

*fail often.net*

FAIL TO SUCCEED

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# Fail Often

## failoften.net

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### ABSTRACT

Fail Often is based on making creativity a habit in the context of an open community.

The idea may also be summed up by a quote:

*You learn more from failure.*  
- Red Burns

### KEYWORDS

Community, Creativity, Motivation, Social Networking, Failure, Risk, Inspiration, Accountability

### TERMINOLOGY

Entry, Challenge, Gallery, Discussion, Group, Profile, Reminders, Invites, Events

### 1. INTRODUCTION

During my first year at ITP I found, much to my surprise, that by giving myself constraints to work within - including milestones, parameters, timelines, etc. - I am far more productive. During the 5-in-5 event during the summer of 2008 (a student-lead project in which a self-organized group of nearly one dozen students made a commitment to create five projects in five days in which I was a managing and contributing member) I found multiple small "prototype"-style projects can be just as satisfying and encouraging than one large project, if not more. I'm promoting this way of thinking to help remind myself of my discovery and to help others become refreshed and productive by working small and constrained instead of being frightened by large white canvases. The final

outcome will be a service and community built around this idea, and a structure available for myself and others to continue creating inside of a safe and helpful community.

### 2. DESCRIPTION

By looking critically at my own creative process, as well as others', I am able to create a system to better accommodate my own personal creative goals and growth, and allow a wider community to learn from my research.

I have explored this topic by focusing on three productive outcomes:

- 1) Building of a community website
- 2) Production of social gatherings
- 3) Creation of work based in commitment

### 3. BACKGROUND

I was heavily influenced by my classes during Spring and Summer of 2008 in regards to constrained, user-centered, and rapid prototyping design, however, during my third semester (Fall 2008) I found my projects to be less than personally fulfilling and spent time re-examining my own creative processes. I contacted my professors and after much contemplation decided the best course of action for my thesis was to create a structure in which I could continue to create and be creatively productive following my time outside of classes at ITP. In this way, Fail Often may be seen as a thesis project that is a consolidation of what I wanted coming in to ITP, what I have learned during my time at ITP, what I desire to hold on to

following the program, and the spreading of this to others in the form of a community.

## 4. INSPIRATION

The concept of creating peer groups focused on creative production has been looked at by art historians, psychologists, and sociologists for decades. These collaborative circles<sup>6</sup> are the foundation of many influential periods in literature, visual arts, and music. Since the advent of the Internet the cost to create these communities has fallen so dramatically that pinpointing a specific movement such as post-impressionism to a single geological location may never be possible again. In order to make decisions on the best way to mold this dynamic I looked at a few similar projects and drew from similar mediums. Tackling issues of obligation and accountability, discussion and criticism, organic and dynamic group composition, and inspiration through creative blockbusting all became dominant themes in the way I structured FailOften.net and the surrounding framework of social events and personal accountability.

### 4.1 Make Something Cool Everyday (MSCE)<sup>1</sup>

Started in 2009, MSCE is an online-only Flickr group dedicated towards the discussion of daily creative projects uploaded by the 1,000+ members of the MSCE community.

### 4.2 The Art of Looking Sideways<sup>2</sup>

A book by Alan Fletcher that serves as a “guide to visual awareness” and an inspirational look at modern life around ideas such as “Chance,” “Noise,” and “Colour.”

### 4.3 Learning to Love You More (LTYM)<sup>3</sup>

A renowned creativity and educational project by Harrell Fletcher and Miranda July, LTYM contains 70 vague but compelling “Assignments” directed at promoting participation in the project through production, documentation, and submission to the LTYM website and book.

### 4.4 Master Photographers<sup>4</sup>

Many well-known fine art photographers (such as

Henri Cartier-Bresson, Gary Winogrand, and Lee Friedlander) have been known to create habitual rules for themselves, requiring they shoot one or more rolls of film per day.

### 4.5 The Show<sup>5</sup>

Created by Ze Frank in 2006, The Show was a daily video blog surrounding the life and happening of the founder and community. The Show attracted a wide and devoted audience for 365 days.

### 4.6 TED Conferences<sup>6</sup>

As an intern at TED Conferences during the beginning stages of this project, I was asked to view hundreds of the TED Talks by the world’s most well-known speakers and scholars. Many contain ideas of constraints, a focused idea, critical, open thought, and creativity through technology (see Elizabeth Gilbert, Amy Tan, Don Norman).

