What strategies for enabling flow-critical play can be derived from the game design of Taskmaster?

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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to extant objections to the overrepresentation of flow theory in contemporary game design practices. Critical play design approaches that rely on a presumed subversive nature of play are threatened by the incentive structure of flow-based games design, which rewards players for diverting critical faculties towards optimisation. Reaching beyond commercial games media, this research conducts a case study of British television show *Taskmaster's* game design elements. It is concluded that the game played on *Taskmaster* grants players opportunities to freely choose between normative and non-normative play, and incorporates subsequent critical reflection on those experiences. Possible design directions derived from *Taskmaster's* production design are discussed.

KEYWORDS

flow theory, critical reflection, taskmaster, flow-critical design, normative play, non-normative play, design directions

INTRODUCTION

Flow theory is deeply engrained in modern games design practice such that the word "flow" can sometimes stand in place of the much less easily defined "fun" when describing the goals of a design. Braxton Soderman's *Against Flow: Video games and the flowing subject* (2021) provides detailed critical objections to adoption of flow theory as a default paradigm of "good" game design. He highlights the underlying political ideology of original flow theoretician Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, and the resulting impact of uncritical engagement with flow on the games industry, players and gamification efforts in non-game spaces. This research speculatively adopts Soderman's position and extrapolates from it's conclusions. In doing so, the researcher hopes to invite further debate on whether design-led approaches can be considered suitable responses to Soderman's claims.

Soderman posits that a design approach that enables flow while engaging with critical understanding of its politics and ideologies is possible (p. 224). One such example is offered as follows:

"The trick is to combine flow and reflection in a fruitful tension, a passionate reflection, to create an experience of critical flow where the player becomes involved within more

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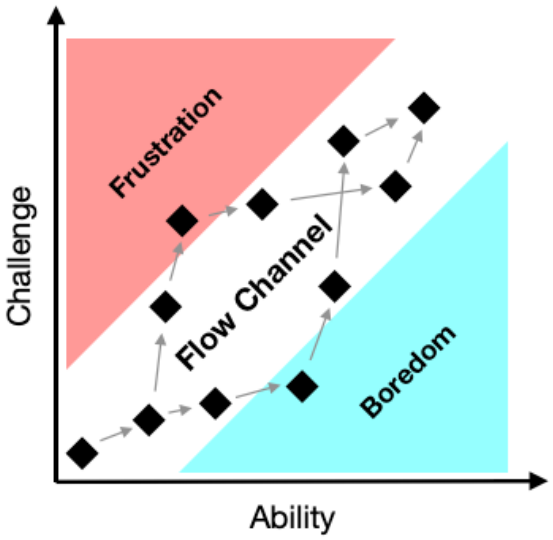

Figure 1: Archetypical example of graphs used to represent flow theory in games design practise. Possible moments within the play experience are plotted as diamonds, with the player's navigation of these moments indicated by arrows. Graph produced by the researcher.

expansive forms of critique and interpretation that reflect on cultural problems." (Soderman, 2021, p. 172)

This implied approach provides a starting point for this study's understanding of "flow-critical" design, whereby players are explicitly directed towards critically reflecting on their own experiences of play. That reflection should be given context by problematising aspects of flow theory ideology, but would ultimately avoid prescribing conclusions to the player.

Taskmaster (Cartwright 2015), while existing outside strict definitions of games media, prominently features critical analysis of its cast's playful performances. It is a BAFTA winning British comedy game show, wherein comedian contestants compete across a series of episodes by attempting novel tasks for the Taskmaster in pursuit of points. Originally created for stage performance at the Edinburgh Comedy Fringe festival by Alex Horne, who continues to write for and star in each episode, the show enters its 21st series in 2026.

This research does not seek to contest that *Taskmaster* in its form as a commercial light-entertainment television show can be considered to address, let alone oppose, any of the concerns Soderman raises about flow theory or its associated ideology. Such an argument would require engaging with media theory analysis of the television show beyond the scope of this research. Rather, the case study presented here analyses the underlying game played by the show's cast and considers how its formal characteristics can provide insight towards flow-critical games design.

CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

Chen (2007) provides a template of flow theory as it is applied to games design, stating that "Flow is also called the optimal experience, or being in 'the Zone.'" (p. 31) This paper presents graphs informed by Csikszentmihalyi's work[1] that compare skills against challenges. Undesirable player states are shown at the extremes and comfortable, desirable states in the centre: the flow channel. Notably, the expectation that players will advance along both axes during the course of their play is represented (p. 32, figure 3). The interpretation of flow theory presented by Chen has since become a staple of mainstream games design approaches. Schell reproduces the same interpretation in *The*

Art of Game Design (2020, pp.144-149). A representative example of such graphs is given in Figure 1.

