

The Beautiful Rule: Thinking the Aesthetics of Game Rules

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Abstract

This paper introduces a model for analyzing the aesthetic value of game rules. Drawing on Nguyen’s theory of agential aesthetics, this paper argues that the aesthetic value of a rule is related to the ways in which it contains modalities of agency. Using football’s (soccer) offside rule as a case study, this article provides a way of thinking about the aesthetics of game rules.

Keywords

Game aesthetics, game rules, game design, gameplay, sports

Introduction

‘That lad must have been born offside.’ – Sir Alex Ferguson on Filippo Inzaghi

He patiently waits but is never still. He is prowling his territory, a small area where he seeks invisibility. Sometimes he starts running, but quickly stops because the timing is not right. But he’s there, perched on a liminal edge, waiting. Then something happens, time accelerates, it is the right run, a defender is left behind, the ball clumsily reaches his feet and with the exterior of his right foot he fools the goalkeeper, the ball goes in, he shouts and raises the corner flag as a celebration. Filippo Inzaghi scores yet another goal for AC Milan, this time against Bayern München in October 2002 ([AC Milan, 2021](#)). The goal is an example of the exhilarating allure of the offside rule, the most beautiful rule of the beautiful game.

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This article is an inquiry on the aesthetics of game rules. Through a hermeneutic interpretation of the offside rule in the game of association football (football henceforth), I look into how game rules can be aesthetically evaluated. Following Thi Nguyen's argument that games are the art form of agency (Nguyen, 2020), I propose that it is possible to assign aesthetic value to game rules due to their effects on player agency. The offside rule provides a template for rules that maximize aesthetic effect, as it involves individual and collective agency, the material conditions of the game, and the process of rule enforcement and interpretability. While the study of sports is often presented in the context of philosophy of sports journal, the goal of this article is to illustrate how game studies can use sports as case studies in "classic" topics of the field, such as the nature of rules in games (Juul, 2005).

Understanding the offside rule also provides insights on the effects of digital visual media in games. By studying the application of Video Assisted Refereeing (VAR), I propose a critical analysis of the effects of broadcasting and digital media on the aesthetics of games.

Since this article is a philosophical analysis of the aesthetics of a game rule, the argument will follow classic philosophical argumentation, introducing premises that lead to a conclusion. These premises will be based on readings of the offside rule, both as text and as part of gameplay situations. These gameplay situations will be primarily sourced from videos of football games, and secondarily sourced from literature on game tactics. The literature on the aesthetics of games is vast, and while different traditions will be acknowledged in this article, the foundation of this analysis is based on Nguyen's aesthetic theory of games, as well as Bernard Suits (Suits, 1978) and David Best's (Best, 1974) analysis of games and sports.

This article is only concerned with the game of football played with Law 11. To play the game of football, that is rule is not necessary, and in fact, most games of football casually played do not enforce Law 11. In football development, offside is not introduced until players are 14–16 years old. My corpus then will be limited to the game played in settings in which Law 11 is enforced.

I started this article by describing a goal by the Italian striker Filippo Inzaghi, a master in playing with the offside rule. While I focused on describing the scoring of a goal, the ultimate purpose of the game of football, the beauty of the offside resides in how it affects agency in multiple layers, dynamically, over time, during a game. The offside rule affects how players act, how teams strategize, the size of the pitch, and it ultimately depends on human interpretation. The offside rule is the foundation of what makes football a great game, and a great spectacle – it is nothing else but the foundation of the beautiful game.

A Most Beautiful Rule: Framing the Aesthetics of Game Rules

I play therefore I am: a style of play is a way of being that reveals the unique profile of each community and affirms its right to be different. Tell me how you play and I'll tell you who you are. - Eduardo Galeano

In order to understand how to study the aesthetic value of game rules, I need to situate this work in relation to the research on the aesthetics of games and sports. This article draws on Thi Nguyen's aesthetic theory of games (Nguyen, 2020). However, it is important to highlight how this article differs from other theories on the aesthetics of games, sports, and play.

First of all, I should mention that I am not going to be discussing whether football is "art." While there are convincing arguments to approach games as art (Sharp, 2015), and even Nguyen dedicates a chapter to the consideration of games as art forms (Nguyen, 2020), I prefer to align with David Best's argument that sport is not art, but that "superb aesthetically, sport can undoubtedly be. Why not judge sport by its own standards, including aesthetic standards?" (Best, 1988). Best's arguments for the aesthetics of sports (Best, 1974) draw on a distinction among types of sports: "On the one hand, there are those sports, which I shall call 'purposive' and which form the great majority, where the aesthetic is normally relatively unimportant [...] on the other hand, there is a category of sports in which the aim cannot be specified in isolation from the aesthetic [...] I shall call these 'aesthetic' sports since they are similar to the arts in that their purpose cannot be considered apart from the manner of achieving it" (p. 480). Best argues that "A purposive sport is one in which within the rules or conventions, there is an indefinite variety of ways of achieving the end which at least largely defines the game. By contrast, an aesthetic sport is one in which the purpose cannot be specified independently of the manner of achieving it" (p. 481). This may imply that studying rules as having aesthetic value *as related to gameplay* goes beyond what the aesthetic study of games and sports should allow.

