

Rethinking Work - For Fun *and* Profit

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Deep Fun

I believe in fun. I've spent most of my life following that belief. I think of it as my "playful path."

Some kinds of fun are maybe not so enlightening or trustworthy. But there is at least one kind, which I call Deep Fun, which seems to be pretty much what my life is for. And what my work is all about.

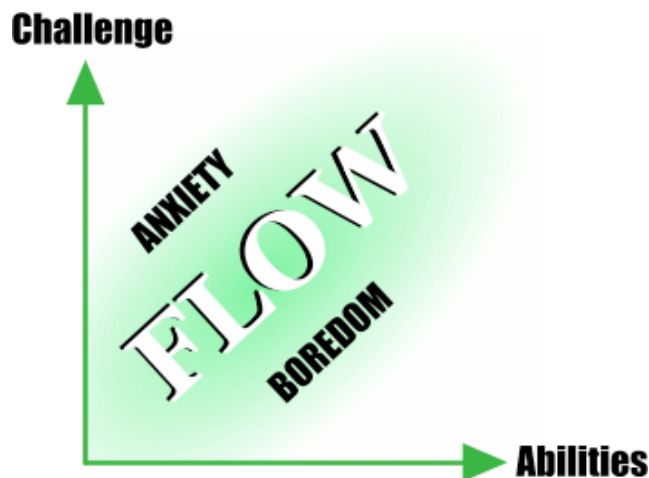
The first person I found who more or less shared my understanding of Deep Fun was a fellow named Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi who, in 1975, published a book called [Beyond Boredom and Anxiety: Experiencing Flow in Work and Play](#).

I've been teaching and elaborating on his concept of Flow ever since. And, because it's so useful, I thought I'd share some of my understanding with you.

Flow

Csikszentmihalyi became intrigued by people who risked their very lives for fun - people like sky divers, bungee jumpers, rock climbers, who, without the incentive of being inscribed in the Guinness Book of World Records or winning vast sums of money or gaining universal recognition. What, he wondered, was the pay off. What could possibly be so rewarding that was worth risking their very lives for.

When asked this very question, the people he interviewed reported things like: achieving a sense of timelessness, of being at one (with mind and mountain), of exhilaration, total focus, clarity, complete immediacy. All of these are characteristic of what we, regardless of



activity, call "fun," and what Csikszentmihalyi ultimately called "flow."

Csikszentmihalyi identified two major factors that contributed to the experience of flow. One he called "abilities," the other, "challenge."

When the challenge is greater than our abilities, we become anxious and potentially dead. When

the challenge is significantly less than that of which we are worthy, we become bored, and potentially dead.

Maintaining the dynamic balance between abilities and challenge is key to the flow experience in both work and play. When something is fun it presents us with complex, but negotiable challenges, challenges that allow us to engage or disengage, to play harder or play safer.

In my interpretation of Mike's Flow model, every line is a vector (an arrow). This is my way of symbolizing what Mike calls the tendency towards "Complexity" - to increase the challenge, increase the range of abilities, risk even deeper heights of anxiety, broader depths of boredom, to access an ever more profound state of Flow.

The first time you jump into a swimming pool, for example, you're probably already too anxious to experience anything flowlike. Especially when you don't know how deep or how cold the water will be. And even more especially when you don't know how to swim.

You go to the shallowest end. Gently, you let yourself in (at the lower end of your abilities). Next thing you know, you're merrily splishing and splashing, trying to impossibly run from one side to the other, and flow is definitely what you are in.

Until you just get tired of it all. There's still both splish and splash, but you're bored. And it's not so fun. The very same water. And yet, no flow.

Until some chemically-encoded perversity takes hold, and you decide to get your head wet. Instant anxiety, and yet, a whole new world of challenge.

And so on, and so on, challenge by challenge, stroke by stroke, between boredom and anxiety, you wiggle your way into the deeper and colder and more swiftly flowing waters, where the challenges become profound and the demand absolute. And so you grow, from wader to diver, from mystery to mastery, learning, extending your abilities. Your "flow channel" widens as more abilities are engaged and deeper challenges faced. At its widest, the channel incorporates the widest variety of possible challenges and available skills. As you challenge yourself more, you grow more, evolving ever more complex sets of skills and sensitivities, meeting and engaging in more and more of the world, becoming an ever more complete human being.

Joe

In a later book, called [Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life](#), Csikszentmihalyi describes one person in particular who was very much on the Playful Path.

“Years ago my students and I studied a factory where railroad cars were assembled. The main workplace was a huge, dirty hangar where one could hardly hear a word because of the constant noise. Most of the welders who worked there hated their jobs, and were constantly watching the clock in anticipation of quitting time. As

soon as they were out of the factory they hurried to the neighborhood saloons, or took a drive across the state line for more lively action.

“Except for one of them. The exception was Joe, a barely literate man in his early sixties, who had trained himself to understand and to fix every piece of equipment in the factory, from cranes to computer monitors. He loved to take on machinery that didn’t work, figure out what was wrong with it, and set it right again. At home, he and his wife built a large rock garden on two empty lots next to their house, and in it he built misty fountains that made rainbows – even at night. The hundred or so welders who worked at the same plant respected Joe, even though they couldn’t quite make him out. They asked his help whenever there was any problem. Many claimed that without Joe the factory might as well close.

