

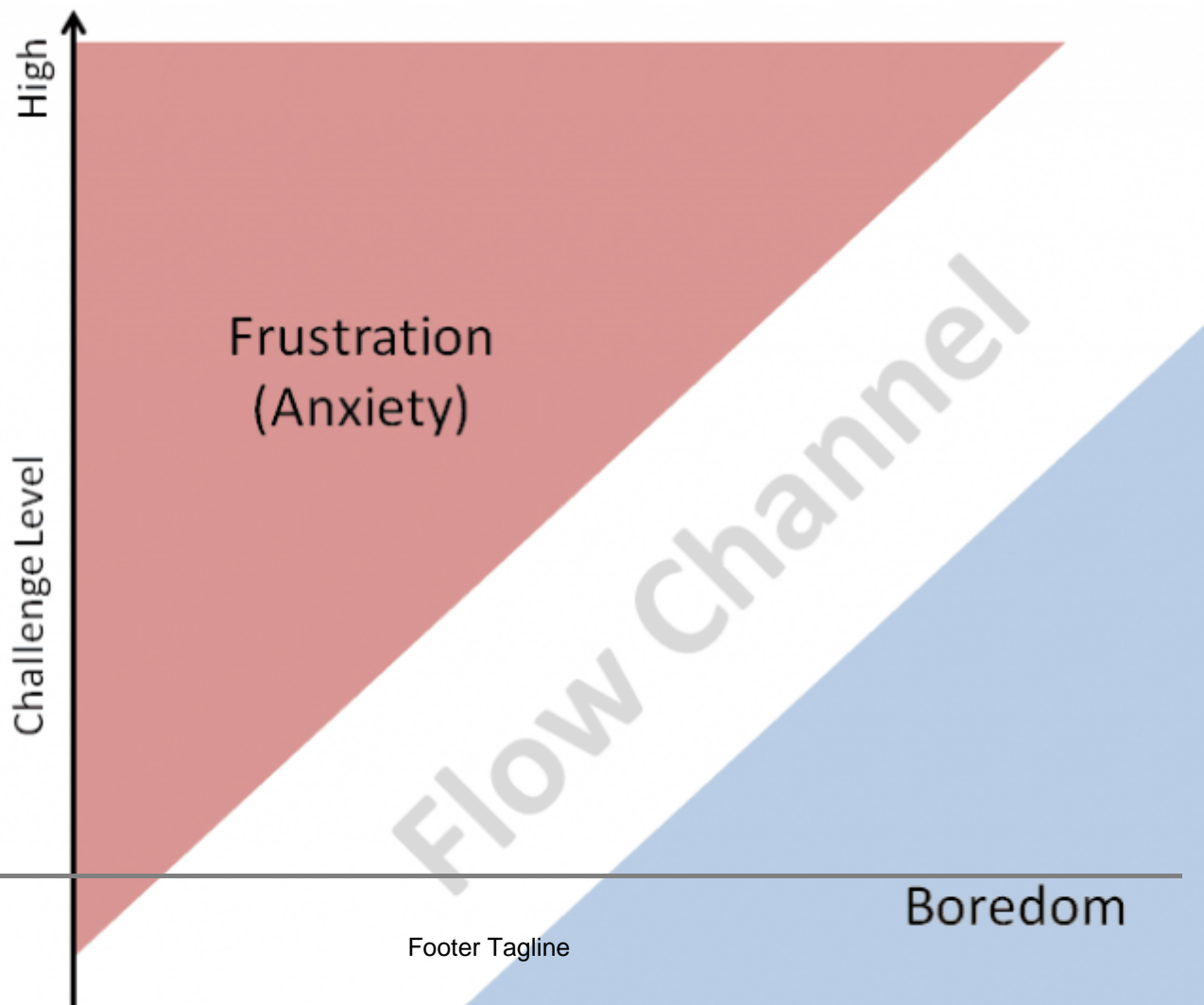
## Flow & gamification: a misunderstanding

### Description

Flow. A popular concept in gamification, goodness knows I have spoken about it often enough – just last week in fact. It was that article that actually made me realise that there is a distinct misunderstanding of flow as [Mihály Csíkszentmihályi](#) describes it.