Indeed, most aesthetic theories of games should be understood as aesthetic theories of *gameplay*. The beauty of games is related to the performance of players during gameplay. The practice of play, framed by games, is the source of the aesthetic experience: "We create, return to, adjust, watch, discuss, mythologize physical games because they appeal to us in a fully meaningful, embodied sense; because a game that revolves around putting a leather ball into a metal hoop ten feet off the ground is, when considered on aesthetic rather than mechanical or coldly informational grounds, potentially a deeply meaningful practice created by humans for humans" (Elcombe, 2012). In this view, the participation of players and audiences is essential to the aesthetics of games as practices (Lacerda & Mumford, 2010). Drawing on Kantian aesthetics (Kant et al., [1790](2001); Schiller & Snell, 2012; Wenzel, 2006), philosophers of sport look at the non-purposive actions in play as the primary location of aesthetic value in sport.

The focus on action and practice explains the relevance of phenomenology in these studies. Since playing games such as sports implies an embodied practice, phenomenology provides an access point to study the beauty of bodies in motion bounded by freely accepted rules. From Merleau-Pointian aesthetics (Hughson & Inglis, 2002) to more classic understandings of sports and games (Kupfer, 2001) and even Nietzschean understandings of soccer (Tuncel, 2017), the role of the body is central in a phenomenological aesthetics of sports. In *What we think about when we think about soccer*

(Critchley, 2017), Critchley makes a compelling argument for a phenomenology of the game: “The phenomenological approach will lead us into a poetics of time, space, drama and all the elements of what William James calls ‘this mysterious sensorial life’ that make up the varieties of football experience. My hope is that this approach will enable the reader to see the beauty of football with slightly different eyes” (p. 13).

Gumbrecht’s *In Praise of Athletic Beauty* (Gumbrecht, 2006) relates the aesthetics of games with bodies, practices, and rules: “Great athletes are not great because they change the rules of the event in which they excel. Rather, they mostly try to reach - and sometimes to move - the limits of what is possible within a stable set of rules and recordkeeping” (p. 63). However, the place of aesthetic value is still the body in motion: “A beautiful play is produced by the sudden, surprising convergence of several athletes’ bodies in time and space” (pp. 189–190). Even existentialist takes on game aesthetics (Vella, 2021) argues for the enactment of ‘ludic subjects’ as the primary locus for beauty in games.

Nguyen’s theory of games as the art form of agency seems to be part of this same tradition: “Let’s start with some paradigmatically aesthetic qualities: those of gracefulness and elegance. We obviously attribute such aesthetic qualities to particular playings of games, especially from the spectators’ perspective [...] there are distinctive aesthetic qualities available primarily to the causally active game player. These are aesthetic qualities of acting, deciding, and solving. (Nguyen, 2020). Nguyen’s characteristics of agential art clearly put practice mediated by a shared object as essential to understanding the aesthetics of games:

“[...] something is a work of agential art if:

1. An audience is prescribed to participate in order to appreciate the work.
2. That participation takes the form of generating the attentive object.
3. That attentive object includes features of the audience member’s process of participation.
4. That prescribed process of participation includes the pursuit of a goal” (ibid, p. 148–149).

However, Nguyen’s theory offers the possibility of looking at the formal elements of games as having in themselves aesthetic value. *Games: Agency as Art* begins by defining games as “a method for inscribing forms of agency into artifactual vessels [...] games [...] communicate forms of agency” (ibid, p. 1). Games are like music and dance and painting, a “human practice of inscription” (ibid, p. 1). This appraisal of games as containers of agency arguably allows for the consideration of games as aesthetic artifacts: “games can intensify and refine those aesthetic qualities, just as a painting can intensify and refine the aesthetic qualities we find in the natural sights

and sounds of the world” (*ibid*, p. 13). By considering games to be “an artistic cousin to cities and governments” in that “they are systems of rules and constraints for active agents” (*ibid*, p. 164), Nguyen allows for the direct analysis of games as vessels of agency, and therefore engaging in the aesthetic analysis of the formal elements of games, such as rules and mechanics (Adams & Dormans, 2012; Sicart (Vila), 2008; Zubek, 2020). The MDA framework (Hunicke et al., 2004) provides a similar approach to rules, only more focused on interrelations between mechanics, aesthetics, and dynamics, and oriented towards practical game design inquiries.

