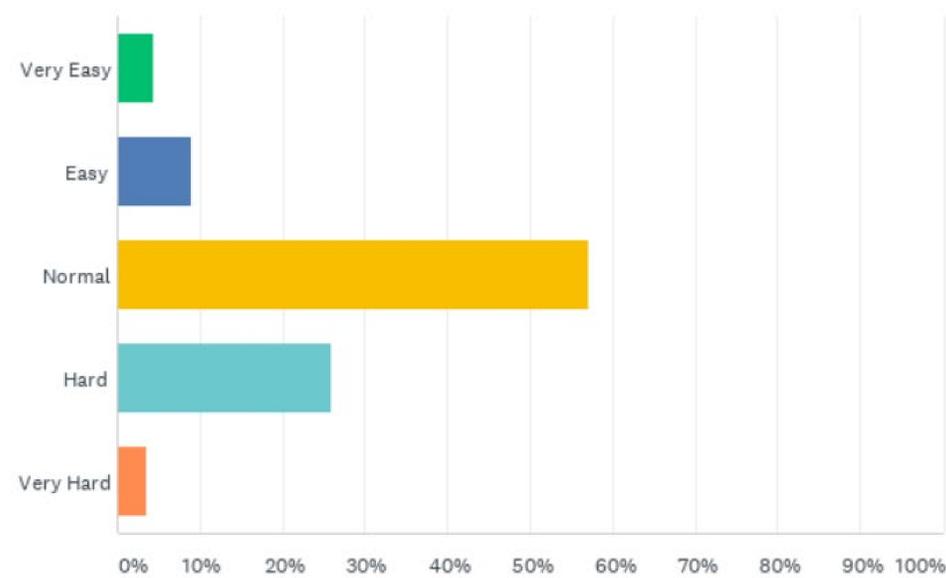# Getting Good: the Role of Difficulty in Player Enjoyment

Using a survey to identify effective implementation of difficulty

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BACKGROUND

- Flow theory is a psychological theory that attempts to explain what factors contribute to achieving a state of focused productivity.
- Summarized as a state of "Optimal experience, where we feel a sense of exhilaration, a deep sense of enjoyment that is long cherished, does not come through passive, receptive, relaxing times. The best moments usually occur when a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile." (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991, p.2)
- Games must create the feelings of flow naturally so that players may fully experience them and maximize their enjoyment of the game at hand

RESEARCH QUESTION

What design aspects contribute to effective game difficulty?

METHODS

- 112 participants recruited from social platforms (Facebook, Discord, Reddit)
- Completed a 10-question online survey
- Survey comprised of 5 multiple choice and 5 free response questions
- Ran from 2/26/2021 to 3/29/2021

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Q3 On games that let you choose difficulty, which do you normally choose?

RESULTS

- 57.14% of respondents tend to choose "Normal" difficulty as it is traditionally the standard experience the developers want their audience to have
- 56.25% agreed that they enjoy games that challenge them more than those that easily allow them to achieve goals
  - 16.96% strongly agreed

In general, players tended to prefer difficulties that:

- Gave them feelings of control over their situation
- Did not artificially increase the length of their gameplay (through the increase of enemy health, for example)
- Made them adapt and learn new strategies
- Rewarded them for trying new strategies and using skills learned in the game
- Did not use unfair means to make the game more difficult (like allowing AI opponents to cheat in order to increase player challenge)

DISCUSSION

- Feelings of control are crucial to feeling a Flow state–or becoming immersed in a game
- Being immersed (or feeling a Flow state) can be synonymous with enjoying a game's difficulty
- Players were most likely to enjoy a game's difficulty if they felt like they were in control
- To enjoy a challenge, players must feel like it is something they can reasonably accomplish if they apply themselves
- Effective difficulty should also reflect a player's improvement and give them active positive feedback (a kind of reward)
- If players did not feel in control, they were much more likely to have a negative experience

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