

In gamification, we (I) talk about [flow](#) all the time. But, as I have explained in previous posts, it isn't really flow that we are speaking about in its truest form - rather balance. The fine line between challenge and ability, where a player might find themselves stretched but not in a position where the challenge is impossible (or boringly easy).

As a very quick reminder, Flow is a state that Mihály Csíkszentmihályi wrote about in his book "*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* [1]". It is a state in which everything is perfectly balanced, skill, challenge, concentration and more. Time seems to stand still, the world around you evaporates - it is just you and the task.

He identified six factors, that in combination produce flow.

- Intense and focused concentration on the present moment
- Merging of action and awareness
- A loss of reflective self-consciousness
- A sense of personal control or agency over the situation or activity
- A distortion of temporal experience, one's subjective experience of time is altered
- Experience of the activity as intrinsically rewarding also referred to as autotelic experience

Anyway, the reason this has sprung to mind is that recently I was late to work, because of a knotted piece of string!

The String

My daughter had made a kite and the thread she had used as the string was knotted and tangled. Before work, I decided I would *quickly* untangle it. I set to the task and after what felt like maybe 10 minutes, I was finished. Only it wasn't 10 minutes, it was 40 minutes and I was late for work!

I had experienced Flow, proper Flow, not just a well balanced or even immersive experience, Flow. Time and space ceased to exist as I battled the string.

This was an epiphanal moment for me, as it solidified a thought that had been building for years. We need to stop talking about Flow as a goal for a standard gamified system! It just isn't a sensible or even a likely objective for standard gamification (a bit like fun..). By that, I mean pure gamification, where it is game elements in non-game contexts, the addition of game elements to improve a process, not to create a "real" game.

Gamification does not promote Flow, it just can't on its own.

We can and should use the concept of balancing skill with the challenge as a design objective, but that isn't enough to create Flow on its own. You can create a feeling of disconnection from reality and a certain level of immersion, certainly, but I have never used a gamified solution that made time and space cease to matter. Be honest, have you? Flow is not a KPI, like fun, it can be the outcome of a well-designed system, I just feel that for true flow you need to look towards full games, not just gamification.

That doesn't mean that I have not experienced great gamified solutions - of course, I have, many in fact!

[1] M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology of optimal performance*. 1990.

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