Drawing on Nguyen’s theory of games as the aesthetic form of agency, I argue that it is possible to study the aesthetic values of rules. If games are containers of agency, then rules are formal structures that contain those forms of agency. This argument is in line with Suit’s the way play theorists gave importance to rules or order in structuring the activity of play (Caillois, 2001; Huizinga, 1971; Suits, 1978).

This framing of aesthetics leaves outside several important elements of aesthetic pleasure, like perceptions and emotions. In this article, I want to as strictly as possible follow Nguyen’s arguments on games and agency and aesthetics, with the ‘harmony of self and world’ as the essential aesthetic result of playing games. The importance of spectacle and emotion, which are undeniable in football, should be addressed in further work on the aesthetics of football.

Rules have aesthetic value if they can be connected to the manifestation of forms of agency during gameplay. The ways in which rules shape agency, creating behaviours but also staying open to creative interpretation and appropriation (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017; Sengers & Gaver, 2006; Sicart, 2014), are elements that qualify the aesthetic value of a rule. Rules as locations of potential agency have aesthetic value, a position that is compatible with phenomenological, existentialist, and materialist understandings of the aesthetics of games. Let’s apply this argument to the offside rule in football.

Explaining the Offside Rule

The offside rule is when the French mustard has to be between the teriyaki sauce and the sea salt – *Bend it like Beckham*

The offside rule was designed to prevent players from waiting for a long ball to reach them to score a goal, a strategy that ruins the game. Football is broken if players just hang and wait for a long ball to score without opposition. However, the size of the pitch and the number of players makes it difficult to prevent that behavior. Hence, the introduction and development of the offside rule. In Wilson’s history of football tactics, *Inverting the Pyramid* (Wilson, 2008), the development of the offside rule is used to illustrate how the evolution of a rule was motivated different types of exploits.

This is not the place to write a history of the rule, but it’s important to highlight its most relevant changes, and how the laws of football are evaluated and changed. In the mid-XIX Century, Law Six defined a primitive form of offside based on where players

are situated when they kick the ball. This Law was refined progressively, limiting the number of players who could be offside to three. According to Wilson (*ibid*, Chapter 1), the evolution of the offside rule was also the evolution of the passing game, and the tactics that would support it. The most crucial change in the rule happened in 1925. Wilson describes this critical change: “At a meeting in London in June, the FA decided they preferred the [offside rule] version requiring only two defending players to play a forward onside. [...] previously a side looking to play the offside trap had been able to retain one full-back as cover as his partner stepped up to try to catch the forward; the new legislation meant that a misjudgement risked leaving the forward through one-on-one with the goalkeeper” (pp. 42–43).

It is worth mentioning that the laws of the game are evaluated and changed by an institutional body, The International Football Association Board (IFAB) which has as its mission to act as custodians of the laws of the game. The IFAB both comes up with suggestions for change through consultation, and accepts requests from different national football associations (see their process here: <https://www.theifab.com/work-process/>, accessed 22/8/2022), and it publishes every year the updated Laws of the game by which all official matches of the game should be played by.

Officially, the offside rule is Law 11, and it’s designed by the International Football Association Board (Law 11: Offside, 2016). Law 11 defines the offside position as that situation in which a player is in the opponent’s half, and they are closer to the goal line than both the ball and the second-to-last defender. If a player is between the goal line and the last defender and the ball, that player is offside. The IFAB has changed Law 11 several times; I am basing this article on the 2021–2022 definition of the rule (<https://www.theifab.com/laws/2021-22/offside/#offside-offence>, accessed 22/8/2022).

Being offside is not an offense, it’s a game state. It becomes a foul if the player attempts to influence the game from that position. Influence can be active, by touching the ball, or passive, by for example blocking the goalkeeper’s line of sight. The referee needs to notice if the player receiving the ball was in an offside position when the ball was released by another player, and whether there is influence of that position in the run of the game.

The offside position “state” does not happen in corner kicks, throw-ins, or goal kicks; nor if the ball is passed from an opponent. A player is not offside if the direction of the ball is changed by an opponent’s action. When the Spanish defender Eric Garcia dived to try to cut a through ball on its way to Kylian Mbappé in the Nations Cup final in 2021, his touching of the ball immediately changed the state of Mbappé from being offside to being onside, allowing him to run alone towards the goal and score the matchwinner (The Football Zone, 2021). Garcia was put in an impossible position: let the ball pass, reach Mbappé, and hope that the Frenchman was offside, or try to cut the pass just to make sure that the threat was eliminated. This example illustrates an important element of the offside rule: it is up to the referees to evaluate whether the players offside have the intention to play the ball.

