trek: The Next Generation (Season 6, Episode 10/11), Captain Jean-Luc Picard is captured by Gul Madred of the Cardassian Empire as the result of being sent on a covert operation later revealed to be a trap specifically designed to capture him. For *Star Trek* — which I have generally found to be family friendly — this particular two-parter was brutal, depicting torture interrogation techniques that would make any reasonable person feel viscerally uncomfortable, even for a fictional character.

The entire process was done to extract information from Picard, break his spirit, and force compliance. In one notable scene, Madred shows Picard four bright lights and demands that Picard acknowledge that there are five, inflicting intense pain if he does not agree. Picard is taken to breaking point, being led by Madred to believe that his crew had been abandoned and that the Enterprise had been destroyed. Picard is shown four bright lights and made an offer: to remain in captivity for the rest of his life, or to live in relative comfort by admitting one simple lie: that there are five lights. Picard is eventually freed through diplomatic means. Realising he has been duped as he is carried back to freedom, he looks back to Madred and defiantly declares: "There are

four lights.”

Even though afterwards Picard privately admits to the ship’s Counsellor Troi that he was broken to the point where he did see five lights, this episode has stuck with me. I can only imagine that, for people in similar situations, it is easier said than done not to take (or be forced down) that false route. But in our current age of disinformation and comfort-driven culture, we encounter a version of this choice all the time: between easy, quick, convenient falsehoods and difficult, nuanced, uncomfortable choices that may be a truer reflection of something. It may not always be possible; even the strongest version of ourselves will face inner conflict. But whenever I’m in a situation where I know I should be honest with myself, even if it’s hard to face, I think of these four words: There are four lights.

**Intuition, compassion, presence, self-reliance, humility, communication, contextualising, and acceptance. These are values I carry with me, all shaped by sci-fi. Stories aren’t just entertainment; they can inspire a better way of living.**

## I Scanned All My Family Photo Albums: Here Are Four Things I Reflected On

Over the last couple of years, I embarked on a project to digitise my family photo albums. They are primarily my parent's and maternal grandparents' but also include a few of my great-grandparents' albums, as well as a selection of other framed photos. There were around fifty albums all in all. Spanning decades. I decided to do it not only because I wanted my own non-physical copies of them for sentimental reasons, but also as a gift to future generations of my family, offering an insightful look into their ancestry. It took me longer than I anticipated to scan and crop them — around ten months — with sessions consisting of a few hours here and there in the evenings and weekends. Side note: I managed to re-watch the entirety of *Star Trek Voyager* as an accompaniment to the endeavour.

To be honest, there were times at the start when I wished I hadn't started the project; it was overwhelming at first (especially when I realised I had scanned the first few albums at a less-than-ideal resolution and decided to start over). But lo, with the help of Captain Janeway and the rest of the *Voyager* crew, I finished. Around 1,700 photos all-in. Doing this gave me some time to reflect on a few things I noticed.

## #1 – There's barely any curation.

It's beautiful.

My family might be in the minority with this (I suspect not), but there was only a vague organisation to the albums. They roughly tended to span time rather than events — but quite often jumped between years within them. Maybe it was down to whichever available film was in a given camera at a given time. Or maybe it was just whichever album had space. Then it comes to the photos themselves. Some are blurry. Others don't have everyone in the frame. While there are plenty of cases where people are looking at the camera, there are many where they don't even notice a photo is being taken. But they all made it into the album either way.

Until the advent of digital cameras, you couldn't be 100% sure of the photos being taken. The viewfinder was used to navigate as best as you could, then you clicked and hoped for the best. You got what you got. My family weren't hugely precious about framing a shot. They didn't care about the rule of thirds or whether someone was blinking. The photos are what they are. Now, maybe this was unintentional, and I'm reading into things with a rose-tinted nostalgia (and indeed, in many cases, without context), but to me, these photos give the impression that people were just there enjoying their present. The photos give a snapshot into that slice of their life for that brief moment in time.

If I contrast that to today, I feel differently. We (myself included) sanitise and curate into oblivion. Someone blinking or not smiling? Take it again. But happier. Someone in the background? It's okay; we can mask them out in an app. Weather a bit dreary? There's a filter to make it look glorious; it's all good. Twitch your thumb and take a dozen while you're there just in case. It doesn't even matter how the day actually was; the photos paint a different story. A better story. Better memories. Worse for me is that I feel we go somewhere, see someone, or do something just so we can get the photo. As soon as a nice moment happens anywhere, for any reason, everyone reaches for their

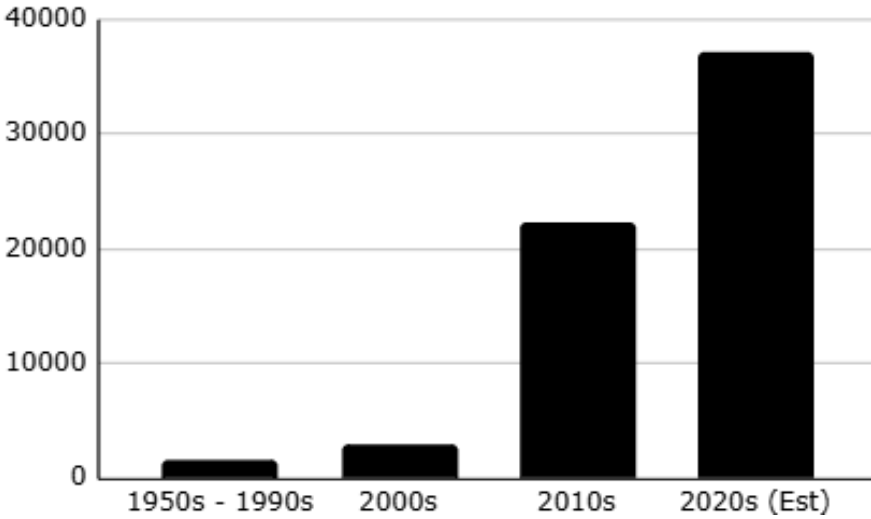
phone like ravenous paparazzi desperate to capture a moment they didn't really experience in the first place. The photos I scanned captured moments. The moment isn't dictated by the photos. That's the biggest point that hit home for me.

## #2 – The quantity of photos was so much less.

This one is going to shock nobody. I'm going to ruminate on it anyway. One of the many opportunities Technology has afforded us in recent decades is the speed, clarity and immediacy of photos. Once you own a phone with a camera, it doesn't cost any money to develop photos; the act of taking and viewing is essentially the same (though the cost of our attention is a different conversation). And so with that newfound expendable freedom, we take so many photos.

