

Day as a Dev Episode Transcript - Systemized Creativity with Tom McHenry (Part Two)

- Kevin Lesht: Welcome to the Day as a Dev podcast. I am your host, Kevin Lesht, and this episode features part two of my conversation with Tom McHenry. If you're just joining the show, in part one of this series, Tom and I walked through his entrance into tech, the benefits of unconventional approaches to learning, and systematic tactics for breaking down problems, and achieving abstract goals. This episode picks up right where we left off, and is it a good one. From strategies for tackling difficult problems, through game design, and cartooning, to thoughts on habits and routines. We fit it all in nicely, and have some fun along the way. Now, part two of my conversation with Tom McHenry.
- Kevin Lesht: As far as reaching those goals too, I want to circle way back to something I was super interested in, that you hit on a few minutes ago, which was your process for... it sounded like, drawing from the world of Agile, of process design in software engineering, where we've got epics, we've got tickets that are working towards those epics, and there are steps in between dependencies.
- Kevin Lesht: You mentioned that you might set some abstract goal, like I want to learn French, and then you've got more finite, more narrowly defined goals building up towards that. I'd be curious, and even a more abstract level outside of that, could you take us through how you design a given week? Or even maybe here, how about this? Could you play into the show here, what does a day in the life look like for you? We've already hit on so many things.
- Kevin Lesht: You're employed as a software engineer. You're a cartoonist, which I think we're going to talk about deeply in a bit here. But if we could, yeah, use the opportunity now. You're practicing all these things. You're a runner, you're a weightlifter, you're a cartoonist, you are a software engineer. What does it all look like? Give us a day. With so many things there, I think all I can say is, give us a day as a Tom McHenry.
- Tom McHenry: Okay. A day as a Tom McHenry. I'm going to go with an idealized day, because I can never really get over the... I can never really fully extract myself from the public school mindset of, I quote unquote, did wrong when I leave something up. I do in my head, put a red X on a day when I miss a thing that I have tried to, like routine eyes.
- Kevin Lesht: Sure.
- Tom McHenry: Yeah. That's me. That's my own mess, I have to work through with lots of journaling and therapy. But yeah, so on idealized sort of weekday, I get up and I go for a 5K, and I come back and I meditate for 10 minutes. Well, I come back, I do some kettlebell swings, meditate for 10 minutes. Then it's like shower and breakfast, and while I'm eating breakfast, I'm writing down at least three and usually no more than 10 things that I'm grateful for, that have happened since the last time.
- Kevin Lesht: Interesting.

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Tom McHenry: Things that happened the previous day.

Kevin Lesht: Always 10? You're able to make 10 every time.

Tom McHenry: No, no. At least... like three is the, we talked about that low bar, which you were saying, that low bar you want to clear. So the low bars is three.

Kevin Lesht: Okay.

Tom McHenry: I don't think I've ever had less than five. I have a very charmed life, full of privileges. And this has been a very good exercise and humbling me too, the number of wonderful things that just happened in like a merge. It's great. We can talk way more about gratitude writing down later. And then, I take the remainder of that time till I need to start getting ready to go out the door. So I need to feed the cats, and wake up my wife and brush my teeth. I need to leave to be doing that at 8:45. I've got this span of 8:05 to 8:45, where I just get to draw. Then it's commute to the office.

Kevin Lesht: Are you doing anything on the train, on your way into the office? Podcast, music?

Tom McHenry: Yeah. Okay, listening to podcasts if I'm walking.

Kevin Lesht: The Day as a Dev show, I'm sure.

Tom McHenry: The show is in my feed, however I have not. I have so many podcasts in the queue. I've not hit episode one yet. We will soon, a lot of things have dropped off.

Kevin Lesht: This is not a good look for the show Tom.

Tom McHenry: Geez. I'm sorry. It will be there, and at which point it will be consumed. It's consumed in the order that it was released.

Kevin Lesht: Just given you a hard time here, yeah.

Tom McHenry: I just happen to be way behind. Yeah. So podcasts on the walk, and then I'm reading a book, whatever book I'm reading on the train, unless I bike to work if the weather is good. Then I get to the office. And at this point, a lot of the stuff I've split out into these daily checklists, that it gets served up to me, which is nice, because it reminds me to do all of these daily practice things and it's like I need to clear up my email inbox, which means literally inbox zero.