Law 11 implies that attackers always have to follow the defensive line formed by the opponent’s team, effectively shrining the size of pitch as related to the playing

of the game. The space where the play can take place is effectively reduced to the space between the two offside zones, wherein the only legal moves in the game are possible. Teams can develop strategies to place opponent players in offside positions on purpose, triggering an offense. This tactic has eventually become a staple of some of the greatest teams: being able to collectively move the defense line so as to place attackers in an offside position that triggers a foul.

The offside rule has an effect in the individual player, who has to be aware of their position in the pitch, but who can also develop the skill to hang on to the boundaries of the defensive line to try to gain legal advantage. The rule also has an effect on team tactics: in the attacking phase, coaches search for patterns of passing that allow to overcome the offside defensive strategy; in the defensive phase, the offside traps helps teams control the effective play space of the game. Law 11 has an effect in the material conditions of the game: the playing field changes size dynamically depending on where the defense lines are situated. The rule also has an effect in refereeing, as it is the task of the referee and their assistants to evaluate player intention and position at the moment of pass. Summarizing: the offside rule affects individual and team agency, the material conditions of the game, and the interpretation of the rules during gameplay. These are the foundations for the aesthetic value of Law 11.

The Aesthetic Value of Game Rules

Football is not about players, or at least not just about players; it is about shape and about space, about the intelligent deployment of players, and their movement within that deployment. - Jonathan Wilson

If games are the art form of agency, then game design is the practice of creating technologies that facilitate the encapsulation of agency in rules and spaces of possibility (Zubek, 2020). While the argument about games, agency, and aesthetics pays some attention to the material and designerly (Cross, 2006) aspects of games, it does still locate the aesthetics of games in the act of playing them.

It is difficult not to agree with this position. After all, a game that is not played is not a game, but a static collection of rules and materials devoid of the enacted agencies of players, their imaginations and emotions. However, I would like to challenge this perspective by arguing that it is possible to locate *some* aesthetics elements of games in their rules. To do so, I propose the analysis of rules from the perspective of the (potential) agency they contain.

A rule's aesthetic value will increase if it has an effect on players' agencies *as well as in* the context (material, temporal) in which those agencies are enacted, for it relates what players do (agency) to the gameworld in which those actions take place. To evaluate the aesthetic value of a rule, we need to describe how it shapes player agency, related to the type of play it wants to create. For example, in the context of competitive agonistic games (Caillois, 2001), a rule should help players challenge their skills and meaningfully reach their goals, while allowing for the comparison of results amongst

players (Suits, 1978). If games are the art form of agency, then rules are the instruments games have to start shaping that agency. The way a rule shapes agency is part of the aesthetic value of the rule.

For a rule to be aesthetically valuable in a multiplayer game, it should also take into consideration the collective agency of the group of players that will play the game. If a rule has influence in the tactics and strategies that shape collective play action while still allowing for flourishing individual play, that adds to its value.

In the context of games, agency takes place in the environment created by the game, and mediated by material practices. In other words: playthings (Sicart, 2021) are also part of the aesthetics of agency in games. The pleasure of the materials we play with is a source of aesthetic experience. A rule that has an effect in the material practices of play has aesthetic value.

The aesthetic value of a rule should also be evaluated by how it frames player agency in the creation of spaces of possibility. A rule that allows for interpretation expands the agential range of players, and therefore increases the possibilities for aesthetic experience within the context of a game (Gaver, 2009; Sicart, 2014). Adding the capacity to discuss and evaluate the application and meaning of a rule gives players agency not only within the game, but also in the metagame (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017; Sicart, 2015), a reflection on the nature of the rules they have volunteered to the bound by.

Summarizing, the aesthetic value of a rule can be determined by:

- How the rule shapes individual player agency.
- How the rule shapes collective agency.
- How the rule relates player agency to the material properties of the game.
- How the rule is open to interpretation, thus opening the metagame to player agency.

For any rule, it should be possible to ascertain its aesthetic value based on one of these characteristics alone. Let's apply this framework to Law 11.

The Beauty of the Offside Rule

Football isn't figure skating. There are no points for style. – Reiner Calmund

The offside rule ties together individual and collective agency, affecting the material conditions of the game while also allowing for a meaningful metagame. Let me address these claims in more detail.

