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Bored Audiences: Zoned In and Out

Abstract:

As affective flatness entailing a sense of stuckness in the present, boredom is routinely cast as the conceptual and experiential opposite of interest indicative of the richness of experience. Taking a different analytical route, this chapter makes an argument for considering boredom and interest in dynamic relation with one another as oscillations in affective intensity. It further calls for adding nuance into what boredom actually means by addressing the dynamics of casual gameplay in the context of the limitations on mobility and stimulus caused by the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Characterised by mass appeal, short play sessions, clear rules, and ease of play, casual games are repetitive, and hence potentially boring, while also routinely used as escapes from boredom, and for filling up time. Starting with conceptualisations of boredom as a modern phenomenon, as the conceptual and experiential opposite of interest indicative of the richness of experience, and as a problem endemic to the attention economies of app culture, this chapter asks what the notion means in the current conjuncture of ubiquitous connectivity and mediated engagement. Through a discussion of casual gaming, it sets out to add nuance to what boredom stands for, and how it becomes diagnosed. Deploying ambiguity as an analytical lens, the chapter then addresses boredom as fluctuating rhythms of experience yielding languor, both pleasurable and very much not.

Introduction[i]

A game of solitaire is started, with fresh decks of cards—or, rather, icons thereof—appearing on the screen of a mobile phone. With auto play on, the player sorts the cards in descending order, resorts to a reshuffle when options for new moves run out, sorts again, shuffles again, sorts again, loses as there are no more moves left. A new game begins, identical in its structure and rules yet different in the selection of cards algorithmically dealt to the one just played, only to be cut short in the face of immediate defeat. Time to deal anew. Swiping and tapping on the screen of her mobile phone, the player is focused yet absent-minded, both present and zoned out, driven by interest while also lulled into something resembling

boredom as things repeat, vary, and repeat with a monotonous tone. She is not doing much, yet remains to a degree engaged.

Casual games are part of contemporary media environments characterised by constant connectivity, multi-channel and multi-platform access, and the layered use of networked personal devices. A casual gamer may be having a break from work, waiting for a train or sitting in one, distracting herself during a Zoom meeting, or playing while simultaneously bingeing on an HBO series. Within this environment, media audiences click, swipe, tap, type, curate playlists, upload videos, and share social media posts in addition to watching, reading, and listening, so that their engagements are hybrid and overlapping. According to a plethora of cultural diagnoses, the currently available volume of diversions and media outlets—and mobile phone apps and online platforms in particular—have resulted in shortened attention spans, perpetual states of distraction, and ubiquitous boredom arising from an inability to focus and care (for an extended discussion, see Paasonen 2021). This chapter proposes an alternative framework for understanding the dynamics of boredom in connection with contemporary networked media, one that foregrounds ambiguity instead. Ambiguity here entails a logic of inquiry accounting for the coexistence of seemingly incompatible and possibly conflicting meanings, uses, and experiences refusing to be confined in any singular interpretation. Considering boredom as being in a dynamic relation with interest as oscillations of interest and intensity, the chapter examines casual gaming in terms of mundane rhythms of experience, as well as transformations therein—as simultaneously affective, somatic, and cognitive attunements and reattunements characterised by repetition.

Starting with conceptualisations of boredom casting it as a phenomenon of modernity, as the conceptual and experiential opposite of interest indicative of the richness of experience, and as a problem endemic to the attention economies of app culture, this chapter asks what the notion means in the current conjuncture of ubiquitous connectivity and mediated engagement. Using casual gaming as a key example, it sets out to add nuance to what boredom stands for, given that the term is capacious enough to accommodate things from existential hollowness to meditative mindfulness, uneventfulness, and passing instances of dullness. Deploying ambiguity as an analytical lens, the chapter then addresses boredom as fluctuating rhythms of experience yielding languor, both pleasurable and very much not.

Engines of Boredom?