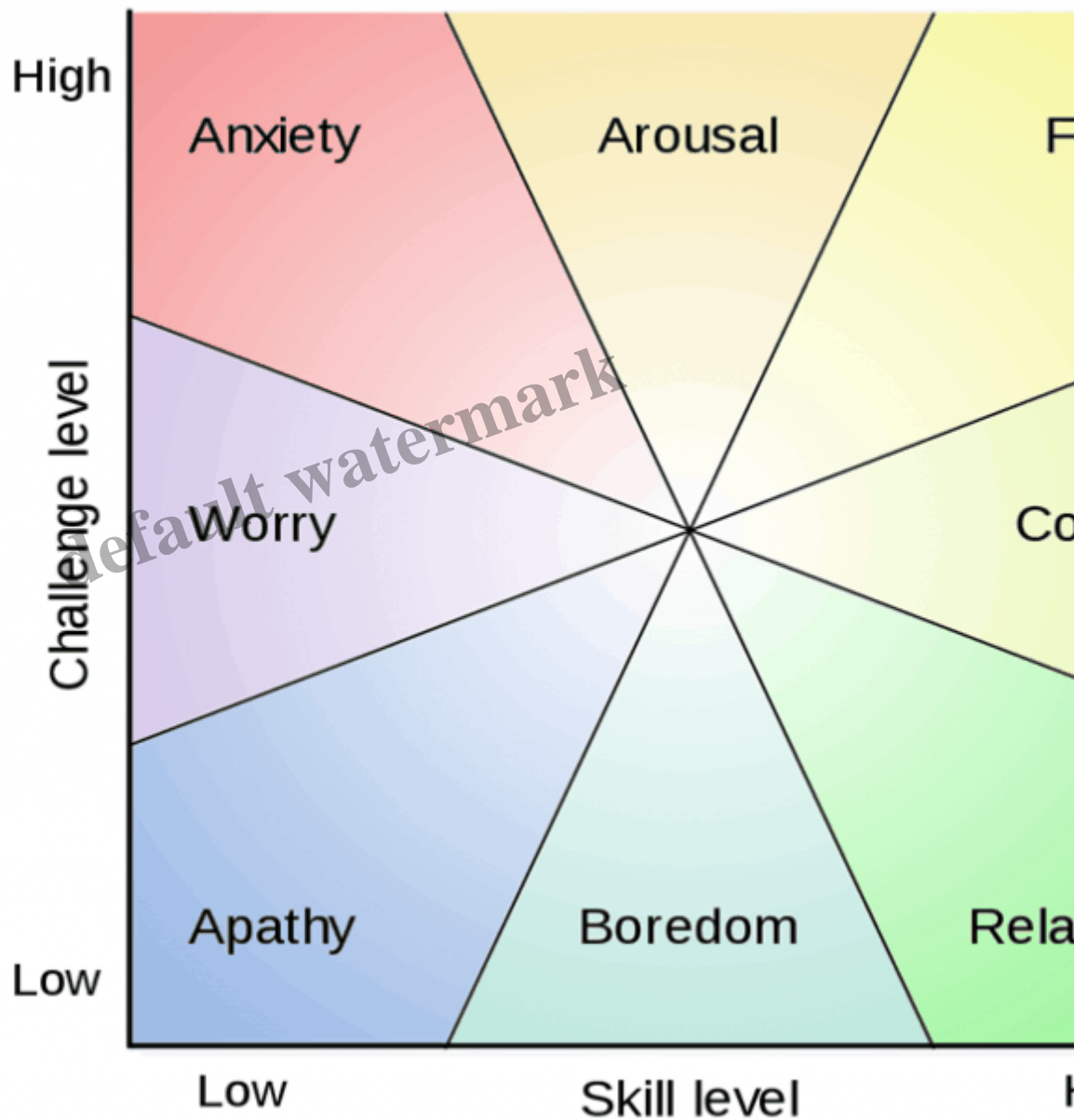
The image below is how we in gamification tend to view it, our simplified version.

### Flow Simplified



We talk about the Flow Channel, the point where skill level and challenge level are in a good balance. So this would mean that Flow could be achieved when you have a balanced low skill and low challenge. However, when we look at how Mihály Csíkszentmihályi originally described it, that would actually be apathy – not a state we want for our users!