Accordingly, this research considers games and play that embrace or pursue flow to be normative. Games that deny reliable access to flow experiences are often received poorly in mainstream games discourse. These attitudes were exemplified by adverse reactions to the emergence of the walking simulator genre.[2] The genre eschews much of the apparatus that enables the normative understanding of flow in games, such as scores or challenging barriers to progression. More recently, critical reception of the much-anticipated release *Hollow Knight: Silksong* (Team Cherry 2025) is characterised by critique of the game's high difficulty (Game Maker's Toolkit 2025). This barrier to free-roaming (and *flowing*) exploration of the game's world is presented as a limiting factor on the developers' executional success, even in otherwise highly favourable reviews.[3]

While flow theory is more commonly associated with digital games, closely related concepts are also privileged by designers of commercial physical games. Calleja (2022, pp. 29-36) uses the term "involvement" to describe an absorbing state of focused attention and free action reminiscent of flow. Reviewing responses from interviewees including influential board game designers Bruno Cathala and Reiner Knizia, Calleja writes:

"The game designers I interviewed all agreed that player involvement is a universally desirable characteristic of a game's design, and anything that breaks involvement, especially for long stretches of time, should be avoided. When describing the design goals for particular games they had worked on, designers cited an emphasis on one or a few of the forms of involvement, with a general sense of aiming to nurture strong involvement being common to all." (Calleja, 2022, p.44)

Objections to Flow Theory Adoption

Uncritical positioning of flow as a paradigmatic element of games design best practice is a concern for Soderman (2021). Drawing from the original writing of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Soderman characterises the underlying ideology of flow theory as follows:

"… flow theory privileges individuals over social collectives. It embraces unified, intentional agents over fragmented subjects. It privileges self-determination over the idea that human action and consciousness are shaped by external forces. It foregrounds growth and accumulation over stability. Finally, it embraces action over critical examination." (Soderman, 2021, p. 32)

Soderman argues that the interpretation of flow theory adopted by the games industry maintains pro-capitalist ideologies. He writes that embracing flow in game and non-game spaces "extends enjoyable streams of consumption, compensates for an alienated life, and even involves us more fully in reality today and its intensified productivity, rather than causing us to step back and critique it." (2021, p. 25) Similarly, Boluk and Lemieux (2017) lament that, "Games have been replaced by videogames and play has been replaced by fun," (p. 8) arguing that increasing commodification of games necessarily incentivises producers to streamline their products towards guaranteed, uncomplicated escapism and away from playfulness as a means of questioning assumptions. This straightforwardness often results in dominant "correct" avenues for play. They argue this is a constituent part of the mainstream practices that surround contemporary videogames consumption: the "standard metagame". (pp. 279-281)

This research is particularly concerned with Soderman's assertions regarding the capacity of flow to minimise and recapture opportunities for critical reflection by "turn[ing] reflection back toward the game and play, managing more expansive forms of distance." (2021, p. 165) Such a "critical instance" (p. 142) satisfies a desire for critical thought without permitting a critical distance from which to critique the flow experience itself. This tension is also acknowledged by Holland (2025), who proposes board games as a vehicle for designers and players to mediate discussions of systemic societal issues. Her

argument foregrounds the transparency of board game rules (relative to digital systems) and the understanding of the game's rules as a prerequisite to play. She proposes using distancing techniques, such as Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt, to break players from emotional investment and encourage systemic analysis and critique (pp.68-79).

The process of dedicating critical faculties to the optimisation of play, and improvement of skill, is termed "theorycrafting" by Paul (2024). Discussing the effects of optimisation-focused play on player communities, he observes that players of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) originally considered theorycrafting practices taboo. However, increasingly challenging content matching the increasing skill of veteran players was released, offering those players continued access to flow channels. Over time, players embraced optimisation-focused play as "the best" way to approach these challenges (p.24). The pursuit of flow overrode the initial preferences of the player base. Flanagan (2009, p. 13) attributes a a fundamentally subversive nature to play and players. This inherent desire to subvert the rules systems of games is proposed as the basis of enabling players to engage with critical play. However, if the desire for subversion is instead captured by a theorycrafting practice of seeking edges that increase a player's skill, then it likely will not enable the desired critical distance for critical play.

Constructing a Flow-Critical Agency

The critical reflection that is desirable in players of flow-critical games should be clearly defined. Ideally, players should be able to experience play that is structured around flow theory as well as play that is not, as the basis for critical comparative reasoning. Such reflections might be aesthetic in nature, as proposed by Robson (2018), who lays out a thorough philosophical claim that both players and observers of particular playings of games can differentiate one that is more pleasing to them than another. Dansey, Stevens and Elgin (2009) incorporate such reflection into their experimental approach. They analyse player responses to externally-defined internally-validated games; the rules of the game were set by the researchers but the players decided if they had "won" for themselves. While the responses were limited, they find some evidence of players expressing both positive and dismissive views towards forms of play without externally-validated feedback (a key component of flow theory as applied to games design). This research, at minimum, illustrates that players' attitudes towards non-normative styles of play can vary.

Queer games theory research offers further evidence of divergent player preferences. Harper, Taylor and Adams (2018) understand "queerness as something that destabilizes or questions normative assumptions" (p. 3). Likewise, Ruberg (2019) states that "The queerness in a video game may lie in the opportunity to resist structures of power, or partake in alternative forms of pleasure" (p. 15). They highlight resistive modes of play that are deliberately "wrong", such as playing to lose (pp. 135-158), as means for players to seek and reclaim non-normative pleasures. Aligning more directly with conceptions of flow theory, Pelurson (2022) outlines videogame flânerie (a slower, purposeless wandering through digital spaces) as a resistive strategy to "the ruling principles of gaming culture with its obsession with accumulation, skill development and improvement." (p. 63) These kinds of alternative playings are of particular interest as they exist definitionally in opposition to an assumed "correct" means of deriving pleasure.

