

Door Close

by Jack Cheng

The buttons in the elevator of my office building are made of brushed steel. They are debossed with numbers and letters, and these indentations are coated with red enamel. Of the two dozen buttons arrayed on a panel along the wall, there is one that has been pressed more than any other, one button on which all the paint has worn away. It is the button that reads: DOOR CLOSE.

Unlike the DOOR OPEN button, which is pressed in an act of generosity, held for the hastily approaching footsteps of a stranger in the lobby, the DOOR CLOSE button comes with a less noble intent—we press it because we are in a hurry, because we want to narrow the window of opportunity for others to keep us from where we are going. We press it so we do not have to press DOOR OPEN. We press DOOR CLOSE repeatedly, with force, and there is perhaps no button which endures more abuse, incites more furor throughout the day that isn't connected to a glowing screen. No button is more emblematic of the culture we live in than DOOR CLOSE.

One might say that we lead busy, fast-paced lives, and the DOOR CLOSE button enables us to shave precious seconds off of our daily commutes, not unlike knowing where to stand on the subway platform to catch a train that will deposit us directly in front of the stairwell exiting closest to our home or office. Carried over the course of years, the seconds we salvage translate into hours of free time, better spent on more productive tasks. But where this logic falls apart is the time saved is increasingly squandered on tasks that are not necessarily more productive, like checking Facebook or playing Angry Birds. It's as if we're depositing money into the bank pennies at a time, thinking it will offset the twelve hundred dollars we've gotten used to blowing at the track every weekend.

The time-saving argument also implies that the act of pressing DOOR CLOSE is a considered act, when it is usually the opposite—a near spasm, a movement performed without thinking and immediately forgotten. DOOR CLOSE is subconscious, and it is underpinned by the same impulse that makes us so addicted to games like the aforementioned Angry Birds. The key to

Angry Birds' success is not the superb quality of the illustrations or the playfulness of the squawks made by rotund avifauna careening off fragile towers of ice, wood, and stone that topple to crush immobile porcine enemies. What makes Angry Birds successful is the fact that there are so many levels, and they are so easy to beat. A couple minutes, a few swipes of a finger, a little spatial reasoning, and we're on to the next one—909 stages in total at the time of this writing. We get ensnared in games like Angry Birds because they offer us clear goals achievable with a small amount of effort. They are designed to make us feel like we are making measurable progress, like we are getting to the end of something.

Similar achievements are omnipresent in our lives: the arrival at the office, a full coffee mug, an empty inbox, all levels of a morning routine. We also have a clear path to reach those ends: a reply link, a dispensing handle, a button that says DOOR CLOSE. They are the controls we manipulate to progress through the world, and there have never been more of them in our lives; never been more things within our command. There was a time when we were unable to see beyond what lands lay before our eyes, unable to travel faster than our legs would move. Now we can fly around the world in a sheer fraction of the generations it took for ancient peoples to traverse the continents. We can get there even faster via the Web, conjuring up videos and real-time updates from virtually anywhere in the world. Airplanes, YouTube, and Twitter all annihilate time and space, enable us to reach a destination quicker than before, kind of like a DOOR CLOSE button.

There is a certain kind of anxiety that comes from being accustomed to a world on-demand and at our fingertips. It reveals itself when we encounter an elevator whose DOOR CLOSE button does not immediately close the door. We become frustrated, thinking that perhaps the button has malfunctioned or worse—it never worked in the first place. We feel helpless, curse the elevator gods for their trickery! I have witnessed this anxiety, both in myself and others. I have friends who can't watch television shows as they air, because they are unwilling to be left hanging, unable to cope with inability to immediately satisfy the urge of "just one more episode." Instead they wait until the full season is available for download and then binge, devouring it in one

sitting. In a recent episode of the comedy show *Portlandia*, two characters are about to leave for a dinner party, when one of them suggests they watch the first episode of *Battlestar Galactica*.

They watch it, and then immediately watch a second, followed by a third, and so on. They miss the dinner party, get fired from their jobs, turn in recluses, and when they get to the final episode of the series, they still haven't had enough, so they track down a man in their city who has the same name as one of the show's creators and convince him to write one more for them.

Portlandia is observational humor taken to the extreme, but even as I describe it, I am realizing I have spent the past three nights staying up with a book on my Kindle, sacrificing hours of sleep and subsequent clarity of mind in part due to the progress meter at the bottom that tells me I am fifty-four percent of the way through. Several times I have told myself I could be savoring this book, would better absorb its lessons by reading it at a more leisurely pace. I plow through it regardless, because at this pace, I am two nights from finishing.

The ease at which we can download e-books or *Angry Birds* or a television series is only going to get easier, low-hanging fruit that becomes more abundant and lower-hanging with each season. By constantly going after these quick rewards, we develop a muscle memory for gratification with little effort. We become averse to climbing above the canopy of the foliage, where the fruits are more uncertain, but potentially more satisfying. Making a habit out of taking small achievements prevents us from asking whether they are the right achievements, whether they are the ends that are meant for us.

Another consequence of an increasingly on-demand world is that we have virtually eliminated waiting, or at least the ennui associated with it. Even when we're waiting to get to the end of something, we can spend that time progressing through other things. But often the most important changes in our lives spring out of such moments of repose, from having the time to reflect on a path we falsely believed we had desired, and abandoning it in favor of something with a fuzzier outcome. Leaving my job in advertising and later, starting my own company, were both decisions whose true rewards weren't evident until much after. Meaning is borne out of

uncertainty; it is the realization of an end or a goal we were not aware existed. Sometimes we climb to the top of the trees and discover that we're there not for the fruits, but for the view.

I've stopped pressing the DOOR CLOSE button in the elevator of my office building. Every once in a while, after a long day, I'll still find myself reaching for it. Then I'll remember why I stopped pressing it. I stopped because when I make a habit of getting to the end of things, I close myself off to the possibility of new beginnings. When ends are so easily reached, catching myself and leaving room for reflection and uncertainty is a small act of rebellion. It's an act that says I am here. I am open.