## Csíkszentmihályi's Flow

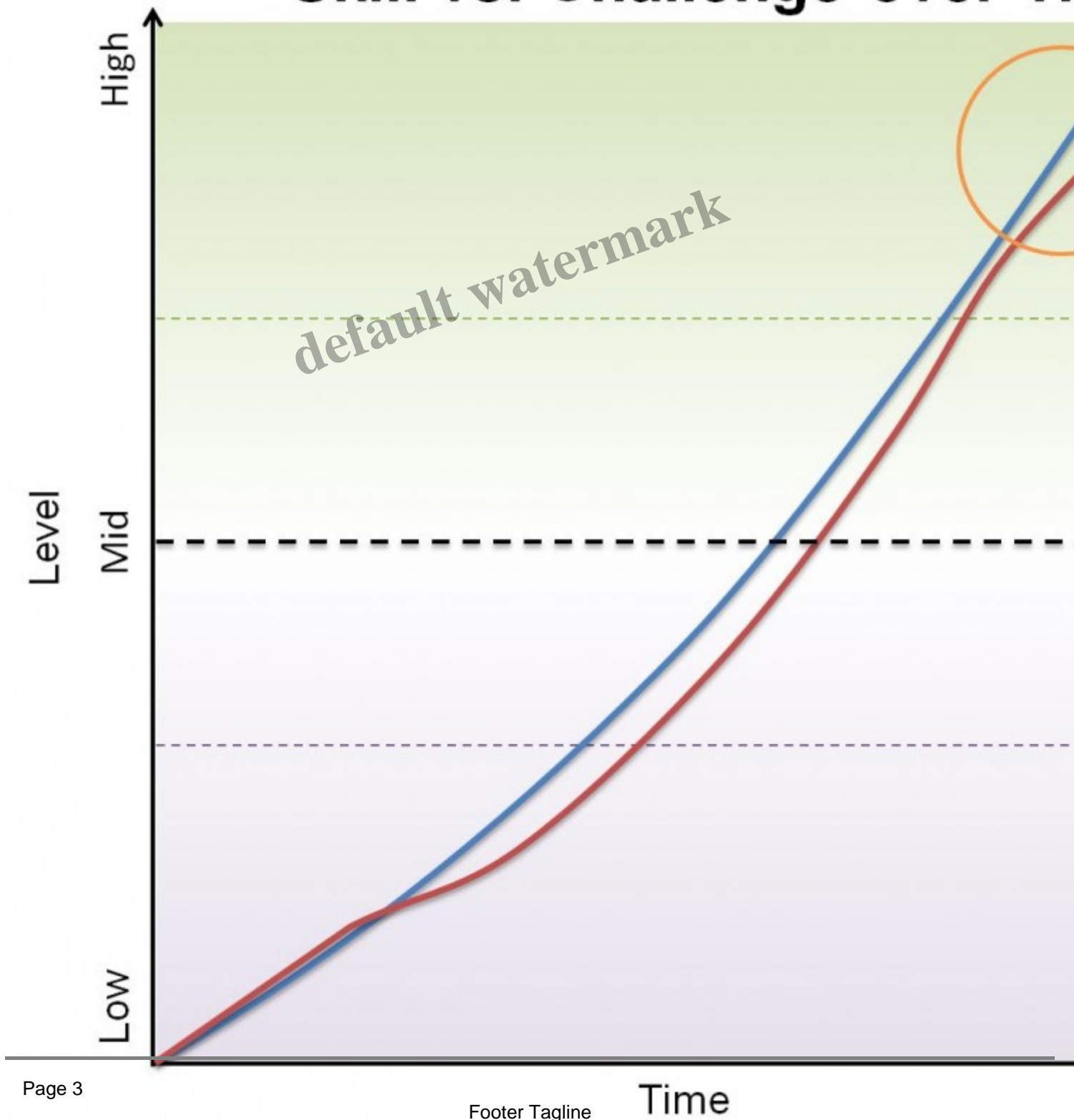


I think and I know this is true of me, that we are actually talking about a balance of skill and challenge over time. Flow theory is about a particular moment in time – a snapshot.

For gamification to work, we want to increase the level of challenge in line with the level of skill our users have. The idea being that they develop new skills as new challenge arise. To high a challenge with to low a skill level and **boom!** – they get frustrated, the other way around and **wham!** – boredom.