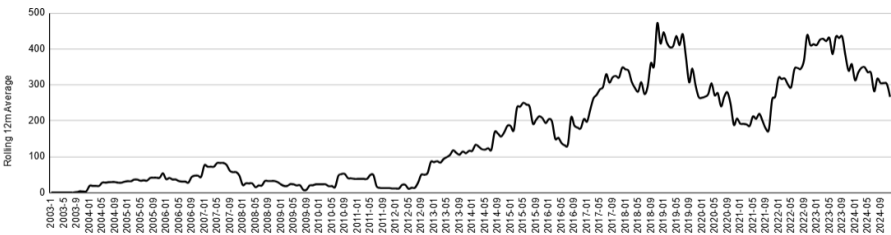
Since late 2003 I've done my level best to organise my photos and videos by Year-Month-Event. It's something I make sure to organise and back up monthly, which has been no small undertaking over the years, given it's been over two decades of me doing it. If I trend my photos folder, you can see just how much it's grown by:

## BRAIN DAWDLING



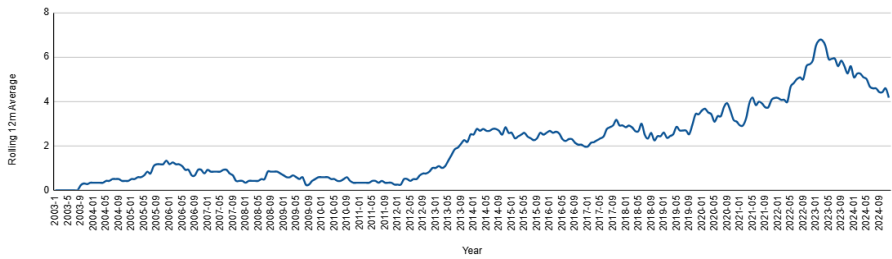
*Photo Filecount by decade*

In fact, by trending the 12-month average of not only the file count but also the folder count (as a proxy for how many events/places I was taking pictures at), you can see the growth over time even more clearly:



*Photo Filecount — Rolling 12m Average*

## I SCANNED ALL MY FAMILY PHOTO ALBUMS: HERE ARE FOUR THINGS I...



*Photo Foldercount — Rolling 12m Average*

To caveat this, a few factors are at play, so these graphs should be taken with a pinch of salt. Firstly, the albums I scanned are not all albums from every one of my (great)grandparents, so that understates the count of earlier photos. Secondly, given we individually take photos now (as opposed to there generally being a family camera in decades past), that understates the current count of photos here. Thirdly, the advent of ubiquitous smartphone use coincided with my early adulthood, so presumably I would have taken more photos anyway as I had new experiences and made new friends. Fourthly, the 2020s estimate is a linear extrapolation from 2020–2024. The pandemic meant we went out less and probably took fewer photos than we otherwise might have. It also assumes no change in behaviour in the years to come. Fifthly, for the Photos by month, some albums spanned a year (or multiple months); for those, I assigned them to January. Similarly, for miscellaneous photos that do not relate to any one event, I put those in December. So for those reasons, those two months will be artificially inflated. Lastly, I removed a handful of outliers related to times when I was photographing/filming events like weddings or holidays with friends — when multiple filming devices were involved. Lots of files were copied/pasted for editing, and sub-folders were made for organisation. To get a more indicative trend over the years, I replaced those counts with the preceding 12-month rolling average.

Any given album that I scanned can span years. Even then, it was largely confined to birthdays, holidays and vacations. Fifty albums seem daunting,

but considering it spans around fifty years and three generations, you get a sense of just how much our photo collection has grown. Is this increase a good thing? I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. I think it's tied to quality in a lot of ways; it plays into the disposability we continue to apply to photos and videos. When was the last time any of us looked at the dozens of fireworks pictures in our camera rolls?

### #3 – The shapes and sizes are all over the place.

The photos I scanned are all housed within albums of different shapes, sizes, colours and designs. Some are in sleeves. Others have been glued in semi-scrapbook style. The photos themselves are similarly varied. Huge, barely-fit-in-the-scanner photos. Photos taken with different cameras. Photos cut out from other photos. Passport-style photos. You name it. Taking into account the physicality of holding the album and looking at the actual photos, it's as if the albums themselves are as much a gateway into life as the photos are. An expression of personality in and of itself. A part of the experience.

It's a stark contrast to today, when the majority of us are taking photos on more or less the same technology, capturing them in the same format and dimensions. When we do look back (usually if prompted to algorithmically), it's through the same lens of a small glowing screen. I consider myself an advocate of digital minimalism and am fortunate to live in a place and an age where (aside from the ever-increasing number of resolutions), we generally have this quasi-technological consensus around digital photos. The immediacy of actually seeing them once taken. The post-processing at our fingertips. The practically infinite cloud-based storage solutions we have available to us.

Despite this, I can't help but feel we should acknowledge that in many ways we've traded these things for the aesthetic beauty and physicality of an imperfect, non-fungible, eclectic mix of past memories. I'm not saying this is

a good or bad thing. Maybe it's neither. Maybe both.

#### #4 – I don't know who everyone is.

Why do we have family albums?

For me, and I think for most of us, it's to act as a conduit to our memories. Historical record-keeping aside, there is no intrinsic value to them. This is assuming we're privileged enough to have family or friends. Able to afford cameras. Mentally fit enough to be able to recall these memories. This endeavour served as a reminder to me that life is ephemeral. These photos capture a minuscule part of people's lives, their relationships and their memories. Some of that connection will be lost to time. I don't know who everyone is in every photo I scanned. I can ask family members, but even if I have a name to put to a face, it honestly wouldn't mean as much to me as it would to individuals I'm closer to. Beyond perhaps a glimpse into the past of people I share an intangible connection with. And only then is the intrigue probably derived from where I can see parallels with myself. One day, maybe decades from now, there might be someone digitally excavating a relative's photo album, and I'll be there in one of them. They won't have a clue who I am. Beyond that, they'll probably be perplexed as to why I ritualistically took pictures of my food before certain meals.

I said at the start that I did this whole project to give future generations of my family a look into their ancestry. But they will only have an emotional connection to these photos if they know (or know of) some of the people in them. If they have similar experiences, and even though they weren't there, in some way contextualise and share in some of the memories too. That's what I've been fortunate enough to be able to do and hope to continue on.

