

# THIS IS STRATEGY

MAKE BETTER PLANS

SETH  
GODIN



# **THIS IS STRATEGY**

*Make Better Plans*

# **SETH GODIN**

 **AUTHORS  
EQUITY**

# Dedication

*Traction is progress.*

*Help others get to where they're going.*

*Big problems require small solutions.*

*The work is easier if you can see where you're headed.*

*Change creates tension.*

*Better is possible.*

# *Table of the Riffs*

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Dedication*

Introduction

1. Strategy is a Philosophy of Becoming
2. Four Threads, Woven Together
3. What Do People Want?
4. The Non-Strategy of “Take What You Can Get”
5. Awaiting Instructions
6. The Elegant Path is the Most Useful Way Forward
7. Not All Elegant Strategies are the Same
8. Systems are Unseen and Persistent
9. We Live in the Solar System
10. Systems Deliver Value
11. The Buildings or the Roads?
12. The Unseen Assistant (and the Mysterious Vandal)
13. Can You See the River?
14. The Collective
15. Successful Systems
16. Real Life Isn’t Lego
17. Two Myths About Systems
18. Built, Natural, and Complex Systems
19. What Makes a System?
20. The Persistence of Systems
21. From Fine China to Underwater Headphones
22. Duncan Hines (and Nina Zagat)
23. All Dogs are Mixed Breed Dogs
24. U.S. News Changed College

25. Where's the Meter?
26. Seeing (and Changing) the Chocolate System
27. Serious Games
28. There are Games in Every Strategy
29. We are All Time Travelers
30. Seeing Time
31. There is a Method
32. The Heartbreak of an Intuitive Strategy
33. Hiding from a Useful Strategy
34. Low-Hanging Fruit Isn't
35. Rome Was Built in a Day
36. One Telephone is Worthless
37. The Desert Island Mythologies
38. Cities are Contagious
39. Analyzing the Last Move
40. Strategy and Tactics
41. Toward a Strategic Practice
42. Project Work is Different
43. You Might Need a Strategy To
44. Slithering, With Patience
45. Plants Make People Happy
46. Seat Belts Save Lives
47. Airbnb was Lost
48. Twenty-Seven Egg Dishes
49. Esther Changed the World
50. Shine a Light
51. Big Problems Demand Small Solutions
52. "Getting the Word Out" (Also Known as "Selfish Shouting")
53. Use, Be Used, or Change It
54. Freedom is Possible
55. Getting Clear About the Business Model
56. And It Flies
57. Passion and Our Business Model
58. The Circle of Us and the Circle of Now
59. Selling Selfish
60. Next Guest, Best Guest

61. Seeing Strategy Clearly
62. A Blueprint is an Assertion
63. Sharing Your Strategy: The Modern Business Plan
64. Intuition is Strategy Without Narrative
65. The Thing About Effort
66. Resilience and Leverage
67. It Barely Works
68. The Minimum Viable Audience
69. And Then What Happens?
70. To Kill All the Whales
71. Not All Needs Have a Market (Yet).
72. Seeing the Windmill
73. Without a Strategy
74. Some Reasons We Avoid Having a Strategy
75. A Framework for a Strategy
76. Creating the Conditions for Change
77. Twelve Slogans
78. Unseen Systems and Unintended Consequences
79. We are Not Plankton
80. Strategic Marketing
81. No Time to Waste
82. Strategy and Aimlessness
83. “Should” Might Be a Trap
84. Where is the Blueprint?
85. Sooner or Later
86. Strategy is the Partner of Freedom
87. The Lottery is Not a Strategy
88. Nostalgia for the Future
89. Doing Our Job or Doing Our Work?
90. Tension First and Above All
91. The Fastest Cyclist in the World
92. When Did Apple Become Apple?
93. When Did Netflix Become Netflix?
94. When Did David Bowie Become David Bowie?
95. What’s Your Strategy?
96. What Does It Mean to Be a Strategic Thinker?