Sihvonen and Stenros (2018) conclude from their study of queer play in social role-playing games that "the emergence of queer play necessitates the affordances of the urtext of the game" (p. 178). They invoke the term "urtext" to refer to whatever materials are provided as a "stimulus for play" (p. 169), normally a published game, differentiated from a game that exists in play with the involvement of players. They draw attention to the need to intentionally include cues that permit queer play in the urtext, especially in the context of social play.

Flanagan (2009, pp. 260-261) differentiates modes of play as "official transcripts" presented by game systems and "hidden transcripts" determined by the player, proposing that during critical play a player might seek ways to express their preferred "hidden transcript" by subverting the rules of the game. However, exploring the boundaries of the

rules is also how players intent on pursuing normative play learn the “official transcript”. If a goal of flow-critical design is to enable players to pursue play patterns outside those prescribed by the game system, Sihvonen and Stenros’ study implies that pursuing “hidden transcripts” must be explicitly encouraged by game systems, at least in part, to mitigate this issue.

Structured games typically present cues for play in the form of an agency. Working from Suits’ (2005) definition of a game as “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (p. 55), Nguyen (2020) considers that designers transcribe an agency through the arrangement of goals, obstacles and affordances available to players. The goals of the player agent are then adopted by the player as temporary ludic goals. A flow-critical game should feature agencies that both critically reflect and make self-lead decisions to pursue either normative or non-normative play experiences.

Nguyen argues that by adopting these temporary ludic goals, players are “learning about new ways of being an agent.” (p. 76) Playing structured games, for Nguyen, is a way to build a library of agencies that the player can draw from to inform their extra-ludic agency. The tacit goal of pursuing any critical play design goal is for players to take something away from play. The researcher is conscious of arguments made against ascribing pedagogical merit to games and play. Tripathy (2023) provides a compelling review of these objections. Similarly, Ruberg raises concerns about inviting players to “play at being queer” (2019, pp. 18-19). By investigating flow-critical design, this research aims to respond to Jayanth’s provocation:

“How can we design spaces, interactions, opportunities, embodiments outside of these [capitalist-colonialist] imaginings, using cultural artifacts that are deeply embedded within these structures?” (Jayanth, 2021, para. 16)

The position of flow-critical games should be to present opportunities for alternative playings. Players should be given the means and opportunities to pursue both normative (*flowing*) and non-normative pleasures and reflect on their experiences of both. However, that reflection should be self-led.

Taskmaster

Taskmaster (Cartwright 2015) is a television show originally broadcast on UK digital television channel Dave, moving to the more established Channel 4 for its 10th series in 2020. It has been associated with the British comedy panel show genre, but more closely resembles a reality television game show in format.[4] Each series, a cast of five comedians compete to win both the episode and the overall series championship by completing a number of playful, often absurd challenges (“tasks”) that are typically open to interpretation and subversion by the contestants. Between series, the only returning cast are the Taskmaster (Greg Davies) and his assistant (series creator, Alex Horne). Each episode features a number of tasks, mostly presented as pre-recorded video clips of contestants’ attempts. These are seeded throughout a live-studio session where the Taskmaster judges the attempts and awards points based on appropriate criteria. While framed as a comedy program, the underlying game is approached with competitive integrity. The format has been adapted for multiple international audiences (often with few changes), and informed a “School Tasking” outreach program in the UK and Ireland aimed at school children aged 9-10 (Struthers and Jones 2025).

Little academic literature discussing *Taskmaster* within the field of games studies is apparent at time of writing. Indeed, Leo (2024) warns that as a television show designed principally to be viewed by an audience, care must be taken when translating insights directly for game designs. Thomas (2025) enumerates the many forms of contingency at play throughout *Taskmaster.* The author draws particular attention to the ways in which social contingency can be used both by contestants to gain advantage, and by the Taskmaster and his assistant to assert authority. This analysis implicitly acknowledges *Taskmaster* as a ludic activity engaged with by its cast, and thus is closely aligned with the present methodology.

METHODOLOGY

This case study seeks to analyse the game that is played on the television show *Taskmaster* (Cartwright 2015). Specifically, this game is considered to be the process that contestants go through in recording their contributions to the production of an entire series. This approach is informed by that used by Sihvonen and Stenros (2018) to investigate player interactions with live-action role-playing games with no publicly available ruleset (pp. 176-177). They analyse the actions and responses of players in order to determine what affordances may be granted to players by the underlying rules, implicit or explicit, which they refer to as "urtext" (p. 169). In this study, a close reading approach is applied to *Taskmaster* episodes to infer the rules and affordances of the urtext in play. Such an approach is considered valid for *Taskmaster* given the show's naturalistic approach to capturing and representing contestants' play. Series creator Alex Horne has given numerous public statements to this effect, noting that "a differently produced show" (Gamble 2020, 6:58, 23:50) would reshoot task attempts or coach players to achieve a more polished outcome.[5] An outline of the reconstructed game procedure, referred to here as "Taskmaster the game" (TMtG), is first established as a basis for further formal analysis.