According to thesaurus definitions, boredom means being "wearied, suffering from ennui" (*boredom, n* 2023); "having one's patience, interest, or pleasure exhausted"; being "fed up, jaded, sick, sick and tired, tired, wearied, weary" (Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary n.d.). The bored individual is thus stuck in a state that is as apathetic as it is uninterested, dejected and dispirited, drained and worn-out, frustrated and blasé, glutted and satiated—so that boredom involves simultaneous saturation, deflation, and exhaustion. Things can feel too much or too little, too busy or too uneventful, or all at the same time (Nash and Lyon 2023). As "a corporeal irritation or restlessness, an agitated inertia in response to a current situation that holds no interest, both temporally and spatially" (Hjorth and Richardson 2009, 32), boredom is a matter of affective flatness *but also* one of irritation characterised by a general lack of interest resulting in a sense of stuckness. For the bored, the present and the immediate future may hold little interest. Time itself can seem to inch by at an unbearably slow pace: the "significance of world and self drain away, motivation ceases, and even the temporality of our existence is altered in a strange way: Nothing seems to happen and thus time seems to stand still" (Slaby 2010, 101).

For literary scholar Allison Pease (2012), boredom amputates agency by sucking away interest and excitement, so that the

> bored subject cannot make or does not find his or her situation meaningful. Such boredom is experienced as an irritating emptiness, a desire for something unknown to relieve the claustrophobic, enervating sense of time passing slowly. The experience of boredom is painful and agitating; it is a prolonged sensation of a hollow within or emptiness without (4).

Indeed, boredom can grow in intensity as an experience of nothingness to the point that one's very life seems to be at risk of diminishing (Anderson 2004): here, the line between boredom and depression can become difficult to draw. Whether seen as resulting from excessive or insufficient levels of stimulus, boredom is defined through the shortage of interest, excitement, joy, and enjoyment—that is, in terms of the lack of positive (see Tomkins 2008). All in all, there seems to be little positive about the dynamics of boredom as tedium, lethargy, ennui, apathy, monotony, dullness, and disinterest.

In cultural theory (as opposed to psychology), boredom has been defined as a markedly modern experience that emerged in the course of nineteenth-century urbanisation,

industrialisation, and the ever-faster speeds that they entailed (see Anderson 2021, 201–2; Goodstein 2004; Haladyn and Gardiner 2017; Lefebvre 1995; Simmel 2002), so that boredom has been seen to result from modern capitalism (Benjamin 2002, 108–9). Modernity itself has, for well over a century, been positioned as an alienating power that dulls people through excessive stimuli to something akin to stupor. Within this, media—from 1920s radio and cinema to television and to current social media—has been positioned as an engine of boredom that nevertheless promises the means for escaping the tedium of repetitive mundane rhythms in an environment already too saturated with things tugging away at one's attention.

In the context of networked media and mobile phone culture, boredom has similarly been identified both as the motivation for and as the result of their use. Within this logic of a vicious circle, boredom is both escaped and effected through routine, even compulsive habits of browsing, glancing, refreshing, clicking, and swiping (Petit 2015). For Tina Kendall (Kendall 2018, 81), boredom has become a "condition of collective lethargy, flat affectivity, and stalled anticipation that we routinely experience, express and seek to displace through our engagements with networked media". Michael Hand (Hand 2017, 115), again, identifies social media as the terrain of digital boredom characteristic of "contemporary life as technologically mediated, repetitive, rushed and denying solitude" within which "multiple practices of presencing, tracking and connecting are at once efforts to alleviate boredom, contributing to experiences of boredom, and occluding the possibility of a more profound boredom". Within this framing, social media is seen to erode the possibilities of profound, existential boredom revealing the nothingness of the self (see Heidegger 1997, 99). Kendall (2018) further argues that such erosion targets boredom in micro-temporal circuits, "downplaying its value as a mode of critical introspection and repurposing it instead as an agent of value extraction for capitalist industries" (85).