97. Tactics are Not Strategies
98. What's a Feedback Loop?
99. Time Isn't Free
100. Avoiding Hindsight Bias
101. Not the Parts, the System
102. Thinking About 'Status'
103. Seeing Status in Hollywood
104. The Output of Systems
105. Our Intent is Altered by the System We're Part of
106. The Birth of Afya
107. Perpetuating the Scam
108. Toxic Systems
109. The Urgency of "No"
110. On Being Judged
111. Choose Your Customers and Choose Your Future.
112. Choose Your Competition and Choose Your Future
113. Choose the Source of Validation and Choose Your Future
114. Choose Your Distribution and Choose Your Future
115. News, Ideas, and Distribution Changes
116. "Everyone" is Elusive
117. What Do You Want?
118. What Does It Want?
119. The Runaway Conditions
120. Things That Scale
121. Working for the System
122. Who is in Charge?
123. Snapshots and Movies
124. The Day I Met Derek Sivers
125. The Emperor Penguins, Crowds and Fear
126. If You Want to Start a Fire
127. The Five Steps to Widespread Change
128. Sand Hill Road
129. 100 is a Fine Way to Start
130. Failing to Change the Donation Dynamic
131. Shun the Non-Believers
132. Understanding Adopters

133. Time is the Overlooked Axis
134. Getting Comfortable With a Series of Snapshots
135. Embrace the Gulf of Disapproval
136. Deterministic Nonperiodic Flow Proves the Point
137. Chasing the Hype Cycle
138. Seeing the Chasm
139. The Need for Scaffolding
140. Scaffolding and Marketing
141. The Catch-22 of Leveraged Systems
142. Treating Different People Differently
143. Shifting to the Masses
144. Misunderstanding Quality
145. The Challenge in Finding Useful Criticism
146. Being Clear About “Better”
147. What We Ask Ourselves When It’s Our Turn on the Curve
148. Short-Term and Long-Term Games
149. Infinite or Finite?
150. Scarcity or Abundance?
151. Dominance or Affiliation?
152. Paying It Forward Vs. Paying It Back
153. Maintenance, Substitution, or Possibility?
154. Games of Skill, Luck and Privilege
155. Games With Divergent Objectives
156. Mutual Enrollment and Complex Games
157. Don’t Bet on Games You Can’t Win
158. All of Our Strategies are All of Our Strategies
159. Grabbing the Last Doughnut
160. Systems Thrive, and Then They Don’t
161. To Get to New York
162. If It Fits, You Can Ship It
163. Feeding the System
164. Scarcity and the Drivers of a System
165. Scale and Magic
166. How NPR Lost to the Podcast
167. Self-Interest is Self-Evident
168. It’s Easy to Avoid the Most Important Part of Our Job



169. It's Voluntary
170. "I Will If You Will"
171. Bringing Strategy to Marketing
172. Living in a Van
173. Acorns Sometimes Become Oak Trees
174. Systems Have Multiple Objectives
175. One Way to Solve the Problem is to Change the System
176. Interoperability
177. What Does the System Respond To?
178. The Paradox of Substitutes and Uniqueness
179. Commodities
180. Understanding Genre
181. Medium Vs. Message
182. Thoughts on Pricing
183. Strategies Require Empathy
184. Dorothy and Her Crew
185. Everyone is Always Right
186. All Persistent Systems Rely on Feedback Loops
187. The Wildcard in Every Feedback Loop is the Delay
188. Systems + Games + Feedback Loops
189. Embracing Constraints
190. Who Benefits?
191. Six System Traps
192. The Moses Manipulations
193. Resilient Systems Stick Around
194. Trying to Turn Me Into an Addict
195. The Challenge of False Proxies
196. We See Systems When They are Forced to Change
197. May I See the Org Chart?
198. The Agent of Change
199. Looking for the Agent of Change
200. The Telegraph and the Skyscraper
201. Cheese Bullies
202. A Brief History of Jaywalking
203. What Will I Tell the Others?
204. Who Says Yes?

