

Starbucking

Chapter Two

Can It Be All So Simple

“There's so much we won't understand”

Even before my Starbucking project began to receive media attention, the most common response when I told others that I was trying to visit every Starbucks in the world was...

Why?

Once the media caught wind, I answered the “why” question over and over—in print, on the radio, on TV—and my answer was typically some variation of “to do something different”. Initially I did not mind the question, because I was excited that my quest was finally garnering some attention, but it did not take long for my background in philosophy began to assert itself, and I attempted to answer the question in a more sophisticated manner. Alas, that was not what most media were looking for, not in articles that could be as short as a handful of paragraphs, or news segments in the three-minute length, and I had to play along and stick to short, snappy answers.

Tis the nature of most TV and radio interviews, and to a lesser extent articles in newspapers, and some magazines, that they will not cover a story about an extreme hobbyist with much depth. When these journalists ask “why”, they are not seeking an in-depth exploration of the causal chain that led to my decision to attempt the monumentally challenging project dubbed Starbucking. Heck, I would guess that the odds of even slipping the words “causal chain” into this type of interview would have been slim, had I even tried. I recognised this early on and stuck to the sound-bite answers, but if I had ever been allowed sufficient time, I would have answered the question of “why” by starting at the beginning.

Coffee is a brewed drink prepared from roasted coffee beans, the seeds of berries from certain *Coffea* species. When coffee berries turn from green to bright red in color – indicating ripeness – they are picked, processed, and dried. Dried coffee seeds (referred to as "beans") are roasted to...

Wait, no—I might have gone *too* far back.

Let us flash forward a few centuries and begin this origin story with the surprising fact that I did not taste even a drop of coffee until the age of twenty-one! I am pretty sure that by the time I was in high school, some of my classmates were already enjoying the bean, but my parents never offered, and I

never thought to ask. Years earlier, while hanging out with a friend at a neighbour's home, I noticed his father with a cup of coffee, and I asked for some. His was that “children don't drink coffee,” and I never thought about trying some joe again for over a decade, during my third year in college.

Hard to say why I finally decided to pop into Captain Quackenbush's one night. I suspect it was just a whim, like when, two years earlier, I randomly decided to pop into a 7-11 and purchase a pack of Marlboro cigarettes—sometimes I just decide to try something new. Of course, I had passed by Quack's many times before, because the coffeehouse sits on Austin's famous Drag, the portion of Guadalupe Street that sits across from the University of Texas. Only that night, in the fall of 1993, I decided to do my studying from the cafe, ordered a café au lait and snack, and in an instant I became a coffee drinker.

A year and a half later, I headed down to Houston to hang out with a high school friend, and after playing a few rounds at a Slick Willie's, a decades-old pool hall that my father used to visit (and the same place where I had my first drink, at the age of twenty-one), Jeremy and I decided to find a place to play a few games of chess. We drove down Westheimer, Houston's primary arterial, looking for a coffeehouse, and I spotted that iconic green logo for the first time and decided to see if they had any tables suitable for a chessboard.

The date was Thursday, March 16, 1995, and was the night that I entered a Starbucks Coffee for the first time.

My drink of choice was still the café au lait that I'd become accustomed to at Quackenbush's, but because one of the geniuses of Starbucks is their subtle marketing, they had a different name for the beverage—Caffè Misto. For Jeremy, just regular coffee, and after adding a ridiculous amount of sugar to mine (“do you want some coffee with that sugar”, he would ask), we sat down for a few games.

Something about that Starbucks cafe appealed to me—they were clearly doing something right to have reached several hundred stores by the mid-90s. The next time I met Jeremy for chess, we headed straight back to Starbucks, and the only reason that I did not become a regular right away was that Starbucks had only just entered the Texas market in the fall of 1994, and only a few locations existed between Houston, Austin, and Dallas. I was still at school in Austin until May, then abroad to visit family in Panamá, so I did not encounter Starbucks again until later that summer.

When I returned from Panamá, I moved to Plano (a suburb of Dallas) to work for a medium-sized software company, Macromedia (still known for the now-defunct Flash and, by some, Fontographer). Their office was in nearby Richardson, and I soon grew into the habit of stopping every morning at the Starbucks attached to the Barnes & Noble in east Plano, and sometimes popping over during lunch for an afternoon coffee. Later that year, the Barnes & Noble Cafe (*not a Starbucks*, but merely serving Starbucks coffee) on the west side of Plano was converted into a proper Starbucks cafe. This location was just five minutes from my apartment and would quickly become my Third Place, *just as Starbucks intended*.