Tom McHenry: Now, I might not act on everything, and reply to everything, but I pull the things out of email that I need to act on into my system, as I like seeing that clean white inbox, with nothing in it and I can't abide using my email inbox as my to

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do list. That's way too much stress. And so yeah, then I go through all the slack channels that have popped off overnight, because of work stuff. And I do some quick journaling about, where my head is at that day. I try to figure out... this is a trick I stole from this book and course called learning how to learn.

Tom McHenry: I'm blanking on the writers name now, but she talks about finding a frog for the day. I don't know where that terminology comes from. But you want to find the thing that you are most resistant to work on, the thing where you're like, "Okay, well, I got a bunch of stuff I got to do. But also there's this ticket that I'm working on. It's about figuring out, how this job is kicking off every day, and failing and no one can figure out why because it's not producing any errors. Gosh, I really don't want to look at that."

Tom McHenry: And if you're not careful, you will take the permission to not look at that, and write it the entire day if you're me. But if you surface to yourself like, "This is the thing I am resisting working on that I am like, I really dislike the most." And you front-load it. If you go like, "Before I do anything else, I'm going to give myself a little time box of like 10 minutes and just work on that thing." You might not circle around back to it for the rest of the day, but probably what is going to happen is that, you're going to open it up for you, and find the fact that the thing that you're procrastinating, you've built up way more in your head than it's actually there to look at. You're going to find a way to break it into a smaller problem and approach it.

Kevin Lesht: That's interesting. Just even, I think setting a time box into that difficult task is helpful for me. I mean, to give you some perspective, I operate from the complete other side, where whether it's a task list for a given day, or even looking at a more mezzo or macro level project landscape, I am very much, knock out all the quick wins, get the ball rolling, build some momentum, and if I identify something as difficult, you bet, I'm going to procrastinate on that until it absolutely has to be done.

Kevin Lesht: And that's deliberately for two reasons. The one being, I'm probably a little scared of it, and also just not that interested in for whatever reason, working on that task. Maybe because there's, I don't know, some ambiguity there or something. But I'm very much of the, let's get the quick wins out of the way. Let's build some momentum and then, let that carry us, which I think has worked for me into those more difficult challenges. But I guess what I've never tried that I will have to, that I like there, is yeah, just sort of even like you mentioned earlier, with setting the bar low, right?

Kevin Lesht: Go into it not expecting to take the whole thing down, but just invest some time towards it and see where that takes you. It might not take you all way towards the end, but at least you're investing time towards the problem, which is cumulative and does forward that given subset of the problem, for you to then pick up or further at a later time.

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Tom McHenry: Absolutely. Because what you're actually doing, when you figure out why your frog is like this, and I shouldn't frame this as like, so much of this stuff is in flux and relatively new to me. This particular trick that we're talking about here is something I've really only been doing for the past three or four months, but it's really changed some stuff up for me. This finding the frog thing, all you're really doing is a kind of a bait and switch on yourself. I am also just doing all the quick wins up front.

Tom McHenry: But one of the quick wins I have defined for myself is, I'm going to do just 10 minutes. I'm just going to stand here in the most uncomfortable spot of my day for 10 minutes. And if I don't come back to it, if it really does suck and I absolutely have no idea how to approach it, then I'm walking away and I'm walking away and I'm just doing other quick wins. That the time box, that the thing you are trying to do is not, solve this problem. The thing you are trying to do is, give 10 minutes to this problem. Means that, you sink almost no time in and you've made it somewhat less scary.

Tom McHenry: It might still be super scary, but probably... what I tend to do, when I get a ticket is break it into super tiny tasks, right? And trying to lay out even like, "Okay, figure out how this piece works." So maybe all I've done is spend 10 minutes with code open in one file, and my to do file open on another pane, and just clarifying some more of the things I need to do on it. That still counts.

Kevin Lesht: Right, that's compounding right there. Yeah.

Tom McHenry: And maybe I don't touch it again until... I'm specifically thinking about today as kind of a weird day, where the back half of my day after lunch was almost all meetings. So I did not touch the thing that is my frog, except in the very first part of the day. But I will touch it again tomorrow in that pre 10 o'clock chunk, where I'm looking at my frog. And maybe I'll get lucky and I'll have more free time.

Tom McHenry: I'm still making progress on it in a way where, before I operated in this, before I was doing this, this way, I was just getting the quick wins and these scary things kept getting put off, and they just grew scarier with procrastination. And if you're me, and you're already kind of an anxious neurotic person, that does not help to coax yourself to do it, right? At no point is it going to be easier. It's just going to become so urgent that you're more afraid of getting in trouble for not having done it, than you are from actually sitting with the problem and doing it.

