4 Simple Lessons

Artists Can Learn from Software Engineering
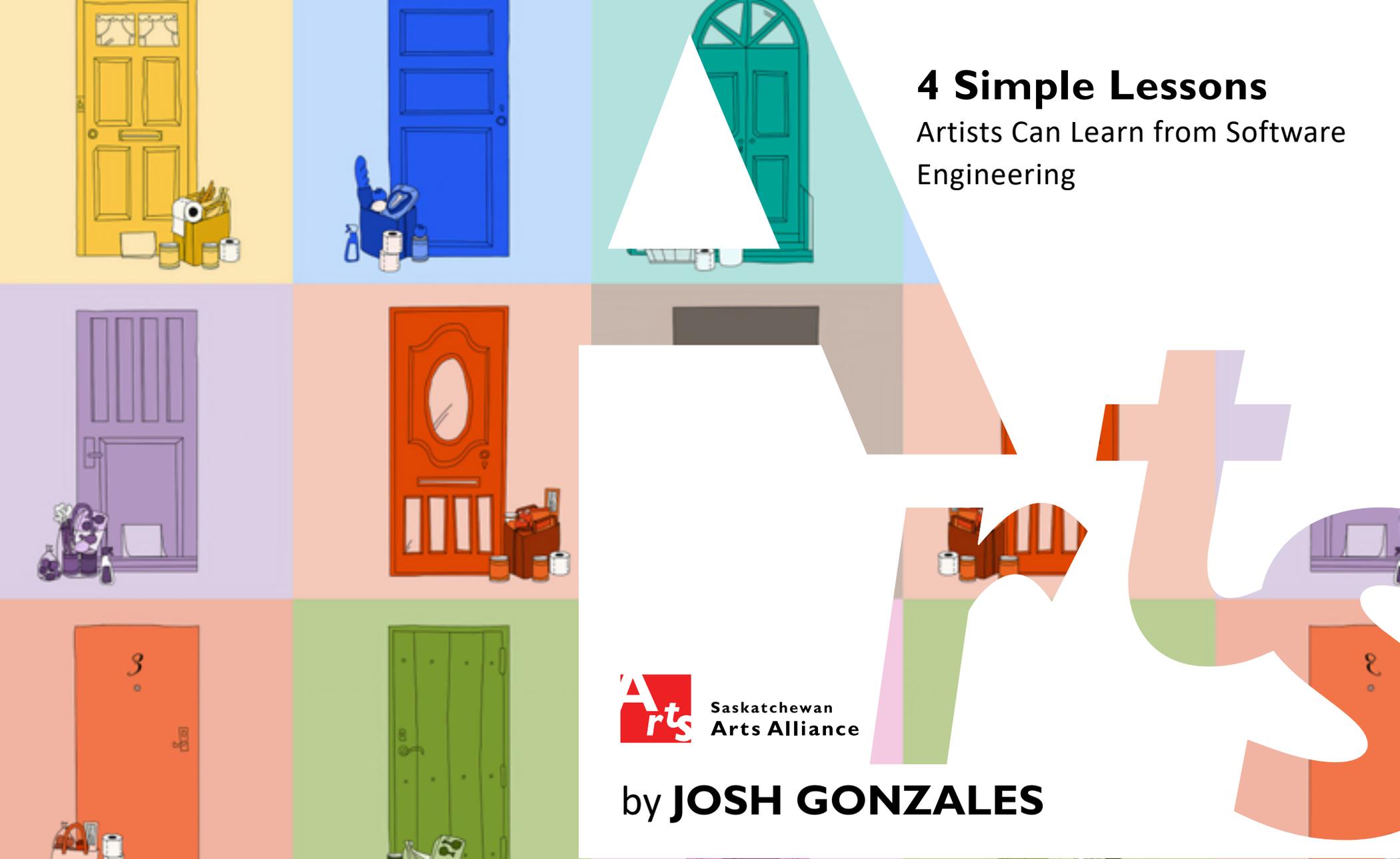
Saskatchewan Arts Alliance

by **JOSH GONZALES**

The world feels like it's changing faster than we can keep up. COVID-19 has fundamentally changed how artists interact with audiences and there is no going "back to normal". We don't know what surprises the future holds.

But all that really means is that we have an opportunity to adapt and grow. These shifts were unforeseeable, but now that they're here we can take existing knowledge and apply it to our new reality. One peculiar field we can learn from is software engineering.