Individual

Games shape agency by providing goals that makes constrained action meaningful and fun (Suits, 1978). Following Suits' terminology, games require a lusory attitude

created and upheld through structures of action and reward. These structures encourage forms of pleasure through the development of skills and the overcoming of challenges. The offside rule provides a clear challenge that players can overcome by developing a very specific skillset: in the case of the offside rule, this would be the capacity to read the opponent's defensive line, and to time runs so they don't incur in a foul.

I opened this article invoking the figure of the Italian forward Filippo Inzaghi, one of the best examples of how the offside rule creates agency. Inzaghi was not the most technically gifted of strikers, nor the fastest. Inzaghi excelled at being always barely onside, reading the timing of the defense and of the passes to make perfect attacking runs. Inzaghi has a great track record: seventh highest scorer in Italy, two-times Champions League winner and three-times Italian Champion. All of that built on the unique talent of being on-time, onside, and attacking the ball with the right timing. Inzaghi understood football as a game of time and space.

The offside rule does not just shape the individual agency of offensive players. In fact, it is fair to say that no player can become a professional if they don't have the timing skills to *play* the offside rule. A defender needs to be able to tackle opponents, as well as help draw a defensive line that can trap attackers offside. Another Italian legend, Franco Baresi, could arguably be the defensive equivalent of Inzaghi: Baresi's greatest defensive talent was his reading of time and space, particularly to perform offside traps in the risky defensive systems of coach Arrigo Sacchi. Sacchi liked to play with a high defensive line, pushing the opposing team far away from their goal as an extra layer of defense. To do that, Sacchi trusted in Baresi's leadership and timing, skills that made him capable of quickly noticing an opponent who could be offside, and move to draw the line to place the player offside and void the threat.

Both these players' agency was shaped by the offside rule and their understanding of it, which helped them excel at a sport beyond their skills. This is exactly the pleasure and the beauty of striving play as a form of agency created by game rules.

Collective

The aesthetic value of striving play created by the offside rule is not limited to individual players. As mentioned, one of Baresi's greatest talents was his capacity to lead a defense line that would regularly catch opponents in an offside trap. Law 11 allows for the creation of this form of collective action: agency located not only on one player, but on a whole team. The offside rule creates a form of collective agency, it provides the framing, purpose, and structure for the development of strategies that require a coordination of players so that they behave as one, throwing the defensive line up the pitch simultaneously to catch opposing players in an offside position.

Part of the aesthetic value of team sports resides in these moments of collective agency that go beyond the individual agency of a player. A game facilitates instances of coordination between players that together form a different, distributed, multiple agent.

For example, the English Women's team at the 2022 EuroCup combined high intensity pressing in the midfield with a high defensive line, which forced most of their

opponents to play in very narrow bands of the midfield, effectively making them easier to defend, and also to catch on a counterattack after having lost the ball. Playing with this style required an extraordinary coordination between defenders and midfielders, and when it worked, like in the case of the 8-0 victory against Norway, the results were aesthetically notable.

The offside rule encourages the creation of these multiple agents, who are then in direct competition with individual agents. The lone striker trying to catch the back of the defenders is an individual agent competing against a multiple-bodies agent. If the striker is like Inzaghi, they will detect a weak link in the setup of the defense line and prey on it, as in the video example I used for illustration at the beginning of this article. The aesthetic value of the game of football resides also in the challenge of the individual against the team, the striker against the defensive line, the one against the many that act as one.

Material

Football is a game played by too few players in a large pitch. The offside rule allows for the actual space where the game is played to be of variable size, dynamically changing the material conditions of the game. The variable size of the play area depends on the movements of teams and individuals. From a player's point of view, their agency has effects on the material conditions of the game: they can change the size of the pitch through their actions, modifying the very space in which the game is played.

The offside rule ties the material change of the pitch to both individual and collective agency. It is the defensive backlines of both teams that determine the size of the pitch, but it's also the presence and actions of attackers that condition that backline placing. While playing the offside trap can be an effective way of compressing the playing field and allowing for more efficient pressing, it is also vulnerable to speedy attackers who thrive on timed runs. Law 11 adds another layer of aesthetic value to playing football, connecting the individual and the collective to the material conditions of play, and thus creating more possibilities for the experience and expression of striving play.

Metagame

The final characteristic that makes the offside aesthetically valuable is related to the metagame of football. I understand metagame as the capacity for players to interpret rules and behaviors to create new gameplay situations (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017). Enforcing Law 11 depends explicitly on referee judgment. The offside rule defines a state that can lead to an offense only when a player is behind the second to last defender at the moment of a pass *intended* to reach them is made. Only then there is an offside offense. The offense is the result of referees evaluating whether the player was offside at the moment of the pass being sent, and whether the player showed interest in continuing the play. A player can be offside, but there is no offense if they do not want to

follow the play. A player can be offside but if their position does not interfere with the goalkeeper's line of sight, there is no offense. A player could have an arm in a slightly advanced position, and not trigger an offside offense.

