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Flow Experience: A Phenomenological Study on Casual Gamers

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Abstract. Prior studies on flow experience within the context of gaming have been conducted primarily to professional gamers. Whilst such a body of literature provides an important contribution to the field, the number of people practicing casual games is increasing. However, the account of how flow experience is developed among casual gamers is limited. This article fills this gap by exploring flow experience among casual gamers in Indonesia. We invited three male casual gamers aged 19-24 years old who reside in Surabaya to participate in a series of interviews. Using a phenomenological approach to analyze and interpret empirical materials generated, we proposed the centrality of time that serves as the unique factor that leads casual gamers to experience flow. For the participants, time availability is central to the feeling of freedom that creates an immersive experience to the game. Such immersive experiences provide a space of escapism from the daily tensions emerged from their everyday lives. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords*: flow experience, gaming, casual gamers, phenomenology, Indonesia.*

Abstrak. Kajian-kajian mengenai flow experience dalam konteks bermain games pada umumnya dilakukan dengan konteks pemain game profesional. Meskipun kajian-kajian ini memberikan kontribusi yang penting bagi bidang ilmu, namun jumlah orang-orang yang bermain game secara kasual juga semakin meningkat. Sayangnya, tidak banyak kajian tentang flow experience pada pemain game kasual. Penelitian ini mencoba mengisi bagian ini dengan meneliti flow experience pada pemain game kasual di Indonesia. Penelitian ini melibatkan tiga pemain game kasual berusia 19-24 tahun untuk berpartisipasi dalam beberapa sesi wawancara. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologis untuk menganalisis dan menginterpretasi data penelitian. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa aspek waktu memiliki peran yang penting dalam menciptakan flow experience. Para partisipan menunjukkan bahwa ketersediaan waktu memiliki peranan yang penting dalam menciptakan rasa bebas yang membentuk pengalaman imersif dalam bermain game. Pengalaman imersif tersebut memberikan ruang eskapisme untuk sejenak membebaskan para partisipan dari ketegangan yang dialami dari aktivitas sehari-hari. Implikasi teoritis dan praktis dari temuan-temuan ini telah kami diskusikan dalam artikel ini.

Kata kunci*: flow experience, bermain game, pemain game kasual, fenomenologi, Indonesia.*

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The rapid growth of e-sport shows how the practice of online gaming has been a pressing contemporary social issue and provides insights into the centrality of internet and online gaming for many people globally (Vivian, Winata, Aulia, Asia, Yulianto, & Renanita, 2018; Yulianto, 2016). Accordingly, there is a growing research interest into gaming and how people dedicate themselves as professional gamers. Scholars, for example, have found that professional gamers have excessive amount of training to develop their senses of competitiveness, which is proven crucial in joining e-sport tournaments (Pluss et al, 2021; Vivian et al, 2018). Central to such work is the focus on the professional games who dedicate themselves in various professional tournaments.

Whilst studies on professional gamers are important, it is also important to note that the number of casual gamers is also increasing globally. As scholars such as Iacovides and Mekler (2019) found, gaming is media to relieve stress for the gamers, in the sense that games often help participants to live well (Rahardjo et al, 2023). Many scholars have also reminded the negative side of games, such as the excessive time invested and how it characterized by avoidance mechanism, which is akin to alcohol, drugs addiction, and the risk of social withdrawal (Leung, 2007; Levi et al, 2023). However, many casual gamers also benefited from playing games in their spare time. The focus on casual gamers is limited and requires further investigation, which we directly address in this study.

In understanding gaming practice, we use the key concept of flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975) to explain the immersive experience in practicing games. Previously, scholars have also used flow experience as the theoretical framework to explore the immersive nature of gaming among gamers (Hull, Williams, & Griffiths, 2013; Sun, Zhao, Jia, & Zheng, 2015). Theoretically, flow experience allows us to explore internal motivation of the gamers. Furthermore, flow experience has been utilized to document how a game's narrative, audio, and visual graphics can lead gamers into an immersive state (McMahan, 2013). Recently, flow experience has also been used to document the experience among e-sport gamers (Huang, Kim, & Ko, 2023). We seek to extend this concept within the context of casual gamers, which have different routines and activities.