Most artists I know aren't familiar with software beyond using tools like Ableton or Photoshop to accomplish artistic goals. To be fair, artists shouldn't be acquainted with software engineering – arts entrepreneurship is a full-time job in and of itself!

Our artist collective, Trifecta Sound Co., is blessed to have an artistic director, Marvin Chan, who has an intimate knowledge of the subject. Marvin is currently finishing his Master's at the University of Regina. His thesis applies software engineering techniques to arts festivals and artist collectives.

Unfortunately, most independent artists don't have the luxury of having someone like him around. Fear not though, as Research Director for our collective I've distilled some of the essential transferable skills so you can use them to advance your own arts career. Here are 4 simple– but not easy – lessons to apply. These aren't very sexy, but integrating them will give you more time for creative activities and increase your productivity.

1. Make hypotheses.

You might have heard of SMART goals. Basically, when someone says a goal is "SMART" they mean it is:

- Specific
- Measurable
- Achievable
- Relevant
- Time-based

You should create SMART goals; they are often useful. However, an overlooked aspect is that your goal – even if it is SMART ¬¬– could be the wrong goal.

Instead of just creating a goal, reframe that goal into a hypothesis. For those who haven't taken a science class since grade school, a hypothesis is a testable theory. So, instead of:

"I'm going to achieve this SMART goal"

You should ask:

"If X happens, Y should happen".

Let's put that in more concrete terms. Say you're a musician.

You could have the SMART goal of finishing a 7-song album 6 months from now. However, you shouldn't stop there. You should also turn that goal into a hypothesis:

"If I release more music, I should see more streams on Spotify"

It's subtle, but that slight shift will help you frame specific goals in terms of career advancement. If releasing more music doesn't get you more streams, then you know you need to look at other aspects of what you're doing as an arts entrepreneur.

2. Find MVPs

One of the more important lessons you can learn from software engineering is learning to create minimal viable products, or "MVPs" for short. In our music example we talked about creating a 7-song album. But would you really need to create 7 songs before testing your hypothesis?

In software engineering, it's important to create an MVP because the software you have in mind may not be what people

actually want. Or maybe they do want it, but in a different format. The same can be said for your art. You could dump hundreds of dollars into creating a beautiful series of large visual art pieces, only to find that the people who love those pieces can't fit them onto their walls. This isn't to say that you shouldn't create that art. Instead, it's creating an initial test of your work to see what people will engage with.

3. Customer development

So far, you've developed a hypothesis and an "MVP art piece". The next part is where your courage is tested: you have to actually ask people what they think. And don't just ask people that will give you compliments; get expert opinions and people in your target demographic to give honest feedback. See if the people you want to buy your art actually buy your MVP. Starting with that MVP ensures that you don't waste massive resources on a large scale project if the feedback you get is devastatingly negative.

This step will take time. You'll have to

contact people individually. Criticism will hurt. Of course, you can choose to ignore what doesn't resonate. But keeping an open-mind throughout the process will help you learn where you can grow.

4. Use Feedback and Pivot If Needed

Now that you have feedback from your MVP, you can make changes to your art. Never ¬– I repeat, NEVER – give up your artistic integrity. However, if your MVP doesn't resonate with buyers, that project shouldn't be a business endeavor. Your commercial work should reflect what buyers want. In software engineering, they call product changes based on consumer feedback "pivots". You should do the same if the people who should be buying your art aren't. Or you may decide you need to change your marketing instead.

The point is you should repeat these processes as many times as needed to keep learning and improving. Make new hypotheses. Create more MVPs. Get feedback. Keep testing until you have a stable amount of work that advances your

arts career. And then test some more.

Engineering your career might seem overwhelming, but it doesn't have to be.

Albert Einstein is often quoted as saying "the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results". Clichéd and corny, but still true.

The truth is nobody knows for sure what's best for your career specifically. The only way to figure that out is to test the things people tell you to do. Use the aspects that advance your career and dump the ones that don't. Software engineering offers a method for you to do that. You don't need to reinvent the wheel.

The principles outlined in this article can be adopted to fit whatever needs you have. These aren't all the lessons you can learn from software engineering, but they are a good starting point. What matters is that you figure out ways for you and your art to continue to thrive, even if we are living in the darkest timeline.

Josh Gonzales is the Research Director for Trifecta Sound Co. He holds a Master's in Experimental and Applied Psychology from the University of Regina. Josh releases alt-folk music under his given name and R&B Pop under his alter-ego Revilla.