205. If You Want to Use the System
206. The Person in Front of You is Part of a System
207. Some of the Ways That Systems Operate
208. Types of Elegant Strategies
209. Bringing Change to a System
210. Luck Doesn't Even Out in the Long Run
211. Leverage and the Exaggeration of Strategies
212. Intent and Side Effects
213. Turbulence and Systems Transformation
214. Gatekeepers
215. Kinds of Tension
216. "What Will I Tell the Others?"
217. Two Tesla Parables: Ludicrous and the Clown Car
218. Competitive Advantage
219. Metcalfe's Law is Waiting for You
220. The First Rule...
221. Do Vs. Want
222. Exchanging the System is Tempting
223. Revolutions are Rare
224. The Game Belongs to the Children Who Play It
225. The Two Unseen Desires
226. The Thing About Cheaper
227. Compounding Our Tribal Instincts
228. Substitutes and the Race to the Bottom
229. Seeking the Invisible Hand
230. Examples of Systems Living in Tension
231. Which Hat?
232. The Weather Report is a Prediction
233. This Might Not Work
234. Back to the Rhino
235. Who Controls the Dice?
236. Who is Waiting for You at the Airport?
237. Understanding Statistics and Polls
238. Best Practices and the Status Quo
239. Analogies and the Problem With "Almost"
240. Cheerleaders and Coaches

241. Collapsing to the Center
242. Understanding the 2 x 2 Positioning Grid
243. The Blank of Blank
244. Moving to the Middle (or Not)
245. Going to Places the Competition Can't Go or Won't Go
246. Where is Everyone?
247. Getting the Word Out
248. Scaling Better
249. Half a Boat Isn't Much Help
250. Thrashing at the Start
251. The Last Minute
252. Every Yes Requires Many No's
253. Empathy for the Retailer
254. Bringing Intention to Projects
255. Successful Projects
256. The Three Project Traps
257. Communication With Intent
258. Risks Aren't to Be Avoided
259. Constraints are a Gift
260. What Do You Make?
261. Problems are Opportunities
262. The Simple Hierarchy of Decision Effort
263. Optionality and Undo
264. Great Choice, Didn't Work
265. Hidden Decisions Get Moldy
266. Compared to What?
267. A Quarter of a Million Dollars
268. Thinking About Money
269. No Regrets and the Kinds of Games We Play
270. Why is It Hard to Talk About Decisions?
271. Bad Luck Paralysis
272. Survivors are Noteworthy
273. The Regression Toward the Mean
274. Better Decisions and Better Outcomes
275. Not Making a Decision is the Easy Path
276. Assets are Tools

277. Assets Over Time
278. What Sort of Hammer Should You Buy?
279. Community Action
280. The Man Who Poisoned Us All
281. The Enduring Myth of Widespread Self-Control
282. Bringing a Strategic Approach to the Most Urgent System Change of Our Lifetimes
283. Helping the Market Fix What the Market Broke
284. Harnessing the Insatiable
285. The Action We Take
286. Indoctrination is Real
287. The Journey, Not an Event
288. Constant Pressure and Chiseling
289. Coordination Failure
290. Asynchronicity is a Superpower
291. Ignoring Sunk Costs: A Simple But Uncomfortable Idea
292. What Does “Wrong” Mean?
293. Tomorrow is Another Opportunity
294. Ignore Sunk Clowns
295. What to Wear on Wednesday?
296. People Like Us
297. Questions That Lead to Strategies
298. Acknowledgments

*Some Other Books by Seth Godin*

*Bookstores Matter*

*Copyright*

*About the Publisher*

## Introduction

Charles Wilson has a problem. He's one of the great pianists of his generation, inspiring people as he performs around the world. As the sole artist, composer, impresario, fan manager, COO and entrepreneur behind the persona of BLKBOK, he has too many options and not enough time. Being dedicated and skilled isn't enough—he needs to figure out how to increase his impact, build a sustainable career and not burn out along the way.