Kevin Lesht: Why I'm excited about that too, is I think, what is so fun about programming and what I think I have always had a hard time with, as far as time boxes go too, is it's very easy to... say, you set aside 10 minutes for yourself, and then you get to minute eight, and you have a revelation or you hit some part of the solution that you then want to dig deeper into. So I think even just setting up a segment of time to explore the problem, clarify things a little more, could lead you

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maybe deeper than you plan to, and really help mitigate some of that scariness, that ambiguity. That's a great... I'll really dig that. I'm going to have to give that a try.

Tom McHenry: And I mean, I literally do set a timer on my watch. So the watch buzzes and I stop. That's another key to it, right? When I first... years ago, people would talk about the Pomodoro technique, and I did it. I tried to keep up with it. 25 minutes is a long stretch of time, and I get why you do 25, because it's good for the deep work and all that stuff. But I think learning on five and 10 minute time boxes for some stuff, especially the things that you are resisting most, there's another magic trick there, because 10 minutes, who cares? 10 minutes is nothing.

Tom McHenry: Sometimes you can stay 10 minutes late at work, because at five o'clock, you realize you hadn't gotten around your frog today, because of a bunch of other stuff. But if I leave the office at 5:00 or 5:10, I'm still waiting on the red line platform-

Kevin Lesht: Sure. Sure.

Tom McHenry: Of half an hour.

Kevin Lesht: Yep.

Tom McHenry: So that's still 10 minutes that I've chipped away, and then I don't have to carry a weird guilt and anxiety and to stand the next morning where I'm like, "I was supposed to look at a blog, and I kind of didn't get there." But also having that alarm go off, having the thing, because I have had and I love the experience of, yeah, that you're at minute eight and the whole thing opens up for you, and you start digging in on something, and you're just like, "Wow, this is so incredible."

Tom McHenry: But I like having the down to earth reminder of like, "Here's the 10 minutes." Because number one, it tells you like, "Hey, see how you were so freaked out about this, and you thought there was no way you'd be able to do it in hours. Well, check it out. Before the buzzer went off even, you already... look how smart you are, right? You arrived at it."

Kevin Lesht: Closed the gap there. Yeah.

Tom McHenry: But it also means that you respect your own boundaries. You respect the boundary. You're giving yourself a message every time you do that, and you walk away. And yeah, maybe you come immediately back, but maybe it just turns off the keyboard for a second.

Kevin Lesht: You really reset for a moment there.

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Tom McHenry: Yeah, you're telling yourself, "Okay, when at 10 minutes, this is still super scary, and I don't know what I'm going to do. I am not going to just dig in. I respect the agreement that I made with myself, that I will only look at this for 10 minutes if I want to, and the 10 minutes is the baseline. And after 10 minutes, we can walk away." You're in a kind of negotiation with your own fears and anxiety, and if you can build trust, but with yourself, a lot of that relaxes a little.

Kevin Lesht: That's where I've struggled in the past. It sounds like I need to respect myself more. I need to develop more-

Tom McHenry: We all do.

Kevin Lesht: I need to develop more discipline there. I am definitely the person that turns the clock over. Hides the... if the timer is running on the phone, or on the computer, closes the tab, turns the phone over. I'm going to keep going until I get, I think as far as I can go, until I hit a true blocker, where I finally take a break in those situations.

Tom McHenry: And there's absolutely a space for that with the way that I'm working, or that I'm trying to, because I love the deep work, you look up and three hours have gone by. I still want to have space for that, but I want to be like... how I want to approach that is, here's the time I have where I'm going to attempt that deep work. Versus, well, we're just going to try it and see what happens. Like trying to approach even that with a plan. Where like, yeah, I'm not setting a time box for this particular block, because it's 1:00 PM, I've got kind of a free afternoon for meetings.

Tom McHenry: I'm going to dig in this problem and dig and dig and dig until I hit a blocker, like you're describing. Which is different from the negotiation with myself of, it's 9:30, I don't want to work on this thing. But I will. And I could really get away with not working on it, because I got kind of a busy afternoon. So I could just kind of hang out, read some articles and shoot the bull a little bit, but going like, no, we'll look at it.

Tom McHenry: And we'll only look at it for 10 minutes, and then we can goof off the rest of the day. I'm like trying to coax a child, like trying to bribe a child. Like, "If you do this one math problem, then we can go to great America, but you have to do the one... you have to eat this one brussels sprout. And then it's all the ice cream you want."