Following this, a claim that players of TMtG adopt an agency that problematises the ideology of flow theory is interrogated. The available affordances and the salient ludic goals of the player agent are considered together, drawing from Nguyen's (2020) definition of agentic adoption. Consideration is given to how such an agent interacts with the ideology of flow theory as defined by Soderman (2021, p. 32), either by resisting the validity of these value assumptions or problematising them through play. These ideological values are understood for the purposes of this case study as follows:

- Favouring an individualised experience over a collective one.
- Promoting a unified and universal experience of play.
- Asserting the power of self-determination over external factors.
- Valuing growth, optimisation and accumulation.
- Favouring action at the expense of critical reflection.

Following the case study, further design directions drawing from the features of *Taskmaster's* production design that enable the relevant features of the urtext are discussed.

While the researcher is familiar with all twenty series of the original *Taskmaster* show that have been broadcast at time of writing, for this study two series were closely analysed. Series 13 and Series 14, both originally broadcast in 2022, were selected as mature iterations of the show with limited qualifying criteria. These series represent the earliest series produced for Channel 4, which provided the show an increased budget compared to original host channel Dave (Farber, 2019). They were not so impacted at the production stage by the Covid-19 pandemic as to result in noticeable compromises with the show's format. As no agreed short hand method of referring to individual tasks is apparent in meta-text surrounding *Taskmaster*, the format [Series : Episode : Task] (eg. [13:1:1]) is used when quoting the full task text is impractical.

CASE STUDY

The rules of the game played on *Taskmaster,* which remain consistent throughout each series, might be summarised as follows: five players each complete a number of unique playful challenges, or "tasks", sight-unseen and without the possibility of restarting or retrying. Each player completes these tasks in isolation, ensuring that players do not influence each other with their approaches to the tasks.[6] Players receive minimal feedback and no scoring in this "performance phase". After all players have completed all tasks, play proceeds to an "evaluation phase" where players watch replays of task attempts by all players which are critically analysed by a non-player judge; "the Taskmaster". Following (and in many cases based on) that analysis the Taskmaster awards points to players on a per-task basis. In all cases the Taskmaster has ultimate discretion in rules enforcement and scoring. Most points wins.

Having established this as a baseline understanding of Taskmaster the game, we now proceed to explore some of its qualities in greater detail, first considering that the qualities of the performance phase withhold feedback and deny opportunities to optimise play. Subsequently, the overrepresentation of the Taskmaster's subjective judgement during the evaluation phase and the incorporation of reflection into play are analysed.

Witholding of Feedback

When performing tasks, players receive limited externally-validated feedback. Scoring, a source of feedback often delivered immediately in digital games, is withheld entirely until after all tasks have been completed. In *Taskmaster* empirical data such as time taken to complete a task is also apparently withheld until the evaluation phase. When requesting guidance or clarification during a task, players are usually told simply that "All the information is on the task."[7] Appeals for clarification of terms for disqualification also receive this response.[8] Players generally have few means of gauging their scoring potential ahead of the evaluation phase. This state limits players' ability to adjust or optimise their strategies over the course of play.

Feedback allows players to monitor their progress in overcoming obstacles, which underwrites the skill-vs-challenge assessment at the core of flow theory. Proponents of gamification often advocate the introduction of extrinsic measurable goals for this reason.[9] Withholding this somewhat troubles the core conditions for flow to occur. However, only feedback that is evaluated externally from the player is withheld. This lack of externally-validated feedback encourages players to use their own value judgements of their performance as a source of internally-validated feedback. Additionally, since the game is played in real-space, there are many opportunities for feedback to arise from the affordances of the real world. Contestants on *Taskmaster* can sometimes be observed in what appears to be a flow-like state during task performances. These opportunities can result from tasks that allow players to construct their own play scenarios[10] and are likely sustained by players' internally-valued feedback. Allowing players opportunities to persue flow-like states potentially enables comparative reasoning as part of players' reflection.

Resistance to Optimisation

The variety of featured tasks impede preparation and optimisation of play within the performance phase. The series of standard tasks each player completes offer a wide variety of challenge types: Some tasks reward physical prowess, others reward puzzle solving ability and still others reward generative creative skills. Some tasks offer players opportunities to interpret the requirements in an open-ended way that allows players to self-select the tested skill set. For example in task [13:10:3], players can either focus on physically chasing the Taskmaster's Assistant or employ problem solving skills to determine the correct "magic words":

"Get the most ducks in Alex's basket. You may only hold one duck at a time. If Alex rings his backwards bell, you must walk backwards until he honks his forwards horn. Alex will pedal as fast as he can unless you say one of the magic words. If you say a magic word, Alex will rest for 10 seconds. All the magic words are single-use magic words. Alex will cycle round the circuit for 10 minutes. Your time starts when Alex honks his horn." ("The House Queens." 2022, 17:32)