**I want photos to serve as intermittent artefacts of my life. Of the experiences and relationships that mattered to me. Not something I revolved my life**

## BRAIN DAWDLING

**around in pursuit of the accumulation of a file count, likes, or any other metric. Photos aren't points in the game of life.**

## The Morbid Motivation of Memento Mori

**A** couple of years ago, while composing for an indie game set in ancient Greece, I found myself researching the philosophies of that time. Through my research, I came across Stoic philosophy. Stoicism offers guidance on living a fulfilling life, emphasising the values of wisdom, temperance, and love while detaching from the endless chase of wealth, power, and fame. Ryan Holiday, in particular, is known for popularising stoicism in the modern world, blending stoic philosophy, self-help, and motivational themes in an accessible way. Principles of stoicism include differentiating what's in our control (our actions and reactions), and letting go of what's not (such as others' opinions of us), recognising that our emotions stem from a perception of events (and not the events themselves), and viewing obstacles as an opportunity for growth, wisdom, and resilience.

However, of all the Stoic teachings, it is the concept of "*memento mori*", a reminder of our mortality, that resonates with me the most. Memento Mori is Latin for "*remember that you have to die*". On the surface, a reminder of the inevitability of death might not be the go-to for a motivational life lesson. Even talking about death is an uncomfortable topic, particularly as a British pastime, where the stiff upper lip and we-don't-talk-about-that cliché have more than a modicum of truth to them. Far be it from me, a happy, healthy

person, to tell people that they should put a smile on their face because we're all mortal; that's not where I'm coming from with this. For me, rather than being a catalyst for existential crises, memento mori has been a humbling reminder to appreciate my life in the moments when I find myself with anxiety, hesitation, or frustration. It causes me to step back and ask myself, "*Is this how I want to look back on my life and be remembered?*"

A couple of years ago, I would routinely walk for hours with my youngest daughter in the buggy, trying to get her to fall asleep (hooray for developing circadian rhythms!). I would usually do this in our city's Common, which adjoins an old cemetery. I would occasionally wander around that cemetery, reading the gravestones and reflecting. The *only* thing alive in there during that part of the stroll was a reminder of memento mori. Rows and rows of people, spanning centuries, many with the same first names as people in my life that I know today. Walking down the same roads as I do now. Their entire lives, worries, arguments, triumphs, trials and tribulations, all silent. So with the certainty that I too will one day join the non-corporeal ranks of my ancestors, I think of memento mori and try my best not to sweat the small stuff. Or the big stuff. Or all the stuff in between. Because it won't last. I think of memento mori and try my best to live with intentionality, to savour little moments, and to love and appreciate everything and everyone that comprises my life. Because it won't last.

If I'm worried about that awkward conversation? Memento mori. If I feel as though I've fallen short of something? Memento mori. If I'm scared to try something new? Memento mori. If I'm feeling impatient? Memento mori. If I have a *really* good comeback to put someone in their place (and believe me, I have some zingers)? Memento mori. If I'm having a bad day and want the world to have one too? Memento mori. If I'm faced with a difficult choice that I know in my heart is the right thing to do? Memento mori.

**"You could leave life right now. Let that determine what you do and say and think."**

— **Marcus Aurelius**



II

## Dawdling on Biases

*Counterintuitive topics that highlight how we might not think  
how we think we think.*



## What You're Not Being Told About Success

“How do you do it?”

**H**We've all been there. In the audience of a talk, panel, or interview, hanging on the words of our heroes. Desperate to learn the secret formula they followed to achieve their success. They must be right because it's them up on that stage and not you. Right? Well, what if I told you there was a statistical bias at play to suggest that something like advice on success from those deemed successful might not be what you think it is?

Let's talk about burger restaurants for a moment. Let's say in a given city, there is a positive correlation between the quality of burgers and the quality of fries. That is to say, a place with good burgers is probably going to have good fries too. And vice versa. You're not that likely to ever visit a place that serves neither good burgers nor good fries. You may visit a place with at least good burgers or good fries, and you probably would regularly visit a place where both are good. Your personal experience might suggest that better burgers often come with worse fries (or vice versa), but that's just because you've mostly visited the places where at least burgers or fries are any good. You've already pre-filtered your observations in the first place. You're not assessing “burger restaurants” like you think you are. You're assessing “burger restaurants with

good burgers or fries”. This is known as Berkson’s paradox (also known as collision bias).

So what have burgers got to do with success, I hear you ask? Well, Berkson’s paradox can be applied to all manner of situations. Let’s say you’re in an audience for a panel of famous writers. The host hands them a microphone and asks the age-old “What are your top pieces of advice?” You hear things like “write every day”, “write what you know”, and “show, don’t tell”. People in the audience furiously write down everything being said. Verbatim. Finally, they know the recipe for success. All they need to do now is follow this advice to the letter, and they too will be successful. But have these famous writers taken the raw, dumb luck of “right place, right time” as a key component to their stories? Or the privilege of being born into a time, place, or creed that created certain opportunities and motivations? Do they simply pay more attention to the speaker’s requests in the panel circuit in the first place?

I’ve also been in countless audiences where they fail to mention the overlooked and underappreciated invisible economy of a spouse, partner, or loved one. Who cooks your meals? Who washes your clothes? Who looks after the kids and allows these so-called successful traits to take centre stage in the first place? What about all of the people who have followed this exact behaviour but things haven’t worked out for them? They could be the overwhelming majority of cases for all we know, but those people would never be invited onto a stage to speak. Bad burgers and bad fries.

The point is that there are a near-infinite number of variables that determine an outcome. When we take advice in isolation, we inadvertently filter out many variables and make determinations about the alleged complete picture we are presented with. In reality, this can result in a collision of assumptions masquerading as a complete picture. It causes us to focus on a subset of things, skews our view of the world, and leads us to erroneous conclusions.

We live in a society endemic to celebrity culture, quick fixes, how-tos, and

prescriptive advice to make life better. Of course, advice and the lived experience of others can be valuable. But often we are being sold the same story about success and fulfilment that simply won't apply to your life in the same way. They cannot know how a specific course of action would affect the specific circumstances of your life. I would argue that they cannot even know that about their own lives.

**So whenever I glean insights from best practices, life advice, or tips for success, I think of Berkson's paradox and never take them literally. There's always more to the story than any of us know.**

## Nobody Cares: Empowerment From The Spotlight Effect

**W**e are all at the centre of our own universe. The main character in the story of our lives. I know I've certainly been guilty of living in my own head.

