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The Allure of Danger

by Alan Van Pelt & Jono Hey

When Paul Garcia goes to work, he wears a special kind of uniform and takes a different kind of briefcase than most. Today, Paul will voluntarily throw himself—and paying customers—out of an airplane at 15,000 feet more than 20 times. Paul is a skydiving instructor and, as he puts it, flies in the face of danger for a living.


Why do people engage in risky activities? Some people are predisposed to impulsive, risky behavior; others derive enjoyment from and even become addicted to the physical sensations of adrenaline rushes. But a love of risk doesn't necessarily signify a desire to cede control. In his book, *Flow*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi points out that extreme athletes like Paul may derive enjoyment from the feelings of utter focus, of being completely in the here and now, that accompany achievable challenges.

Risky behavior is only enjoyable if we have a say in the matter. Our choice about whether to throw caution to the wind stems from the perceived risk of actually being injured, and from the degree of control we feel we have over the risk. This explains why driving at high speeds is a lot more fun than riding as a passenger in the same car—or why many people prefer driving over flying, despite the fact that flying is statistically far safer.

One way designers can invoke the thrill of danger is by taking what might normally be a dangerous situation and making it relatively safe, while maintaining the illusion of danger. When bungee jumpers dive from high platforms, they momentarily forget that they're tethered. As they plummet, the bungee

cords fall out of view and all the jumpers perceive is the ground rushing up towards them. Similarly, shark divers who wear metal chain-link armor easily forget that the armor is there. To a frightened brain, it's hard to imagine that something like clothing could protect against a set of menacing, chomping jaws.

Creating conditions for the 'flow' of Csikszentmihalyi's description can also be a powerful way to increase users' enjoyment. It's important to fully engage a user without overwhelming, to match the level of challenge to the users' ability level. In this way, a difficult bike course that would cause you or me frustration might engage an accomplished cyclist. Creating clear goals for users, giving them greater control over the outcome, and providing ongoing feedback are also important for flow. Some drivers prefer manual transmissions over automatic for the greater control of, and feedback provided by, the car. Shifting requires greater dexterity and timing, while the sound of the engine and pull of the ride provide ample feedback for drivers to tweak their performance.

Under the right circumstances, danger can be powerfully engaging, sexy, and even addictive. Designs that invoke the experience of danger can help attract a dedicated, enthusiastic following—but doing so requires more than just putting users at risk. So next time you're brainstorming, ask yourself, "How can I help my user fly in the face of danger?" 

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