Flow experience was first introduced by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) to find out why people chose meaningful experience rather than material rewards. Csikszentmihalyi (1975) defines flow experience as a psychological state that occurs when a person is fully immersed and focused in the given activity. In doing so, there is an enjoyment and complete absorption to the activity which transforms the sense of time. Flow experience is a condition where an individual feels satisfied without any boredom or anxiety when doing an activity, smoothness in doing the activity, and feelings of no obstacle (Huang et al, 2023). Flow experience is also characterized by the feeling of energized and excitement in doing the given activity, which results to the form of leisure.

Prior studies on flow experience within the context of gaming have been largely conducted on MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) gamers (Kuss, & Griffiths, 2012; Griffiths et al 2012). Those studies showed that gamers experienced flow experience whilst playing such type of game (Hull et al 2013). Recent research also shifts the focus to MOBA (Multiplayer Online Battle Arena) (Kang et al, 2020; Gutierrez, 2021) and FPS (First-Person Shooter) gamers (Sweetser et al, 2017; Corcos, 2018), which also found how flow experience is exist among these gamers.

In the context of Indonesia, articles about game tended to focus on online gaming motivation, aggressiveness, and gaming disorder (Ramadhani, 2013; Saputra, 2015; Yuwono & Virlia, 2022). Prior work on flow experience has been conducted in the context of other sports such as climbing (Azarine & Yanuvianti, 2014). However, there is little evidence about the flow experience among casual gamers.

Whilst the studies on flow experience have been done extensively, there is a debate on the nature of flow experience. Scholars have explored flow experience in gaming but encountered difficulties in observing virtual activity (Huang et al 2023). The nature of gaming as dynamics and complex experiences involving audio-visual objects (such as gadgets, video games), has added layers of complexities.

There are many assessment methods specifically made for flow experience in gaming. But all of which are not acknowledged widely because the difficulties to observe and measure virtual activity. Some scholars have tried to measure flow experience by using modified version of Jackson and Marsh's (1995) Flow State Scale. That being said, it is considered not enough to measure the 'virtual' aspect in gaming. However, scholars suggest that there is a common theme such as 'balance between personal skill and challenge', and 'loss of time' found on prior articles. This article seeks to explore flow experience among casual gamers to gain better understanding and a new perspective towards flow experience.

Contextually, this study is conducted in casual gamers in Indonesia because the number of casual gamers in Indonesia is massive. Scholars found that within the context of mobile phone gaming, Indonesia is fourth largest user in the world (Novalius, 2018). The inherent features of smartphone, namely their mobility and accessibility (Sun et al., 2015), align perfectly with the characteristics of casual games, making them an ideal fit for this platfor. The research question of this research is '*How do casual gamers experiencing flow?*'

METHODS

Research Design. Gaming practice is a subjective experience and casual gamers can have different take in building meaning on their gaming activity (Vivian et al, 2018). Accordingly, phenomenological approach is particularly relevant to explore flow gaming experiences among casual gamers (van Manen, 2023). Previously, scholars have also utilized phenomenological approaches to explore various issues in Indonesia, such as marriage (Yulianto et al, 2016) and business practice (Yulianto & Faturochman, 2016). This research extends this approach to gaming context.

Participant and Location. We chose three male university students aged 19-24 years old. All three played games under 36 hours or 49 hours per week on their smartphone and lived in Surabaya. Playing games for less than 36 hours per week serves as a strong indicator that these participants are not hardcore gamers (Charlton & Danforth, 2007) or professional gamers, who spend an average of 49 hours per week (Nagorsky, & Wiemeyer, 2020). All participants started playing games in kindergarden or elementary school. They spend 1-3 hours of playing per day and played to avoid boredom. The games are therefore practiced as leisure activities and not a way to skip primary activities as students, such as doing assignments. The game they played have time limitation per game round and are of the strategy-type games. The examples of the game played are "Clash of Clans", "Yu-Gi-Oh! Duel Links", and "BBTAN: Break Brick".

