

Man, The List Maker

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How important are lists to humankind? No less important than being uniquely responsible for the progress of civilization.

Think about it. Back in the cave man days, men left the cave each day and were able to function only because they had a short mental list: locate food, collect water, avoid predators, and, if convenient, bathe and pick flowers for mate.

As life became more complex, the mental list wasn't enough, so men had to carry a clay tablet on which to scratch their list, which gave them the pleasure of crossing off items as they were completed. List making was thus responsible for the next great milestone: the early development of written language. (Here's a little-known fact: museums always display cave man figures with their knees slightly bent, arms out, eyes darting about, with a distressed expression. This is not someone being harried by predators, but clearly a man who has lost his list.)

Men advanced civilization again by realizing that they could maintain both short-term (make spear, hunt boar, find tree to escape from charging boar) and long-term (domesticate dog, explore Europe, dump the nomadic thing and start farming) lists.

Which brings us to modern times, in which we have come full circle, as men once again carry tablets (called PDAs) on which they continually update their lists. As powerful and successful an achievement as list making is, however, there are some items (learn to ask for directions, remember mate's birthday) which have been on man's list for centuries and are, sadly, not yet crossed off.