The Secretary of State has a problem as well. The US State Department is one of the largest organizations in the world, with countless staff and a huge budget. How to put them to work to make the desired impact in more than 150 countries?

Kristin Hatcher is doing essential work to deal with sexual violence, particularly on college campuses. While the urgency of her cause is clear, finding the traction to raise money and put it to work is an ongoing challenge, far more difficult than it should be.

Jesse Cole, founder and owner of the Savannah Bananas, had a problem. His remarkable idea was constrained by an existing system. Now, he is finding ever more success in bringing his wacky baseball jamboree to stadiums across the country. He recently made important decisions that freed the team from where they were stuck, and the options in front of them are multiplying.

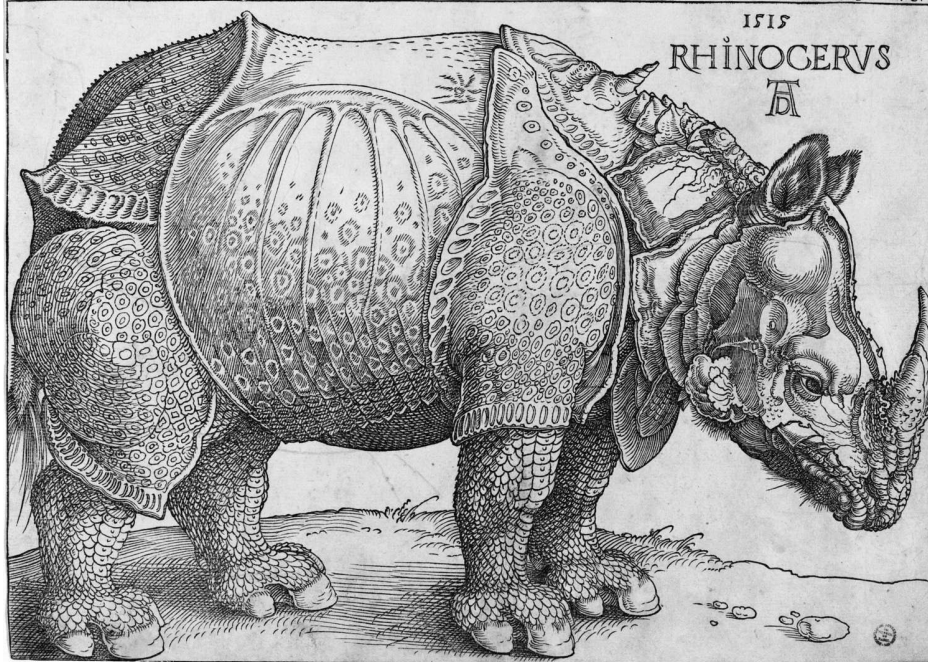
When organizations large and small ask me about marketing problems, I often respond by saying, “you probably need a strategy first.” But what's that? Strategy is difficult to see and not easy to talk about, because it happens over time.

To find a better strategy, we need to be prepared to walk away from the one we've defaulted into. When technology shifted, Nintendo stopped making playing cards and built a video game company. And yet, when the telephone arrived, Western Union decided to simply make better telegrams.

The world is shifting, faster than ever, creating opportunities and problems every day. This is our chance to make a better plan and to create a bigger impact with our work. This is strategy.

Perhaps you can't see it (yet).

1515  
 Tach Christus gepurt. 1513. Jar. 26. i. May. Hat man den großmichtigen Kunig von Portugall Emanuel gen Lysabona pracht auß India ein sollich lebendig Thier. Das nennet sie Rhinocerus. Das ist hie mit aller seiner geseit als abonderste. Es hat ein fard wie ein gepueckete Schildbrot. Und ist so dicken Schalen vberlegt siss ist. Und ist in der groß als der selbende Aber nydertricker von paynen/ vnd siss wech afftig. Es hat ein scharff starck Horn von auff der nafen/ Das beghynde es alse zu wegen wo es bey flaynen ist. Das dossilg Thier ist des selbde fang to de fynde. Der selbende fucht es siss vber/ dann wo es In antumbe/ so laufft In das Thier mit dem kopff zwischen bye sordem payn/ vnd reyt den selbende vnden am pauch auff vil erdrege. In/ des mag er sich mit creuen. Dann das Thier ist also gewapent/ das In der selbende nichts kan thun. Sie sagen auch das der Rhinocerus Schndt/ Straydig vnd Listig sey.