For example, when I commuted for several hours a day, I used to stare out of the train window and daydream about a life where somebody out there, looking for the next great video game composer, noticed my handful of tracks and took me under their wing. If I kept going, they would “discover” me, see the potential I offered, and I would be on my way to sustained success. Or take when I began developing indie games: I thought that all we had to do was make them. Eventually, publishers would burst through the door to take us to the next step of the adventure. The world is watching, after all. Or at least the few vanity metrics on social media led me to believe they were. Our team would often go back and forth during development: how would people feel about this specific mechanic? How would this element of the story be received? Would the reviews be good, mixed, or bad? It was the same with my writing. What if people misinterpreted me and got offended? What if they cringed when they read it? What if they spotted a typo and judged me as sloppy? And what if a

publisher spotted something in one of my writings they liked, saw something special in little old me, and I'm on my way to a best-seller list?

Over the years, I've come to realise that it was never about whether people would like what I did, agree with the creative decisions I made, or come to assist me on a path to greatness. It was actually more about whether they even noticed or cared that I did anything in the first place. And spoilers: they almost certainly didn't. Help isn't coming. The spotlight effect is.

The spotlight effect is a psychological phenomenon by which people tend to believe they are being noticed more than they really are. I'm, of course, not referring to those of us in society who dedicate their lives to noticing when others need help. The existence of vocational professions such as doctors, nurses, teachers, and rescue workers, et al leads me to believe that kindness, compassion, and caring are core to the human condition. But when it comes to acts of pure creative expression? Or when we think society owes us the right to build a career purely from our own unfettered self-actualisation? Where we think that someone is going to notice how hard we've been working, how busy we are, or how much potential our art has? In those cases, the spotlight effect is shining brightly. I don't think that particular help is coming. That help is too busy looking for help itself.

You might be asking yourself what's the point in creating anything if nobody cares either way? I choose to see the spotlight effect as an opportunity for empowerment. It means we have the freedom to explore and execute our ideas without others gatekeeping us and telling us we are good enough. Without judgement from anyone but ourselves. Free to make mistakes and "practice in public" with the knowledge that our creations are borne from a place of pure, intrinsic joy. Despite recent technological innovations that are hurling the creative industries towards an uncertain future, the act of creativity cannot be taken away and will remain with us regardless. I'm reminded of a quote attributed to one of my favourite filmmakers, Kevin Smith, who kickstarted his career by self-financing and creating his indie debut, *Clerks*. When someone

told him it was easier said than done for a famous director to give career advice, below are two excerpts from his response: “Don’t wait for help: help is never coming. Just do it yourself.”, followed by “You can either have an awesome screenplay that never leaves your laptop or you can have a film that’s less than you hoped it’d be, but still a far better expression of self than your light hidden under a bushel, waiting for assistance that’s never coming.”

I’ve also learned over the years that simply making something isn’t enough if you want that something to be noticed. Community engagement and outreach can play their parts too. How can anybody be given the chance to notice your creativity if they don’t even know it exists? Have you noticed anyone’s effort as much as you’re hoping someone notices yours? There’s also undoubtedly an element of hyperbole here; in a world of *billions*, there are, of course, going to be those who do notice the creative efforts of others (hi mum!). But the spotlight effect teaches me that nobody is likely to notice you as much as you are. Perhaps creativity from an unbridled place of intrinsic joy is the crucial difference between a hobby and a profession. I don’t know. That’s a line that I’ve struggled to see for most of my adult life. But it’s not about me.

**The spotlight effect reminds me to get out of my head, embrace the intrinsic joy of creativity, and try to be the help that isn’t coming.**

## Every Time Is Somebody's First Time

**D**o you remember your first day of school? Or the first day of a new job? Everything is new and unfamiliar.

If you're unlucky with the people around you, they'll make matters worse by calling you out on the things you should know. Because they have expertise in a specific term, tool, or process, they assume everyone else obviously knows it too. Because it's obvious. And because of the fact that if you don't, then you're stupid, or lesser than, or way in over your head.

This is known as the curse of knowledge, a cognitive bias whereby a person with specialised knowledge of a topic assumes that others share that knowledge. The curse of knowledge can be seen in all manner of places. It could be lurking in teachers who design curricula too difficult for new students to grasp new concepts. It could be in your colleagues, reeling in disbelief that you have never encountered a certain acronym, concept, or piece of code. It can be a parent who is dumbfounded that their child is taking so long to do something basic. It can put others down and make them feel ashamed. It can shatter people's confidence when embracing a new endeavour in their lives. It can even undermine your self-esteem by preventing you from acknowledging the value of your own lived experience.

In my view, nothing is ever really that obvious. It's "obvious" only to those who have acquired certain knowledge and experience. Everything in our lives, from walking and talking to social cues, all the way through to coding design patterns and piano playing, is obvious to someone. And completely, unabashedly, bafflingly new to others.

This is what writer Stan Lee meant when he said: "Every comic is someone's first". This isn't just advice for clarity in narrative devices. It acknowledges that those new to a topic may not know everything about it as others do, but they have just as much right to embrace and enjoy it. We all know more than we think we do. And at the same time, we are all learning something for the very first time.

**So whenever I'm feeling impatient, frustrated, or annoyed, I take a step back and think about the curse of knowledge. Because it's not just a cognitive bias; it's an opportunity to practice humility, compassion, and patience. Isn't that obvious?**

## The Anthropic Principle and Framing Problems

**T**he anthropic principle is a philosophical concept that holds that the universe is compatible with life because life is here to observe it. This essentially means that a situation creates the need for observers because, without them, there would be no observers to observe its existence. This may sound like a highfalutin topic reserved for the philosophers among us, but I think there's a useful life lesson here. It makes me think about how I frame problems.

Ever had a frustrating time at work with something unexpected? Gah, why did this have to crop up now? Why have I got to spend my time doing this? Why me? Over time, I learned that these situations are ultimately the anthropic principle at play. If these problems didn't exist to be solved, would the job exist for me to have it? If nothing ever went 'wrong', would there be a need for that task to be part of an actual job done by me in the first place?

Once I reframed things this way, I was able to appreciate that any role I've had wasn't there to simply execute as laid out in a job description, but rather to help solve the problems that invariably arose in the course of doing it. This

could apply to frustrations everywhere in our lives: at work, with creative pursuits, or at home. Some problems we face are intrinsic to the various roles we inhabit. This isn't to diminish or ignore genuine problems in the world and in our lives. And sure, this interpretation is a bit more poetic than it is rigorously philosophical. But the insight remains.