Kevin Lesht: Right. Hit the giant drop, hit the Red Bull, or whatever that ride was called, after that.

Tom McHenry: Raging Bull?

Kevin Lesht: Raging Bull. That might have been what it was.

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Tom McHenry: No. That's the boxing movie, Iron Bowl.

Kevin Lesht: Wow! It was something close to that. On fantastic rides, I did want to address as well. Your game horse master. I was on your interview when you first joined home chef, and I don't know, I'm sure you've got it somewhere. But I had to pull up your resume, because I remember a whole bunch of resumes come in, and certainly at the time I had no say in getting you in the room. But would have gotten you in there regardless, if I was in a position to make that decision, and what certainly jumped out to me, that I think we talked about years ago, when we did first meet, but I'd love to circle back on now is, on your resume you've got this block.

Kevin Lesht: I'm going to read it back to you. I don't know if it was under projects, achievements, but horse master. The game of horse mastery is a video game that challenges players to grow, train and nurture their own horse from birth, in the hopes of earning the most coveted tenured position in the world. Horse master. This game was nominated for 2013 XYZZY Awards, Best Game, Best story, best setting, best individual NPC. It was voted number 23 on the top 50 interactive fiction games of all time by interactive fiction database.

Kevin Lesht: You see a block like that on the resume, and Gosh, I think if that isn't a side project that will separate you from the pack, I don't know what is. And a question I'm now curious about, that I thought we could use as a jumping off point. We talked about cartooning earlier a little bit. We'd love to get there from this as well. But designing a game like Horse Master, where do you start? What goes into something like that?

Tom McHenry: Sure. Yeah. So this job that I was talking about, that I had before I hurt my hands real bad. That job... as I kind of said, I had downtime, and I was kind of tinkering around with JavaScript stuff. At one point I was writing... most of the good knowledge of JavaScript I got, was I was trying to write a browser based Dungeons and Dragons style, Dungeon Crawl with randomized dungeon levels.

Tom McHenry: So every time you'd play it, it would be different, as based on this game NetHack, that is still one of my favorite games that's ever existed. But I was trying to write it without knowing anything about code, and to run in the browser. And I learned a lot. I fell down a lot of rabbit holes. But yeah, at some point in tinkering around with that stuff, I was reading a bunch of articles about... and playing some games by people who were making these games in this game engine called Twine. It's a weird outgrowth of a thing to generate wiki code, and then clicking on the wiki code would show you a screen and you'd click on a link, and it would flash you a different screen.

Tom McHenry: I've realized it sounds like I'm just describing really basic websites. But you'd never change your URL. And so you are continually being shown new blocks of text or images. And you can make really easy... choose your own adventure

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games. But you can also interject JavaScript into it, and I already knew a bunch of JavaScript. So messing around with this other kind of project.

Tom McHenry: And so I didn't really have anything for it. It was just like, "This is an interesting thing that exists." And I like a lot of the weirdo games that are coming out that use this twine system. A lot of games by women and people of color and queers, and the trans community is super big into making these games. And I was a voracious player of them, and thought it was really neat. And then another thing that I happened to be doing around the same time is, I would just go into the office of supplies and get a sharpie and a post-it note, and I would set a timer for like 20 minutes and I would try to fill as many posted notes as I could. And so they'd be like little doodles, and scraps of phrases.

Kevin Lesht: This is content for the game? Could be anything.

Tom McHenry: This is just a thing I'm doing to brainstorm. And so sometimes it's just like, what comes out of it? Or jokes or weird turns of phrase, and one of the weird turns of phrase that I jotted down on one of these lunch breaks where I was doing that for 20 minutes is, Horse master: The game of horse mastery. And it cracked me up. I wrote that. I had doodled underneath a guy in a cowboy hat.

Kevin Lesht: Which I think made it onto the box art, for the game.

Tom McHenry: Basically, yeah. It winds up being turned into box art. And so then as a goof, I thought, well, what if I tried to actually do some twine scripting? And I'll make this goofy thing and I'll show it to my wife, Sarah. And she'll get a kick out of it, because she thought the combination of words, Horse Master: The game of horse mastery was funny. And it really kind of snowballed from there. Like I has made essentially a demo of the first, I don't know, maybe 10 screens. It's not very much of the game at all. And she was like, "This is fun."

Kevin Lesht: Keep going.

