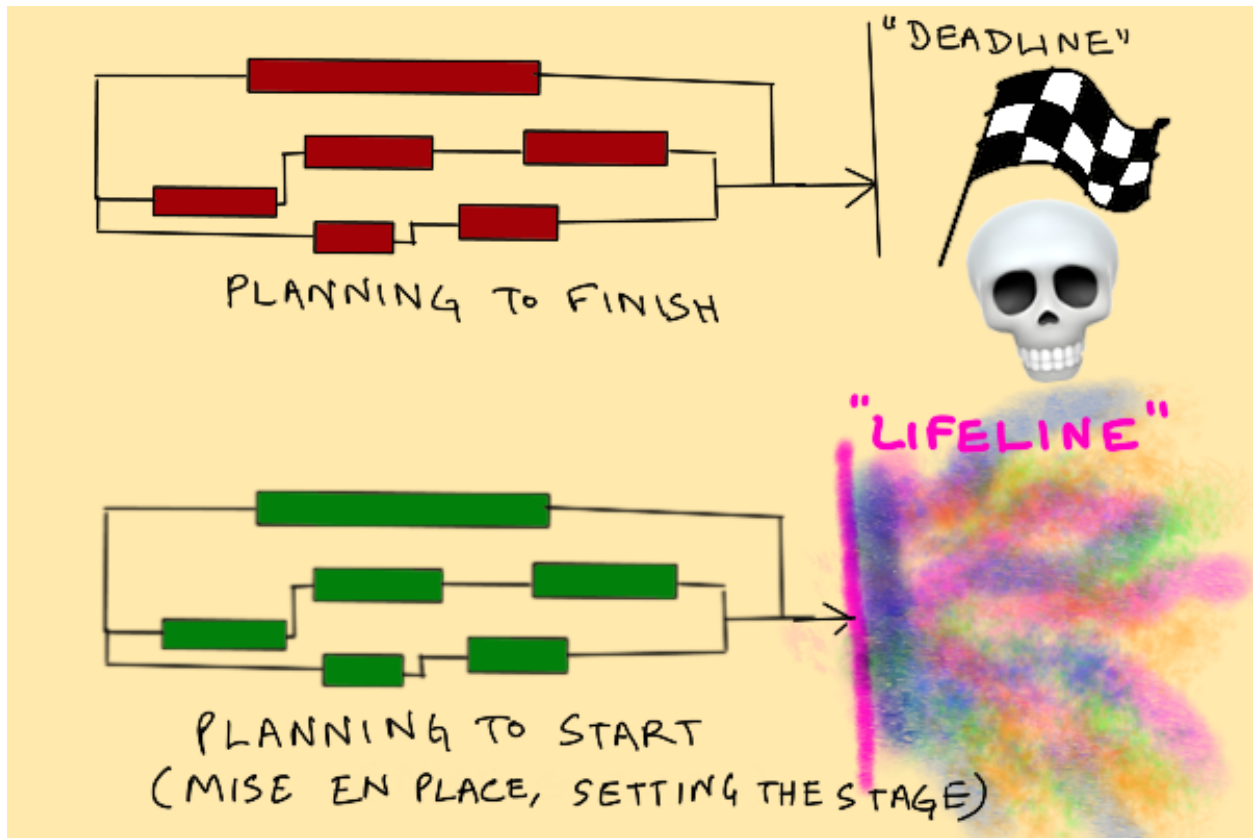# Planning to Start, Planning to Finish

by Venkatesh Rao

This week's podcast (12 minutes) is on a crucial difference, between planning to start, and planning to finish.

We talk a lot about the difference between more and less planning, on the spectrum between full waterfall and full agile, and like most of you, I share a bias towards less planning.

1. It is a difference that goes beyond software. In novel writing, for example, people talk of a difference between plotters and pantsers, people who work out detailed plots versus those who make up a story by the seat of their pants.

2. Plotting increases the probability that you'll stick the landing in a satisfying way, but pantsing increases the chances of the activity having a liveness to it, a narrative vitality. That's the real tradeoff gestured at by waterfall/agile conversations.

3. Over the years I've realized that a different distinction, within planning, is probably much more important: between planning to start, and planning to finish.

4. Planning to finish is the familiar kind, where you plan all the way to the end and the terminal condition is the completed state of the activity. The finish line, the deadline, the checkered flag.

5. Planning to start though, is the more important kind for any creative work. The French phrase *mise en place,* a favorite of Hercule Poirot, gets at this. It roughly means "setting the stage", especially with reference to cooking preparations.

6. When you plan to start, you get to the starting line rather than the finishing line, by setting the stage for a more creative, improvised phase. You can call it getting to the starting line, or as I prefer, by analogy to deadline, the lifeline. A condition where a zombie set of parts is assembled together in a way that makes it come alive.

7. The difference relates to what Scott Adams called the difference between systems and goals. When you plan to start, you undertake planned activities to end in a functioning system where habits can flow.

8. Another connection familiar to many of you is to James Carse's notion of finite versus infinite games. Planning to finish is playing a finite game to win it and exit it. Planning to start is working to enter an infinite game and continue playing it.

9. Whatever you choose to call it, you should probably spend more time thinking about this difference than about how much planning to do, which is often a much simpler question.