**In situations where it's tempting to huff or roll an eye, the anthropic principle can be a useful reminder to find perspective. Maybe sometimes, a problem exists because you are there to solve it.**

## Life Lessons from Randomness: Benford's Law and Pareidolia

### Benford's Law

**I**f I asked you to write down 100 people's ages, how representative of the world do you think your guesses would be? Certain types of datasets, such as transactions, prices, ages, and population sizes – particularly ones with multiple orders of magnitude that are not artificially restricted, tend to follow an interesting pattern: the leading digit of a given number disproportionately falls on the smaller end of the 0–9 scale. In fact, approximately 30% of the leading digits in such data will be 1. This is called [Benford's Law](#). It blows my mind.

You might assume that numbers in the real world would be uniformly distributed, with an equal chance of falling between 1 and 9. But consider this: reaching the age of 20 requires first passing through the ages of 10 – 19, meaning that the older someone gets, the less likely their age will have a leading digit closer to 9. This principle extends to ages; analysing datasets for conformity to Benford's Law can often help detect false or fraudulent data.

When people fabricate data, they tend to distribute digits more evenly. We struggle to perceive patterns in things we assume are random, and when we attempt to mimic it, we often get it wrong.

## Pareidolia

Have you ever seen a face in a cloud, or in a tree, or in some inanimate object? This is a phenomenon known as pareidolia. The definition, according to Wikipedia: “Pareidolia is the tendency for perception to impose a meaningful interpretation on a nebulous stimulus, usually visual, so that one sees an object, pattern, or meaning where there is none”. In many ways, pareidolia is the opposite of Benford’s Law. It reflects our mind’s tendency to perceive meaningful connections when none actually exist. At least, not in the ways we imagine. I often think about Benford’s Law and pareidolia as two sides of the same coin.

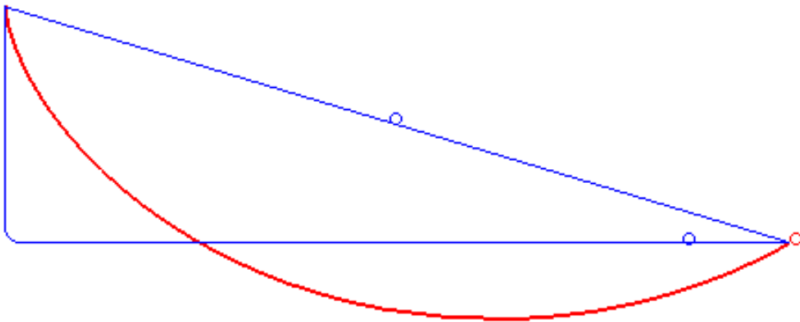
## On Randomness

We often perceive meaning where there is none, and, conversely, fail to see the connection between related things. I’m not suggesting some grand conspiracy theory where every single thing in life is connected in some great tapestry of deception. I’m talking about how different professions will use bespoke vernacular in a way that doesn’t easily connect how much in common so much of the working world has. Or how we compartmentalise many of our challenges in society: a lack of sleep, a poor diet, general wellbeing, socio-economic inequality, ecological responsibility, without seeing the connections (albeit nuanced and complex) between them. Or even how we perceive our wants and needs from things like targeted ads, job titles, and even dumb luck, to artificially create connections and narratives of value and self-worth in our lives that are designed to perpetuate a certain lifestyle or sell a product or service.

**I use Benford's law and pareidolia to think about the role of randomness in my own life and whether a problem I am facing is just another face in the cloud.**

## Thank You, Brachistochrone Curve

**I** magine a ball moving from point A down to point B. What's the fastest way for it to get there? Draw it on a graph and think about the impact of gravity and momentum on that ball. You'd be forgiven for thinking it's whatever is the shortest distance, i.e. a diagonal line as the crow flies. Or if not that, then the one with a massive drop to gain momentum early on. Nope. It's a curve. The Brachistochrone curve, to be precise. Take a look below:



The Brachistochrone curve (red). Source: Wikipedia.

As you can see, it's not the shortest in terms of measurement. It doesn't have the fastest drop at the start, either. In fact, it's the one with the lowest ebb and the only one which, towards the end, actually ends up going in the opposite direction from where it started. And yet, it's the optimal path for getting from point A to point B in the shortest time.

This really resonated with me. I'm somebody who tracks and trends all manner of things in their life: finances, video game backlogs, running times, weight, and more. Even though I know intellectually that a blip in the wrong direction doesn't necessarily mean a bad trend over time, I still feel the pang of irritation that maybe I'm not doing well enough at something. In those moments, I need to remember that I'm not considering the "momentum" of my endeavours or contextualising the quality of what I'm measuring. I'm simply looking at points in time and assuming outcomes. That's not always correct.

**Whenever I feel like I'm moving too slowly, or things are taking too long, or I'm at a gratingly pointless low point and feeling further away from my goals than ever before, I'll be thinking of the Brachistochrone curve.**

## Life Lessons From The Monty Hall Problem

**T**he Monty Hall problem is one of the most mind-bending examples I know in the world of statistics and probability, demonstrating that situations are not always what they seem. If you haven't heard of it, it's a probability puzzle originally posed by Steve Selvin, popularised via Marilyn vos Savant's "Ask Marilyn" magazine column. It's as follows: "Suppose you're on a game show, and you're given the choice of three doors: Behind one door is a car; behind the others, goats. You pick a door, say №1, and the host, who knows what's behind the doors, opens another door, say №3, which has a goat. He then says to you, "Do you want to pick door №2?" Is it to your advantage to switch your choice?"

The answer my brain defaulted to, and what most people say to me when I bring it up, is that it doesn't matter either way because it's now a 50/50 chance. Nope. It's actually statistically advantageous to switch doors. In fact, your chances now go from  $1/3$  to  $2/3$ . It has been proven empirically with simulations (and mathematically). This is the Monty Hall problem in all its counter-intuitive glory. So why is it advantageous to switch? It's essentially because your original choice has a probability of  $1/3$  of it containing the car, which means that there is a  $2/3$  combined chance that the other two doors contain the car. If the host reveals that one of those two doors, in fact, has a

goat, then the remaining door has a  $2/3$  chance of having the car.

But that's not what gets me. Here's the kicker that I think about with this: what if I turned up after the host had opened the third door, but I wasn't aware it was there? For all I know, in front of me are two doors. For all intents and purposes, I believe I have a 50/50 chance of winning that car. Only I don't. The Monty Hall problem proves that I don't. The fact that there were three doors initially meant it changed the situation. Context matters.

I have a tendency to worry and overanalyse situations by trying to consider, control, or risk manage every possible eventuality in a given scenario in my life. The Monty Hall problem makes me wonder how many times in life we make calculated decisions and work out our chances in certain situations, when in reality there's a goat behind a door we haven't seen.