Tom McHenry: You should do this.

Kevin Lesht: Yeah.

Tom McHenry: Yeah. And I hemmed and hawed, and I hemmed and hawed and I talked to some friends out at a conference. And I told them, "I have this thing I'm working on. It's stupid. It's called Horse Master: The game of horse mastery." And they were like, "Idiot, you have to make this!" Without knowing anything about it. Like, no one knows anything about it, except me. That was May and I was like, "All right, fine. The official release date will be July 1, and I will release whatever I have." And then having a release date-

Kevin Lesht: How much of the game was done prior to that?

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Tom McHenry: Almost nothing.

Kevin Lesht: Okay. Yeah.

Tom McHenry: And so I went to feverish work at it. And it was like, it's another one of the things when my hands get hurt, not that further down the line in the future, I'm looking at it like the parts where I feel really alive in what I'm doing, and writing this game, and like going so deep into figuring out how to make a number display and then figuring out how to make a random number display, and then figuring out like, "Okay, well I could make a start. And a start could get a bonus based on a random thing." Like, "Okay, okay, we can make this thing happen."

Tom McHenry: And the plan is getting more and more elaborate as time is also running out. So I'm stripping out huge chunks of the game. Then like, yeah, the thing that came out had a couple of bugs on release day, but everybody was really kind about it. And I fixed them very quickly. And I was officially a game designer, and it just happened to take off. I knew enough people that played it and showed it to friends. To this day it's probably still my best known thing. The handful of games I made, especially Horse Master are way, way more known than any of my comics work.

Tom McHenry: My comics work is the passionate obsession of my life that, people who like, they really like but it doesn't have the... it didn't strike that weird chord that Horse Master did, where like, Horse Master went quasi viral. I've read a chapter in a dissertation about Horse Master-

Kevin Lesht: Really?

Tom McHenry: There's a couple of journal articles about Horse Master. There's a book called Video Games For Humans, edited by Maricopas, that has a chapter on Horse Master by Naomi Clark.

Kevin Lesht: Yeah, I've played it. I think it's a fantastic concept and execution of the game. I think my horse was coffee breath, does that sound like a-

Tom McHenry: Coffin breath? Coffin breath.

Kevin Lesht: Coffin breath, that was the horse that I think I had. I didn't reach mastery. I did not reach mastery.

Tom McHenry: Can I ask you the question I always ask people when they tell me they play Horse Master?

Kevin Lesht: Please.

Tom McHenry: What did you name your horse?

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Kevin Lesht: I don't... so I played this game when you were coming into interview. I don't know if I can remember what I named the horse, but I did... what was coffin breath? Was that a breeder of horse?

Tom McHenry: It's a breed of horse.

Kevin Lesht: Okay, I do remember-

Tom McHenry: There are three horse breeds.

Kevin Lesht: Okay, that was definitely the horse breed that I chose.

Tom McHenry: And you played in debug mode? Which no one could, except for me. You could place a unicorn.

Kevin Lesht: That's great, yeah. Got to the happy Easter eggs in that, got to slip in the Easter eggs.

Tom McHenry: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Kevin Lesht: Yeah, if it comes back to me, I'll drop it in the show notes. I'll forward it to you, what I happened to name my horse. I can't recall right now, but that would be...

Tom McHenry: You'll have to play it again.

Kevin Lesht: It's all I'll have to do, yeah, I will.

Tom McHenry: Apparently, hold up, I've not really returned to it. Sometimes there's been talk about... as part of the Patreon that my wife and I do, we've talked about doing maybe a twitch stream, where I play it and get a director commentary.

Kevin Lesht: Yes.

Tom McHenry: I stole this from so-and-so.

Kevin Lesht: Yeah.

Tom McHenry: This is stolen from that.

Kevin Lesht: Please do that. That would be fantastic. On the artwork that went into Horse Mastery, what certainly, I think set you up well there too, and you mentioned I think throughout our episode here, that you practice daily, cartooning. I would love to dig in to that for a bit. And I wonder if... certainly want to touch on... well, would love to touch on first, well, your cadence for the cartoons that you're sending out throughout the day. Because each is of a different focus, which I think is super interesting.