Data Collection. The recruitment period of the participants is between October 5th, 2017-November 2nd, 2017. The three participants agreed to participate in a series of interviews in Surabaya. All participants

have signed the written informed consent forms and received small souvenirs at the end of the study as compensation for their dedication to partake in this research.

During the data collection phase, the first author interviewed them offline using semi-structed interviews and using open-question topics such as 'gaming experience' (e.g. when did you start playing games?), 'time spent' (e.g. how long did you play the game?), 'game played' (e.g. what kind of game are you interested in?), and 'gaming sensation' (e.g. what do you feel when playing the game?). The interviewer also utilized some basic interview techniques, such as probing to delve deeper into specific aspects of an answer and help understand the depth of the experience. Interviews were done two times per person, which resulted to six interviews in total. Each interview has an average of two hours long.

In analyzing the empirical materials, we followed Creswell's (1998) guidance on analyzing both textural and structural description of the data. Horizontalization is particularly important to assist us to analyze the data by collecting interview transcripts from the participants that are relevant to answer our research question. We then continued our data analysis by developing some clusters of meaning where we started to group the relevant quotes to present relevant snippet of experiences. Next, we worked to analyze the textural description where we present the participants' experience based on cluster of meaning. Data was analyzed without using any software.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

During playing games, our participants demonstrated two main phases which reflect the flow experiences in casual gamers. The first phase is Flow Process and followed with the second phase, Flow Dynamics. In the following section, we are going to discuss each phase with the relevant quoted interviews and our analyses and interpretations.

Flow Process. In this phase, participants offers some experiences that reflects some factors that lead or hinder the participants to achieve *flow process*. These factors are time availability and game difficulty (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009), as visualized in the following figure:

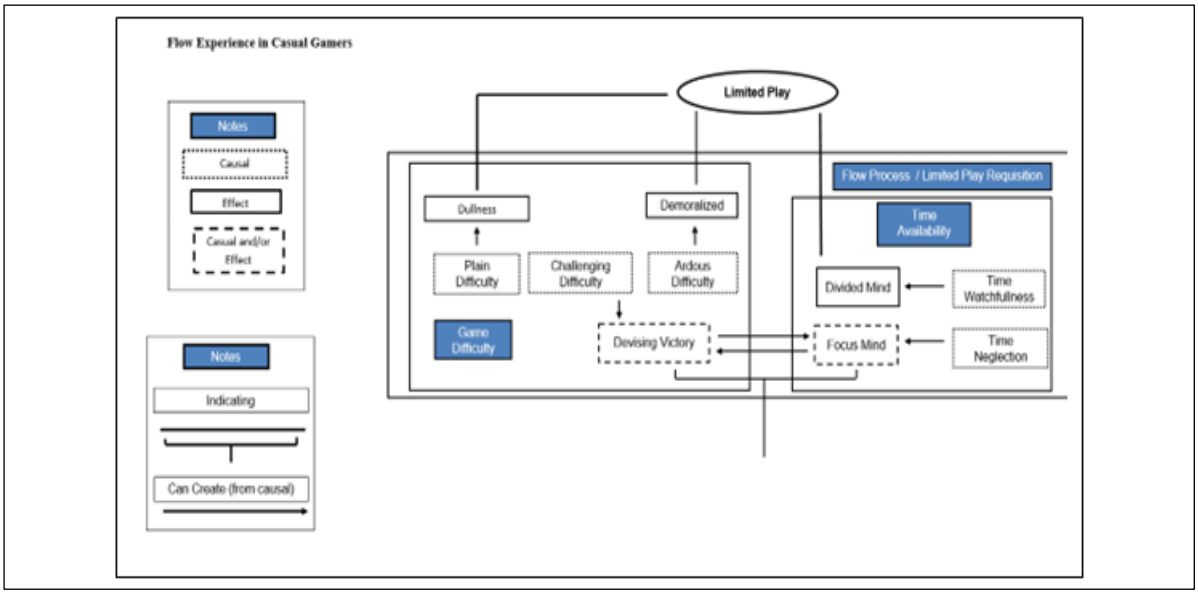

Figure 1. Flow Process in Casual Gamers

Time Availability. Before playing the game, participants will generally assess if they have enough time to play the game. If the participants feel they have little time, they tend to be aware of their gaming hours. If the participants feel they have enough time, participants are not concerned of their gaming hours. Our participants stated:

