

Restrictions Breed Creativity

Sam Huffer, 24 May 2019.

Essay Topic

“Inspiration and technique are mutually exclusive terms: one cannot be creative when working within constraints.” Discuss this statement in relation to theories of creativity and drawing from the practices of at least two artists, writers or musicians.

Essay

Creativity is broadly defined as “the production of ideas or solutions that are novel and useful” (Rosso 2014, p. 553). “Many people believe that the more options available [to creators], the more creative a person can be” (Rosewater 2007). This claim is somewhat shaky when discussing external constraints, but has very little ground to stand on at all when it comes to constraints and creative technique. This is evidenced by the myriad of ways constraints are deliberately included in creative practice, and the creativity that arises from restrictions in other context, such as playing games or writing essays.

When discussing external constraints (resources, working environment, etc.), the veracity of the statement “one cannot be creative when working within constraints” depends on the nature and severity of constraints imposed on the creator. Too many or too few resources (whether material or temporal) hinder people’s ability to be creative; resource quantities that create a level of challenge appropriate for facilitating creators reaching flow-states and flow-like states (Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi 2014, pp. 230-232), however, will encourage greater creativity. A working environment with fixed goals but freedom of how they’re achieved, and a culture of assessing ideas for potential rather than flaws, will also help facilitate creativity (Amabile 1998, pp. 81-12, p. 86). Environments that lack any of these features will limit the creative returns of those working in such environments.

When it comes to creative technique and how the creator chooses to work, however, to use a phrase that has become something of a catchphrase for game designer Mark Rosewater (Rosewater 2013a, 2016a, 2016b, 2018a, 2019): restrictions breed creativity. According to Rosewater (2016a), when one is presented with a blank sheet of paper and asked to create something new, they might find it difficult, as when the brain is asked to solve a problem, it wants to check if it’s already solved it before and re-solve it in the same way. With creative thought, one instead wants to make the brain go to new places and think in different ways. In adopting a creative constraint, especially if it’s one you’ve never used before, you force your brain to start from a new vantage point, solve new problems, use new patterns of thought and therefore create new solutions (Rosewater 2007, 2016a, De Bono 1995, p. 18), making them a “valuable tool” (Rosewater 2016a) for idea generation in creative work (Rosso 2014, p. 555). Even if the adopted constraint doesn’t initially lead to a usable solution, whatever it does produce, however ridiculous, can still be used as a stepping stone to stimulate the creator, provoke thought and generate further ideas that could eventually lead to a viable creation (Rosewater 2007, von Oech 2014, de Bono 1995, p. 16).

Constraints as a creative technique are not just a hypothesis that is speculated on in articles; they are used in practice by many creators, Mark Rosewater being a prime example. His *Making Magic* articles (Wizards of the Coast 2019) and *Drive To Work* podcast (Gamepedia 2019) are produced alongside his work as the Head Vision Designer (Rosewater 2017) for *Magic: The Gathering* (Garfield 1993) and detail not only general game design theory (relating, for example, to creativity), but techniques that he has used to enhance his creativity (Rosewater 2007) and what has resulted

(Rosewater 2013b). One way that *Magic* R&D enhances the creativity of their sets is by alternating designing sets with a top-down approach (designing the mechanics of a set to fit its flavour) or a bottom-up approach (crafting the world and the narrative of a set to match the mechanics) (Rosewater 2018b), and starting from a different flavourful or mechanical focus every time to generate new output (Rosewater 2016a). Rosewater (2018b) cites *Innistrad* (Wizards of the Coast 2011), *Theros* (Wizards of the Coast 2013) and *Amonkhet* (Wizards of the Coast 2017) as examples of worlds and sets designed top-down as gothic horror world, Greek mythology world, and Ancient Egyptian inspired world respectively, and Ravnica (Wizards of the Coast 2005), *Zendikar* (Wizards of the Coast 2009), and Tarkir (Wizards of the Coast 2014) as examples of worlds and sets designed bottom-up as two-colour multicolour world, lands-matter world, and a block whose narrative was derived from a unique drafting structure (Rosewater 2014), respectively.

In narrative writing, constraints as a creative technique are commonplace. Twitter stories, where one has to write a story within Twitter's 140-character limit, have become a popular form of short stories. @MicroSFF (Westin 2019) and @ASmallFiction (Miller 2019) are examples from my own Twitter feed, both of whom have or are turning their Twitter stories into books (Westin, Westin 2013, Miller 2018). Novitz's lecture on theories of creativity (2019), which covers constraints in creative practice, further lists Neil Gaiman, David Mitchell, and Jennifer Egan as additional authors of Twitter stories. Novitz's lecture also goes into some detail on constraints in creative writing practice beyond the character limit of Twitter stories, discussing the S+7 technique, lipograms, and narratives based on an architectural structure.

A particularly notable example that Novitz covers in his lecture (2019) is the Oulipo, a movement of French authors who all focused on using constraints in their creative practice – who “embrace[d] [constraints] proactively” (Gallix 2013) and investigated “the possibilities of verse written under a system of structural constraints” (Academy of American Poets 2004). Among the members of the Oulipo are: Raymond Queneau, author of *Exercises in Style* (1947), which retells the same event 99 times in different styles, and of *A Hundred Thousand Billion Poems* (1961), which features ten sonnets with interchangeable lines that can be recombined in 10^{14} different combinations; Italo Calvino, author of *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969) and *The Tavern of Crossed Destinies* (1973), both of which were inspired by decks of tarot cards (*The Castle* by the 15th century Visconti tarot deck painted by Bonifacio Bembo, and *The Tavern* by the 18th century Marseilles tarot deck), and of *If On a Winter's Night a Traveller* (1979), where, in odd numbered chapters, the protagonist searches for the in-universe book of the same name, and in even numbered chapters, the reader is shown what they read; and Georges Perec, author of *A Void* (1969), a lipogram excluding the letter “e”, and of *Life: A User's Manual* (1978), which uses an architectural constraint to structure the narrative, and the Knight's Tour to determine how the narrative moves through the chosen architectural layout.

Even in activities that one might not normally consider as the creation per se of a creative work, constraints can force the participants to think creatively and produce creative output. In particular, games, whether video games, board games, etc. make players “evaluate things from new vantage points and force you to problem solve”, inherently testing “many of the skills needed for thinking more creatively”, and they do this so well that Rosewater suggests playing games as one thing people can do to be more creative (2007). As Novitz outlines, players can take the generation of creative output by games even further than what is required to complete a game by voluntarily adopting constraints not enforced by the game itself, such as playing as a trader or being non-violent in a game intended to be violent (2019).

The idea that “inspiration and technique are mutually exclusive” and that “one cannot be creative when working within constraints” is demonstrably false. At best, such an idea misrepresents the variation in effects that different constraints external to a creative work, and the magnitude of their severity, can have on the creativity of the individuals subject to those constraints. At worst, it is

a falsehood that ignores the creativity that can be and has been bred and furthered by incorporating restrictions in creative practice, from game design to programming to art to filmmaking to scientific research to theatre to literature. Even this essay can be construed as a creative work produced by its author working within the constraint of addressing a prompt to generate creative output. If the act writing of a work on a hypothesis in and of itself invalidates said hypothesis, then that hypothesis has no merit and ought to be discarded.

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