



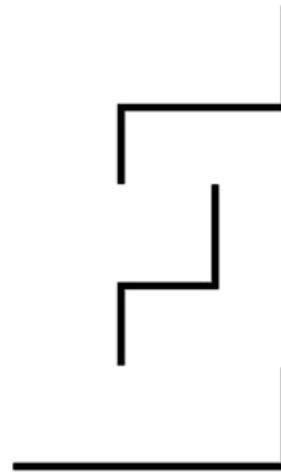
# Creative Elegance

THE POWER OF INCOMPLETE IDEAS

Matthew E. May

**IT IS NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE TO MAKE IT THROUGH A TYPICAL DAY WITHOUT EXCHANGING IDEAS.** Whether deciding on something as simple as a restaurant for a long overdue night out, or as complicated as the design of an entirely new product, we are forever involved in sculpting and selling our creative thought. Conventional wisdom says that to be successful, an idea must be concrete, complete, and certain. But what if that's wrong? What if the most elegant, most imaginative, most engaging ideas are none of those things?

Gaze at the image below for a moment. The three sets of right-angled lines depict something so ubiquitous that you'd be hard-pressed to make it through the day without it. Can you identify it?



If you can't, it's because a key piece of information is missing. Once that information is shared, however, you will never again be able to see the image in quite the same way again. You are looking at the upper case version of the most widely used letter in the English language. The letter, though, exists in the white space. Do you see it now? It is the letter E. Look again. My guess is that from now on, you'll have difficulty *not* seeing it.

What you've just experienced is the power of "the missing piece." It's not a parlor trick. It's an example of a counterintuitive notion: what *isn't* there can often trump what *is*.

And it's a good example of creative *elegance*. Experiencing elegance is nearly always this profound. The unusually simple yet surprisingly powerful nature of any elegant this or that gives us pause, and the impact changes our view of things, often forever. Elegance delivers the power to cut through the noise. It can shake markets. It can change minds, and mindsets, as you've just witnessed.

No "complete" E, no matter how elaborately or ornately rendered, could have engaged you as fully and had the same kind of indelible impact on you. Once you were given a clue, your brain created the image for you, changing your mindset, without your having much say in the matter. The incomplete E took on a new form, a life of its own—one with real staying power.

## Conventional wisdom says that to be successful, an idea must be concrete, complete, and certain. But what if that's wrong?

What is important to take away from this quick demonstration is that the full power of elegance is achieved when the maximum impact is exacted with the minimum input. Adding anything to the figure would have actually detracted from the desired effect: the surprise you likely experienced when the E became visible. The E is obvious only in retrospect, but it is the unusually simple yet thoughtful construction of what *is* there that gives the missing piece its surprising power.

Elegance is not, in other words, a matter of simple erasure.

ON SUNDAY, JUNE 10, 2007, NEARLY TWELVE MILLION TELEVISION VIEWERS EXPERIENCED THE VERY SAME EFFECT. David Chase, creator of the hit HBO series *The Sopranos*, used the method to achieve what many critics now hail as the most innovative hour of viewing in recent episodic television history. Fans of the show waited with anticipation to find out the fate of mafioso Tony Soprano, the main character and from whose viewpoint the story is told. Would he or wouldn't he be "whacked?" Debates had been raging for the 22 months since Chase had announced the final airdate. But instead of a concrete finale, television screens suddenly went black seemingly in mid-scene during the final seconds. Credits rolled within a few more seconds, and *The Sopranos* series came to an end.

## [W]hat *isn't* there can often trump what *is*.

What is so fascinating about the abrupt ending is not the decision itself, although it was unprecedented and broke new ground artistically. Rather, it is the aftermath that is intriguing. Just as no fully drawn E could have the same lasting impact on the brain, no fully-developed conclusion would have engaged viewers with nearly the same lingering depth and intensity.

The most immediate reaction—"What just happened to my television signal?"—had nothing to do with the storyline. What is interesting there is not the reaction itself, for that might have been predictable in this age of satellite and cable TV, but that everyone had the same reaction in that no one saw it for what it was, as the ending. They saw it as something gone wrong. And that made them stop and think. So it's what occurred over the course of the next 48 hours or so that is worth noting.

The initial disappointment at being left hanging with a clearly missing conclusion was quickly replaced by an unparalleled level of post-show scrutiny coupled with a fresh appreciation for “the genius of David Chase,” spurred by his semi-cryptic public comment that “Anybody who wants to watch it, it’s all there.”