Each task attempted by contestants on *Taskmaster* is substantively unique. While some tasks are derivative of previous tasks, these are a significant minority among the standard tasks.[11] The frequency of skill-preferential tasks and evaluation styles is not known to the players before play begins. This makes preparation for TMtG inefficient, if not impossible. Rehearsing a particular skill may or may not benefit the player. Earlier play may or may not enhance players' skills for later portions of the performance phase. This incentivises players to rely on their existing strengths, rather than improving skills during the course of play. During play, optimisation is often constrained by the prescription of restrictive time limits or, less commonly, limited attempts at completing the task. In some cases both are enforced, as in task [14:7:4]:

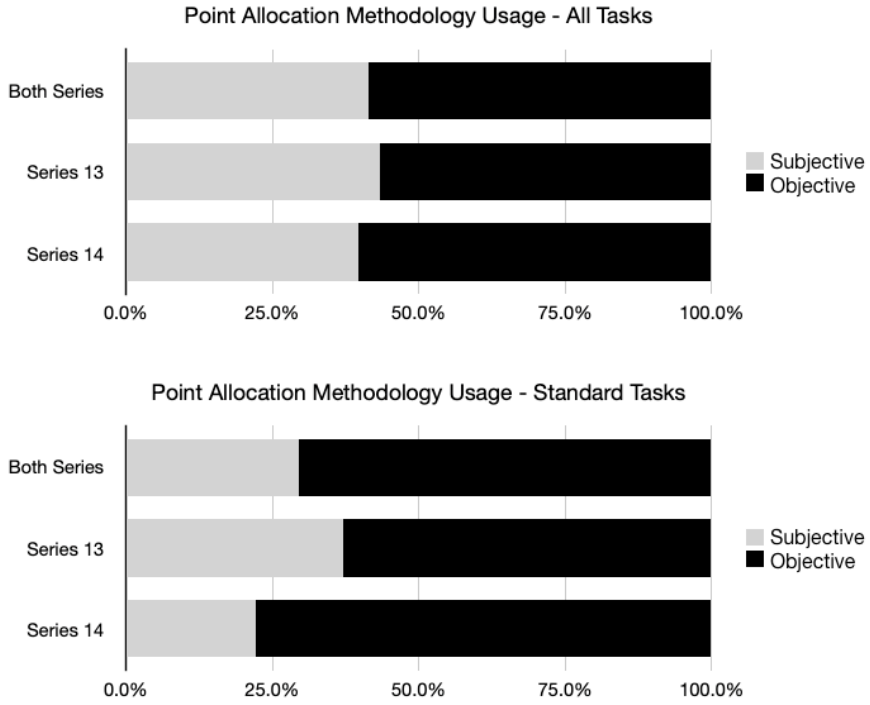

Figure 2: Graphs illustrating simple frequency analysis of methodology usage for awarding points in Series 13 and Series 14.

“Make an exercise ball touch Bernard. Bernard can't move. You may launch an exercise ball from behind the line and may not touch any balls after each launch. Most balls actively involved in a successful launch wins. Your task ends when a ball touches Bernard or 15 minutes have elapsed. Your time starts now.” (“The system of endless plates.” 2022, 28:43)

In addition to ensuring that each task is novel, *Taskmaster* exhibits an awareness of developing meta-strategies that emerge in response to players’ familiarity with previous series of the show. This can be seen clearly in response to Millican’s strategy of checking under tables for additional information, based on patterns of task design from previous series. This design pattern is not employed in Series 14, however a note is left for her to discover under a table that simply reads “Hello Sarah.” (“A new business end.” 2022, 7:55) From this, we may infer that TMtG is not only interested in presenting new challenges, but actively preventing useful preparation.

These qualities of tasks encourage and reward responsive action, often ensuring that players’ initial impulses and capabilities inform their attempt at the task. Players are not expected to improve at performing either a specific task, or tasks in general across the course of the game.

Alignment of Points and Criticism

Following the performance phase, play of TMtG proceeds to a discrete evaluation phase in which responses to the tasks are analysed and scored by the Taskmaster. While the breadth of tested skills is large, scoring schemes can be broken down into two categories: “objective ranking” and “subjective ranking”. Subjectively ranked tasks are scored entirely according to the Taskmaster’s aesthetic judgement, which by the nature of the novel tasks is difficult for players to anticipate. Objectively ranked tasks are scored according to some quantifiable metric, often “fastest wins”.