**Context could change everything we think if only we knew about it.**

## The n-Body Problem As A Life Lesson

**L**ife is complicated, right? Take anything, like the simple act of making a cup of tea, and you'll be able to break that activity down further and further, ad infinitum. What's the heat of water when it hits the bag? How much water? What kind of bag? Are we even using tea bags? Milk? Sugar? One lump or two? Now take something else, like biscuits, and think about the ways all the different elements of "biscuits" could interact with those of a "cup of tea". The resulting taste. The texture. The structural integrity. The inevitable risk of a soggy disaster. Now add lemon juice. What happens? It depends on the tea, the biscuit, the lemon juice, and everything that comprises them. The number of factors, elements, behaviours, and characteristics of pretty much anything is practically endless. A fractal. Connected to everything and relative to everything else. I recently learned about something in Physics that illustrated this point perfectly and helped me to understand that appreciating the spontaneity of life is the only choice I have.

In Physics, the *two-body problem* is the study of calculating (and predicting) the motion of two bodies orbiting each other in space, taking their respective characteristics and their relationship to one another into account. This can be calculated using established formulas. However, when a third body is

introduced, the result is chaotic and unpredictable, with no solvable equations (for most systems). This is known as the *three-body problem*, a subset of the wider "*n-body problem*". I'm a Physics layman, but I think of it as the difference between *rock vs. paper* being a known outcome every time, but *rock, paper, scissors* being an entertaining game.

The three-body problem is a fitting metaphor for life and, more broadly, for all its unpredictability. Look out into the world and your own life; each of us juggles countless "bodies" with our values, careers, experiences, challenges, and routines. Each has its own characteristics and relationships with the others in ways we can't really predict. We think that we can control outcomes because we see the things in our lives and their relationship to one another. But the existence of the n-body problem shows me the practical impossibility of calculating and controlling outcomes. If mathematical models can't do it with three things, how can we hope to do it with the infinite number of things going on in our lives?

**Perhaps there's a point in that; maybe life's beauty lies in its spontaneity. Maybe it's the unpredictability that coalesces into our lived experience. And maybe that's okay.**



### III

## Dawdling on Progress

*Thoughts on moving forward into an uncertain future.*



## Data and Our Imperial Past – Is History Repeating?

**I**f you think of Empires, I imagine a number of things spring to mind. Exploitation, power shifting, technological change and the flow of wealth influencing societal culture. Is history repeating itself in this new digital era?

### Empire and Classical Music

*The British Empire* is a deeply important subject in history that requires sensitivity and empathy at the heart of any analytical endeavour involving it. There are many social justice issues facing our society today—such as racism, xenophobia, inequality, systemic biases, consumerism, privilege, and, more generally, Britain’s place within Europe and on the world stage.

These can all be attributed, in whole or in part, to the systemic, multi-generational consequences that permeate our society as the insidious legacy of practices of European Empires, which are considered profoundly problematic by contemporary standards. Britain’s identity crisis with itself is illustrated in

the current debate over whether to remove and reveal statues seen as symbols of glorifying the atrocities of the past, for which we live with the effects today, or retain them as symbols of a bygone era of colonial history.

There is an area of study called *Music and the Anthropocene*, which links periods of human expansion to the world of music, a field I discovered through the podcast [Sounding History](#). This argues that the world of European classical music was a direct beneficiary of the wealth redistribution that flowed from colonised nations to Europe during the colonial period, in which the Industrial Revolution acted as a catalyst for the exploitation of human life, paired with the extraction and trade of natural resources on an unprecedented scale. To me, this places Classical music, the forerunner of orchestral music that is ubiquitous in global media today, as an uncomfortable bedfellow to the acts committed in the name of Empire. As a Composer, it suggests to me that had these events not occurred, then the musical landscape occupied by Western classical music would have existed in a substantially different way in terms of the diversity of palette, instrumentation, rhythm, harmony and melody. It would have influenced music today in a completely different way.

## Continuing To Live In Interesting Times

The advent of the web connected the world in a way that forever changed the paradigm of communication. With the invention of social media and computing power continuing to grow into the 21st century, a perfect storm of progress culminated, enabling Artificial Intelligence — notably Machine Learning capabilities — to thrive. This explosion of innovation and technological capability has taken much of the so-called “knowledge working” world to an existential precipice of revolutionary change. The two decades or so of structured and unstructured data accumulation across the global web have been repurposed into a corpus of humanity’s entire working knowledge. The recent innovations in Large Language Models (LLMs) are arguably threatening (or *promising*, depending on one’s perspective) to transform the nature of work

and the scale of content creation and to cause a maelstrom of disruption for professional and creative services in their wake.

While the extent and nature of these changes are still in flux, there is also an opportunity to use these new technologies for *introspection*. We are in a position to analytically challenge past truths, establish new connections, glean new insights, make fresh discoveries, and therefore draw new artistic inspirations using a range of records previously relegated to the annals of history.

## Connecting The Dots

If you take the above ruminations and draw certain parallels, it would be that technological innovation offers advancements of capability at scale. This coincides with the exploitation of commodities and labour in some capacity to profit a select group. And that, ultimately, that profit flows into artistic endeavours.

Data in this context can be compared with precious metals, sugar, tobacco or other commodities industrialised in the past, where entire populations are exploited to the benefit of an extreme few. It occurs to me that given the training data sets that LLMs and AI Art generators utilise are based on swathes of human input (which those individuals may not be aware of or have consented to), require monumental computing power and therefore energy, are being monetised by a select few, and are specifically targeting the generation of creative media, whether we are, in fact, at the dawn of a new imperial technological age. Only this time, it will be affecting a modernity that has built entire economies on writing, art, film, music, games, and the wider creative arts.

This isn't to equate some of the atrocities of history with the latest AI innovations. Or to take a view on the moral implications of the advent of

## BRAIN DAWDLING

these tools (or indeed make a moral judgement on those that decide to use them). But it does give me pause to think about whether parts of history are repeating. In a quote attributed to Mark Twain:

**“History Doesn’t Repeat Itself, but It Often Rhymes”.**

## Do You Have The Skillset For The Future?

**H**ow do we develop the skill set needed for future tasks? I would argue that we already have.

We are at the start of a new digital epoch. A society of data-driven insights, pervasive social devices, and accelerating artificial intelligence, all within an ever-present digital economy. For centuries, society has advanced its technological capabilities at an accelerating pace. Personal computers. Then the internet. Then smartphones. Then social media. Finally, that singing fish that people used to put up on a wall. However, it was the release of ChatGPT (alongside the various other generative AI products) at the tail end of 2022 that felt like a complete paradigm shift into the dawn of AI. Functionality that I thought would be years away entered the public sphere seemingly overnight. And so, not for the first time in recent memory, the world feels different now.