Realizing that every frame was carefully crafted by Chase, who both wrote and directed the episode, viewers re-examined scene after scene, noting both blatant and subtle visual clues, soundtrack hints, veiled dialogue, past-show references, even camera angles, color palettes and lighting effects. Theory after theory popped up in both online and traditional media. The debate took on a life of its own. Viewers crafted their own endings, filling in the missing piece with the trail of code Chase had provided. To most, Tony Soprano’s fate became quite obvious, albeit only through a full retrospective.

That is exactly what happened with the letter E. And like the letter E exercise, *The Sopranos* episode is quite indelible.

David Chase did what many of the best innovators and most prolific individuals are doing in many different domains: creatively engaging people’s imaginations by leaving out the right things.

But what are “the right things?”

[I]t is the unusually simple yet thoughtful construction of what is there that gives the missing piece its surprising power.

THE VALUE OF WHAT ISN'T THERE DAWNED on bestselling business author and self-employed professor Jim Collins when, in the throes of his early post-Stanford Business School career at Hewlett-Packard, his favorite former professor admonished him for a lack of discipline. An expert in creativity and innovation, she told him his hard-wired energy level was riding herd over his mental clarity, enabling a busy yet unfocused life. Her words rang true: at the time, Jim was aggressively chasing his carefully set stretch goals for the year, confident in his ability to accomplish them. Still, his life was crowded with the commotion of a fast-tracking career. Her comment made him pull up short and re-examine what he was doing. To help, she did what great teachers do, constructing a lesson in the form of an assignment she called “20-10”: *Imagine that you’ve just inherited \$20 million free and clear, but you only have 10 years to live. What would you do differently—and specifically, what would you **stop** doing?*

## Elegance delivers the power to cut through the noise.

The exercise did precisely what it was intended to do—make Jim stop and think about what mattered most to him. It was a true turning point. He realized he’d been racing down the wrong track, spending enormous energy on the wrong things. In fact, he woke up to the fact that he hated his job. He promptly quit and headed back to Stanford to launch a new career of research, teaching, and writing. The assignment became a constant reminder of just how important and precious his time is. He now starts each year by choosing what not to do, and each of his to-do lists always includes “stop-doing” items. Collins preaches his practice, impressing upon his audiences that they absolutely must have a “stop-doing” list to accompany their to-do lists. As a practical matter, he advises developing a strong

discipline around first giving careful thought to prioritizing goals and objectives, then eliminating the bottom twenty percent of the list—forever.

Collins made the “stop doing” argument in his eloquent 2003 year-end essay appearing in *USA Today*:

*“A great piece of art is composed not just of what is in the final piece, but equally what is not. It is the discipline to discard what does not fit—to cut out what might have already cost days or even years of effort—that distinguishes the truly exceptional artist and marks the ideal piece of work, be it a symphony, a novel, a painting, a company, or most important of all, a life.”*

Understanding what piece to make missing isn’t easy. While a few examples can provide some hand-rails to guide us, it helps to first understand where the missing piece strategy came from.

**THE GREAT RENAISSANCE ARTIST LEONARDO DA VINCI INVENTED A TECHNIQUE** called *sfumato*—literally “in the manner of smoke”—that he loosely defined as “without having distinct edges and lines.” With *sfumato*, lines are left a little vague, and forms are slightly blurred to merge with one another. This is what allowed da Vinci to achieve such life-like effects in his masterworks. The mystery of the Mona Lisa is somewhat less mysterious, for example, once you see that the corners of her eyes and mouth—the two features responsible for human expression—are deliberately indistinct. She seems to be alive because her attitude is so open to interpretation.

Leonardo advised aspiring painters, “...paint so that a fumoso [smoky] edge can be seen, rather than hard and harsh outlines and silhouettes... that is, more confused—that is to say, less clear...” In other words, Leonardo is advocating leaving something to the imagination. But why? According to the late art historian E.H. Gombrich, it is because da Vinci was aware of the superiority of tantalizing suggestion over exactitude in engaging the viewer’s eye. Da Vinci instructs artists to leave any preliminary sketch indeterminate precisely because “confused shapes arouse the mind.” Gombrich said that *sfumato* leads the observer “to understand what one does not see.” Leaving something for us

to guess at was a stroke of genius. Five centuries later, Leonardo's work continues to spawn an industry of lectures, debates, books and movies.

Da Vinci wasn't alone in taking the road less finished. Michelangelo perfected and made famous a technique pioneered by sculptor Donatello before him, called *non finito*, meaning unfinished or incomplete. A shallow relief style, non finito not only left sculptures seemingly unfinished, it made them appear deeper than they actually were. Michelangelo's subjects were essentially "stuck" in the block of material, purportedly to emotionally involve the observer by revealing and preserving in stone the human artistic struggle.