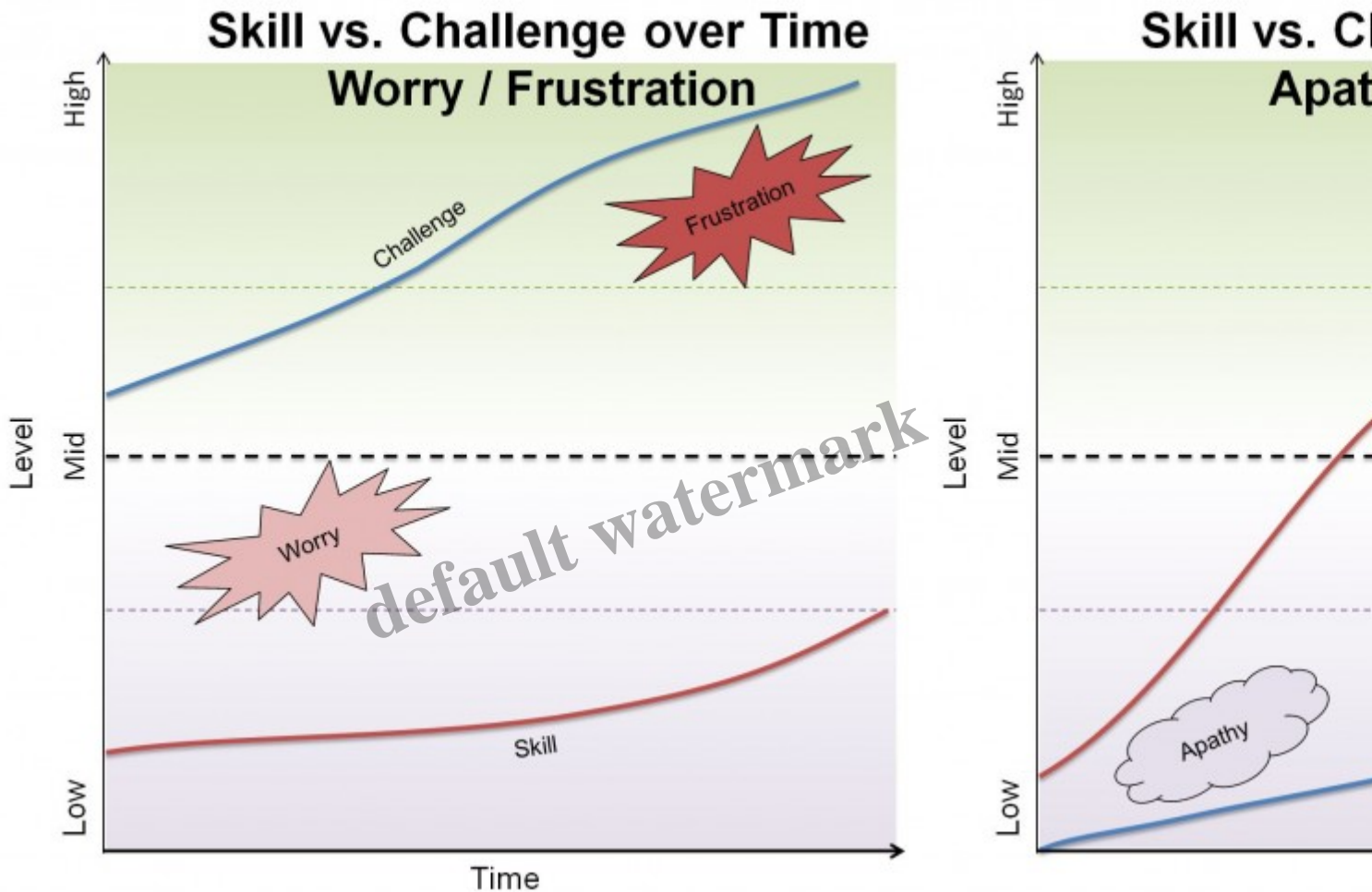
So, lets consider Challenge vs Skill over Time. The image below is similar to the ones I used in my article last week. It shows two lines. One is skill and one is challenge. It shows the 'ideal' balance as I have just described. Over time, challenge and skill increase in a parallel way.