I've found this topic to be sensitive and polarising in my professional network, one that comprises a vast array of professions, including investment bankers, technologists, accountants, game developers, composers, and more. On the one hand, I see people writing about AI with febrile glee, evangelising

that these innovations will create scaled efficiencies and vastly improve the effectiveness of the knowledge-working world. That it will democratise capabilities that were previously gatekept by those with the available labour, capital, and privilege to pursue them. On the other hand, there is genuine concern that it will exacerbate the already troubled creative industries, threatening the sustainability and intellectual property of an industry that provides careers for the people who educate, inspire, and enrich the cultural landscape of society at large. That it will create a race to the bottom in books, games, and other media, with the artistic quality of a potato. And worst of all, that audiences will not care. If this technology is here to stay, it's undeniable that society will face a number of challenges in navigating the change. But what skills will individuals need?

I see data literacy courses, training sessions, and seminars increasingly prioritised, rightly focused on the technical prescriptions for applying certain techniques in certain situations, like a school exam. However, having been involved in designing data literacy training myself, I've observed a tendency to treat it as an entirely separate skill set, rather than as the utilisation of existing attributes in a different context. One of the biggest contrasts I've observed between school exams and actually working in industry is how much of a role pragmatism plays.

In exam conditions, you sit with nothing but a pen, paper, and a tough question to answer. In a work setting, you might face that same question, but with access to the internet. You'll likely be solving it as part of a team. You'll have less time than expected. In fact, it was due yesterday. You, your team, the department, the company, and the industry will all have their own incentives, whether promotions, politics, or profits, that may not necessarily be conducive to solving that problem optimally, if at all. Those tasked with solving the problem may have wildly different life circumstances and working environments. You have incomplete information. Those who hold the information you need may not be incentivised to give it to you. Maybe they're on holiday. Maybe they're prioritising their own problems. Maybe

your organisational culture fosters competition rather than collaboration. And even if they do give you the information, it may be wrong, late, incomplete, or outdated.

Navigating these challenges cultivates skills gained through experience, both inside and outside the workplace. Skills such as breaking a problem down into smaller pieces using curiosity and iterative learning; articulating and defending what you need and why; utilising calm but constructive conflict resolution approaches; a professional scepticism and ability to scrutinise and question things that don't make sense. You also learn to appreciate that the world might not care about something as much as you do, to understand competing and conflicting priorities in your own life and others', and to challenge and redefine the problem itself. Situations change, and sometimes understanding the spirit of what you're trying to solve shifts the proposed solution. Lastly, we cultivate the skills of listening to others and to ourselves. Of Compassion. And Patience.

Whether economic and societal pressure from these recent technological innovations destabilises the role of humans in value creation is a valid and separate concern. But even if the context, pace, and scale of work change, as long as there are human problems to solve or human observations to reflect upon, the values above will persist as intrinsic elements of that process. These skills are fundamental attributes of a human skill set that will endure, whether society is in the Bronze Age or in the twenty-first century, utilising generative AI to develop our products and services.

**Seen through this lens, perhaps you have a stronger skill set for the future than you give yourself credit for.**

## Academic Articles Are Actually Awesome

One of the challenges of our time is our relationship with facts. The endless news cycles, a culture of instant gratification, and the polarisation of opinion have led us to rely on social media posts, memes, and short-form videos to stay “informed”. I want to push back against that mindset for my own life.

Learning for the sake of learning is one of my favourite pastimes. Whether it’s music, data, history, geography, politics, or more, I am a curious and voracious learner fascinated by the beautiful, diverse, and endlessly intriguing world we live in. So as one way to go deeper into topics, I’ve recently stumbled back into academic journals, realising their potential. Not just for students or professors, but for anyone curious about niche topics. I understand that for many, academic writing can come across stuffy, dry, inaccessible, complicated, or just plain boring. But for those like me, journals can be a wonderful resource. Here’s why.

## #1 - Their content.

Academic journals publish research papers intended to be read and scrutinised by their communities. Much of this work is rooted in the scientific method, involving observation and hypothesis testing without bias or predetermined outcomes. Ideally, at least. For me, they stand in stark contrast to the vapid, attention-driven age of disinformation that social media often fosters. A journal doesn't care whether you *like and subscribe*. Its reach isn't dictated by ad spend or algorithms. It stands on the merit of its content. And that's both important and valuable.

## #2 - Citations and literature reviews.

In academic writing, sources are cited to substantiate claims. Many journals also include *literature reviews*, key sections that offer a comprehensive overview of previous studies on a given topic and their findings. While these inclusions may seem unremarkable, they create a robust network of knowledge and guide readers toward further research as they expand their understanding of a given topic. And I think that's awesome.

## #3 - A consistent structure.

Regardless of the subject, academic journals generally follow the same structure: they begin with an abstract (a summary of the research area and its conclusions), followed by a literature review, then the main body of research, the testing methodology, the results, and conclude with a discussion and references. This consistency makes reading journals more efficient; you can scan the abstract, then the introduction and conclusion, and if you feel it's relevant to what you're studying, read the whole thing.

## #4 - Availability

There are countless journals with topics from all walks of life. While many are behind paywalls, plenty of open-access options exist. The [Directory of Open Access Journals](#) and [Google Scholar](#)'s filtered search) are great places to start.

In summary, academic journals are far from the dry, inaccessible sources they might seem at first glance. Their content is rigorously tested, their citations and literature reviews build a comprehensive body of knowledge, their consistent structure makes research efficient, and open-access options are available for those who seek them out.

**So the next time you're looking for a way to research a topic or deepen your understanding of the world, spare a thought for academic articles. They are more awesome than you might give them credit for.**

## Because I Said So: How The Algorithm Is Boring You

**W**hether it's games, music, movies, TV shows, or news articles, "For You" recommendations have become a mainstream way of discovering new content. But are they actually helping us? The advent of the web connected the world in a way that forever changed the paradigm of communication. The invention of streaming and social media has transformed the amount and nature of content available to consumers, created an economy that revolves around attention, and with computing power continuing to grow into the 21st century, a perfect storm of progress has culminated, enabling artificial intelligence and machine learning capabilities to thrive at scale. It's at the start of this new digital era that we find ourselves today. Our media consumption tastes, in all of their algorithmically fuelled glory, are at the behest of recommender systems.