Although the term *Third Place* was coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place*, the concept existed long before that, and well before Starbucks. What Starbucks did, as described by former CEO Howard Schultz in his 1997 book *Pour Your Heart Into It*, was to bring the idea of coffeehouse as third place to mainstream America (and later the rest of the world). This Third Place concept, describing a place that is neither home nor work, immediately appealed to me in the months after I had graduated from college and left the community of the dorm to move to a new city where I knew no one except my coworkers.

Within a matter of weeks, that (now defunct) Starbucks, on the northwest corner of Park Blvd and Preston Rd, became my regular nighttime hangout. At first I would just sit and read, and later, upon purchasing my first laptop, I would sit and work, but it was not until I began to meet other regulars that the Third Place experience truly blossomed for me. First one friend, then another, and another—after a few years there were nights when a dozen of us would be hanging out on the patio until closing, then those of us who remained would go off to IHOP or Denny's and hang until the early morning.

Over the course of two years, my relationship with Starbucks evolved. The company was no longer merely my third place, but in truth, my love for the Starbucks and its coffee (yes, there was a time when I actually *enjoyed* drinking Starbucks) began to define me. All who knew me—family, coworkers, friends and acquaintances—soon learned that Starbucks was my preferred coffee, so much so that I'd go to great lengths to get my fix. I have memories of driving 90-100 MPH up I-35 from Austin to Plano (in the days before smaller cities along that corridor merited a Starbucks) to get my fix before my local store closed, then getting into an argument with the shift supervisor because she refused to serve me even though I was only a few minutes late (Starbucks has something called a 10-minute rule, although it has never been clear to what extent it is followed by all stores). Another time, I was on a date down in Dallas, and after I dinner we pulled up to the nearest Starbucks, but it happened to be closed, so I knocked furiously on the window and held up a twenty-dollar bill for the barista, who agreed to an espresso shot for me.

My passion for Starbucks was so extreme that when a second Starbucks opened at the intersection of Park & Preston (one of the busiest in all of Dallas/Forth Worth), and I noticed a newish apartment complex behind the parking lot, just a few minute's walking distance, I actually *moved to that complex* so that could walk to the cafe.

That Starbucks, in the Preston Park Village retail plaza, would soon become historic. The cafe immediately became my daytime hangout (in part because I had a crush on one of the baristas, who would soon be fired for stealing), and by that time, the summer of 1997, I was doing a significant portion of my work remotely.

At the same time, Starbucks had begun to expand at an accelerating rate. At the beginning of the decade, the company had fewer than 100 stores, and a half-decade later (when I discovered the company), they crossed the 500-store threshold. Two years later, the company had tripled in size, with new Starbucks popping up in the Dallas/Fort Worth market every few months, and it was exactly that aggressive expansion that triggered my idea to try and visit every store.

That historic Preston Park Village Starbucks opened on Saturday, May 17th, 1997, and by mid-August I was already Starbucking, which means that sometime in that three-month window was the day that I was hanging out at the store, chatting with the baristas about this or that new Starbucks that I had encountered. I was already in the habit of seeing any new Starbucks that I happened to discover, and that afternoon I asked if they knew how many Starbucks cafes existed. One of the partners reached under the counter and pulled out a folder, found some document, and gave me a number that was just under 1500 stores.

Just like that, a light bulb went off in my head.

Although the date that Starbucking was conceived will forever be lost to history, I am confident that the idea began as a simple question to those baristas--*would it be possible to visit every Starbucks in the*

world?

My memories of that day are fuzzy, but I'm pretty sure that the two baristas chuckled, initially with disbelief, but then I said something like “1500 seems doable”, and they nodded and agreed that the task was by no means impossible. When I walked out of that Starbucks later in the day, the idea that would later be called Starbucking was cemented in my mind—of that, I have no doubt. I was not yet *committed to pursuing the project*, however—as I explained in the previous chapter, the idea remained a “maybe” until that first road trip, when I discovered how immensely enjoyable Starbucking would prove to be.

Returning to the eternal question, “why are you Starbucking”, the comprehensive description that I just laid out only explains the inception of the idea but does not actually answer the question of why I, *and I of all people*, pursued and continue to pursue the project. The idea to visit every location of anything, whether Starbucks or some other business, national parks or museums, could have occurred to any person, and if I had to guess, I would say that sometimes in the 1990s, before my project even received any publicity, *someone* in the country had the passing notion to visit every Starbucks but immediately dismissed the idea as fanciful, meaningless, or too difficult.

Once you understand that, the question, “why”, becomes more interesting if we reframe it as “why did Winter, of all people, choose to pursue Starbucking?”

