

Reframing “The Gap”

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In 2009, famed NPR personality Ira Glass shared his thoughts on the creative process in what is now a widely recognized interview. During this interview, Glass introduced “the gap,” a concept he uses to describe the discontinuity between artistic taste and ability. He offered advice for beginning artists on how to overcome the frustrating disparity. Glass said:

“Nobody tells this to people who are beginners, and I really wish somebody had told this to me. All of us who do creative work, we get into it because we have good taste. But it's like there is this gap. For the first couple years that you're making stuff, what you're making isn't so good. It's not that great. It's trying to be good, it has ambition to be good, but it's not that good. But your taste, the thing that got you into the game, is still killer. And your taste is good enough that you can tell that what you're making is kind of a disappointment to you. A lot of people never get past that phase. They quit. Everybody I know who does interesting, creative work they went through years where they had really good taste and they could tell that what they were making wasn't as good as they wanted it to be. They knew it fell short. Everybody goes through that. And if you are just starting out or if you are still in this phase, you gotta know it's normal and the most important thing you can do is do a lot of work. Do a huge volume of work. Put yourself on a deadline so that every week or every month you know you're going to finish one story. It is only by going through a volume of work that you're going to catch up and close that gap. And the work you're making will be as good as your ambitions. I took longer to figure out how to do this than anyone I've ever met. It takes a while. It's gonna take you a while. It's normal to take a while. You just have to fight your way through that.”

Glass seems to offer advice as a source of comfort for beginner creators who may feel disappointed by the quality of their work. He offers a formula for success by reflecting on his own experience, detailing the phase of making “disappointing” work that ultimately leads to “interesting, creative work.” He then offers a fix: making a huge volume of work. Glass then uses the metaphor of a fight to describe the relationship between the creative professional and the gap. This quote has since been widely interpreted, resulting in various graphs, illustrations, and videos that attempt to visualize the central concept of the gap between taste and ability. This idea has undoubtedly brought hope and inspiration to many creators, giving them language to describe a particular problem within the creative process and optimistic advice on how to overcome it.

Personally, I've felt very drawn to this idea. As an artist, I frequently encounter the frustrating disconnect between my personal taste and ability. Yet, through my practice I find that the formula offered by Glass (ability + lots of practice = aesthetic satisfaction) has proven more harmful than helpful. Although some days my gap seems to be narrowing, other days it seems to be wider than ever. This fluctuation of success has led me to question some of the claims made by Glass. In this essay I will tease apart Glass' interpretation of the gap and offer a

systematic critique of the assumptions underlying his central claims. Each critique will target and assess a specific claim made by Glass, in order to propose a more suitable interpretation for creative practitioners.

1. Aesthetic aims need not align with aesthetic taste

This distinction is not always obvious. It can be difficult to tease apart these two terms because they often overlap. In his interview, Glass claims that people who do creative work enter such work because they “have good taste.” Without discussing the normative dimensions of his claim (which I will address in my following point), I maintain that a) taste doesn’t necessarily drive work, and b) taste doesn’t always align with aims.

Is ‘taste’ the most appropriate word to ascribe as one endpoint of the gap? Creative practitioner or not, we all have aesthetic taste. Every autonomous person has their own idea of beauty, and are able to make judgements about a work’s aesthetic merit. However, having aesthetic taste alone does not necessarily drive one to do creative work. Consider artists who pursue therapeutic ends through creative-making. Rather than make work in order to achieve a particular standard of beauty, these artists express a feeling or emotion. Additionally, those who make creative work may not necessarily aim to make work that aligns with their taste. Creative practitioners are entitled to ascribe beauty to work that differs from the work they’d like to make. As stated previously, it is not uncommon for taste and aims to overlap. But for creative practitioners, it is useful to consider the relationship between taste and aims in order to better establish standards for their work. Collapsing these two concepts might mislead creators to set standards of success according to others’ work, rather than to their own personal goals.