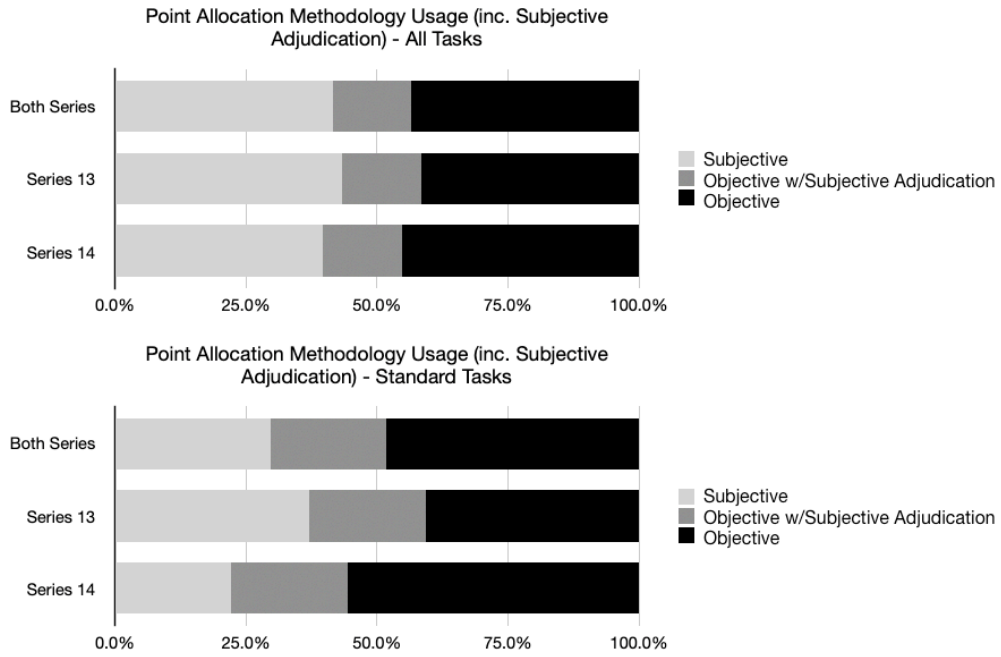

Figure 3: Simple frequency analysis of methodology usage for awarding points in Series 13 and Series 14 incorporating opportunities for subjective decision making in objectively scored tasks.

A simple frequency analysis of the use of these methodologies is illustrated in Figure 2.[12] Across both series 29.6% of standard tasks were ranked subjectively. Subjective judgements made by the Taskmaster account for a substantial portion of the total awarded points. Additionally, some objectively scored tasks retain some means by which the Taskmaster may make a judgement as to the validity of the attempt. This might appear as a non-values-based judgement similar to those of an impartial referee, but the Taskmaster might as easily be inventing the rule that is being adjudicated at the same time.[13] Considering this, as shown in Figure 3, the scoring of more than half of standard tasks across both series are impacted by subjective judgement.

While players have some influence over the Taskmaster's opinion, discussed next, a subjective opinion of another human will always be an external force somewhat beyond the control of the player. This overrepresentation of subjective judgment in scoring limits players' expectations of self-determination. Further, if players produce internally-evaluated feedback during the performance phase, that feedback is placed in direct comparison with externally-valued feedback during the evaluation phase.

Reflection Incorporated in Play

The evaluation phase of TMtG involves a review of each of the players' performances in each task. While likely included in *Taskmaster* as a function of the television show format, this process can nonetheless be read as a formal step in the procedure of play. For each task attempt, the Taskmaster offers critical remarks, often drawing on aesthetic assessment of the attempt.[14] The discursive nature of the analysis offers opportunities for players to make strategic, political plays such as offering missing context or justification to their task attempt or discrediting the attempts of other players. Notably, this step occurs for each task regardless of the scoring criteria for that task (either subjective or objective). Speech during this portion of the procedure, either from the Taskmaster or from players, is treated as "in play" and can impact the game's scoring by exerting influence over the Taskmaster's subjective judgement. Of the two series closely inspected for this study, this type of play is significantly more prevalent in Series 13 with one or more players engaging in political play in the evaluation phase of most tasks.

This opportunity for play during the evaluation phase incentivises players to reflect on their performance. Doing so enables players to make effective petitions. In formalist terms, it could be considered that critically reflecting on the differences between their internally-validated and externally-validated feedback generates a resource, "insight" say, that is required to enact social play verbs[15] in this stage. At this stage of the game players have already completed all of their standard task attempts. They are unable to affect the outcome of task attempts yet to be evaluated. Thus, while players may be strategising for plays they can make during the evaluation phase, in order to do so effectively they must engage in reflection on their own and other's play from a position of enforced distance.

These elements of the urtext are most clearly illustrated by the responses of Judi Love throughout *Series 13*. Love makes social plays throughout the series, but instances such as her dismayed reactions to her own performances in tasks [13:2:3] ("Birdy hand finger." 2022, 24:00) and [13:5:3] ("Having a little chuckle." 2022, 20:00) indicate that this play is closely tied to critical reflection of her earlier action. Note that while Love's reflections here seem to be aligned with the negative response from the Taskmaster, reactions from other players that seem to indicate surprise at favourable judgements given to them are evident throughout both series. This implies that the procedure of the evaluation phase does not necessarily dictate a particular framing for the reflection players do. Players may either stand by or reject their approach as a result of the reflection.

Discussion

From this analysis, it is apparent that players adopt two distinct agencies during the play of TMtG. These agencies align with the two main phases of play, and the first constitutes the object with the second must be concerned. These agencies are made discrete by the formal separation of the performance phase from the evaluation phase.

