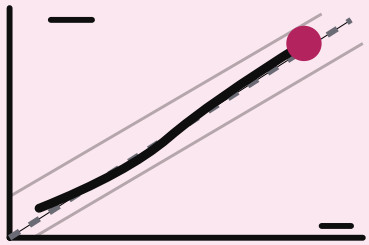
Theory

Flow

A state of concentration and enjoyment in which a person becomes so absorbed in what they are doing that they lose track of time, and which appears when challenge and skill are balanced.



In Spanish	Origin
Flujo	Csikszentmihalyi (1975)

What problem it addresses

It explains why a task bores us if it’s too easy, distresses us if it’s too hard and hooks us when it’s just at our level.

Principles

Clear goals

You know at every moment what to do.

Immediate feedback

You see right away whether it’s going well.

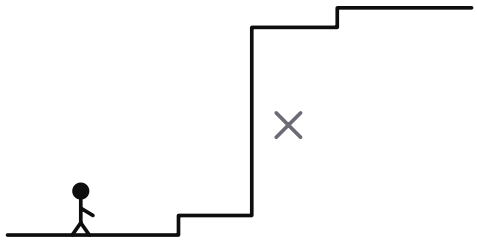
A matching challenge

Neither so easy it bores nor so hard it overwhelms.

An example

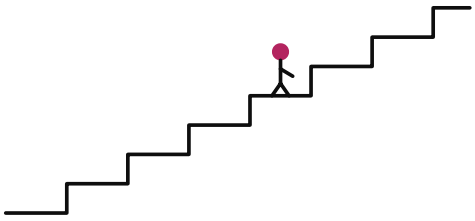
An illustrative example: a game for learning to code.

Fixed difficulty



The first levels are boring and the last ones impossible. **People quit.**

Difficulty that keeps pace



Each level raises the challenge a little as the person improves. **People keep playing.**

Keeping the challenge one step ahead of skill makes the experience engaging.

Why it happens

1 

If the challenge is low, boredom appears.

2 

If it's too high, anxiety appears.

3 

When they are balanced, attention becomes fully focused.

Applications in design

✓ Use it like this

In games, learning tools or complex products, match difficulty to each person's progress.

✗ Avoid

Interrupting someone who is focused with notifications or unnecessary steps.

👁 Don't fall for it

Not every product should captivate: sometimes it's best for the task to end quickly.

Work > leisure

What the research says

78 adults recorded how they felt for a week. Most moments of flow happened while working, not in free time (Csikszentmihalyi and LeFevre, 1989).

●●○ **Debated evidence.** Even so, they said they were more motivated in their free time. Flow is also hard to measure, and studies use different definitions.

Connections

Used in

- Game design
- Learning design

Related to

- Cognitive load
- Gamification
- MDA: mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics

Authors and works

1975	**Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**	Described flow from interviews with artists, athletes and other people absorbed in what they did.
1990	**Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi**	Spread the idea in Flow, a book for a general audience.
1989	**Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Judith LeFevre**	Measured when flow appears in daily life with random prompts over a week.

Sources

Original sources

- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1975). Beyond boredom and anxiety. Jossey-Bass.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). Flow: The psychology of optimal experience. Harper & Row.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., & LeFevre, J. (1989). Optimal experience in work and leisure. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 56(5), 815–822. View source (https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.56.5.815)

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