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- Kevin Lesht: So maybe we could begin with what that regimen looks like. You run in the morning, and I think I see the first one that you fire on a daily basis. I love this idea. I want to let you set it up of course, but your first cartoon of the day, could you start us there and take us through that daily routine of cartooning?
- Tom McHenry: Well, I love this because it's very kind of you to assume that a lot of this is more regular than it is in practice.
- Kevin Lesht: You certainly put on a good show, if it's not, I think.
- Tom McHenry: Something for my run, that's part of the accountability practice that I try to do for the running. Right? So it's kind of public keeping me accountable for going for a run. I know I will get pinged if somebody is like, "Hey, what happened?" And I have to write the streak every day. So I'm hyper aware of that. Like, "I've got eight days banked up already. I don't want to fall off."
- Tom McHenry: So yeah, that is just a single image, in black and white on a sketch book of something I saw, when I went for a run. Or something that happened, something I overheard when I was running.
- Kevin Lesht: A question there, too. And just I think, we've talked a little bit about some philosophical concepts as well. Do you think that's helped you be more present in the moment too, because I think, when I look through your comics, there are things that you have posted that I still question if they are reality, it seems.
- Kevin Lesht: But then it makes you wonder too, right? These things are going on. They're not that far exaggerated from what you can imagine being a scene playing out in real life. So it makes you wonder, these things are happening all around you and you just need to pay more attention. Be mindful, be present.
- Tom McHenry: Yeah. So there's something from my run, is pure nonfiction. Those are memoir, autobiographical comics. I never lie in them. It's always something I really saw. It would be weird. Our co worker, Mike Worley, one time asked me how long it took me to write them. And I thought, he meant how long it took me to draw them. He thought that they were always -.
- Kevin Lesht: They were fiction? It was completely fiction.
- Tom McHenry: Yeah, or sometimes they were fiction. He just couldn't believe that I would remember a thing I overheard a random Cub's fan saying to another Cub's fan when I ran by them, but I did. Because that's how my brain works. I've trained it to be... to just notice. I'm constantly trying to notice, and that is a huge part of, yeah, you call it meditative, but a kind of meditative practice.
- Tom McHenry: I have tried to, as much as possible be present in my body when I'm running. Like that's part of the thing. You don't want to fully dissociate, even though that

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body is feeling pain and misery. Because running is just awful. Your body burns, and it hurts and it sucks. But if you can be present in your body and absorb some of your surroundings, and you smell the air and hear the things that people say and see, just like that weird junk on the ground.

Tom McHenry: I think today it's a drawing of a Batman thermos that's just jammed into some snow. I'm like, "That's weird. What a strange thing to see?" That the world is constantly presenting you with interesting and strange stuff. But you have to create space for yourself to notice. And it is difficult when everything wars for your attention to set time aside, to deliberately notice.

Tom McHenry: So I do and so yeah, sometimes it really seems like it must be made up, but I assure you, and maybe sometimes, the words get fudged because I'm sort of repeating a thing a person said, that is totally bonkers over and over again in my head until I can get home and write it down, but it all really happened.

Tom McHenry: But in addition to that, I also draw these little journal comics about going to my gym, which was kind of a stunt that I just sort of stayed with, because I have never really stayed with a gym membership, very long until this place, which I joined on, kind of a bet. And I love the gym I go to now, and the way that it's set up, and the way the people are there. It's just a great community and I'm super jazzed about... I consider myself a weightlifter as part of my identity now, in a way that I never did before.

Tom McHenry: So in addition to those kind of more none fiction things, I just sort of doodle throughout the day. There is downtime in being a dev, both in the time where you have to just sit and think about a problem... so often I'm like-

Kevin Lesht: Test suites running!

Tom McHenry: You got deploys going off.

Kevin Lesht: Right.

Tom McHenry: So I often have a piece of paper where I am trying to diagram out how some complicated series of classes and sub classes call out to each other, to kick off different jobs and where a bug could be entering. And then next to it, where like, a notion for a funny way of phrasing things has entered my head, and I jot it and I draw, I doodle a little guy next to it. That's kind of the loser single paneling stuff. And sometimes I put that stuff online, but a lot of times that's just sort of a grist for the creative mill.

Tom McHenry: But then there is the final, the finished fictional comic stuff, which I really, in my best days can do a page a day of that. And sometimes two. So when I'm in my best mood for that sort of thing, I do a 28 page comic book every month.

Kevin Lesht: Every month, a 28 page comic book?