During the performance phase, standard tasks typically follow a familiar format of providing a goal and obstacles preventing the trivial completion of that goal in line with Suit's (2005) classic definition of games. However, since the agent has limited affordances for accessing externally-validated feedback, the responsibility for assessing whether or not the goal has been achieved (or the degree of success) is temporarily devolved to the agent. That this leads players to produce a variety of different "correct" responses troubles the flow-theory assumption that players should be unified in their experience. Additionally, a limitation is placed on this agent's affordances for optimising their play through preparation, repetition or leveraging of meta-knowledge. This clearly sets the agent at odds with the assumption that opportunities for growth are fundamental to play.

The second agency players adopt during play of TMtG is present in the evaluation phase. Given that the Taskmaster's subjective opinion is given outsized influence in the distribution of points, we might consider that this agent is largely at the whim of this external, socially contingent force. This troubles the valuation of self-determination in flow ideology. The primary verbs of this agent require critical reflection on the actions of the player and comparison of the internally- and externally-valued feedback they receive. Crucially, they have no affordances to alter the behaviour they are reflecting on. This reward structure clearly problematises the valuing of action over critical examination, bringing them into a "fruitful tension" (Soderman 2021, p. 172).

The flow ideology value least troubled by TMtG is that of an individualised experience. The nature of the performance phase as a solitary experience (at least for the default play examined here) inherently primes a player to enter the second, reflective stage overvaluing their own interpretations of "correct" responses to the tasks. Additionally, the nature of awarding points individually to determine a single winner incentivises selfish, competitive play during the evaluation phase.

Given the analysis presented here, what can be concluded is that TMtG successfully resists or problematises many, but not all of the values of flow theory. It should be noted that these values are what Soderman describes as the "less conventional meanings of

flow" (2021, p. 224) and as such are more in need of novel design-based intervention. Thus, deriving design directions from this analysis should assist the future development of flow-critical games.

DESIGN DIRECTIONS

The previously analysed formal features of Taskmaster the game could form the basis of design directions for flow critical games. However, discussion should be made of the properties of the production of *Taskmaster* that fundamentally enable those formal qualities of the inferred game that are flow-critical. It is clear that the realities of designing for the production of a television show and for games are very different. Despite this, actionable provocations can be derived from *Taskmaster*'s design as follows:

Design Games for Real Space

Supported qualities of TMtG

Enables players to find unique approaches that enable their necessarily self-directed play experiences, without need for designer anticipation.

Justification

The affordances for play in real-space are infinitely greater than any currently realised digital space, both in number and complex nuance. These wider possibilities for action, coupled with an ambiguous set of ludic goals, resist assertions of unified "correct play" or an "assumed player" by devolving more agency to the player.

Example implementations

Physical games are of course readily apparent, however games with open ended ludic goals are less so. Social deduction games such as *Blood on the Clocktower* (Medway 2022) offer opportunities for self-selected goals by enabling players to find a style of play that is comfortable for them. *Don't Get Got!* (Big Potato Games 2018), much like *Taskmaster*, asks players to complete simple, loosely defined challenges in a freeform setting. It is explicitly recommended to be played in the background of another social activity. This broadens the possible approaches players can take exponentially.

Design Games to be Played Once

Supported qualities of TMtG

Minimises opportunities for optimisation and ensures separation of task completion and evaluation phases.

Justification

When the possibility of optimisation exists, players attempting to meet a ludic goal are strongly incentivised to exercise it. Most games that players are familiar with involve overcoming obstacles to achieve a clearly defined goal. Flow introduces the concept that players must learn to improve at overcoming those obstacles in order to access fun, which is what this provocation aims to resist. Removing opportunities for optimisation limits the possibility that opportunities for critical reflection will be recaptured.

Example implementations

Usually, games designers cannot guarantee that a player will not engage with their game multiple times. Even in cases where repeat plays are clearly unintended, such as puzzle games with fixed solutions, players may replay them given unlimited opportunity. However, escape rooms, mega games and event style live-action role-playing games limit players' access to play either due to locational or temporal restrictions. Games that require a third party to operate, such as a GM in most table-top RPGs, also self-limit the amount they can be played to some extent.

Make Critical Reflection Relevent to the Player Agent

Supported qualities of TMtG

Ensures players engage with analysis of their action during the procedure of play, and that players intent on optimising towards ludic goals do not miss opportunities to engage in reflection.

Justification

Often in flow-based games, critical reflection is left as an exercise for the player after play is concluded. During play, flow recaptures opportunities for reflection and turns players' thinking towards strategy and optimisation. Making critical reflection part of the means of play resists the privileging of uncritical action in flow.

Example implementations

Taskmaster the game, as understood by this research, provides the best exemplar of this design known to the researcher. However, party-style boardgames such as Wavelength (Hague, et al. 2019) often incorporate reflection on subjective aesthetic judgements as part of their core premise. Less obviously, the digital game *Content Warning* (Wilnyl, et al. 2024) incorporates a review of automatically edited footage captured by players on a virtual in-world camera into its gameplay loop, although it is unclear to what extent critical reflection is incorporated into game systems.