Most books on strategy are for corporate MBAs or West Point generals.

This is for you. For someone who wants to make things better.

My narrative is recursive and elliptical, circling back on itself as it seeks to help you see how time, games, systems, and empathy dance together to make our world. And once you see it, you can't unsee it.

About five hundred years ago, Albrecht Dürer made a poster of a rhinoceros, a creature that almost no one in Europe had ever seen in person. Each detail is finely rendered, but not quite right. But if you look at it for a while, the essence of a rhino comes through.

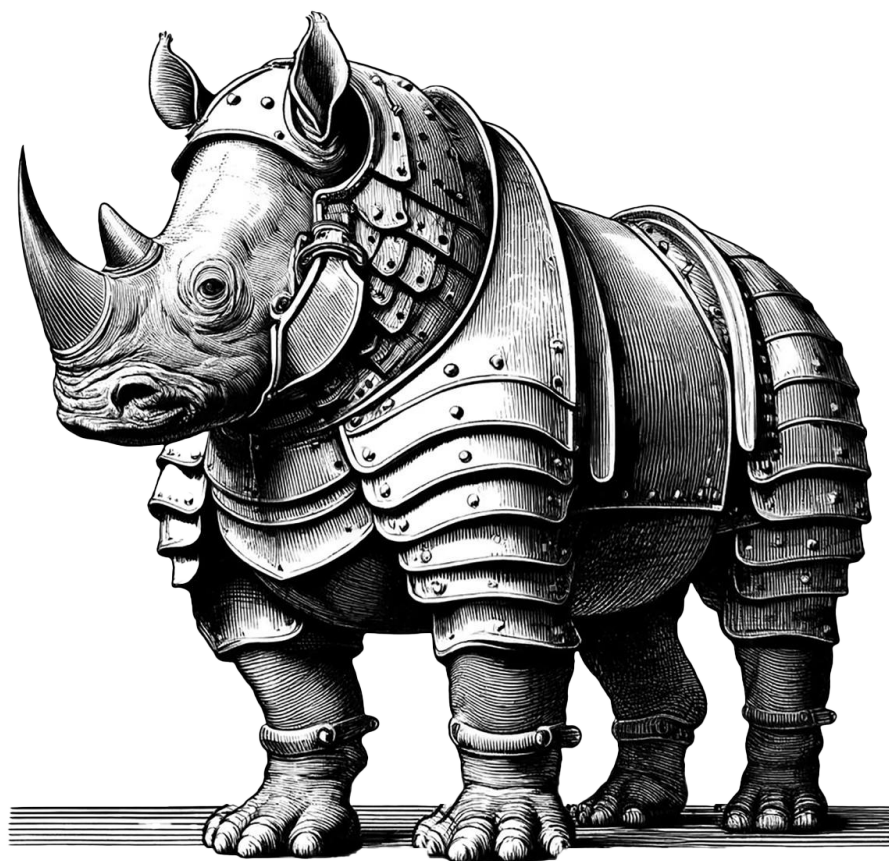
Strategy is often an unseen option, apparently too sophisticated, expensive, or elitist for most of us. But once we see it, our next steps become clear. We have what we need to make better plans.

Strategy is the soil, the seed, and the gardener working together over time. Strategy is our chance to make an impact.

As you work through this manifesto, it's okay to skip the parts that don't resonate (yet). Jump ahead, then loop back.

Stick with it. Discuss the parts that don't match what you're doing right now, and more importantly, the parts you don't want to be true.