2. Creative work is not objectively good or bad

Although it seems to be a cliché, this point is worth restating. How one uses language reinforces certain beliefs about one’s self and the world around them. Reducing creative work to “good” and “bad” not only distorts aims, but is unproductive in evaluating work. There may be temptation to replace “good” and “bad” with “right” and “wrong,” but this isn’t always appropriate either. Of course, there are some situations in which one’s aims align with a particular standard. Consider a ballet dancer attempting to execute an arabesque at barre. According to ballet, there are specific criteria for achieving an arabesque. Therefore, it is safe to say that one’s arabesque can be “right” or “wrong.” The same can be said for a musician attempting to play particular notes from a score or an actor following a script. However, standards and criteria are not always clear, and producing work may be driven by expression rather than execution. In these cases, it is important for creators to be as clear as possible about their aims and criteria for achieving them, so that when their work deviates from their aims, they know how to articulate why. Reduction prevents reflective reasoning, and so perhaps it would be more appropriate to use language like “that wasn’t what I was trying to do” rather than merely “that was bad” or “that was wrong.”

In ascribing normative claims of “good” and “bad” to creative work, Glass misinterprets the space between aims and ability. By shifting language, creative practitioners are better equipped to identify and navigate their own personal gaps.

3. The gap is not a phase

In his interview, Glass is addressing a specific group of creatives: beginners. He interprets the gap as a phase that creative practitioners, in the beginning of their practice, either move past or quit altogether. The problem with considering the gap as a phase is that it excludes seasoned creative professionals who also grapple with the gap between their aesthetic aims and their work. It may seem that people who have long-established practices do not struggle as much with the gap. Rather than assuming this is because they have *overcome* the gap, perhaps it is more useful to consider that they have accepted or found comfort in the liminal space. I have yet to meet an established creator that has it all figured out. In fact, many of the seasoned professionals I have worked with have suggested that the gap is ever present in their own work to this day. Considering the gap as a phase puts unjust pressure on creative practitioners who might be grappling with this disparity well into their careers.

Establishing phases of creative development *flattens* the complex, deeply personal dimensions of artistry. It puts unnecessary restraints on the creative process, and may potentially discourage or inhibit creative practitioners. I believe it is more appropriate to conceive of the gap as an embedded component of the creative process -- a constant dialogue between aesthetic aims and process that lives as long as does the work itself.

This leads me to my next point:

4. The gap is always in flux

Some days one's gap might feel narrow, and other days it might feel wide. This fluctuation is *normal*, and should not be likened to irreversible progress or backtracking. In his interview, Glass offers a formula for filling the gap between taste and ability. His fix is simple: make a lot of work. There is nothing inherently wrong with this suggestion -- consistently making work, setting deadlines, and moving forward in the face of disappointment is sound advice. However, Glass also claims that through making a lot of work, creative practitioners will effectively be able to transcend the gap, making their work “as good as their ambitions.” This formula is dangerously close to the ‘practice makes perfect’ mantra. Research in cognitive neuroscience has taught us that practice does not in fact make perfect, it makes *permanent*. And so, what Glass fails to include is how *quality* of practice influences the size of one's gap. By doing things over and over again, one may never get closer to their goal without a shift in quality. This is left out of Glass' equation, and might prevent creative practitioners from actually approaching their aims.

Furthermore, as previously stated, creative practice is not linear, and aesthetic aims have no cap. These endpoints are not as fixed as Glass makes them out to be. As our work and ability shift, so too do our aims. By recognizing that taste, aims, and ability all *evolve*, creative practitioners are free to take stock of their gap without necessarily measuring their progress.

5. Fighting the gap only makes it stronger

In his final word of advice, Glass tells his reader that they “just have to fight their way through [the gap].” This battle metaphor seems to refer to the gap as a force to be beaten. Not only does this negatively portray a natural process of creative making, but also construes the gap as something to be conquered. I believe this advice to be unproductive and misleading. As an embedded facet of creative practice, the gap is not something to combat. By attempting to “fight” or work against the natural disparity between aims and ability, one’s work may be subject to frustration and aggression, rather than care and passion. I am proposing a new interpretation of the gap, one that is colored positively. What would happen if one viewed the gap as a workspace rather than an abyss -- as something to strive *through* rather than strive against? By shedding a positive light on the gap, I hope to encourage creative professionals to work with the discontinuity rather than against it.

The gap is not a threat to our creative work; it nourishes ambition and provides endless opportunity for growth. No matter what stage of our creative careers, we are all subject to the gap. By recognizing the inherent fluctuation of our aims and ability, creative professionals can be free from the stress of attempting to fill an unfillable gap. While this is only one facet of creative practice, it may open doors to new and exciting territory.