'If it is like this, I'm concern about the time I used. That's why when i feel i play too long, i stop playing because i need to do other stuff' (*Ezra*)

'Well, even if i did feel loss in time, i wouldn't really realize it. I usually played at night, and there are lots of free time at night. So I wouldn't really realize it because there are no activities to concern about, there are no time limits. But as far as I know, i never feel anything like that' (Solomon)

The interview script above shows that participants with limited time tend to prioritize other activities, leading *to time watchfulness*, where gaming is confined to not interfere with other primary commitments. Conversely, those with ample time experience *time neglection*, enabling undistracted focus on the game for leisurely play. Participants' construction on "sufficient" time vary, with some finding one minute enough and others requiring at least 10 minutes for playing games.

This time availability reflects that for casual gamers, time availability is a central feature of their flow experience. Casual gamers tend to navigate their gaming experience within a broader responsibility. The joyfulness of playing games and associated flow feelings is perceived as an escapism to replace the main responsibility. Here, the awareness of the time creates a space for the participants to temporarily escape from the tensions in the everyday lives.

We found that the aspect of time called '*time availability*' is the unique factor that is needed to achieve flow experience for the casual gamers. This finding differs from Csikszentmihalyi's study (1975) where the aspect of time called 'loss of time' is a process that happens when people are in flow experience.

Game Difficulty. When playing a game, the participants may receive varying levels of difficulty. Starting from the easiest (*beginner or plain),* the challenging *(intermediate)* and arduous (advance level). Our participants stated:

'The interaction with other people when we play game. So when I played my card and the figure comes out, other people will do also. So that i can become focus when playing the game, my mind can't think about anything else other than attack and defence' (Ezra)

'But here's the thing. So yesterday, when I win against my friend which I've told you before, the 75 one, at that time I was like 'why is it so easy?' when I reached 90-ish "Is that all?"' (Tomba)

'Sometimes when the level are too high,it becomes much more easier.Thats what usually happened. Second of all, when the game level is too high for me to the point I lost from time to time, which usually happened. It's like, making the game feels bored because I'm stuck there.' (Solomon)

Participants playing at the beginner level tend to feel boredom as the game lacks challenges. On the contrary, continuously playing at advance level induces frustration and demoralization, as the challenge becomes overwhelming and seemingly insurmountable. This diminishes motivation, leading to a sense of purposelessness in continuing the game. Optimal engagement occurs at *intermediate*, prompting participants to strategize for victory *(devising victory*), fostering a focused mind (*focus mind)*. The process of devising a winning strategy often extends playtime as participantss become absorbed in overcoming the current challenges.

'Focus mind' have both similiarities and differences with focused concentration

from Nakamura and Csikszentmihalyi's study (2009). The similarities can be found when the participants who find themselves in challenging situations, can focus to overcome that challenges. However, "focus mind" in casual gamers also appear when the casual gamer feels they have enough time to play game whereas hardcore gamers focus on the challenges without any concern about time. We believe that this difference occurs because casual gamers are gamers that don't dedicate themselves to play games most of the time. Casual gamers can't focus themselves because there are things needed to be done. Unlike hardcore gamers who dedicate themselves to play games most of the time. Which is why the feelings of 'loss of time' didn't occur in casual gamers because they already calculated their playing times.

Game difficulty can lead casual gamers to flow experience, this is in accordance with Liu and Chang's (2012) study where they say challenge is an important thing for gamers to achieve flow experience. Ideal challenge, one that has balance of personal skill and game difficulty, is the challenge that lead us to flow experience. Any kind of game gives challenge to the gamers. As long as it gives an ideal challenge, they will always lead us to flow experience. This is supported with other kinds of activities such as surfing where the surfer felt challenged by the ocean's wave (Partington, et al, 2009).

Flow Dynamics. The second phase involves accounts of how participants experience the dynamics and full sensation of flow experience. This phase consists of two phases: Flow Process and Flow Experience, as visualized in the following figure.