Thanks for doing the work.



*How to Use This Book: Find the others and ask the questions*

I've workshopped the ideas in this book with people around the world, and we've discovered two simple ways to transform your relationship with strategy.

The first: Find three or four other people and start a group, in person or in Zoom. Meet once a week and make assertions, highlighting your fears and sharing your path. Surprisingly quickly, you'll notice that you're shifting your strategy.

The second: Use the questions, lists, and challenges in this book as prompts for claude.ai. Claude is a powerful AI that can take your prompt and personalize it for your project, challenging you to think about strategy in new ways.

Every riff here is numbered, to make it easy to refer to sections worth discussing, regardless of what format your colleagues are using to engage with the book.

The system is always changing. It's up to us to change it for the better.

## 1. Strategy is a Philosophy of Becoming

*Who will we become,  
who will we be of service to,  
and who will they help others to become*  
This is strategy.

A strategy isn't a map—it's a compass. Strategy is a better plan.

It's the hard work of choosing what to do today to make tomorrow better.

This is the point. This is at the heart of our work and the challenge of our days.

Toward better.



## **2. Four Threads, Woven Together**

Time, games, empathy and systems. They're everywhere we look, and easy to ignore.

Each supports and is supported by the other three. Throughout this project, we'll be shifting from one to the other, building up to a fuller, actionable understanding of how strategy works.

Time, because strategy plays out over time in the way a garden grows.

Games, because there are multiple players and different possible outcomes. Trees compete for light and only one grows to be the tallest, but all of them are part of the forest.

Empathy, because people don't see what you see or even want what you want. Plant your seeds in places where the conditions are right.

And Systems, because whenever we work together, a system is created. And that system often lasts far longer than we expect. The swamp isn't the same as the plains, but each is a complex web of interactions.

Each builds on the next in a never-ending braid.

### 3. What Do People Want?

Once our basic needs for food, shelter and health are met, most people dance with three conflicting desires:

- Affiliation
- Status
- Freedom from fear

(We can probably add joy, wonder, thrills, satisfaction and other internal narratives, but for now let's focus on these three.)

Affiliation is community. Fitting in. Being liked. Affiliation is wearing the right fashion, using the correct salad fork and knowing the words to the song around the campfire.

Status is always relative. Who eats lunch first? Who's up and who's down?

And freedom from fear is an internal construct. Fear can be used as fuel, but it's more likely to be avoided.

Marketing works on these three principles. And systems all use them to maintain their structure.

If you want to understand why someone makes a choice, look for what people actually want, not only the proxies and substitutes they say they want.

#### **4. The Non-Strategy of “Take What You Can Get”**

“You can pick anyone. I’m anyone.”

Hustle for attention. Do a very good job. Play it safe and follow the leader.

This is a non-strategy. The non-strategy of doing what we were told, of fitting in and settling. This is the non-strategy that comes from not thinking about strategy.

The number on the car’s speedometer isn’t always an indication of how fast you’re getting to where you’re going.

You might, after all, be driving in circles, really quickly.

We can do better.

I can’t tell you what your strategy should be, but I know that you need one.

## 5. Awaiting Instructions

“What happens next?” is a different question from, “What will I do now?”

The easy out is to simply react to events and follow the checklist. Our freedom and agency demand we take a different path, though. Our work begins by finding a strategy and creating a different future.

There are choices to be made.

Stay put or move to another town... Stick around the firm to make partner or start your own practice... List your work on Upwork or Etsy or build your own store... put your music on vinyl or Spotify... raise your prices or lower them... open a new store or close the wholesale division... Go to a famous college at great expense or get a great education at a state school... have a traditional wedding or elope... start a blog or a podcast... Merge with a competitor or sell the business.

Too many choices, too many options.

Confronted with so much choice, it's tempting to just do your job. To pretend that it's up to someone else, and to put your head down and follow instructions.

Don't surrender your agency and revert to the numbing day-to-day grind of compliance. You can make things better.