## What are recommender systems?

Recommender systems are the algorithms that determine much of the content we see online. This includes the music, films, and videos we are recommended, the consumer products we get promoted to us, the news articles we are presented with, and the advertisements we are served. They therefore play a crucial role in shaping our individual worldview. For many of these products and services, discoverability of content has become a focal point for creators and consumers alike; so much so that content itself is increasingly shaped by what is more likely to be algorithmically promoted.

A mainstay of recommender systems is the machine learning technique of *collaborative-based filtering*, which recommends content based on the consumption histories of users with a similar profile. For example, if person X listens to songs A, B, C, and D and person Y listens to songs A, B, and C—then song D will be recommended to person Y because of their shared listening history of songs A, B and C with person X. This is supplemented with (or used in place of) content-based filtering which appends metadata such as (in the context of music) track lists, artist profiles and audio signals in order to make recommendations.

## What's the problem with it?

In my view, there are two main limitations with collaborative-based filtering. The first is referred to as a *cold-start problem*. Have you ever logged out of a platform (or started a new account) and looked at the type of content that's being displayed? It's completely different. It may as well be another platform entirely. This is the cold start problem. It's essentially that recommendations cannot be inferred without first gathering a sufficient number of user selections. So, for example, it cannot recommend new songs until you've listened to a bunch of songs first. I think this somewhat dilutes the need for recommendations in the first place.

Secondly, there is an issue of *survivorship bias*. This is a logical error that occurs when conclusions are drawn without taking into account that a selection process was performed to obtain the data in the first place. In the context of collaborative filtering, recommendations are made based on past histories, which in turn may have been generated by past recommendations. This creates an increasingly narrow selection of content for users over time. It's the equivalent of a group of friends wanting to find new bands to listen to by asking one another for recommendations, and over time just listening to the same small group of bands. Eventually, new bands cannot be discovered because their friends do not listen to them in the first place. And when we outsource our tastes like this, the results risk rendering us stale. Boring, even.

### Why does it matter?

I get that this has kind of always happened; it's not a million miles away from the concept of word of mouth. But there's also an assumption that I actually want to be recommended content similar to my past consumption habits and those of others like me. And while I don't want to be recommended content that I deem irrelevant, unimportant, or extreme, I can't help but question whether this is helping me get a well-rounded, balanced, and diverse insight into what the world has to offer. I'm not sure it is.

I know it may sound cliché, but you'd be forgiven for making the assertion that being served up content based on the content we've already consumed is one element of many contributing to the age of echo chambers and polarisation that we find ourselves in. Given the volume of content being generated is growing at an ever-increasing pace, more than any one person could ever possibly consume in a lifetime, is collaborative-based filtering still fit for purpose? I think we have an opportunity to explore alternative, more nuanced, explainable, and content-based approaches that would enable a richer exploration experience and more meaningful, interesting discoveries.

**And if not that, then at least an awareness that sometimes, taking back control of our curiosity and adopting an organic approach to discovering new things can open our eyes beyond the box that's been made for us.**

## Data Never Lies If You're Asking The Right Questions

**D**ata literacy can unlock a wealth of answers and insights. But are we always asking the right questions? One of the reasons I love learning and writing about data literacy is that there's often a life lesson underneath it. Take Simpson's paradox – it's a statistical phenomenon that occurs when a trend may exist in various groups of data, but that trend is hidden or even reversed when the data are analysed together as a single group.

Let's say you're looking at data from a University to see if there's a relationship between admissions and some other factor. When you look at the data for the University as a whole, such a relationship may not appear to exist at all. However, that relationship may exist when you look at admissions by department. When it is the departments determining admissions, it may not have been appropriate to analyse the University as a whole. The ways you slice the data can determine the conclusion you get. We experience this paradox daily. We have so much information overloaded into the ether that it's easy to see where our collective proclivity for headline numbers - from inflation to GDP to sales and other KPIs - has come from. These can masquerade as clear-cut metrics but often aren't.

Let's take something I'm spending (probably) too much time reading about at the moment: UK national election polls. These headline opinion polls can be framed to lead readers to believe that certain parties will get a certain number of seats in parliament. If we had a system of proportional representation, this might be true. But in reality, the process we're collectively following here in the UK is first-past-the-post at a constituency level. We're essentially having 650 elections all on the same day across the country, and so looking at a single number will not give you any insight into the makeup of the actual outcome. I'm not saying they're useless; national polls can indicate sentiment, and their trends can be insightful and provide a general sense of direction. But parties of "equal" national polling can result in two totally different outcomes. Without understanding the context, the concentration of that sentiment, and the systems we have in place to declare winners, it would be easy to draw incorrect conclusions.

Things like Simpson's paradox teach me that actually understanding the situation you're analysing is more of a crucial component to grasping something with data than simply fretting about which feature, language or tool you're using to analyse it. Using data analytics or statistics to prove or disprove something is often touted as a panacea for establishing objective truth because 'the data doesn't lie'. Indeed, the data doesn't lie (excusing large language model hallucinations for a second!). But it will tell different truths if you ask different questions.

**The next time you're facing conclusions, facts and statements based on 'data', be sure to check that it's answering the question you think it is.**

## Conclusion

I've spent a lot of my time rushing; towards goals, productivity, and some imagined version of success. I've long felt torn between being a "technical" person or a "creative" person, trying to be in one mindset at a time. But the insights that have stayed with me the longest haven't come from optimising my busyness, crossing another task off my list, or looking at one thing in just one way. They've come from pausing. Slowing down. Taking detours. Reflecting. Noticing the connection in things we usually rush past and ignore.

That's what this book has been about. Dawdling. Not to waste time, but to truly pay attention. Taking a closer look at things I usually wouldn't have given a second thought to, like an old photo album, an obscure statistical paradox, or a '90s sci-fi TV show. And finding meaning in all of it.

If there's one thing I'd love for you to take away, it's this: everyday experiences have value, regardless of the label we give to them or ourselves. There is value in the conversations we have, the lessons we learn, the memories we make, and the stories we tell.

Thanks for embracing the dawdle with me.

## About the Author

Matt is a music composer, sound designer, indie game developer, and former governance and data analytics specialist. Based in his hometown of Southampton, UK, he enjoys life with his wife and two daughters, revelling in dad jokes and writing in reverie about a range of things. Check out more of his work at [mattjavanshir.co.uk](http://mattjavanshir.co.uk).