CONCLUSION

The case study presented here concludes that the underlying game played on the show *Taskmaster* (Cartwright 2015) enables players to adopt agencies that problematise or otherwise trouble most of the core ideological values of flow theory, identified by Soderman (2021), while still producing a game that is enjoyable for players and television audiences. These are values that Soderman states require broader understanding, critical evaluation and design intervention. Of those values, it is concluded that the game instead embraces a valuing of individuality. However, this value already has many well understood methods of opposition, for example through collaborative games or team sports. Most notably the linear structure of the game, which separates performance and evaluation phases, create space for critical reflection by players on their own play experiences and comparative reasoning of internally- and externally-evaluated sets of feedback.

The methodology used allowed the researcher to analyse the underlying urtext for play in *Taskmaster.* This focus on the apparent affordances and rules for play enabled analysis without the need of complex disambiguation of what constitutes play or would be better considered performance in this televised game show. By taking a primarily formalist approach, however, some nuance is lost. For example, by using only a surface level analysis of what actions appear to be afforded to players during play, it can only be concluded that opportunities for critical reflection occur. This study concludes that reflection is enabled and encouraged by formal qualities of Taskmaster the game, and that players can be observed expressing opinions at odds with external judgement of their play. However, it is conceded that a more ethnographically focused approach may be necessary to conclusively comment on whether the reflection that occurs during play is useful to designs focused on being flow-critical.

Importantly, without structured investigation of participant responses it is difficult to conclude whether contestants on *Taskmaster* are actually engaged with flow. Indeed, the case study finds that the withholding of externally-evaluated feedback during the performance phase limits the conditions under which flow is normally invoked in games. However, it has been observed that players sometimes self-select to engage in activities that are better suited to the pursuit of flow. This research argues that opportunities to reflect on play practices that pursue flow are as relevant to flow-critical play whether the pursuit is successful or not. Indeed, if players find they prefer their play experience while being denied experiences of flow, that is highly relevant to broader discussions of flow-theory's position in games design practice.

The resulting formal analysis of the urtext provides insight into possible design directions for future flow-critical game designs. Features such as the withholding of externally-valued feedback, strategies for resistance to optimisation and the overlapping of points acquisition with social play provide avenues for exploration of novel designs. To provide a companion to these insights, design approaches based on more fundamental assumptions in *Taskmaster*'s production design are highlighted. It should be noted that neither the inferred game from the case study nor the design provocations necessarily align with the easily commodifiable game products of today's commercial games market. This is to be expected, given that the market is currently structured around easily accessible, consumable and uncritical products.[16] The researcher wishes to reiterate concerns about ascribing pedagogical value to games and play. In outlining this approach to flow-critical design, the intent is to suggest a design direction that may reach individuals who already have privileged access to be engaged with flow-based games. These individuals, much like the researcher, would benefit the most from reflecting on how, when and why they engage with games at this time.

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[1] For example, Csikszentmihalyi (2002, p. 74).
[2] Stang (2019) references Kain (2016), a prime example of contemporary attitudes.
[3] See: Colp (2025), Phillips (2025), Schofield (2025) for example.
[4] The show's creative team have refuted the panel show genre label (Chortle 2017). The genre is often associated with a less exact relationship with scores and winning than *Taskmaster* exhibits.
[5] Horne has stated they "never retake" (Parkin 2022, para. 20). See also series director Andy Devonshire's comments in Gamble (2023, 25:50) and Taylor (2018, sections 5, 7 and 9) for example.

[6] The show contains recurring task formats that break some of these rules in the form of “team tasks” (that two or three players complete co-operatively) and “prize-” and “live-studio tasks” (which offer a greater degree of player interaction). This analysis describes the default scenarip where players are performing “standard tasks”.
[7] Referring to the written instructions read by contestants at the start of each task.
[8] Notably, task [13:2:2] stipulates that contestants “must be properly blindfolded at all times and must never step beyond the rope.” Ramsey requests clarification that he’s allowed to stand on the rope and is given this ambiguous response by Horne. Ramsey is blindfolded, so this response is useless. (‘Birdy hand finger.’ 2022, 14:30)
[9] See McGonigal (2012, pp.57-61) for example.
[10] For example, see Ramsey’s response to task [13:6:2] which involves himself and Horne attempting to eat sausages from strings propelled by a turning cement mixer (“The 75th question.” 2022, 15:50). Similarly, Chawawa and Kearn’s responses to task [14:3:4], which asks contestants to “catch something”, demonstrate the possibility for players to self-select opportunities for flow, when compared to other contestant’s less literal responses. (“Dafty in the middle.” 2022, 31:50)
[11] Prize-tasks are an exception to this. As previously stated, the focus of this research is the default mode of play.
[12] For this analysis, tasks are considered objectively ranked if the scoring specification makes explicit reference to an empirical measurement such as “time”, “distance” or occurrences of a discrete event. All other tasks are considered subjectively ranked.
[13] The Taskmaster’s discretion is ultimately used to determine if an infraction should result in disqualification. These determinations are often seemingly arbitrary, such as when everyone is disqualified from task [14:6:4] (“Long-legged lobster.” 2022, 35:40) immediately after not disqualifying Chawawa from the preceding task. (23:50)
[14] As in Robson (2018).
[15] That is to say, possible game actions.
[16] See Boluk and Lemieux (2017, p.6-8)