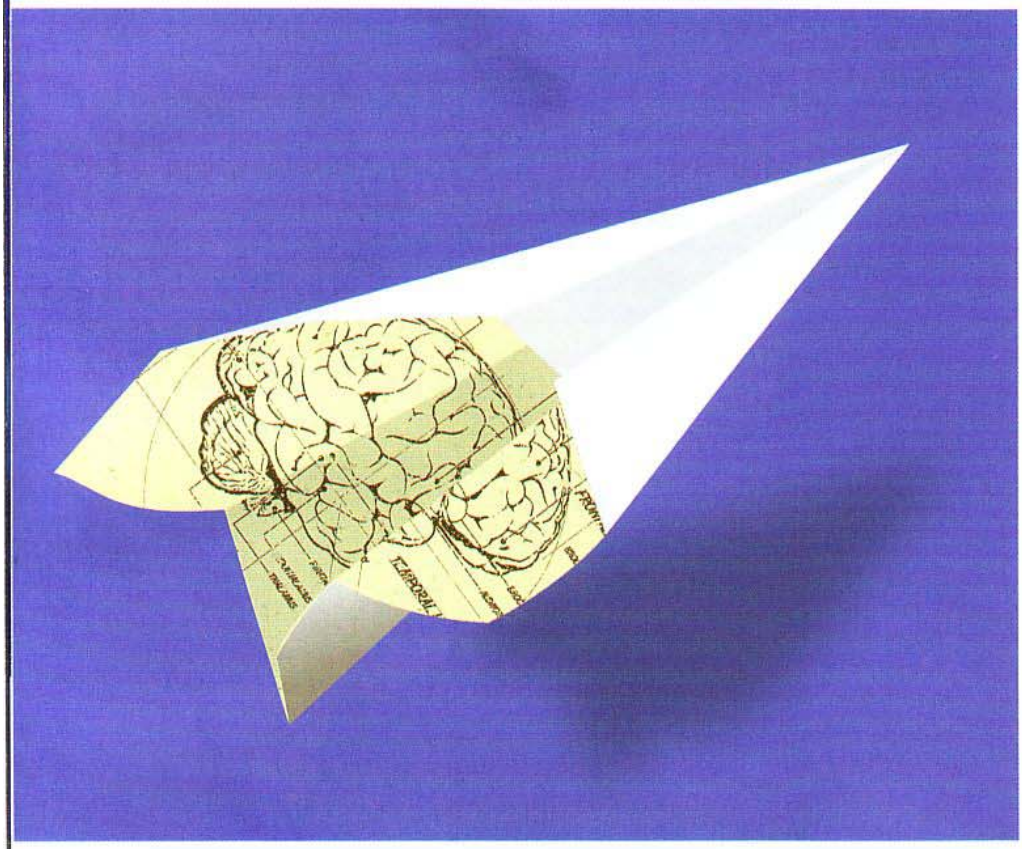
CLIVE THOMPSON

Flights of Fancy



ART

Why an idling mind is the mother of invention.

Your mind will probably wander while you read this article. Don't worry, I won't be offended. ¶ Our modern info-culture lionizes those who possess laserlike focus, particularly at work. Drifting off into a reverie is considered the enemy of productivity, which is partly why some companies control employee access to the Internet. They don't want the *Doctor Who* Wikipedia page to trigger a 15-minute woolgathering session. ¶ But what if we're wrong about daydreaming? What if it's crucial to solving problems in our personal lives and at work? ¶ Brain scientists are beginning to suspect that it is. And if they're right, we might need to rethink the way we work—perhaps even develop tools that actually *encourage* mental drift. ¶ For years, brain scientists viewed a wandering mind as merely a lapse in cognition. But recent studies have found that we lose concentration shockingly often. A 2007 study by Michael Kane of the University of North Carolina found that our minds drift away from our tasks fully one-third of the time. And this suggests that daydreaming can actually be useful—because if it were such a bad thing, it's unlikely that we'd do it so often.

Why *do* our minds wander? Brain-scanning technology has uncovered some clues. It turns out that when your mind drifts, your temporal lobes—which are associated with processing long-term memories—become busier. So when you float off into a reverie, you're actually doing important data-storage work.

Daydreaming isn't just the mind's way of processing information, though. Other scans have found that the wandering mind also utilizes the prefrontal cortex, the part of our brain that's involved in problem-solving. The upshot, says Jonathan Schooler, a professor of psychology at UC Santa Barbara who is studying this area, is that your idling mind is likely doing deeply creative work, tackling your hairiest long-term tasks—projects you've been trying to address for months, the arc of your career, the state of your marriage. "Mind-wandering is actually a very involved task," Schooler says. "You leave the here and now and focus on more remote concerns that nevertheless might be more important. We've been focusing on the downside of this, but we need to think about the upside."

Indeed, Schooler suspects that research like his explains why so many "aha" moments occur when we're drifting—like Archimedes in the tub.