“Throughout the years I have met many CEOs of major companies, powerful politicians, and several dozen Nobel Prize-winners – eminent people who in many ways led excellent lives, but none that was better than Joe’s.

The experience of Deep Fun, as the story of Joe so clearly illustrates, can be found in work as readily as it can be found in play. My particular focus on games and toys and the stuff of play has occupied so much of my life mainly because it is easier for people to access Deep Fun in play than it is at work. Especially at the work place.

Joe was exceptional. On the other hand, so are we. Just as we understand the value of rethinking the very nature of institutions of learning, just as we have come to believe that learning is essentially fun, and needs to be kept fun, we know, in our heart of hearts, that the same is true of work. When work is good, it is fun. When work is right, it is fun. When we are working the way we work best, what we are also having is fun.

I have one more fun gift to share with you. It comes from a book written by Jean Liedloff in 1975, called:

[The Continuum Concept: In Search of Happiness Lost,](#)

We had traded our slightly too small aluminum canoe for a much too big dugout. In this vessel, carved from a single tree, seventeen Indians at one time traveled with us. With all their baggage added to ours and everyone aboard, the vast canoe still looked rather empty. Portaging it, this time with only four or five Indians to help, over half a mile of boulders beside a large waterfall, was depressing to contemplate. It meant placing logs across the path of the canoe, and hauling it, inch by inch in the merciless sun, slipping inevitably into the crevices between the boulders whenever the canoe pivoted out of control, and scraping one's shins, ankles and whatever else one landed on, against the granite. We had done the portage before with the small canoe and the

two Italians and I, knowing what lay ahead, spent several days anticipating the hard work and pain. On the day we arrived at Arepuchi Falls we were primed to suffer and started off, grim-faced and hating every moment, to drag the thing over the rocks.

When it swung sideways, so heavy was the rogue pirogue, it several times pinned one of us to the burning rock until the others could move it off. A quarter of the way across all ankles were bleeding. Partly by way of begging off for a minute, I jumped up on a high rock to photograph the scene. From my vantage point and momentary disinvolvement, I noticed a most interesting fact. Here before me were several men engaged in a single task. Two, the Italians, were tense, frowning, losing their tempers at everything, and cursing non-stop in the distinctive manner of the Tuscan. The rest, Indians, were having a fine time. They were laughing at the unwieldiness of the canoe, making a game of the battle, relaxed between pushes, laughing at their own scrapes and especially amused when the canoe, as it wobbled forward, pinned one, then another, underneath it. The fellow held bare-backed against the scorching granite, when he could breathe again, invariably laughed the loudest.

All were doing the same work, all were experiencing strain and pain. There was no difference in our situations except that we had been conditioned by our culture to believe that such a combination of circumstances constituted an unquestionable low on the scale of well-being, and were quite unaware we had any option in the matter.

And therein in fact lies the difference. Our awareness. There is an option. Whether we are at play or at work, we can choose to have fun.

Oddly enough, it's not such an easy choice to make. As Liedloff says, it's a cultural thing. We are conditioned. We are taught that fun is frivolous. That people who look like they are having fun are not to be taken seriously.

We are also taught that fun comes in packages that look like fun. That fun comes from buying fun things. And so we learn that we can never have enough money to have all the fun we think we should have, that what we already have can never be fun enough.

A first step in choosing to have fun is noticing it when we do have it. Especially the free, everyday kinds of fun: eating, chewing, taking a shower, holding a baby, washing dishes; or the workplace-like microfun that comes from cleaning up your desktop, removing the paper clips from old documents, saying "hi" - all those micro-flow experiences, the ones near the very source of the Flow channel. Notice them. Notice the fun of them. Just notice. Just the fun.

A second step involves actually using the "f" word in public. Acknowledging to each other when this moment, this meal, this meeting was, in fact, along with

everything else, fun. Every acknowledgment is a step towards legitimizing fun.

Deeper fun is a little more difficult to notice, because it's deeper. Especially at work. The fun of thinking deeply, of solving a problem, of experiencing your competence, of making things, of being really listened to.

I've found it easier to notice deep fun, to practice making it deeper, when I'm just playing. Games - especially games that I don't have to take seriously - seem to be the richest source for me. They're like proving grounds for exploring the glories of fun.

Generally, any game that doesn't involve keeping score, or caring about actually winning are the best, because fun is most clearly the only reason for playing them. I call these "[pointless games](#)," and have compiled an extensive collection of them on my Deep Fun website.

Finally, explore how to make things that are already fun even more fun. I've collected my favorite techniques in an article called "[Seven Ways to Make Games \(& Actually Almost Anything\) More Fun](#)."

1. If there are two sides, add a third or take one away.
2. Every now and then, change sides: when someone is ahead by two somethings or when someone throws a 9, or when somebody has to go to the bathroom.
3. If there are turns (checkers, gin rummy, serving the ball in ping pong or volleyball), take them together, at the same time, as in "1, 2, 3...go," or every now and then skip a turn.
4. If there is score, keep playing until you discover who's the second winner, and the third, and the next, and the last. Or give each other points, or play pointlessly.
5. If it's not fun, change it: add another ball, or a rule, or a goal, or take a rule away, or change a rule, or borrow a rule from another game, or add a whole game and play them both at once, or do something silly.
6. If it's still not fun, change yourself: try it with your eyes closed, or with your "wrong" hand, or tie yourself to someone else.
7. If it makes the game better, cheat.