The answer is fairly easily explained by my personality, at least to those who have known me for a long time—some have said that Starbucking sounds *exactly* like something Winter would do. As a young child, I would make up songs (my older cousins still remember, and sing them back to me), and in elementary school I would claim that I was hatched from an egg. I have always sought out attention, and in a 2004 interview with *The Washington Post Magazine*, I speculated that I did not receive enough love as a child, an admittedly inartful statement that ruffled some feathers among members of my family. In truth, no matter how much love, or attention, I received, I always wanted more, and that need largely explains why I would pursue a unique project.

Attention-seeking does not fully explain why Starbucking *specifically*, because humans can seek attention in all sorts of ways—attire, material success, exceptional performance in business, arts, sports, or the like. When seeking to stand out, most humans stick to already trodden paths, but I have always sought out the road not taken, not only to attract attention, but also because I have an undying need to experience new things.

A clear example of my passion for the new can be found in my two decades as a competitive Scrabble player. Over the last eighteen years, I have managed to achieve a #12 ranking in North America, place fifth at the North American Scrabble Championship, win the Word Cup, and cash at various international competitions. Despite these achievements, I have always sought to push the boundaries of Scrabble into new areas. I invented a new sport dubbed Sprint Scrabble, which requires each player to run a lap before making their play, and later I would devise a novel rating system that used fruits and vegetables to indicate rating, rather than a numerical value. It is a basic part of my nature to seek out the new, and that serves to explain why I immediately gravitated to Starbucking rather than some other pursuit.

One more aspect of my personality, my collecting instinct, offers an additional reason why I pursued Starbucking, rather than dismissing the idea like an ordinary person (*There's nothing worse in life than being ordinary.*) Once I reached the age at which I had an understanding that my possessions, like toys

or cards, existed as a series, I quickly developed an instinct to try and collect them all—trading cards, Transformers toys, coins, stamps, books, and even, for a brief spell, IZOD polo shirts in as many colours as my mother would purchase. My primary collectible, and the only one that lasted for any length of time—over three decades—were comic books. In the summer of 1983, my parents moved the family from southwest Houston to Missouri City, TX, to a subdivision named Quail Run, where a 7-11 convenience store sat at its entrance. One afternoon I rode up to the store, noticed *Peter Parker, The Spectacular Spider-Man #82*, and purchased it on a whim (similarly to how I would try cigarettes a decade later, then coffee a few years after that), and it wasn't long before my life revolved around collecting comic books.

At the peak of my collecting, before I began to sell them off, I amassed around 20,000 books, many of which I had never even read. While I did enjoy the stories and the artwork, my underlying drive was first and foremost to collect them all. In fact, I used to have dreams of owning a large house that would host a complete collection of all the Marvel and DC comics (unrealistically expensive, I know), but the itinerant contractor lifestyle that I adopted in the late 90s made it clear a large collection would no longer be feasible. I anticipated that my parents would sell the house in Houston, possibly move overseas, and I slowly began to rid myself of a part of my life that had once consumed much of my existence. By that point, though, the focus of my collecting instinct had shifted to Starbucking, and I hardly missed the comics.

Essentially what happened during my first decade of Starbucking is that I substituted collecting the cafes, a hobby that had no space constraints, for the comic books, which required too much space to be compatible with a nomadic lifestyle. Just as with the comics, my goal was to collect them all, and I had rules about which stores counted, just as comic book collectors have rules (for example, only collecting first printings).

Once you understand that the collecting instinct acts as the impetus for my Starbucking, the “why” of certain aspects of my project become clear. If I were merely driven to make a global name for myself, I could simply claim to be trying to visit every Starbucks, achieve a high number, but skip stores that proved inconveniently expensive, time-consuming, or troublesome. Or I could pursue projects like that of comedian Mark Malkoff, who in 2007 attempted to visit all 171 company-owned and accessible Starbucks in New York in twenty-four hours. None of those options would satisfy my collecting instinct however, and just as with Pokémon, I gotta catch 'em all!

So, here we are—the inception of Starbucking arose from a causal chain of events dating back to my college years, and I was driven to pursue the idea because I seek to stand out, I need newness, and I possess a collecting instinct. Those are the long answers to the “why” question, but those answers are *still limited*—they do not cover the full four-dimensional phase space of Starbucking. To *fully* understand the “why” of my Starbucking project, one must examine my motivations and frame of mind *over time*.

In the introductory chapter of this book I explain that even after dreaming up Starbucking and hunting down local stores in Texas, I was not yet committed, not until I discovered the joys of traveling cross-country the following summer, and the amazing challenge of locating large numbers of stores, in the era before an online store locator and maps. As I continued Starbucking, I began to discover new reasons to enjoy my project. In 1999, I went Starbucking in Canada for the first time, and all of a sudden the excitement that I had discovered in road tripping around the United States took a whole new element, that of learning how another country worked. Later that year, I went Starbucking in the United Kingdom, and that experience was an order of magnitude more interesting and exciting than Canada.