If he's right, we ought to think about redesigning the way we work. Modern productivity software is made to minimize mental drift. We ruthlessly track our ▶

ILLUSTRATION BY David Drummond

progress on each task, click off to-do lists, design our workdays with Google-Calendered five-minute-increment meetings.

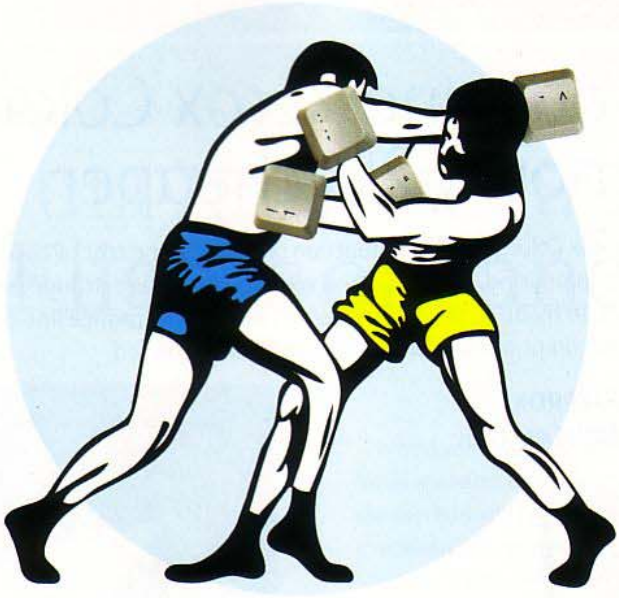
How about designing software that *optimizes* daydreaming? For example, one problem with drifting is that we're often unaware we're doing it. We can hit upon a cool idea but never even realize it. Imagine an app that randomly pings you to see if your mind is wandering—and if it is, lets you record what you're thinking about. "It'd be like a personal shrink," Schooler jokes—a way to strip away the crud of daily work and learn what your brain's real priorities are.

Granted, most scientists think that if you really want to let your mind roam, you need to engage in a nondemanding task, like going for a three-hour walk.

Most jobs don't allow that, of course. That's why I've begun to think that the "social" Internet has become a rough substitute. If your boss is trying to force you to focus on PowerPoint and Word documents, you might gravitate to mentally discursive, floaty experiences—the idle surfing of Facebook updates, Wikipedia entries, YouTube videos, casual games like Bejeweled. Maybe these things aren't so much time sucks as desperate attempts by our brains to decouple from the go-go-go machine and head off on its own.

It's just a thought. W

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C++ SMACKDOWN

Meet the reigning champ of competitive coding.

Watching Michael Phelps set seven world records at the Olympics was exciting. But a tense computer science competition where a programmer feverishly codes and debugs a C++ or Pascal program before the clock runs out? Now that's one to really wow the grandkids.

Henadzi Karatkevich has been taking part in computing tournaments for almost half of his life—which is to say, since he was 8. The 15-year-old mathlete from Gomel, Belarus, was encouraged to pursue the "sport" by his parents, both programmers. He graduated quickly from local coding contests to national ones.

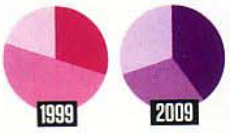
Karatkevich's most impressive victory so far was at this year's International Olympiad in Informatics in Plovdiv, Bulgaria. In the grueling two-day event, young people from around the world were tasked with writing algorithms to solve a series of thorny problems. (Example: Create a program that can calculate revenue generated by a parking garage, given space rates, car weight, and the order in which cars arrive and depart.) Karatkevich chose to spend most of his time writing epic strings of code, skimping on testing and debugging. "It was a risk, but I got lucky," he says. He was still 14 at the time of his victory, making him the youngest winner in the 20-year history of the Olympiad.

Will the new world champion go pro? Software recruiters must be salivating, but Karatkevich will be tied up in high school for the next three years. After that? "I have no concrete plans," he says. Then he clarifies: "Naturally, I will be a programmer." —ERIN BIBA

START

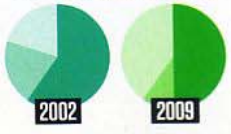
STATGEIST // CHARTING THE WIRED WORLD

THINGS THAT ARE TOO SLOW



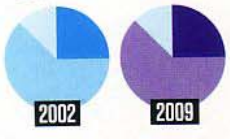
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- Email
- Newspapers
- DSL

CONTENTS OF BUSINESS PLAN



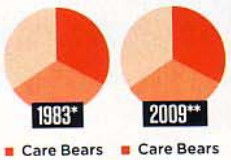
- Sell stuff online
- Get VC funding
- Sell out to Microsoft
- Get publicity via Twitter
- Ask parents for money
- Sell out to Google

CONTENTS OF INDIE MOVIES



- Tracksuits
- Childhood traumas
- Velvet Underground songs
- Animal suits
- Childhood fantasies
- Velvet Underground songs

T-SHIRT SUBJECT MATTER



- Care Bears
- Unicorns
- Jesus

* 6-year-old girls in Alabama

- Care Bears
- Unicorns
- Jesus

** 24-year-old guys in Brooklyn

ILLUSTRATION BY Jennifer Daniel