Parallel to this, boredom has been presented, and even celebrated, as an alternative to the accelerated present, as a means of slowing down and re-centring one's mode of being as variations of mindfulness (see Paasonen 2021, 135). It has also been associated with the lack, rather than an excess of stimuli—as in diagnoses of the COVID-19 pandemic involving mass boredom under lockdowns and limited mobility leading to a disrupted sense of time and space in experiences of unfocused listlessness (Nash and Lyon 2023). Such interpretations point to the lack of uniformity in opinion beyond the field of boredom studies as for the roots and causes of boredom within modern capitalism. There is little doubt about casual gaming

apps and social media platforms seeking to capture users in their divertive rhythms in order to harvest user data for the purposes of targeted, and hence more efficient, advertising. This being their basic modus operandi, analyses of the capitalist underpinnings and addictive logics involved are apt. My concern is that accounts of boredom as an outcome of networked media, or as a broad symptom of modern/late/advanced capitalism, turn attention away from diverse, contextual ways of experiencing dullness, and risk framing these in homogeneous and possibly ahistorical terms (see also Paasonen 2022b). This also risks flattening out the range of media uses involved. If boredom basically means affective flatness, what can be made of it within audience research?

The argument I want to pursue is not one of either/or in terms of boredom's connections with media ecologies and economies, or their broader contextual underpinnings connected to either circumstance or the personality traits of any singular user. Rather, following Louise Nash and Dawn Lyon's (2023) call to consider boredom in terms of mundane rhythms and ruptures thereof, I explore the dynamics of experience within which dullness comes about with the aim of accounting for the ambiguities this entail. Let us first consider casual gaming during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Pandemic Gaming

With pandemic constraints, the spring of 2020 witnessed a surge in all kinds of uses of networked media, from people connecting through social media platforms during lockdowns to OnlyFans gathering together sexual self-shooters and avid audiences, and Zoom calls becoming a staple medium for work meetings and Friday night cocktails alike. The sales of jigsaw puzzles surged (Bodenheimer n.d.; McNeely 2020), and all kinds of online games and puzzles, from solitaire and crosswords to super casual games became a means of killing time, Wordle (released in October 2021) becoming a phenomenon in English-speaking contexts and the videogame Among US (launched in 2018) trending (see Biswas and Gangul 2022; Liu 2020). It is hardly surprising for casual gameplay to be used for the purposes of entertainment and distraction in contexts characterised by insecurity, immobility, anxiety, and ennui, yet I suggest that repetitive gaming as a pandemic panacea also speaks of the complexities of boredom as a registered condition and constant companion in everyday life. That is, the relationships between the cause and the cure, the malaise and the remedy connected to boredom are not necessarily as clear-cut as has been suggested.

Casual games are characterised by mass appeal, short play sessions, clear rules, and ease of play. Depending on the game, one's skill level may increase over repetitive sessions, yet this is not necessarily the case, given the role of randomness and simple game mechanics (Anable 2018; Liu 2020, 44–45). Casual game play can fill up time "in the interstices of everyday life, in the gaps between productive and telic or goal-oriented activity" in what Larissa Hjorth and Ingrid Richardson (2009, 2020) define as ambient play. This can be engaged with as intermittent background activity in short sessions over the day (Keogh and Richardson 2018), or played repetitively so that hours pass. Casual gameplay can offer respite from occupational tasks where one does not quite switch off from work mode but rather lolls in something akin to what Natasha Dow Schüll (Schüll 2012, 2), in her work on video poker gambling games, identifies as a "machine zone" where the player's rhythms and attention move in sync with those of the game. With casual games played on a mobile device, the issue is less that of the rhythms of the machine itself—the phone—than those of the game, whether app or web based, designed to run on it, even as the affordances of the end devices (swipes, taps, sounds) are key to the overall experience.

Rounds and rounds of solitaire involve repetition but also differences in flow and ease, so that the experience involves constant modulations within apparent sameness. One game-play session may be short and fleeting, yet it may also involve repetition upon repetition as a game is started anew, or as one proceeds from one level up to another, again and again. This means that casual gaming comes with a fair dollop of predictability: a word puzzle or game of Tetris will, after all, unfold with precisely the same rules and dynamics, yet each session is also different in the words one can put together from the letters on offer or the shapes falling down the screen, resulting in a rhythm composed of both variation and familiar monotony. There is dullness at the heart of such mechanical repetitiveness, yet this sense of habitual routine in no way forecloses enjoyment. Quite the contrary, seeming uneventfulness may well yield pleasure.

