

## **Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject**

*Braxton Soderman*

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In the 1960s and 1970s, Mihaly Csikszentmihályi developed his theory of flow. According to Csikszentmihályi, flow occurs when individuals engage in an activity, and during this engagement, their skill levels are balanced against the activity's level of difficulty. If the activity's challenge level is too low, boredom may result, causing the individuals to disengage. Conversely, if the challenge level is too high, the individuals may become frustrated. In this case, individuals may also disengage. It is only when the skill level and challenge are balanced that flow can be achieved. When this state of mind occurs, Csikszentmihályi maintains, the activity becomes enjoyable. Although flow theory can be applied to a variety of contexts—playing chess, creating art, playing a sport—Braxton Soderman is primarily concerned with how flow theory connects to video game play in *Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject*. Achieving a flow state has long been held up as a positive goal for video games, but according to Soderman, this goal needs to be challenged.

Soderman's critique is neatly laid out step-by-step through an introduction, five subsequent chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction and first chapter provide a comprehensive overview of Csikszentmihályi's theory. Later chapters

examine the politics of enjoyment, flow's connection to planned obsolescence, capitalism's penchant for production and consumption, comparisons between video games and older media forms, the ability to maintain critical distance while playing a video game, and an examination of flow in independent games. Soderman's conclusion rounds out the text by examining the critical futures of flow.

As originally proposed, Csikszentmihályi considered flow a better response to capitalism than Marx's socialism. In sum, Csikszentmihályi asserted that flow would enable individuals to avoid alienation from their work by achieving a flow state and thus turning work into a pleasurable activity. In essence, social revolution is unnecessary when work becomes play. In contrast, Soderman explains that flow has been commodified; game developers actively create games to help players achieve a flow state. On one hand, games serve as a distraction from the troublesome issues found in capitalist societies. As Soderman asserts, ". . . flow can function not as a peak experience of enjoyment, but rather as a way to manage and cope with personal and social problems" (p. 63). Second, achieving flow while playing a video game results in a pattern of production and consumption that merely reinforces the capitalist ideology. In both cases, flow actually reinforces capitalism's ideology as opposed to emancipating oneself from its grasp. Soderman also criticizes society's movement toward gamification, which similarly makes work, education, and other aspects of our daily life merely a game to be played (what Csikszentmihályi termed the politics of enjoyment), but which also falls prey to capitalist ideology

making it easier to commodify these activities. Moreover, the politics of enjoyment and use of flow theory pushes individual solutions over collective ones. This, too, also falls neatly under capitalism's wing.

As Soderman moves through his critique, he provides a few options. One is to not use flow for purely pleasurable purposes, but also for reflection and critical distance by encouraging individuals to adopt an outside perspective rather than an inside perspective focused on the game play. This outside perspective allows the player to consider issues such as insecurity and social anxiety, among others. It is not that play and enjoyment should be abandoned but, instead, that play should encourage interpretation. Soderman designates this experience as critical flow. Soderman then situates the potential for critical flow within the rise of independent games as a counter to dominant mainstream game development. Independent games, he claims, offer the opportunity for an outside perspective. The possibility to enact an outside perspective is rooted in the difference between games and playfulness. Csikszentmihályi stated that games are playfulness that has been tamed but also that playfulness can remove the constraints of a game—playfulness provides a way to emancipate games. In short, "Playfulness renovates rather than opposes. Playfulness does not change what exists; rather, it changes how we view what already exists" (p. 206). The ability to change how we view what already exists is the outside perspective.

While Soderman provides a logical process to make his arguments, one must question the usefulness of his critique. At two points, Soderman alludes to potential problems. In chapter 5, he recounts Christopher Byrd's review of the game *Donut County*. In his review, Byrd comments that the game did not make him think differently about gentrification (the game's focus), but the game did help him escape his real-world problems. In Soderman's view, the game was too immersive for this player. However, it is important to question whether the average game player really wants to be made aware of these societal issues if escapism is the primary goal. Will these outward views of society's ills be merely shrugged off as inconsequential? This is an important question to ask. Soderman also discusses how the mainstream game developers tend to commodify the innovations made by independent developers, trapping these new ideas in the continual cycle of capitalistic production and consumption. While renovation is poised in opposition to innovation, what stops mainstream developers from coopting these renovations as well, especially if players are more concerned with escapism? In short, do the game players even care? That does not mean that Soderman's ideas are not worthy of further consideration but, instead, that these ideas need to be situated in the day-to-day lived experience of the individuals playing games.

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