### 4.7 ITP Classes

Designing for Constraints, Persuasive Technology, Social Facts, Show and Tell, Urban Computing

Many other books, websites, papers, classes, and people helped during my intense research phases. More of these references are available in the Extended Research section of this paper.

## 5. RELEVANCE

Taking time out of our schedules to be intentionally creative and productive in a lighthearted manner can dramatically help self esteem, confidence, innovation, and refresh our view on the world, while giving more energy and creativity back in to work and the rest of life.

By spending time outside of our daily routines to intentionally allow ourselves to be creative, play, and perhaps fail, we free our minds from becoming trapped in destructive thinking habits, feel refreshed, build self-confidence, allow ourselves to laugh, and have a refreshed way of looking at the rest of life.

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1 - <http://www.msced.com>

2 - Fletcher, Alan. The Art of Looking Sideways. London: Phaidon Press, 2001.

3 - <http://www.learningtoloveyoumore.com>

4 - <http://www.magnumphotos.com>

5 - <http://www.zefrank.com>

Forcing yourself to be creative at a set interval is not a new idea, but creating an online and offline support network of people around you to discuss your projects, help you conceptually block-bust, and encourage you might be. This is a mash-up of social networking and creation, rather than curation, of content for personal websites and portfolios.

By focusing on iterative creation methods, we are able to better discuss and pinpoint the areas of difficulty and problems with a generally promising idea or concept.

## 6. PRODUCTION

### 6.1 Website

As a reflection of the concept itself, many changes and suggestions were taken in to consideration when building the website of FailOften.net. The website's goal of becoming the online/virtual home to the community was summed up in the invitational e-mail to all new members:

*Take risks, show us your process,  
your progress, what you learn, when you fail,  
and when you succeed.*

#### 6.1.1 Design

Home page - See Appendix II Figure 1  
Gallery - See Appendix II Figure 2  
Forum - See Appendix II Figure 3&4  
Challenges - See Appendix II Figure 5  
Profile/My Account - See Appendix II Figure 6  
Entries - See Appendix II Figure 7  
Groups - See Appendix II Figure 8  
Invites - See Appendix II Figure 9  
Events - See Appendix II Figure 10

#### 6.1.2 Development

HTML  
CSS  
PHP/mysql  
Drupal

Key Drupal Modules Implemented:

- Views
  - Advanced Forum
- 

- Organic Groups
- CCK
- Invite
- Blocks
- Advanced Profile
- Twitter

#### 6.1.3 Testing

My first round of testing was in February with 9 people. Of these nine, seven turned in their projects by the due date. All found the idea very compelling and showed interest in continuing to use the services of FailOften.net after the testing phase was complete.

#### 6.1.4 Refinement

After the testing session of the initial design for FailOften.net was complete, I had the volunteer testers fill out a survey to determine the most influential functionalities of the website. The following major features were used, or altered, accordingly:

- A reminder system (e-mail) for the creative contracts (challenges)
  - Multiple project posts were confusing and changed to a single Entry post
  - The "biography" field on account sign-up was seen as overwhelming and was removed
  - The need for a central topic of conversation/creation was needed, and a required group, to be named the Weekly Theme Group (WTG), was created
  - To provide a healthier/less volatile environment the term "Creative Contracts" was changed to "Challenges"
  - Many members of the site were interested in posting, but little discussion was had, thus a "Post once, Comment once" rule (unmoderated) was created
  - In the initial development a single "due date" was used, but after some discussion the process of "often" was crucial and thus a more interactive
-

“Daily”, “Weekly”, or “Monthly” project commitment (Challenge) was available

## 6.2 Social Events

### 6.2.1 O'Reilly Ignite

See Appendix III Fig. 1

In February 2009 I spoke at the third O'Reilly Ignite Conference in New York City, giving a preview of my thesis and the contributing website to a crowd of over 500 people. The response was very positive and I received many new users and contacts from the experience.

### 6.2.2 Point Loma Art Department

See Appendix III Fig. 2

During Spring Break in March 2009 I was asked to lecture in consideration for an open professorship position in the Art and Design Department. I spoke at my alma mater, Point Loma Nazarene University, about my time during undergraduate studies, my work following graduation, and my work at ITP. This was capped by an explanation of my thesis and FailOften's approach, and how it could benefit their current program.