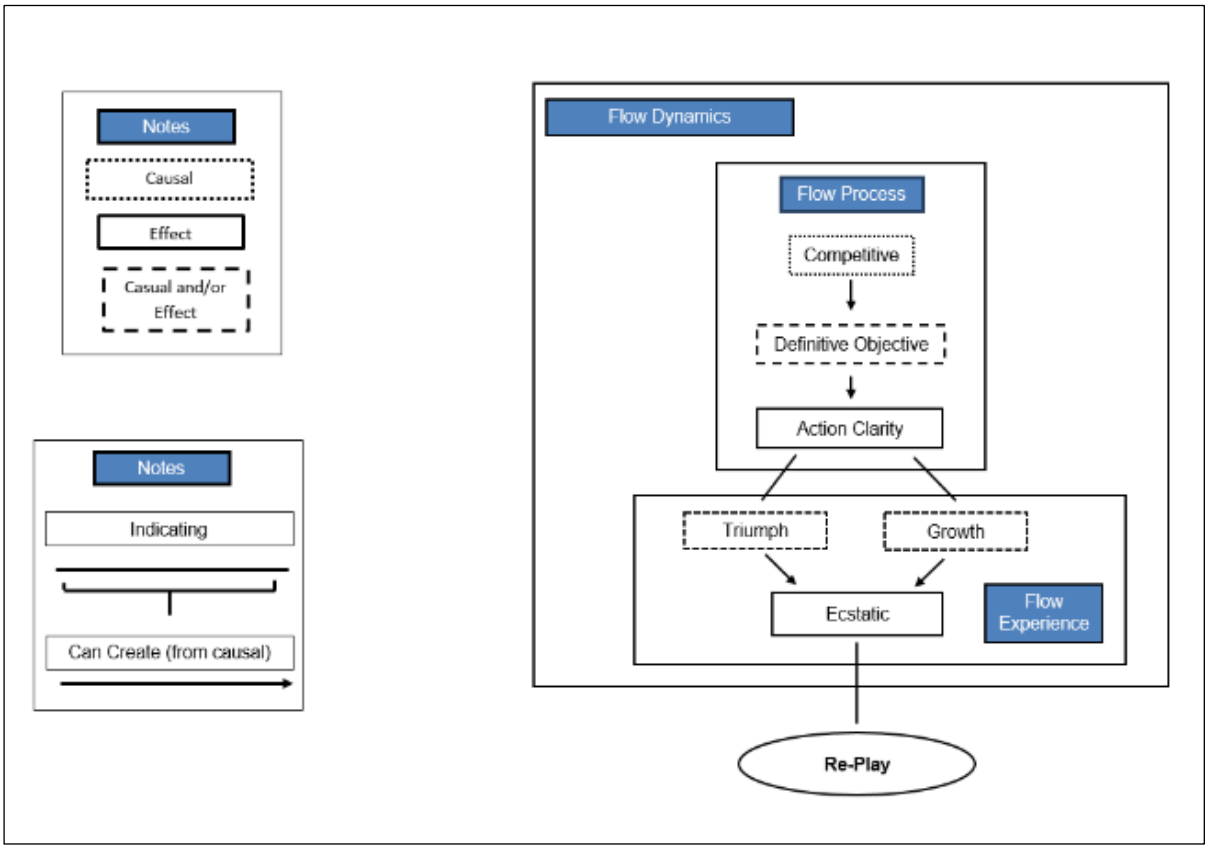

Figure 2. Flow Dynamics in Casual Gamers

Flow Process. The notable account of this phase is how participants experience competitive feelings, having a defined objective, and action clarity in every decision. Here, participants have clear goals and awareness (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009). This phase started with the the emergence of a competitive state in the participants. Our participants explained:

'A way to handle it…. well if it is in BBTAN it's like…. How do I put it…. So now I have the spear, when this box are in the last 3 spot before the finish line, I know i have to eliminate them first, that last 3. I have to eliminate them before they reach the ground, when they are high, I eliminate the ones above them. For eightballpool, I tricked the system, like, I played with my ruler or threads, so there are lines in there.' (Tomba)