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- Tom McHenry: Yeah. Now, that every month... the definition of that month has grown from four weeks to six weeks, to sometimes eight weeks.
- Kevin Lesht: Time is a fungible thing. I mean it's-
- Tom McHenry: Time is a fungible thing. What's also true is I have just gotten kind of sloppy with some parts of that routine, which is probably fine. You need to -.
- Kevin Lesht: Why do you think that is?
- Tom McHenry: Well, perhaps you found this too, but when you have a life that you have routinized a lot of things, when something comes along that derails you a little bit, it can be difficult to get back into it. Now, when I get into it, I produce at very furious rate. And that's great. But then something happens like, "You know what? This writer, that I really like is speaking at a thing that I...", so I'm not going to draw in the spot at night, when I frequently would draw, but instead, I'm going go hear this writer talk, which is good.
- Tom McHenry: I should go to those things. Or a friend calls and wants to do something, I get sick. There's so many things that can break your little creative routines, if you're not careful. But I don't even think you need to be careful. You just want to be mindful of the parts of them that work, and be forgiving to yourself for breaking them, which I am often very bad at. I'm often very... I mentioned before, putting the big red X, just like the public school situation, okay.
- Tom McHenry: I did not work on any of those fictionalized comics pages today. In my head, there's a big, red sharpie X and an F minus. See me after class, at the top of the page for today. When I did so much other stuff that was good and helpful and positive, which is part of why I try to keep track of the things that I'm grateful for, that happened to me that are good, because it's trying to counteract that big F minus at the top of the page.
- Kevin Lesht: Yeah, that is something that I have not figured out yet. I mean, even to relay a story back to answer your question about, is this something I have experienced? Absolutely, I think so. I also practice quite a bit of creative activity of habit stacking. And I think for me, where I'm at now, is I've realized it's just about ruthless prioritization.
- Kevin Lesht: And certainly, whatever is most engaging to me, is going to fit those priorities. But it is upsetting. I've had to give up quite a bit of habits that I would like to bring back into my routine, that I just haven't been able to find a place for yet. You talk about onboarding new things that might capture your attention, the podcast, right? Five episodes in. You are episode number five, loving the podcast, but it is certainly taking up quite a bit of my time, and I've cut things out.

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Kevin Lesht: I used to be a voracious reader. I would read every single day. I have not read I think... certainly articles and things like that, but I haven't read any books or anything like that, since I've started the podcast. And I've got the reading list, even when I was reading continuously, ever growing. So much to get to. You're never going to get all of it.

Kevin Lesht: And that's a tough thing. That's, I think, been the thing that has sat with me as the heaviest mental weight, as far as habits that I've given up. I think too, I've had to shift my schedule around too, I found that... so previously, you know this well, I wake up, somewhat say early in the morning. I like to work out before heading to work, but what I found is... so usually my routine would be, and I certainly don't want to dominate the show here. So in a very generalized sense, work out, go to work and then after work, fill that time whatever... again, as you mentioned earlier, an idealized day with whatever creative activity I'm trying to drive forward.

Kevin Lesht: But now the podcast work, I have found the preparation, the post production to be a pretty high cognitive load, in the sense that I'm not able to work effectively at night. And so the sacrifice I've made there is, I don't think I'm as productive in the gym, as I am in the morning, when I shift that to the evening. But that's what I've done, just to sort of take advantage of my mental capacity, and work on these knowledge focus kind of activities in the morning.

Kevin Lesht: So now I'm working out at night. And yeah, I don't think I'm as productive in there. But maybe just a practical example of habits I've given up, and habits I've had to shift around to... but I'm still happy, to accommodate what is capturing my attention the most right now. And to your point, yeah, onboarding a new habit like this, I've experienced similar things when I've introduced new activities. And I think it's just yeah, it takes some onboarding time before you really figure out whatever your new routine is.

Tom McHenry: Yeah. And you get faster at things, right? Your post production time will go down.

Kevin Lesht: Right.

Tom McHenry: Since you get more expertise, and the audacity or whatever. I have all sorts of things that I sort of think of as like, still open cognitive loops. Things that were daily habits that I have fallen off on. I used to... this is like a fun trick. I would try to write a tiny song in 10 minutes every morning.

Kevin Lesht: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom McHenry: And I just sort of have fallen off on it because like, "It's kind of inconvenient to get too, and my mornings are already sort of stacked." I could get up 10 minutes earlier, and make this thing work, and maybe I'd like to, but at a certain point, I

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think you have to also be willing, and this is something... I'm giving this like it's advice, like I follow it and I don't, but letting yourself crop rotate.

Tom McHenry: And maybe, yeah, the adventure of this podcast and the cognitive load of it being in the morning, while the working out goes to at night. Maybe that's only for the next six months, and then you rotate it back, because that is actually happier and you need less cognitive load to do this. The podcast stuff, or...