### 6.2.3 Swan Song Drive-By

See Appendix III Fig. 3

This social event is taking place on 4/30 - images and follow-up information to come.

## 6.3 Personal Commitments

As an attempt to not only facilitate, but also adhere to the ideas surrounding my concept and utilize its premise, throughout the semester I followed two personal commitments (Challenges):

- 1) Take a picture every day of the semester
- 2) Make a moderate sized weekly project

Both were documented and uploaded to the FailOften.net website.

The product of the same intentional commitments can be seen in the entries submitted by my Test Members during my website testing phase in February.

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### 6.3.1 Daily Photos

My first challenge was to take one picture every day of the semester and upload it to a Flickr set. By using my iPhone and an application called Mobile Fotos, I was able to accomplish this as well as geo-tagging the position of most images taken. This challenge gave me over 130 pictures in only a few months that can serve as a snapshot journal showing and reminding myself where I was and what I was doing.

See Appendix III Fig. 4

### 6.3.2 Weekly Projects

See Appendix III Fig. 5-19

I have completed 15 weekly projects that seeded the website and community of FailOften.net. These projects were at times exhausting, but I found them extremely helpful in remaining to feel refreshed, productive, and actively creative. These 15 smaller projects are as follows:

- 1) Snow Walk - a photo walk around my neighborhood at night in the snow
  - 2) The Jetsons & 2009 Technology - a comparison of The Jetsons and technology from 2009
  - 3) Scarchive - A cataloging from head to toe of all viewable scars on my body as of February 2nd, 2009.
  - 4) Hoarding Rap - a rap about a shopaholic in the midwest USA
  - 5) 30 Seconds Each - passing a camera around the room, asking friends to record for 30 seconds each, and editing the footage into a final montage
  - 6) Wonderland Scene - A small diorama wonderland scene created from small trinkets and doodads, photographed, and then altered in Photoshop.
  - 7) Signage - A Fail Often sign I made as inspiration for an artist studio
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8) Blue Bio-Mechanism - an old printer and piece of blue fabric cause curiosity

9) The Woman with the Wooden Leg - A photo essay about a woman with a wooden leg.

10) DavidOverholt.com - a new portfolio website design for my personal website

11) Failure and Risk: Interview with Red Burns - a video interview I did with Red Burns about failure

12) Silkscreen Posters - screenprinted posters for the Swan Song Drive-by on April 30th.

13) MARX - silkscreen poster designs, stencil, and brand identity for an urban RFID game

14) Abstract Umbrella - a pulley, rope and wooden sculpture utilizing the entirety of a 800 square foot studio

15) Street Photography Prints - first large format printing of select street photography

### 6.3.3 User Test Entries

Entries submitted by users during testing varied greatly and helped support the idea of having a multi-discipline/media community surrounding the promise of creativity.

See Appendix III Fig. 20-26

1) Test Member 1 - placed personal items on their bedroom wall.

2) Test Member 2 - designed a floral patterned dress

3) Test Member 3 - sketched aquatic themed architecture

4) Test Member 4- a picture of relaxation in tea and biscuits

5) Test Member 5 - light study photography on wrinkles in fabric

6) Test Member 6 - prototype for a large photo and sculpture piece

7) Test Member 7 - developed old 35mm black and white film negatives

## 7. STATUS

### 7.1 Current

#### Website

- Groups, Forums, Challenges, Entries, Invites, Gallery, all working
- 30+ members
- More interested

#### Personal commitments

- 15 total weekly projects completed and documented
- 150+ daily pictures taken and uploaded

### 7.2 Future

#### Website

- More lighthearted/familiar environment
- Integration with Facebook application
- Writing of a singular Drupal module for many of the iterative processes needed
- Help needed from Drupal/PHP developer

#### Social events

- Sponsoring of days to join community together for creative collaboration
- Seasonal iterative challenges (re: 5-in-5, Thing-a-Day)
- Group gallery/exhibition of submitted Entries
- Workshops

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

Although it was my initial intent to create a framework in which myself, and others, can continue to create and form a community around the ideas of creative habit and accountability, I now find myself at the end of only the first hurdle. I now have this structure, this framework, and it requires my own creative devices, commitment, and the community as a whole, to make it become what it was set-out to be. I merely have the pages in which to write,

and the guidelines (though finite) necessary to continue.

