

On writing

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Today's artificial division of the world into two types: those who are productive because of constraints and those who are productive despite them.

As with any 'two kinds of people in this world' distinction, it's artificial, but I'm gonna run with it anyway. [My favorite distinction of this type is from *Pink Flamingos*: 'There are two kinds of people in the world: my kind, and assholes.' That just sums up the worldview of so very many people.]

Igor Stravinsky was decidedly on the side of constraints:

My freedom thus consists in moving about within the narrow frame that I have assigned myself for each one of my undertakings. I shall go even further. My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit. [Stravinsky, 1942, p 65]

So Mr. Stravinsky works within certain forms, though you won't find many folks who would call him uncreative.

On the other end, you've got the joke about how Michelangelo carved *David*: he started with a block of marble, then chipped away all the parts of the block that don't look like David.

You could argue that the constraints are just a question of degree: Michelangelo still had the constraint of the limited tools and techniques he had on hand, and marble has certain properties that preclude some techniques that would be fine on other slabs. But for the length of this column, I'm standing by my arbitrary distinction. E.g., at the extremes, you start to see the differences in people's reactions. When you list a hundred considerations before anybody can do anything, some people get engaged and start exploring the possibilities and combinations and some get frustrated; when you present a blank piece of paper and say *go*, some people get flustered and some attack.

I used to play a lot of Chess—I won the junior division Chess championship at the Champaign Public Library—but quickly gave up on it, because playing the game stressed me out. When you set up a Chess board, 50% of the board is covered in pieces. The pawns are in front, which means that you have to get them out of the way before you can move the pieces you want to move. That is, Chess is a game of constraints. There are many shelves' worth of books on Chess openings, and you could read them

as a catalog of constraints: if you move here, this constraints loosens, but this other constraint binds more tightly, whereas if you do this the situation is reversed.

So I still play Chess at about the level of a skilled fifth grader, and have since moved to playing Go. The full game is played on a 19-by-19 grid, which means that the first player can pick among 361 options, though there are only a hundred or two that are salient. The second player then has 360 choices for the response, and so on until a structure and its constraints emerge out of nothing. I won't claim to be more than an OK Go player, but I feel better playing it.

So I'm coming to a close on my second book. I have about a dozen pages that need a heap of research and rewriting, and then I can count the whole 450pp of it as done. That is, I'm in the endgame, where there is a structure and its attendant constraints—that I built for myself—and I have to work within them to solve problems. So I came over here and filled a blank screen with text.

But that's why I like writing, be it stupid columns like this, full books, or code. It's the process of building something out of nothing—creating meaning.

Just as a block of marble is not perfectly malleable, a blank screen is not entirely constraint-free, being that you need to fill it with some coherent sort of language (English, HTML, C, some combination thereof). Further, you need to accommodate the sort of constraints other humans impose. A theory of the audience's mind is absolutely essential for good writing—and good sculpting, good coding, and any other sort of filling of the blank slate. Unless you put "Dear Diary" at the top of the page, you'd better have something that other people find coherent and useful.

To formalize this, more or less every published work has a query letter attached, explaining who the audience will be for the book/article/whatever, and why the article will interest and serve that audience. When I'm in a bookstore, I often try to picture the query letter that was attached to any given book. "Dear Editor: I would like to propose to you a book entitled which will consist of photos of people dancing with their cats. Although the cat photography market is crowded and demand is strong, I could not find a single book in which the cats were dancing."

But anyway, watching things form is fun. My commute passes several construction projects, and I always stop watching the road for a block to see how much more things are taking shape today than they were the last time I passed by. Then they finally finish, and it's just another condo.

OK, The Form says that this is where I'd put a conclusion, which would say something like, 'In conclusion, I like writing stuff. I like watching things form'. But instead, here's a picture of a row of Baltimore houses being torn down to build a hospital.

References

Igor Stravinsky. *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures*. Harvard University Press, 1942.



Figure 1: Creating a blank slate.