

LET ME COUNT THE WAYS

What do sonnets and service oriented architecture have in common? Graham Oakes says it's all to do with standards.



Graham Oakes: too many standards create bureaucracy, too few create chaos

The definition of a sonnet is: a poem composed of 14 lines, with a well-defined rhyme scheme and (in English) a rhythmic structure based on five stresses per line.

At first glance, English literature doesn't seem to have a lot to say about service engineering, so what can a sonnet teach us about SOA?

Well, I think we can learn a lot from the sonnet. On the face of it, the sonnet is a very restrictive form. The number of lines is prescribed. The rhyme scheme and hence stanza structure is only allowed very limited variation. Rhythm must follow a strictly defined pattern. A poet can push back on these restrictions to a certain extent, but the end result rapidly ceases to be a sonnet.

Yet poets have written sonnets on a huge range of themes over the centuries. No-one forces them to write within the structure – free verse is perfectly acceptable these days – yet they happily choose to do so. And in doing so, they've demonstrated that the sonnet is actually a very flexible poetic form. There's something about having rigid rules: they give poets a base to kick off from, allowing them to leap across an enormous range.

It's that flexibility that connects the sonnet to SOA. Flexibility is one of our most highly prized architectural attributes. We invest enormous intellect, effort and budget in trying to achieve it. So where is the rigid base that we can kick off from?

Standards are an important part of that base. Standard message headers and structures allow us to focus our attention on the payloads, where the value lies. When the infrastructure provides standard services for message routing, transformation and security, then we can focus on processing the message correctly at its destination. Standards create fixed points that we can rely on as we attempt to build flexibility in other areas of the architecture. This is why standards are so important.

But there's another aspect to the structure of the sonnet that we shouldn't overlook. All that thematic and emotional flexibility was created from a small set of structural rules. With just a handful of standards (number of lines, rhyme scheme, rhythmical structure) you set very clear bounds on how a sonnet is constructed, but you also have a structure that's simple enough for poets to get their heads around.

Flexibility comes from rigidity, but it's a finely balanced thing. Too many standards create bureaucracy, while too few create chaos. This is something for every architecture office (and standards body) to contemplate.

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