'Usually I'll be pressured. Because my enemy can play the cards as much as I can play my cards. But it is worth it. The thing is, is that my elixir is doubled, but same thing happens to my enemy. So I can play my cards witht the elixir, much bigger and faster, so does my enemy. And well….. usually it makes me more excited because there is only 1 minutes left' (Solomon)

The quoted interview above reflects that this process started when participants were in a competitive state when playing the game. Participants will feel there is a competition between them and the enemy, with an increased intensity of feelings to win. The participants will start have a definitive goals to overcome the enemy the more time the participants are in a competitive state. As time goes by, the participants will realize a pattern from the enemy and start to exploit the enemy flaw pattern. This state is called action clarity. And with action clarity, the participants can execute their definitive goals and begin to enter the flow experience.

Flow Experience. In this phase, participants feel sense of improvement (growth), winning satisfaction (triumph), and fun (ecstatic). In terms of definition, triumph and ecstatic have the same meaning with sense of control and autotelic experience which stated by Nakamura and Csikzentmihalyi (2009). From action clarity, participants will be lead to growth and/or triumph, and ends with ecstatic. Our participants shared:

'Because in strategy, how do I put it? well when you are thinking, it is not that simple. When you are playing the game, it's like, train, well not really, but I'm content because the game sharpens my brain' (Ezra)

'The fun thing is when we are having one on one in online, so when I win i feel like "well that was fun" and by the end of the day, i want to play again if i have the time' (Tomba)
'Hmm…. the interesting part about clash royale is perhaps within the system I think. The ranking system. So you can increase your ranking when you win. Like with different level, you can get different cards. So basically your deck can be expanded, it's ever changing' (Solomon)

According to our participants, a 'Triumph' is felt when the participants know exactly, they are going to win. This increases the participants' skills and confidence. 'Growth' is felt when the participants perceive that the challenge can improve their personal skill. Afterwards, they will feel ecstatic because they either won against the enemy and/or felt their skills improving. Most of the time, the participants wanted to re-play the game to experience all of these feelings all over again.

Casual gamers feel growth when they are in flow experience, which supports Csikzsentmilhalyi (1975) and Cowley et al study (2008) where individuals who are in flow experience will feel a self-improvement in theirselves. We believe that when an individual finds challenge in an activity, the individual will see an opportunity to improve themselves. Seeing this opportunity will instill self confidence to the individual to overcome the challenge they will face.

These finding lead us to believe flow experience in casual gamers are a condition where casual gamers have zero concern with time and focus on challenges ahead. From that challenge, casual gamers become more competitive and start to know exactly how to overcome the challenges. It all ends with casual gamers feel the sense of improvement, triumph, and ecstatic which will lead them to re-play the game to re-experiencing all of these feelings again.

CONCLUSION

Throughout the study, we have demonstrated that flow experience can occur when the participants have the feeling that the task is moderately challenging, feasible to do, and in line with their time availability. Our exploration offers an insight that within the context of gaming practice, what differentiates the casuals and the hardcores is the unique factor of time availability. Our casual gamer participants provided extensive experience that assessing time availability is central to the flow experience and how they develop their leisure time by playing games.

While the conclusion suggests similar flow experiences to the hardcore professional gamers, understanding the specific game features, challenges, and achievements that trigger flow in casual gamers is central to the understanding of flow experience in casual gamers. Comparing these triggers with those identified for hardcore gamers could reveal interesting differences and provide insights into how game design can cater to diverse player motivations and play styles. It is also important for the next study to consider the type of game that casual gamers opt to play. This is including the observation if some casual gamers tend to play games from their home or foreign countries, which reflect ethnocentrism in the gaming practice (Maison et al, 2018).

The findings of this study should be interpreted with limitations. The limitation of this study is that it relies on only the internal psychological mechanism of the participants, which limits the nuanced of the findings. The next research should also consider factors like gender, game genres, gaming frequency, and socioeconomic background of the participants. We believe that different social classes will also have different take on how gaming is practiced in the leisure time (Pelupessy, Yulianto, & Madyaningrum, 2020). It would also be interesting to involve participants from different occupational roles and not only restrict the participation of university students.

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