MIND PERFORMANCE HACKS

Tips & Tools for Overclocking Your Brain

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HACK
#19   **Seed Your Mental Random-Number Generator**

Your mind is like your computer's random-number generator: it needs a "seed" from the environment to break out of its routines. You have to put something into it to get something out!

Too often, brainstorming meetings take place in sterile, empty conference rooms with bare walls and nothing to look at anywhere else. They are almost like the industrial clean rooms where microchips are manufactured and not a speck of dust is allowed to gather. Is it any wonder that so many bad ideas come out of these rooms? The truth is that brains need "dust." Brainstorms, like rainstorms, need nuclei around which (b)raindrops can form. If you *start* with no ideas, you will *end* with no ideas.[1]

Think of your mind as a desktop computer faced with the problem of generating a random number out of thin air. Such a computer cannot generate truly random numbers; it can only perform a series of rigid calculations. From the human point of view, randomness enters the computer only when it is programmed to consult its real-time clock for some real-world quantity, such as the number of milliseconds since January 1, 1970. Given this unpredictable input, the PC can then go on to generate output that looks quite random—and even creative. In other words, the computer needs input from an outside source to break out of its rigid patterns.

Humans, too, can become stuck in creative ruts. Everyone has a certain set of interests, ranging from things about which they are mildly curious to those about which they're completely obsessed. Choreographer Twyla Tharp calls this our "creative DNA." Sometimes, this *hardwiring* leads to repetition in our creative output. At that point, we, too, need to seed our mental random-number generators with new data to kick us out of our ruts.

In Action

You can seed your own creative process with almost anything:

- Read a street sign.
- Read a street sign backward.
- Turn on the radio or TV for 10 seconds. (Remember to turn it off! Don't accumulate negative momentum **[Hack #65]**!)
- Open a book at random.
- Use the random-page feature of the Wikipedia.
- Buy a magazine you would never dream of reading, and read all of it.

Free-associate from the first random stimulus you encounter via one of these methods. What does it make you think of, and how does it relate to your project? You may find po [Hack #21] useful here to join ideas together.

Follow that thought as far as you can, possibly employing techniques such as SCAMPER [Hack #22]. Don't be afraid to be silly. Sometimes a great idea is several silly ideas down the line from the seed. When you reach a dead end, seed again!

If you are having a brainstorming meeting in an empty conference room of the sort already described, bring some books, a magazine, music, pictures, anything that can act as a creative seed. The Oblique Strategies [Hack #23] are explicitly designed with this purpose in mind. If the rut you are in extends not only to your project but also to the rest of your life, try rolling the dice [Hack #49].

In Real Life

While working on my latest board-game design on the bus to work, I passed a sign in an industrial zone that read "American Frame and Alignment." I decided to use the word *frame* as the seed for my brainstorm. One thing led to another, and I soon had a bunch of ideas dealing with *enclosing* games within rule structures, with recursive games and *frames within frames*, like those pictures that show a person holding a picture of herself holding a picture of herself, and so on. This one seed for my mental random-number generator eventually shaped the design of my game system a great deal, and it is now called GameFrame.

It's a sure thing that my "creative DNA" determined the shape of my game, at least partially. For example, I've been fascinated with recursion and self-reference at least since I read *Gödel, Escher, Bach* when I was 14. These powerful inclinations are analogous to the rigid programming of one's PC. However, the street sign bumped me out of my rut. Before I gave my *random-number generator* a *seed* to chew on, the only idea I came up with was that my game might use drinking straws as components!

End Notes

1. Hall, Doug, and David Wecker. 1995. *Jump Start Your Brain*. Werner Books.

See Also

- Random Wikipedia page (*http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special:Random page*)

- Random page from H2G2 (*http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/Random EditedEntry*)
- Other random URLs (*http://randomurl.com*)
- Wikipedia entry for "Random number generator" (*http://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Random_number_generator*)