Later that same year, I began to photograph the Starbucks that I visited (something that I should have been doing from the beginning), and I rediscovered a passion for photograph that had begun during high school, when my father gave me his old Canon A-1 camera. I was immediately fascinated with photography to the point of annoying my classmates with my incessant clicking, and I was fortunate to have already begun interning for Exxon and had money to spend on film and processing. I upgraded to a newer camera in college and put my efforts into photographs for dorm periodicals and yearbooks, yet despite my zeal, once I graduated, I never touched that camera again. To this day I cannot understand why I stopped, nor why I spent my first two years of Starbucking without ever thinking to snap any pictures.

A short time after I began photographing, I created a website, coded the HTML myself, and that introduced a whole new aspect to Starbucking. Two years later, I began to receive media attention that drove traffic to my website, and I soon began to receive emails from Starbucks fans from around the globe, and my identity as “the Starbucks guy” began to take shape, which fed into my lifelong desire to stand out.

Around the same time, in the mid-aughts, Starbucks' growth rate had accelerated to the point at which Starbucking was not only challenging, but phenomenally difficult, and my road trips around the country began to feel like I was solving a classic computer programming challenge known as the Traveling Salesman Problem. Most people would have been deterred by the difficulty, but for me, the harder Starbucking got, the more exciting the project became, and the greater the sense of accomplishment.

Similarly, as Starbucks expanded to ten countries, then twenty, then fifty (now more than eighty), not only did I face the immensely-enjoyable challenge of figuring out how I would ever travel to all these places in my lifetime, but I also enjoyed the experience of discovering completely new parts of the world—the endless discovery fed into my need to experience new things.

The bottom line is that there was never *one* “why” of Starbucking, not at the beginning, and not over time. From the beginning, Starbucking was so expansive, so grand in scope, that the act of pursuing the project gave me a nonstop stream of reasons to continue my adventures.

The answer to the question of “why” was, from the beginning, multifaceted, and that is why the question, asked by countless journalists over the decades, has always been frustrating. I have always wanted to give a comprehensive answer, and even when the journalist allowed this, the end-product would often cut out any detail or depth. It was obvious to me that most of them wanted a superficial answer, but can it be all so simple? Not in my opinion, and even as I restrained myself, my desire was always to answer the question philosophically.

If you were to scroll through the comments on the articles, videos, and the documentary, that have been published about Starbucking over the decades, you would notice a pair of recurring comment that pops up almost as much as the “why” question—“Starbucking is pointless” and “he is wasting his life.”

You see, Starbucking is a Rorschach test. People see what they want to see in Starbucking—some see it as art, some as collecting, some as a compulsion, while others immediately dismiss it as a pointless waste of time. From a philosophical perspective, these comments serve as catalysts for a deeper exploration of Starbucking, because they get to the heart of a question central to philosophy, one tackled by early philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, more recent thinkers like Nietzsche, and

generally speaking, any student of philosophy.

The moment that somebody says “Starbucking is pointless”, I have the opportunity to turn around and ask that person to point to any human activity that *is not* pointless. I have made that observation in a number of interviews, and upon hearing this, many people are incredulous and immediately answer that activities like raising children or working are clearly *not* pointless. If, however, you were to ask the average person to justify, rationally, why working or having children are not pointless, that person would struggle to do so.

Sure, having children is absolutely a meaningful act when placed in the context of the basic human instinct to reproduce, but when you look at the act from a universal perspective, what exactly is the meaning of one's individual decision to have a child? Similarly, look at most jobs that people around the world have—is there truly a universally meaningful reason that they should be spending their time in that way, and not doing something else?

To be perfectly clear, I am not arguing—have never argued—that Starbucking *is* meaningful. Instead, my longtime assertion is that it is difficult to argue that Starbucking is any less meaningful than most other activities.

Why does anybody do anything?

In this chapter, I have described how the idea of Starbucking came to be, and why, on a basic psychological level, I chose to pursue the idea and continue to pursue it, but I find the question, still unanswered, of whether Starbucking has any meaning to be much more interesting. My comments in this chapter have barely scratched the surface of the discussion that could be had about the meaning of Starbucks, the good life and aesthetics, to list a few philosophical topics that could arise when we probe more deeply than your average local TV news reporter.

Later in this book, I will tackle the question of meaning again, hopefully adding some context to Starbucking, but for now, I've said all that I needed to say about “why”.