The offside rule was designed to depend on referees' interpretations of a player's position and intention during play. The rule is relatively clear regarding when a player is offside, but it leaves some wiggle space for interpretation. Unlike the rule that defines what a goal is (the ball crossing completely the goal line), the offside rule needs interpretation. Referees need to read the play as it happens, and in doing so Law 11 adds another layer of agency-driven aesthetic value. The referee acts as an interpreter and executor of the rules.

The role of interpreting and enforcing rules adds a layer of agency to the game that is not present in many of the other laws of football. Law 11 has an effect in the way the referee interprets the rules, the run of play, and the particular timing of situations. At the same time, it has an effect in how players can act and behave towards the run of play, for example by actively showing that they are not part of the game, so that the referee cannot interpret that they are actively part of the sequence of play. The importance of interpretation as stated in Law 11 gives referees and players an extra domain where they have agency, in this case related to the understanding of rules as the game is played.

Football is popularly known as "the beautiful game", but for those who do not enjoy playing or spectating it, that assertion is baffling: the game is slow, it has low scores, and it takes place on a large pitch that is often partially empty and devoid of action. Players seldom get relevant time on the ball, and they more often than not just jog around the pitch without being directly involved in the run of play. And yet, the spectacle can be mesmerizing to watch, and football can be argued to be a game that creates extraordinary moments of athletic beauty.

The offside rule is one of the reasons behind the aesthetic beauty of the sport. It shapes individual and collective agency, placing one against the other in agonistic challenges. The offside rule facilitates the excellence of the individual battling with the excellence of the collective. At the same time, that battle has a definitive impact in the material conditions of the game. Law 11 articulates the essential agonistic conflict of football; it creates meaningful individual and collective challenges, and demands from players, referees, and spectators both individual and collective engagement. The offside rule, for its effects in the agency and conflict of the game of football, could be described as the most beautiful rule of the beautiful game.

Matters of Beauty

"There are many poets in football, but poets don't win many titles." - Jose Mourinho.

Written rules seem to be a crossover between mathematical formulae, in which elegance in the formulation is a sign of beauty, and apodictic writing, an instrument that

tell people what to do in ways that are resonant and interpretive, like religious commands. The aesthetic value of game rules does not reside in their textual expression, but in how they inscribe and prescribe agency. As Nguyen argues, games are the art form of agency, in that they contain forms of agency that we can inhabit. Those forms of agency have a series of starting points: the presence of players, the location for the play experience, the social context and relations between players, and the rules of the game.

In this article I have focused on the aesthetic value of rules using football's Law 11 as a case study. Football is beautiful in motion, when played, in its social, embodied, and cultural dynamism. But that motion, those multiple agencies, are originated by voluntary binding to rules. A game rule can be considered to have aesthetic value when studying the agential forms it has inscribed. Not all rules have the same aesthetic value. In football, for example, the rule that states that a goal counts when the ball fully trespasses the goal line is not conducive to expressive practices of agency.

Following Nguyen's arguments to consider games as the art form of agency, I propose to consider the offside rule as aesthetically valuable because of the ways it generates individual, collective, material, and interpretative modes of agency that define the aesthetic qualities of the sport as played. If games are the art form of agency, rules can be considered as artistic expressions when they provide multiple forms of agency that are put in practice in the act of playing a game.

The aesthetic effect of game rules is that of striving play, "aesthetic experiences of practicality to their players" (Nguyen, 2020, p. 13), of which the most important one is the harmony of self and world (*ibid*, pp. 107-111). This goes beyond classic discussions of aesthetics in games and sports, in that it situates the aesthetic value of these practices not in being observed/expected, but in being actually played.

This article then contributes to Nguyen's theory by locating the source of aesthetic agency in a particular rule. This article materializes and specifies where agency is "contained", and how those "containers" can be evaluated from an aesthetic point of view. For a rule to be considered aesthetically relevant, it should *minimally* have an effect on the individual agency of a player as experienced in the context of gameplay; while *maximally* it should have an effect in the material and metagaming/interpretive layers of the game.

If games are the art form of agency, then a rule is aesthetically valuable in the way it contains a form of agency that leads to particular practices of play. In the case of multiplayer games, an aesthetically valuable rule should reflect both the individual and the collective agency, and how they relate to each other.

