Web apps, Seeds and Time travel

by Sergei Nikolajev

It is another marvelous sunny day here in New York City – nothing like your regular 24-hour shivery shift in Northern Europe where I grew up in. I go online to check the amount of sunshine people get in NYC probably to remind myself how lucky I am to be here and now. It's 2 535 beautiful hours per year, so, on average I get to indulge myself in a 7-hour sunbath of blissful warmth per day. On contrast, Riga, the capital of Latvia, would allow you to dip your nose and cheeks in a 4.8 hour long (short, too short) keg of glimmer. Even though almost five hours a day on average on paper seems like not so bad of a deal, I honestly remember it being different – less than that, a fraction of what should've been. Most of the time, you would find yourself among the enfolding grayness of the sullen surroundings. Your garbs absorb the soaking moisture out of the humid air that chills you to the bone. The misery spreads into the facial expression and makes you want to hope that everyone else around you feel the same way. I can feel the shivers coming back.

All these thoughts and memories provoke a desire to reflect on my trajectory into the future and my final destination. But, as the three wise men ought to say (I might be making this up): going further requires you to make peace with the past – I decide to use my trusty time machine to travel back in time twelve years ago. I will find my junior self and teach the little bastard a thing or two about websites, entrepreneurship and… well, everything that can make him feel even more miserable. I will enjoy this trip very much indeed.

This ongoing internal dialogue has two major goals. First goal is to reconcile with my past self by admitting to and analyzing my shortcomings of building businesses and websites. The second goal of this endeavor is to help fellow entrepreneurs familiarize themselves with a website creation process: where to start, what to expect, what questions to ask and how much to get involved – a perfect set of actions to rectify the mistakes before they have been made. A rather convoluted concept but totally plausible within the confines of the time-travelling framework.

Back in 2008, I had an idea to open an online store for toys, gifts and gadgets. Since then I had been engaged in multiple e-commerce projects, hired a bunch of web developers, built several web apps and made tons of amateur mistakes. There were frauds, lies, mysteries, failures and some victories along the way. In 2020, I am a professional web developer myself and a slightly more seasoned business person. I couldn't help but notice how aspiring entrepreneurs, founders and CEOs of all ages keep stepping on the same rake that used to whack in my face

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over and over again. So, I have come to a conclusion that I have accumulated enough experience and it's the right moment to share some valuable insights with you. My personal pilgrimage in a space-time continuum of my consciousness as well as our mutual journey along these lines will be worthwhile.

T minus zero and we have lift off. "Hey, buddy, what's up?"

Businesses differ, says captain Obvious, but they all go through the same development stages during their life cycles. The way I see it, there are roughly four stages a business might go through in terms of growth: SEED, SPROUT, PLANT and GARDEN. SSPG – if you're into that sort of thing. Of course, there is a larger variety of levels, but this amount of vegetation is enough to follow my trail of thought. Shout-out to #gardenersrule. You probably don't have a slightest idea what a hashtag is in 2008. There, there, my cute clueless little caveman. You'll find out soon enough.

SEED is a regular startup that is *probing* the market. It's not a venture capital backed and full-o'-cash kind of startup. This might not even be a registered company yet. The focus here is on building a minimum viable product, minimizing expenses, being ready to pivot, finding the customer, solving the problem, getting paid for the first time.

SPROUT is a small business, a registered legal entity, with growing customer base and revenue. This could be a newly formed company that is entering a known market and is no longer testing the waters. The focus here is on iterating, fixing errors, polishing the product, making existing customers delighted.

PLANT would be an established business with regular customers and steady cash flow. When operating at this level, the focus should be on building a brand: brand strategy, brand identity, brand personality, brand messaging, voice and tone; scalability, efficiency, processes, sales and communication channels.

GARDEN is an expanding company, a growing brand that is recognized. The focus in web design and development here would be on security, anti-fraud, accountability, social responsibility, trends, rebranding, multi-branding and diversification.

I will split my internal discourse into four phases – one for each SSPG stage. Each phase will have themes or essays that I consider worth looking into. I will be formulating questions and going over them within the confines of the particular phase. My hypothesis is that as business develops, its goals evolve as well, thus the quality, functionality and scale of web applications

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and their costs should inevitably change to support the transformation. Therefore, there should be a different level of analysis involved in the website creation process at every stage the business entity goes through.

I am not trying to make a case that the marketing funnel or social media strategy, for instance, should be attended to exclusively at the PLANT level. These are important activities at every stage of business buildout. However, during the initial growth certain actions are not as significant and should have a lower priority, whereas as the company matures have to become a part of a daily routine.

You might argue that brand strategy and brand identity are crucial at the SEED stage; that if we nail it right at the start and invest heavily into creation of a perfect product, it will promote itself and we're set for life. I would say – sure, it's a really nice dream. If you have lots of cash, tons of time and a steady growing market you can hire professionals to help you with that. Unfortunately, most of us don't have unobstructed access to a hefty gold sack of plenty or have little time to squeeze through the window of opportunity that might only seem to be open.

Truth be told, when you are barely scraping by, strategizing and branding should not take precedence. The most important part at the SEED stage is finding the customer who will pay you for your product and feel good about having done so. When you prioritize strategy over sales at the initial stage, you are consciously choosing to stop the development of your business for whatever made-up reasons you might have. I know what I'm talking about, because I had done exactly that and it was a mistake. Most of your time and effort should be spent on getting sales, but at the same time, that activity would not necessarily exclude strategy and some basic branding if you're sure you can afford it, both money and time-wise.

Whenever there is a task at hand there are actions that are reasonable at one stage and make no sense whatsoever at another. Let me give you an example. If you had a SPROUT type construction company and you had one project that required you to have a forklift, it wouldn't be rational to purchase it. You would rent one because beyond that single contract you wouldn't need the machine. It might've been practical to obtain this tool if you were a PLANT or a GARDEN level business when you have multiple projects and paying year's rent overwhelmingly exceeds the costs of having the apparatus in-house. But for a small operation large, resource-consuming purchases are pointless.

The same applies to websites. It's great to have an e-commerce website like the one adidas has, but do you need to invest hundreds of thousands of dollars when you are a bootstrapped startup testing waters? First of all, I don't think many of us have that much. Secondly, you wouldn't have a clue what to spend it on anyway because you don't know the market and how

to find and approach your target audience at the SEED stage yet. You'd burn through cash faster than a dog-pursued scalded cat chasing scattering mice.

You know the primary law of time-travel, don't you? If you ever meet your future self that tries to bore you to death with psalms of unwelcome moralizing advices and then you kill it – there is no future for you. So, I guess, there is no feasible way to make me shut up. And since that is the case… What are we waiting for? Let us look at what you're getting yourself into and try to build us a simple website for you next SEED stage startup.