Graceful Gaming: Aesthetics, Automation, Habit

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INTRODUCTION: AESTHETIC PLEASURE AFTER FLOW

Game scholars and designers alike have long employed "flow" to characterize the pleasure induced by play as the harmony of player skill and game challenge. In *Against Flow*, Braxton Soderman demonstrates that we should regard psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's eponymous concept with a healthy skepticism because its explanatory power hinges on an ideologically fraught individualism (2021). This paper starts from the premise that Soderman's deconstruction of flow renews the urgency of a task already underway, namely, developing concepts that account for the diverse forms of aesthetic satisfaction video games occasion (e.g. Atkinson and Parsayi 2020; Kirkpatrick 2011; Myers 2008). He prompts us to ask: If flow is derived from positive psychology, can alternate intellectual traditions furnish aesthetic categories that more precisely capture video game experiences? Whereas flow tacitly perpetuates individualism, can other descriptors abet recent efforts to decenter the human in the analysis of games (e.g. Chia and Ruffino 2022; Fizek 2022; Janik 2021)? This paper answers these questions concerning a concept under elaborated in other fields and all but subsumed by flow in the analysis of video games – grace (Arsenault and Bonenfant 2012). What is grace?

Grace in Sport

German philosopher Friedrich Schiller defines grace as "beauty in motion" (1793/2005). Unsurprisingly, therefore, "grace" is prevalent in analyses of sport (Lerer 2014). Literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht uses it to denote the appearance of effortlessness in an athlete, and an enjoyable inability of the spectator to process the athlete's body movements. Recall Jesse Owens's 100m performance at the 1936 Olympics. Unlike his struggling competitors, Owens glides to victory with such ease that he seems propelled by an outside force. However, Gumbrecht's insistence that the appreciation of sport relies on a significant "distance between athlete and the beholder" ultimately sides his theory of grace with the observing spectator, not the acting performer (2006, 8). Game philosopher C. Thi Nguyen reconciles this opposition by exploring the double role players exercise in games as first-order agents and second-order enjoyers of their performances (2020, 142). The climber, for example, both executes a lunge for the next hold and relishes in her own movement's grace (Nguyen 2020, 102-112). If, qua Schiller and Gumbrecht, grace requires a human agent to seemingly divest herself of will in favor of an external force, what enables the experience of one's movement as another's?

The Grace of Habit

Félix Ravaisson provides an answer: habit. The French philosopher conceptualizes habit as the means by which an organism consolidates repeated behaviors prompted by contact with its environment to prepare a conduct appropriate for the future. Over iteration, responses to stimuli pass "from consciousness to unconsciousness, from will to automatism" in becoming habit but do not imply a Cartesian mechanization or a Kantian residue of nature that must be overcome (Bergson 1946, 275). Rather, habit is a "second nature" that brokers the continuity between will and nature, between voluntary and instinctive movements (Ravaisson 2008, 65-6). The "succession of imperceptible degrees" whereby conscious intention becomes embodied inclination frustrates conventional demarcations of activity and passivity, highlighting that human agency is not the preserve of higher cognitive functions (Ravaisson 2008, 57). Ultimately, habit entails "grace" – an ease of activity that strikes us as not our own and, for Ravaisson, suggests the operation of "god within us" (2008, 71). Whereas Ravaisson doesn't address aesthetics, the paper contends that the disjunction of habit and consciousness he describes enables the enjoyment of the former by the latter. How does this work in practice?

David Sudnow: From Piano to Video Game Play

Take piano. In sociologist David Sudnow's account of acquiring improvisational proficiency – *Ways of the Hand* (1978) – his repeated (habitual) practice inculcates unreflective propensities (habits) for harmonic play. Habituation allows more complex compositions as consciousness offloads aspects of performance to the obscure intelligence of habit and, moreover, authorizes the experience of grace insofar as one's movements now appear to originate from outside oneself – to follow the way of the hand. If, as Sudnow demonstrates, embodied automation has long been fundamental to the aesthetic experience of one's musical performance, what do video games add? Sudnow's account of playing *Missile Command* (Atari 1981) in *Pilgrim in the Microworld* (1983) suggests that the TV's on-screen representations amplify the appreciation of one's participation in graceful movement (Keogh 2019).

The Aesthetics of Aim-Assist

Recent work on habit seeks to converge embodied and technological automation, construing both as means of delivering activity from consciousness (Airoldi 2021; Bennett et al. 2021; Pedwell 2021). While the two already cohere to produce a sense of grace in Sudnow's account of early video games, what of the more complex anthropotechnical entanglements current titles stage? The final section discusses the aesthetics of two kinds of aim-assist in first-person shooter, *Call of Duty: Warzone* (2020), to reinforce the paper's central claim that algorithmic automation can supplant bodily habit to foster grace. Specifically, the elation experienced as "embodied literacy" (Keogh 2018, 77) and "algorithmic adjustment" (Soderman 2021, 128) harmonize to achieve a headshot exemplifies the epiphany of grace in gaming.

Conclusion: Why Grace, Not Flow?

The paper makes a threefold proposal. First, whereas flow is a capacious category that depicts various phenomena as inducing the same pleasurable state, grace is a more precise term for characterizing that instance of pleasure when we recognize the beauty of our own motion. Second, at a time when posthumanist frameworks are ubiquitous in game studies, the field needs theories that, unlike the individualism of flow, account for the distributed nature of aesthetic experience. Common in eighteenth-century philosophy, grace marks a "posthumanism in the age of humanism" that hinges on an appreciation of "nonhuman" forces (Landgraf et al. 2018). Finally, grace bears another utility in light of media theorist Sonia Fizek's recent monograph on thoroughly automated video game spectacles that we don't so much play as watch (2022). If grace

concerns a pleasurable divestment of will, then its eighteenth-century apotheosis is German poet Heinrich von Kleist's musings on the marionette theater. Further research might consider whether artificial intelligences demonstrate "more grace… than the human body" (Kleist 1972, 24).

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