

A black and white photograph of a bridge under construction. The bridge is a steel truss structure with a large arch, supported by tall concrete pillars. In the background, a city skyline is visible, featuring a prominent skyscraper with a spire. The water of the river reflects the bridge and the sky. The overall atmosphere is industrial and architectural.

The Hacker's Guide to Passive Income

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This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/passiveincome>

This version was published on 2013-08-24



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How I Got Here

Although I didn't know it, I was bitten by the passive income bug in 2007. I was 20, and a sophomore at Duke University studying Philosophy and Chinese. Up until that point, my upbringing had been complicated. I'd grown up in the UK and Australia and was the middle adopted child of a successful American businessman and a fantastic British mother. I was afflicted by a serious eyesight condition called optic neuropathy, and my father passed away from brain cancer when I was 18. I arrived for college in the US a few months after my father's funeral.

To say that I was in a volatile position emotionally would be a huge understatement. I was irrationally passionate about some facets of my studies and totally unable to engage with others. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, and drifted from major to major for the first two years of college. I was seriously upset and confused about my father's passing, and to most of my peers, simply pretended that it hadn't happened. I often turned to drugs as an escape route.

Around this time, I became an avid follower of what Techcrunch was then depicting as the startup scene. Like many others, I'd been seduced by the dream upon which the tech-startup blogosphere was gaining incredible momentum. All we needed to do was learn to code, create an

app, and then sit back as the dollars rolled in. Right?

That Summer, my first passive income business, “even-harder.com”, began selling subscription recreational viagra to college students. I’m not joking. I had noticed that “viagra cocktails” were becoming the party-drink du jour within the frat crowd, and wanted to cash in on the trend. I built a truly horrible website in Adobe Dreamweaver, and sourced generic erectile dysfunction meds from India. It was probably illegal, of questionable ethicality and failed spectacularly within two months.

In 2009, slightly older, I tried again. By then, I’d taught myself enough PHP to build a crude Facebook app, and thusly ‘Strike a Match’ was born. Strike a Match was a dating app, where you could anonymously ‘strike’ Facebook friends that you had a crush on. Any mutual strikes would cause both strikers to be notified, and the identity of the person who liked you back would be revealed. The hope was that hanky-panky would then follow.

As a user, you could only strike five of your crushes, but additional strikes could be purchased for the reasonable sum of 20c each. To my bewilderment, I made \$4,392 selling strikes, before the app was castrated by Facebook’s casual and unannounced removal of a critical API endpoint.

In 2010 I entered the startup world as an entry-level programmer. I wasn’t very good. I worked first in California, where I one day accidentally wiped the production database, and then in New York. I did TechStars, and (regrettably) self-identified as a bro-grammer. Poised at my

always messy standing desk, I worked long hours, wrote javascript, and for the most part had a good time.

After two and a half years, now 24, I decided to take sabbatical from the startup I was working at. I was employee number two, and was in the frustrating position of being close enough to the top to feel like a founder, without having any real power, or equity. I felt that the startup wasn't going anywhere and that I couldn't do anything about it. I felt that my learning curve had flattened to a sluggish plateau. I was bored, and sensed that, at this rate, I wasn't going to fulfill the vision of who I wanted to be by age 30.

I enrolled in a masters at New York University. At grad school, I wanted to deepen my knowledge of Science and Philosophy, and through this, be stimulated to create my next software product. I also hoped to meet some women, who were scarce in the startup world.

Two weeks into my masters, I built a small codebase for a weekend homework assignment. I was struck by the thought that, maybe, this codebase had the potential to bring in some extra pocket money. I felt stupid doing it, but I spent the next two weeks sitting in my apartment in Brooklyn, building a simple website to sell the codebase as a service. When I deployed the site, I didn't announce it to anyone.

Ten months later, the codebase had evolved into a passive income source making me five figures a month. I was traveling the world with my girlfriend and spending less than

twenty minutes a day working. The dream had arrived.

But the ten months leading up to that moment were not easy. Some of the darkest and loneliest times of my life were spent building and marketing Followgen. I drank too much, isolated myself from my friends and fought too much with my girlfriend Stephanie. Equally, I'd never been so exhilarated and challenged, often bursting with an excitement for life that confused my friends.

When I entered 'maintenance mode' (the bit where you sit back and enjoy the revenue) I didn't always know what to do with myself. My few years in conventional workplaces had left their impression on me. Having a seemingly limitless supply of time and freedom often felt like cheating.

At the time of writing, I'm sitting in my late father's study in the house I grew up in, in London. I'm still running Followgen and I'm writing this book. I don't know what the future holds, but I'm extremely excited. The journey is just beginning.