## Understanding what piece to make missing isn't easy.

But neither Leonardo nor Michelangelo were the first to explore the concept of purposefully unfinished or ambiguous work. As Zen philosophy took hold in Japan during the 12th and 13th centuries, Japanese art and philosophy began to reflect one of the fundamental Zen aesthetic themes—that of emptiness. In the Zen view, emptiness is a symbol of inexhaustible spirit. Silent pauses in music and theater, blank spaces in paintings, and even the restrained motion of the sublimely seductive Geisha in refined tea ceremonies all take on a special significance because it is in states of temporary inactivity or quietude that Zen artists see the very essence of creative energy. Because Zen Buddhists view the human spirit as by nature indefinable, the power of suggestion is exalted as the mark of a truly authentic creation. Finiteness is thought to be at odds with nature, implying stagnation, which is associated with loss of life. The famous poet Fujiwara Teika developed the equivalent of non finito

in his verse, believing that “the poet who has begun a thought must be able to end it so masterfully that a rich space of suggestions unfolds in the imagination of his audience.” Teika’s work became a guiding force in the development of Zen thought in Japan, and his treatises on aesthetics are viewed by historians as the equivalent of universal handbooks on the philosophy of art.

While these are historical examples, non finito has made plenty of modern appearances. One vivid example (aside, of course, from *The Sopranos* finale) is the scene in Mike Nichols’ 1967 classic dramedy *The Graduate*, in which young college graduate Ben “Mrs. Robinson, you are trying to seduce me” Bradford, played by Dustin Hoffman, plunges into the swimming pool clad in full scuba gear, speargun and all, and remains submerged at the bottom, contemplating his so-called life. There is no dialogue, no narration, no music, only the sound of Ben’s breathing. Yet because of the masterful construction of what came before in the film, we have all the context we need to interpret what the character is thinking and feeling. At the same time, the scene remains open to our interpretation, and we’re allowed to inject our own personal experiences and emotions into the inaction. According to film critic Joe Morgenstern, the two-minute long “silent” scene ranks among the most indelible and ingenious in cinema history.

It would appear that the requirements of ideas to be concrete and complete have at the very least some very noteworthy exceptions. In fact, these exceptions may not be exceptions at all. They may be the basis of new rules, rules that, like the artists and designers granting their audience a freedom to finish what the creator began, reflect the highest respect for the intelligence of others. And those are the very kind of rules that can change the game entirely.

One final story makes the point.

### **THERE IS NOTHING REALLY “IN AND OUT” ABOUT IN-N-OUT BURGER.**

The lines are always long, but well worth the wait. In-N-Out Burger is a Southern California institution with a cult-like following not unlike that of Apple or Starbucks. Its reputation extends far beyond the West Coast, though, and indulging in a Double-Double—two 100% beef patties plus two slices

of American cheese, hand-leafed lettuce, bread spread, tomato, with or without onions, on a fresh-baked bun—is on the to-do list of many tourists. The company has in the last few years pushed beyond California to neighboring Nevada and Arizona, and when one opened in Scottsdale, the wait was four hours. Even people who shun fast food seem to love In-N-Out. In fact, it is one of only a couple establishments favored by Eric Schlosser in his book *Fast Food Nation*, an indictment of the American fast food meal.

In-N-Out Burger was founded by Harry and Esther Snyder in 1948 in the Los Angeles suburb of Baldwin Park. It was Harry's innovation to start a drive-through burger stand where customers could order through a two-way speaker box. Back then, carhops and big canopied burger joints were the norm. The company has remained family-owned and privately run since its inception—so private its executives rarely speak to the media—even though Harry, Esther, and oldest son Guy, each of whom took turns at the helm, have passed away. Based on the Snyders' standing philosophy, every new manager learns at the In-N-Out University to "Give customers the freshest, highest quality foods you can buy and provide them with friendly service in a sparkling clean environment." In-N-Out Burger is known for its consistent quality, freshness—you can watch the potatoes as they are hand-cut daily for the fries, shakes are made from real ice cream, and there are no freezers or microwaves—and simple menu.

But most important, In-N-Out Burger understands the power of the missing piece.