Furthermore, a rule could have an effect on the material conditions of the game, situating play not just as an abstraction, but as an actual embodied practice mediated by the game itself. Reminding that bodies and things are parts of play, too, is a valuable contribution of an aesthetically interesting rule.

Finally, a rule can allow for interpretation and negotiation within the boundaries of the game experience. Playing games is a social practice that requires negotiation. If a rule allows for a certain flexibility, for the creation of wiggle spaces that allow for the inevitable negotiation of intent, purpose, and meaning of the activity as led by players.

I have argued about the exceptionality of the offside rule as it interlinks agency with the material practice of the game and its interpretability. The offside rule is not unique. An argument could be made that the basketball rule that prevents attacking players to pass the ball back to their side of the court has similar effects than the offside rule: it encourages dynamism in individual agency as well as in collective agency, and it has an effect in the material practice of the game; plus, it is up to the referees to determine the intention of a defensive player when the ball crosses the half-court line. The offside rule provides a template for an initial formulation of the requirements for a rule to be considered aesthetically valuable. This analysis has implications for game design and game culture.

For game developers, the four characteristics of the offside rule as an aesthetic rule can be used as a heuristic to evaluate the impact of their work in player experience. The aesthetic value of a game, and hence the pleasure of playing it, could be backtracked to rules. A game designer could use this understanding of the aesthetics of the offside rule to ask design questions to particular choices. For example, a rule closely connected to the core mechanic of a game could be evaluated in the ways it creates a form of agency that enhances the purpose of that mechanic. In the offside rule, the difference between offside position and offside offense means that players can develop a certain skill set that makes them better at reading the movements of the opposing defense to break the offside situation. A similar type of skill progression that connects the type of agency a rule contains would make the game more aesthetically interesting to play.

In the case of a multiplayer game, the offside rule provides a template for the pleasures of collective action. A rule can create interesting social dynamics by creating instances of shared agency between different individuals. When a defense line moves as one and an attacker gets caught in the offside zone, it is a moment of shared success through collective action. A designer of a game with multiplayer components can use this template to inquire whether a particular rule, or set of rules, contributes to the creation of these types of collective behaviors.

The offside rule also offers a template for studying the material effects of agency in a game. All gameplay experiences are embodied. A deeper understanding of the way a rule or set of rules can have an effect in the material conditions of the game, and therefore also in its embodied experience, can help developers create experiences that extend agency to the very material conditions of play.

Finally, all gameplay is an interpretation of rules and mechanics in search of pleasurable experiences. Rules are often used to constraint agency, funneling it towards a certain experience. However, a careful downplaying of system authority, opening up for the interpretation of the meaning of a rule, can extend player agency and foster the creation of creative appropriations of rules themselves. Metagaming such as

speed running is possible because some rules are open to interpretation. Game designers could use this characteristic to evaluate how open to interpretation a rule can be to generate unexpected, emergent behaviors that can contribute to enhance the pleasurable experience of the game.

For media and cultural studies, this template to study the aesthetic values of rules can be used to think about the impact of visual and computational media in the experience of games. The application of Video Assisted Refereeing to help referees take decision in top flight football has been a contentious issue since the very start (Bordner, 2015; Chen & Davidson, 2022; Fasold et al., 2019; Hüttermann et al., 2017; Mather, 2020). While the idea of referees being assisted by other referees armed with monitors and video and artificial intelligence was sold as a triumph of fairness (Svantesson, 2014), the outcomes have been controversial. Few football fans seem to think that VAR has been an unequivocally good addition to the beautiful game.

VAR application has had an effect on the handball rule, on the duration of matches, and on the collective joy of celebrating a goal, as all goals are now being checked for possible prior offenses. There is an ineffable *something* that is wrong with VAR, something that shows a clash between the theoretical benefits of applying technology (fairness), and the actual practical effects of its application (Pitt, 2021).

Let me propose an argument to explain this failure of technology. VAR promises fairness through objective application of the rules. Objectivity is ‘guaranteed’ by the combination of the truth mode of video and artificial intelligence with the time given to referees to observe, in high definition detail and with pause, the events in the game (Collins, 2010; Panse & Mahabaleshwarkar, 2020). However, VAR is being applied to a rule designed to be interpretive. Is the player offside when the pass is sent? Which part of the player? Are they gaining advantage? Are they blocking the view of the goalkeeper? Those are questions the referee needs to answer, and take a decision during the run of the game. These are questions open for interpretation. An arm or a hand or even a foot can be offside but not necessarily give an attacker an unfair advantage. The lines drawn by computer-aided software show positions, but ultimately it should be the referee who decides whether an arm, elbow, or head give an unfair advantage to a player.