## Skill vs. Challenge over Time



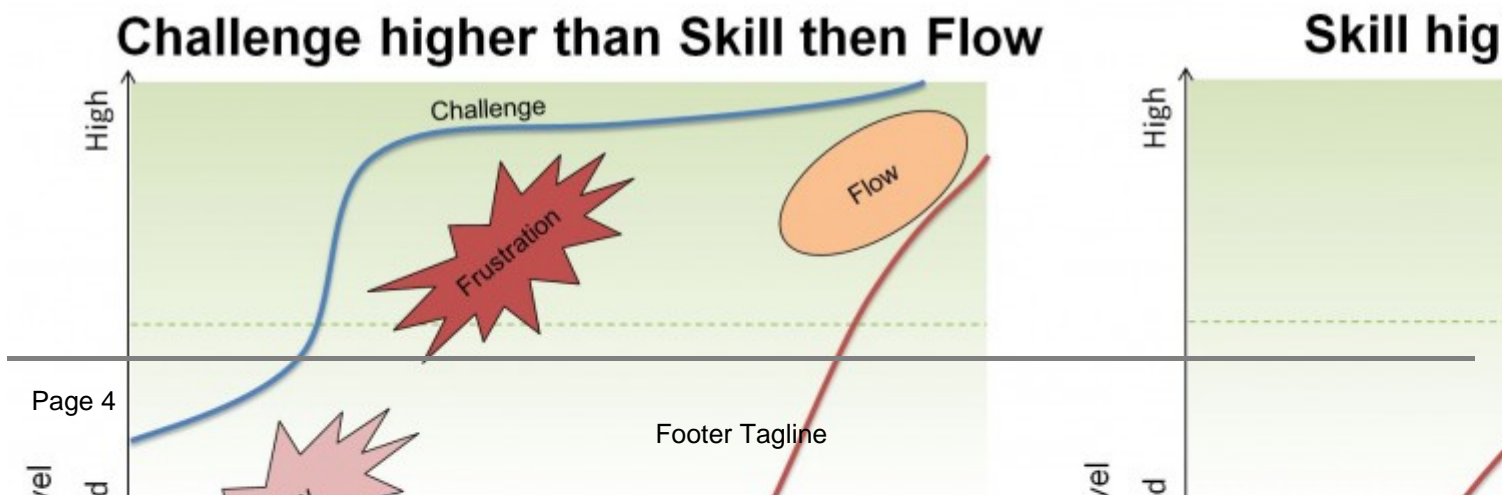
The points where the lines converge at the high skill relative to challenge level could be potential points of Flow. This brings about a slightly different approach to working out where boredom and frustration occur – something I got wrong in my last article on this actually!

If the skill level drops too far below the challenge level for a period of time – that is when you get frustration. If the challenge is below the skill levels – that is when you can get boredom.



So the graphs would look a little like this – left is frustration (lower skill relative to challenge), right is boredom (lower challenge relative to skill). I know, I know – this is way more complex than the nice simple flow diagram we have all been using, so I don't expect anyone to adopt this – but, it seems to be more correct!

Just for fun, I have plotted a few of the other areas of the original Flow diagram on the same chart type. Time is a little less important, but the position of Skill and Challenge is!



The point to all of this is, Flow was never meant to be represented as Skill and Challenge over time – the simplified diagram we have all be using is misleading in this respect. Flow is a moment when perceived skill and perceived challenge are both above the median (note not just high) and they are well balanced. However, there is more to it than that!

From his book *Handbook of Competence and Motivation*;

1. One must be involved in an activity with a clear set of goals and progress. This adds direction and structure to the task.
2. The task at hand must have clear and immediate feedback. This helps the person negotiate any changing demands and allows them to adjust their performance to maintain the flow state.
3. One must have a good balance between the perceived challenges of the task at hand and their own perceived skills. One must have confidence in one's ability to complete the task at hand.