Tom McHenry: Maybe I fall off on the running again, and I pick up the song. Like, letting yourself move to the things that excite you, rather than holding yourself hostage to a routine that is not getting you the things that you want, is an important part of it. Knowing when to quit is just as important as knowing how to start.

Kevin Lesht: I think too. It sounds like for both of us, with these activities that we're passionate about, we're fortunate and that we can attach to them these other lateral passions, right? With weight lifting for me, with maybe reading, both those things I can multitask in a sense, to play back into whatever my highest priority is, which is the podcast, right? When I'm weightlifting maybe I'm doing guest prep for a show in the form of listening to material that my guest has otherwise already presented themselves on other podcasts, that they have been on.

Kevin Lesht: Reading too, maybe. I think what's so awesome about being able to host the podcast is that, every episode, I just get to learn so much by researching the guests. A little comes from that, but most of it just comes through a conversation like this. So it presents itself. I think we're fortunate in that sense, and with you too, right? Tying comic production to cartooning, to each of these activities, you go on the morning run, you leverage that experience to send a cartoon out, and then you hit the gym and same deal, you're able to attach a cartoon with that. It's really cool. That it's productive in that sense.

Tom McHenry: Well, I sometimes will say, that the sketch book habit taught me about the other habits, right? That is the one that I kept the longest, and I've picked it back up after injury and all that stuff. It taught me how it feels to actually be inside of a habit, and have a thing be part of your life, which is to say, it can free you up some... I don't think many people approach the habit of, they're running, people who run all the time and are runners. I don't think many of them think of it in their head the way I do, which is, I think of a given run as a page of a sketch book.

Kevin Lesht: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tom McHenry: And I mean that in that some days, I can go out and I just put a big X, and it's still counts. It's still ink on the page. Giving yourself the freedom to... like today, I wanted to read for 10 minutes, and this book that I wanted to read, and I couldn't focus. And I read it. I read a couple of paragraphs, and that still, quote unquote counts in as much as anything counts. Because the thing you are

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actually doing is this higher goal that can't be compressed, that has to be compressed down to these tiny, tiny, tiny units that are sort of silly when you talk about them.

Tom McHenry: But if the thing that you want, is this thing to be part of your life... when you talk about your habits, what you're actually talking about is your identity, the identity that you want to have, the identity that you do have. I'm like, I want to be able to identify as an artist, which means I need to have a creative practice. I want to be able to identify as a runner, and that means I need to be running.

Tom McHenry: But that also means I need to give myself the capacity to fail at those things most of the time. That those things need to... I need to follow up on a habit, I need to draw so many bad pages, I need to go on so many runs where I'm so slow, or I hurt myself, because I slipped on the ice. And not holding myself against other people, but looking at the streak of time, till you get to the point where you're like, "I cannot identify as not a runner anymore." Because only a runner would run hundreds of days in a row.

Kevin Lesht: Sure. Yeah.

Tom McHenry: Like only a runner would be able to run this many marathons. So therefore, I must have accomplished the goal that I set out for, which is that I wanted part of my identity to be a person who runs. And so yeah, it needs to open you up to a place where the thing is no longer super thrilling, and no longer super agonizing, but it's just the air that you breathe, the water that you swim in. It's like pages come out of me into comics the way that I eat lunch, or I go to sleep or I tell my wife I love her. They are essential to my being. And so, they happen. They are still driven by a feeling, but they are who I am. They are an expression of myself. If that makes sense.

Kevin Lesht: That is a fantastic, I think summation of everything that we've talked about so far. I cannot think of a higher note to end the show on, Tom. We're going to have to book some more episodes, I think, because there's just so much more to explore there. And also because I'm a little scared of going outside. I think, it has dropped to nine degrees, since we have been in this recording session. But for now we're going to have to brave the cold. We're going to have to go out there. Tom, thank you for your time. Thank you for your advice. Appreciate you joining.

Tom McHenry: Thank you, Kevin. Thanks so much for having me on the show. It's been a blast.

Kevin Lesht: For show notes and more on this episode, head on up to the site. That's dayasadev.com. While you're there, check out our release notes. This is a short newsletter that we send out about once a week. It includes updates along with all sorts of other goodies packaged up for your inbox.

Kevin Lesht: Thanks for listening. For the Day as a Dev podcast, I'm Kevin Lesht.