

The Joy of Small Projects

When was the last time you completed a project? When was the last time you started a project? Have you every felt that you were trapped working on something that you don't enjoy anymore? Size is something that I'm sure most developers with the drive to do side projects have felt. Recently I have been completing more projects with more success than ever before. This is my new process.

Process

1. Pick the best project you can think of
2. Pick a very aggressive and limiting timeline
3. Reduce the project to its absolute minimum
4. Execute that plan to completion

Going Deeper

Start a new project like you would start any project. Dream big and find a need that will help you and help others. The next steps will force you to question this dream so make sure you believe in it from the start. If you cant make it through the next steps come back here and work to find a project that will endure.

Now pick an aggressive timeline. How much time do you realistically have to work on this new endeavour? For me a realistic timeline is often an afternoon or if I am lucky a weekend. At this point you should be asking yourself "How can I possibly solve this big problem in so little time?". You will want to extend the timeline into multiple days or weeks. Fight against this urge and limit yourself as much as possible.

Now you have to make everything fit together. Go for a walk and let your creative brain work. You have a big problem and a really small amount of time. Your job is to work within this boundary. You are not allowed to change the timeline. Figure out how to shrink your problem, distill it down to its most core essence. Throw out everything that can be removed. This is the time to be ruthless and aggressive with your ideas. Find out what you actually need in order to complete your project.

By this point your idea should be really really small. You should have one if not two interesting problems to solve before the idea will be completed. Extra parts like fancy UIs, online accounts and project management features should be long gone. What you have now is a small project. It has a clear start and end. You should be confident that it fits within your timeline. Now is the time to bring your project to completion. If you followed this process, you should quickly go from nothing to a completed project in a matter of hours. You will be proud of the results.

The key is to be realistic. Companies pay millions of dollars to build complex apps and to convince you that you need to build the same complexity into your own projects. That is unrealistic. Make your projects small and finish them every time.

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