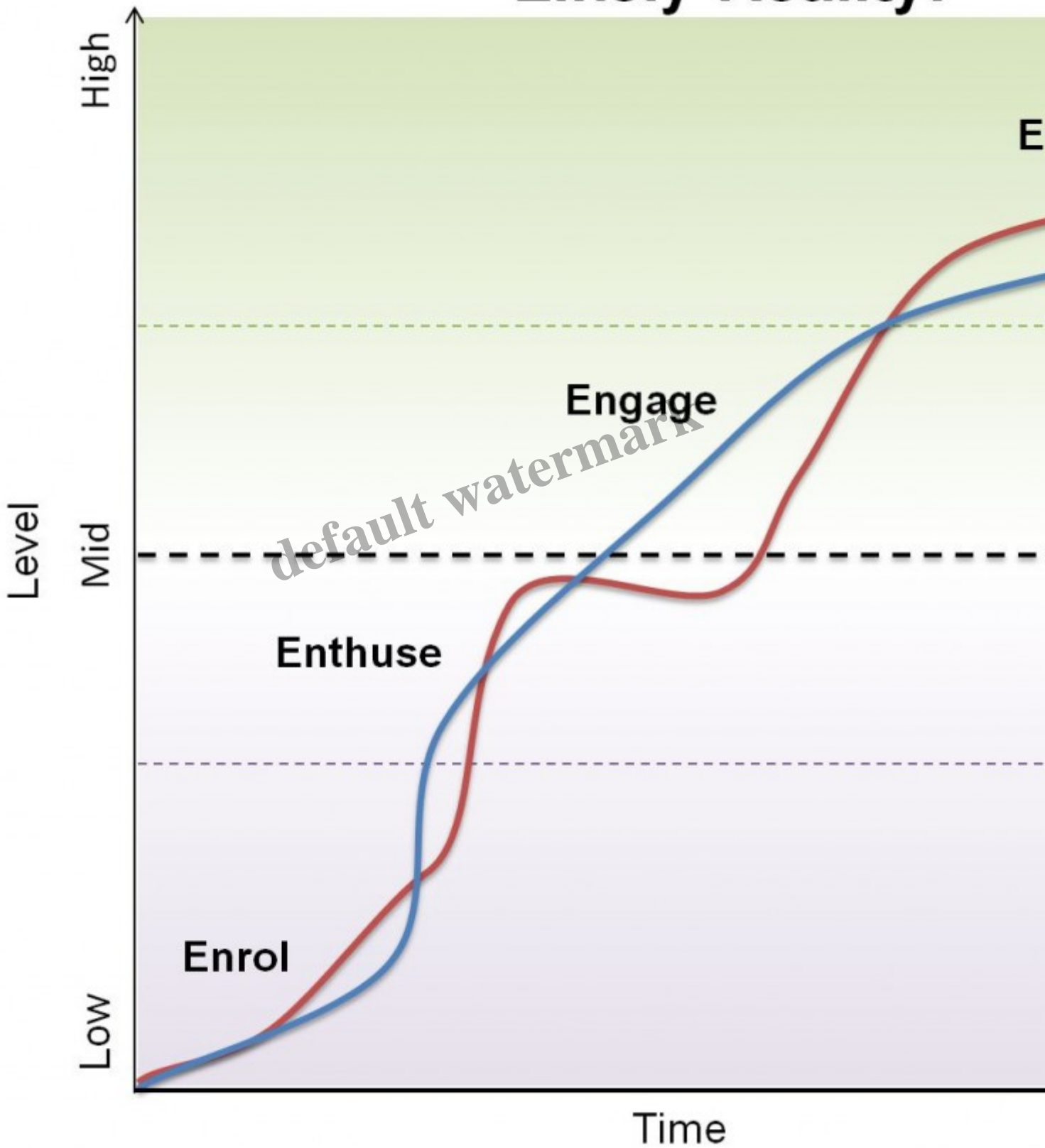
If we can build out solutions to avoid apathy, boredom, worry and frustration – then we are on to a winning track! To do this, keep re-enforcing the users level of skill, let them know what it is and give them the confidence that it is a match for any challenge they may have ahead.

According to Flow theory, as long as the perceived skills of your user are high compared to the challenge, then the worst that can happen is they will experience relaxation, but at least aim for control!

**Extra – A likely more realistic path / journey!**

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# Likely Reality!



I have used me [EEEE Framework](#) to show a possible user journey as well.

Also – there is an assumption here that skill will increase over time – this is of course not true. I use it as a way to illustrate systems aimed to help increase skills over time – not just because of the challenges!

### **Category**

1. Gamification

### **Tags**

1. business
2. control
3. design
4. flow
5. Gamification
6. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
7. Skill
8. Video game

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