STRUCTURES AND THE CREATIVE MIND: ON MAVERICKS, RELUCTANT SUBSCRIBERS, AND NERDS

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The first time I really thought about the role that systems play in creative ventures was while co-producing a film for the 48 Hour Film Project (a self-explanatory competition in which you make a short film from scratch in just two days). Working alongside Lucio, my fellow producer, we tried to structure and organise a hectic weekend in a way that would best allow for creativity to flourish. Yet it became clear that we each looked at structure in a very different way. Whereas I was excited by the prospect of creating a shooting schedule so efficiently foolproof that we could have members of the team working around the clock, Lucio was far more concerned with ensuring that our goals were attainable, that our deadlines actually kept us on track. A third member of our team thought that we shouldn't bother to organise the endeavour at all, reasoning that by attempting to plan out a creative activity we would take away the artistic integrity entirely. He even went so far as to suggest that, rather than booking actors, we use passersby once on set.

When speaking about systems and creativity, it is important to define the two. Jonathan Plucker and Ronald Beghetto define creativity as "the interaction among aptitude, process, and environment by which an individual or group produces a perceptible product that is both novel and useful as defined within a social context."[1] In other words, original thought isn't creative simply because it is "out there", but requires some sensitivity and response to

contexts, practicalities, and needs. A system, as defined by Donella Meadows, is an "interconnected set of elements that is coherently organised in a way that achieves something."[2] Speaking to fellow designers, artists, and creative professionals about systems within creativity, I discovered three main archetypes, which I have chosen to call the maverick, the reluctant subscriber, and the nerd.

The maverick tends to be an artistic soul, seeing organisation and structure as barriers to free expression and enemies of creativity. That perception resonates with the "double diamond" model of the design process, in which divergent thinking such as brainstorming is followed by convergent thinking that narrows down ideas.[3] During the divergent stage, individuals must "have the interest, enjoyment, and commitment necessary to identify prob-lems, generate multiple ideas, and not be distracted by extrinsic concerns."[4] Externally enforced structures such as assessments and formal processes are particularly harmful to ideation at this stage of the creative process. Constraints can create an environment in which people do not feel free to express their ideas for fear of "getting it wrong", causing mental blocks and preventing creatives from coming up with something novel.

Novelty, however, is not the only requirement for a creative idea. When moving into the convergent stage of thinking, structures help to take ideas from purely abstract to actually useful. Deadlines and goals give people something to work towards, which is particularly effective for the second archetype, the reluctant subscribers.

Those that fall into the reluctant subscriber category are a little more pragmatic. They recognise that, although creatives may not necessarily enjoy following procedures or being constrained, they are necessary evils in delivering creative projects, completing the creative thought process, and taking novel ideas to their useful outcomes. According to Isabel Briggs Myers—author of the famous personality index, the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)—creativity correlates most strongly with those who fall into the "intuition" and "perceiving" categories.

Intuition refers to the way in which one takes in information. Under the MBTI framework, intuitive types rely more heavily on imagination, ideas, possibilities, and looking at the bigger picture (in contrast with those who tend to focus on what is immediately in front of them, prioritise facts and information, and hone in on details). Perceivers are characterised as being flexible and open to opportunities; they are likely to prioritise what makes them happy rather than pleasing people around them, and often find it difficult to commit to plans and important decisions.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that intuitive and perceptive creatives often work better when external structures are imposed upon them. If creativity requires both innovative thought and suitable and advantageous outcomes, we can look at novel ideas as naturally emerging from the intuitive side of one's personality, but self-imposed rules and constraints are not inherent tendencies of the perceptive side. Without a deadline, many creative people find it challenging to finalise outcomes, and can continue iterating and allowing an idea to grow and grow to no end. On the other hand, having a brief or constraint can help filter the influx of possibilities and allow one to look simultaneously at the details and the bigger picture.

Then there are the nerds—those that recognise that constraints not only aid the creative process but constitute expressions of creativity in and of themselves. This idea was most famously demonstrated in *The Five Obstructions* by Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth. In the film, von Trier gets Leth to remake his masterpiece short film *The Perfect Human* five times, each with a different brief or restriction—from shooting the film in the worst place in the world to making it into a cartoon. Although the final documentary shows lengthy sections of the remade experimental films, its main focus is the reactions of the men and the process of following the obstructions.

Many fine art practices recognise the process of artistic creation as a form of expression. The various plain white canvases found in art galleries across the world are hailed not for their aesthetic beauty but for the way in which they were created and their conceptual reasoning. Another example is rule-based artistic processes, like the British painter Bernard Cohen drawing a single, continuous line until it filled an entire canvas. More recently, this algorithmic approach to art has been increasingly executed through digital controls. Roman Verostko, who coined the term algorist, creates works by programming a pen plotter machine to paint using calligraphy brushes. Though he does not physically execute the paintings himself, he still considers himself an artist because he creates the code behind the artwork.

But why stop there? Could the role of a film producer be considered a creative one? To many, there is nothing more beautiful than a well-designed spreadsheet. According to the International Council Societies of Industrial Design, design is "a creative activity whose aim is to establish the multi-faceted qualities of objects, processes, services, and their systems in whole life cycles".[5] If design is inherently creative, then designing logistics and structures must be considered a creative practice as well.

In a recent film project, a small team and I had just three hours to shoot a 10-minute, 60-shot short, performed by first-time child actors. In order to do that, we created a spreadsheet that organised the shots by location, shot

width, and importance in order to find the most efficient way to get it all done. This minimised changes in the camera set-up and enabled us to shoot different characters in different locations simultaneously—creating a filmic production line of sorts. We finished the shoot with five minutes to spare. Was the final film visually striking and well-made? Certainly not. But within the planning and the process, it was unquestionably a thing of beauty.

Whether we like it or not, it is undeniable that creativity and systems go hand in hand—be they the banes of our collective existence, unavoidable measures, or welcome forms of articulation and expression. Nothing quite gets my blood flowing like pure, unadulterated efficiency, and there are certainly more avenues to be explored within this realm.

1   Jonathan A. Plucker, Ronald A. Beghetto (2005) 'Why Creativity Is Domain General, Why it Looks Domain Specific, and Why the Distinction Doesn't Matter', in Robert J. Sternberg, Elena L. Grigorenko, and Jerome L. Singer (ed.) Creativity: From potential to realization. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association

2   Donella H. Meadows (2008) Thinking in Systems: A Primer, Chelsea Green Publishing.

3   Design Council (2005) The Design Process: What is the Double Diamond?, Available at: https://www.designcouncil.org.uk/news-opinion/design-process-what-double-diamond (Accessed: 22nd August 2018).

4   M. A. Collins, T. M. Amabile (1999) 'Motivation and creativity', in R. J. Sternberg (ed.) Handbook of creativity. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 297-312.

5   ICSID (2002) Definition of Industrial Design, Available at: http://www.icsid.org/about/about/articles31.htm (Accessed: 22nd August 2018).