I have received many requests for invitations to join the FailOften.net community, many peers from ITP have shown interest in using its services post-graduation, and second year students have also shown enthusiasm in continuing some of the effects of my projects (including continuing the Swan Song Drive-by). Continuing to hold physical workshops, events, performances, exhibits, and gatherings in coordination with the website will be critical in holding on to a solid and healthy community.

I believe the most important thing I have learned is it is easy to gain "interest" in an intriguing topic, but it takes administrative commitment, public evangelism, focus, and strong community support to turn intrigue into continued and productive action.

## REFERENCES

Fletcher, Alan. *The Art of Looking Sideways*. London: Phaidon Press, 2001.

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TED - <http://www.ted.com>

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Roam, Dan. *The Back of the Napkin: Solving Problems and Selling Ideas with Pictures*. Ottawa: Portfolio Hardcover, 2008.

Shirky, Clay. *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*. Boston: Penguin (Non-Classics), 2009.

Fogg, B.J.. *Persuasive Technology: Using Computers to Change What We Think and Do (Interactive Technologies)*. San Francisco: Morgan Kaufmann, 2003.

PASH, and Matt Pashkow. *Inspirability: 40 Top Designers Speak Out About What Inspires*. Cincinnati, OH: How, 2005.

Krause, Jim. *Photo Idea Index*. New York: How, 2005.

### *Presentations / Events:*

Pecha Kucha - <http://www.pecha-kucha.org/>

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Online Reading:

Stay hungry, Stay Foolish -

<http://www.gauravonomics.com/diary/stay-hungry-stay-foolish-fail-early-fail-often/>

Steve Jobs "Stay Hungry Stay Foolish" -

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UF8uR6Z6KLc>

### *Design / Creativity*

Experiment Design/Design of Experiments -

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Design\\_of\\_experiments](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Design_of_experiments)

Designing for Constraints

Minimum Constraint Design (MinCD)

Designing with intent

Experience Design -

<http://alistapart.com/articles/experience>

The Art of Topless Dancing and Information

Design - <http://alistapart.com/articles/topless>

The Curse of ID -

<http://alistapart.com/articles/curse>

Human to Human Design -

<http://alistapart.com/articles/humantohuman>

Process -

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Design\\_thinking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Design_thinking)

7 stages -

<http://www.creativeguide.com/sevenstges.html>

OODA Loop -

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OODA\\_Loop](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/OODA_Loop)

Creative Creativity -

<http://www.creativecreativity.com/>

### *Prototyping*

Flash - <http://www.flashprototyping.com>

Paper Prototyping -

<http://alistapart.com/articles/paperprototyping>

### *Master Photographers:*

Magnum Photos - <http://www.magnumphotos.com>

Winograd - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Winograd>

: 300,000 unedited images, 2,500 rolls of undeveloped film

On a lot of them -

<http://www.arenaphotographers.com/viewArticle.php?articleID=20> (Cartier-Bresson would shoot off a couple rolls before breakfast)

Koudelka -

<http://www.magnumphotos.com/Archive/C.aspx?>

VP=XSpecific\_MAG.PhotographerDetail\_VPage&pid=2K7O3R135R3G&nm=Josef%20Koudelka  
Ze Frank Interview -

[http://cecilvortex.com/swath/2007/03/29/an\\_interview\\_with\\_ze\\_frank.html](http://cecilvortex.com/swath/2007/03/29/an_interview_with_ze_frank.html)

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<http://shootthegong.wordpress.com/2008/05/12/jobimanson-on-->

surf-photos-spontaneity-and-a-roll-of-film-every-day-for-a-year/

StretchDaily - <http://www.stretchdaily.com>

Picture a day -

<http://lifelifehacker.com/software/photography/project-365-take-a-photo-a-day-for-a-year-207424.php>

365 Sketches -

<http://www.aharrison.com/365essay.html>

52 Projects - <http://www.52projects.com/>

Google 20% Time

Yahoo Hack Day

Creative Thursday -

<http://www.CreativeThursday.com>

NewsToday - <http://www.qbn.com>

Wikipedia - <http://en.wikipedia.org>

Wooster Collective -

<http://www.woostercollective.com/>

Semanal - <http://semanal.ning.com/>

Thing a day - <http://www.thing-a-day.com>

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