With VAR, the interpretive aesthetic quality of the rule is being slowly substituted by a technical solution that implements logics of computational evaluation through technology (Mather, 2020). Football has evolved to be an unfair game, a game with fallibility at heart, due to the importance of interpretation (Aragão e Pina et al., 2018; Bordner, 2015; Boyer et al., 2020; Fasold et al., 2019; Maruenda, 2004). The commercial interests around the top flight game are in contradiction with that fallibility, requiring a technology of capital to ensure that potential human error does not harm the ‘objective’ results.

Yet the aesthetic pleasure of the game derives partially from the fact that some decisions about the run of the game, the shape and size of the pitch, and the intentions of

others are up for human interpretation. The aesthetics of football is not limited to the aesthetics of the moments of athletic prowess; the game is beautiful when Maradona scores a clearly illegal goal the referee does not see, when Filippo Inzaghi was so much on the edge of being offside that it was impossible to decide whether he was on or offside. Football is aesthetically valuable when it is a flowing clash of individual and collective action in a variably-sized play space within a larger pitch, all regulated by a fallible human interpreting and applying the law.

The beauty of football resides in how close to ritual and law it is: depending on deliberation of a person, on the direct engagement with an authority that can be wrong. This is not a game being unfair, but profoundly human. VAR brings a form of inhuman power to the game, a logic of fairness rooted in economic interests. VAR pushes a logic of computation into the experience of the game. Because of the interpretive space created by the offside rule, football fully explores the limits of human agency, physical and interpretive, in the context of a game. The game is beautiful because the referee can be wrong, because the result can be unfair, and because some rules are suggestions of action enforced by interpretation.

Adding elements of visual and computational media to games can break the importance of interpretation and negotiation as part of gameplay. VAR shows how depriving a game from the possibilities of interpretation and error does not make the game more fair, but more a ghost of the pleasures it can afford to its players and spectators.

Conclusions

If I wanted you to understand it, I would have explained it better - Johan Cruyff

This article has explored the possibility of evaluating the aesthetic value of a game rule. In my reading of the offside rule, the rule is aesthetically valuable because it has an effect on the individual and collective agency that structures the game as played, while relating those agencies to both the material conditions of the game, and the meta-game around the interpretation of the very boundaries of what a rule encompasses.

Summarizing: a rule is aesthetically valuable when it shapes directly the main modes of player agency in a game, while also relating it to the material and interpretive practices of playing the game.

Not all rules will follow this template: single player and multiplayer games will have different manifestations of aesthetic value. Similarly, it may be possible that there are aspects of the aesthetics of games that are not covered by this narrow focus on games as the aesthetics of agency. However, I have taken a first step in a specific direction: this article proposes and exemplifies an argument that allows for the study and design of game rules as aesthetically valuable.

The arguments I presented in this paper can be applied beyond sports, and therefore are of use for game studies. For example, the appeal of events such as Games Done Quick (<https://gamesdonequick.com>) can be partially explained as the aesthetic pleasure of seeing players explore the ways in which rules can contain different forms of agency. In

fact, the aesthetics of speedrunning can be studied from the perspective presented in this paper, as a metagame exploration (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017) of how particular interpretations of rules can extend the forms of agency inscribed in the formal definition of the rule.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a framework for the analysis of rules from an aesthetic perspective. It should be possible to use this framework to study any rule in a game that creates aesthetic pleasures, from multiplayer pleasures to the pleasant accepted constraints of individual agency. For example, part of the fun of the original *Flywrench* videogame (Essen, 2007) can be traced to the rule that determines the speed of the respawn of the player. *Flywrench* is a game of diabolical difficulty, but the painful pleasure of playing it (Wilson & Sicart (Vila), 2010) can be ascribed also to the way this particular rule makes certain that player agency is promptly returned to the player after failure. Shortcircuiting reflection also short-circuits frustration, and encourages a longer investment in the audiovisual pleasures of *Flywrench*.

The problems ahead are not small. An aesthetic without ethics may call for the praise of aesthetic rules that lead to unethical behaviors. There should be no aesthetic without ethics, and therefore the foundations of this analysis need to be expanded through the lens of morality. Another problem comes with my broad use of “games.” A more detailed analysis might add, or subtract some of the foundations of my argument when it comes to other types of games, from board games to playground games, or to strange contemporary *things* like videogames.

And yet, despite the work ahead, there is now a foundation. A game rule can be aesthetically valuable. The beauty of a game might not just reside on playing, but on the way rules contain that aesthetic value, facilitate it, and encourage players to relate to them.

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