To begin with, the menu has only four food items. You can order a Hamburger, a Cheeseburger, a Double-Double, and French Fries. The fifth item is a beverage. You can partake in the standard array of Coca-Cola products, or order one of three flavors of milkshake: chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry. That's it. *Or is it?*

One reason for the cultish phenomenon of the company is the "secret menu." You have to be in the know to be privy to it. The most interesting thing about the secret menu is that not only do the

items on it far outnumber those on the published menu, but they are completely unique concoctions, dreamed up by customers, universally prepared according to a cross-company formula, and well beyond Starbuck's approach of allowing tweaks to an already extensive menu. When you order, say, a "tall, extra-hot, non-fat, double-shot, four-pump, no-whip mocha" at Starbuck's, your receipt simply reads "TL MOCHA." When you order, a "2X4," or a "3-by-Meat," or a "Flying Dutchman" at any In-N-Out Burger, it will appear on the receipt just as you ordered it. But nowhere will you see anything even remotely referring to it on the menu posted above the register.

There are about a dozen "standard" off-menu items. A 2X4 is a burger with two beef patties and four slices of cheese. You can order any combination of meat-X-cheese you desire: 3X3, 4X4, etc. In fact, Wikipedia shows a photograph of a 20X20, and on a Halloween weekend in October 2004, Zappos.com CEO Tony Hsieh and blogger What-Up-Willy ordered and ate—with a team of six others—a 100X100, consuming nearly 20,000 calories in less than two hours. This, of course, should not be tried at home.

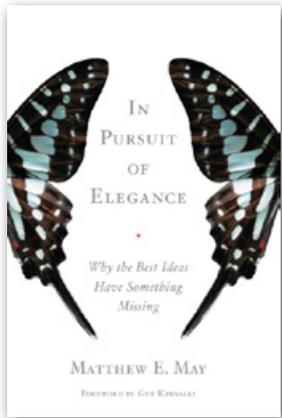
A *3-by-Meat* is sans cheese, and again, you can order any number-by-meat. The *Animal Style* is a mustard-cooked patty, with pickles, extra sauce, and grilled onions. *Protein Style* is for those watching their carbs: no bun; instead, the makings are wrapped in a big leaf of iceberg lettuce. (This is actually quite good, and a favorite of the women in my family.) A *Grilled Cheese* is a cheeseburger without the burger, and great if you're not a fan of red meat, while the Veggie Burger is actually a bun with whole grilled onions, sauce, lettuce and double tomato. The *Flying Dutchman* is simply two patties and two slices of cheese—no bun, no nothing else—on a paper plate. The *Extra Toast* is literally that: the bun's left on the grill longer for crispiness. That's just the burgers. Fries can be *Animal Style*, topped with sauce, onions and cheese, *Light or Well-Done*, which are under-cooked or over-cooked, respectively. Shakes can be ordered regular, or *Swirl* or *Neopolitan*, meaning two or three of the flavors mixed.

In-N-Out has never changed their menu to reflect these items. In other words, it creates a sense of mystique around what is missing from the menu. By resisting formal menu expansion they've avoided the self-defeating overkill seen in consumer electronics, with its "feature creep," and the resulting "feature fatigue." They understand the avid Sudoku player's desire to fill in the missing pieces, and they simply go with it, keeping their wares pared back but enabling their patrons to add their own personal touch. They don't actively promote, or even pay much attention to, the secret menu. In fact, when you talk to the executives at In-N-Out, they seem as mystified as customers by the presence of the secret menu, but they do understand the completely intangible value of the tailored touch.

Their only rule is "to do whatever the customer wants done to a burger." Most importantly, they understand that to expand the formal menu could only detract from an important reason why In-N-Out is so very popular and successful: a powerfully elegant "stop doing" strategy.

**A FINAL WORD.** The magic behind the dramatic and enduring impact of creative elegance, while it remains rare and radical, is not new. Chinese philosopher Lao-tzu understood the power of the missing piece when he wrote this verse over 2500 years ago:

*Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub,  
It is the centre hole that makes it useful.  
Shape clay into a vessel,  
It is the space within that makes it useful.  
Cut doors and windows for a room,  
It is the holes which make it useful.  
Therefore profit comes from what is there,  
Usefulness from what is not there.*



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew E. May is the author of *In Pursuit of Elegance: Why the Best Ideas Have Something Missing* (Random House/Broadway, May 2009) and of *The Elegant Solution: Toyota's Formula for Mastering Innovation* (Simon & Schuster, 2006). A popular speaker, he lectures to corporations, governments, and universities around the world, and works confidentially with creative teams and senior leaders at a number of top Fortune-listed companies. He spent nearly a decade as a close adviser to Toyota, and his articles have appeared in national publications such as *USA Today*, *Strategy+Business*, and *Quality Progress*. He has appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, and on National Public Radio.

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