Writing on boredom when working from home during the pandemic, Nash and Lyon (2023) associate it with a lack of rhythm, or a rhythm that is too slow or repetitive for comfort. The issue can then be framed of being pushed onto a zone of listlessness where both time and space seem to have shrunk, "characterised by the simultaneously stressful and fragmented rhythms and the intensified feeling of disinterestedness and boredom" (Liu 2020, 39). Xin Liu describes hyper-casual mobile gaming within pandemic conditions and

constraints as both “bored/disengaged and intensely engaged” (35)—that is, as actively dis/engaged forms of attention.

There are degrees and nuances to boredom, which means that its experiences vary not only in terms of their contextual specificities and perceived intensities, but also in their qualities and temporalities. As Liu argues, boredom and un-boredom may be hard to tell apart in mundane engagements with media, while dullness can gain positive valence as a relaxing lack of speed, stimulus, and intensity. Casual gameplay is designed to be boring in its ease and repetitiveness so that interest remains for other, similar yet different games (Liu 2020, 45). One may move between Wordle, Mahjong, and Candy Crush Saga in circular and cyclical ways so as to be differently interested and lulled into something akin to boredom; just as one may move between languages within Duolingo’s reiterative, gamified structure combining the sense of the monotonous with the aspiration of improving one’s language skills. In order to make sense of such mundane rhythms of engagement, it is necessary to think beyond distinctions drawn along binary lines between attention and distraction, interest and boredom—that is, to consider what Liu (2020, 39) conceptualises as “in/attention and dis/interestedness”. Exploring boredom through the lens of ambiguity in this vein makes it possible to consider it in contextual terms as involving gradations of experience.

Importantly, Liu explores pandemic casual gaming as a practice of care: of not being fully present in the present but subscribing to a different rhythm instead. Since play has mostly been understood as autotelic—where the practice is an end in itself, unconnected with any exterior goals or functions—gameplay has been associated with unproductivity. In his classic theorisation of play, Claude Caillois (Caillois 2001, 5–6), for example, sees it as creating “no wealth or goods … At the end of the game, all can and must start over again at the same point. Nothing has been harvested or manufactured, no masterpiece has been created, no capital has accrued. Play is an occasion of pure waste: waste of time, energy, ingenuity, skill, and often of money.” Veli-Matti Karhulahti (2013) proposes that such purported meaningless does not render play senseless, for “there is a sensation to be understood”. In affording affective modulation, casual gameplay then produces and means *something*. For example, such solitary and absorptive activity can suspend the player’s sense of time and space and create “personal buffer zones against the uncertainties and worries of the world” (Schüll 2012, 13).

Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (Csikszentmihalyi 1975, 49) identifies boredom as resulting from a discrepancy between a person's skills and the possibility of using them—from things being too easy and lacking an element of challenge. Hence a mechanical task can be boring, as can a situation where one does not have much to do. For Csikszentmihalyi, boredom—along with anxiety—is nevertheless constantly present, and hence impossible to just do away with. It then follows that attempts to alleviate boredom through immersion in enjoyable experiences are equally constant as "microflow experiences of enjoyable, trivial, unnecessary, and simple behaviour" practised for the sake of enjoyment (142). Activities such as coffee breaks, doodling during meetings, browsing social media, or playing casual games facilitate escapes from the boredom that otherwise patterns everyday life. Building on Csikszentmihalyi's discussion of flow experiences, of which microflow events form a part, Schüll (2012) conceptualises machine gambling as involving psychophysiological shifts and desubjectifying effects as gamblers feel "carried forward by a choreography not of their own making" so that they are both playing the machine and being played by it; being transported to a different somatic, cognitive, and affective zone (166–67).

For Csikszentmihalyi, people are geared towards that which adds to their overall liveliness and enjoyment taken in life. This is very much in line with how encounters with the world are to either increase or diminish the body's force of existence and powers of acting within affect inquiry. In a new materialist phrasing building on Spinoza and the much later work of Gilles Deleuze (1988), microflow experiences can be seen to increase and affirm one's life forces and capacities to act, even if in minor and fleeting ways (Massumi 2015, 53–54). As microevents, casual gameplay subtly shifts players' bodies from one state to another. Within such fabrics of experience, the flat and the intense, the dull and the enlivening enmesh, oscillate, enable, and depend on one another.

Interludes and Binges

Microevents can involve modest degrees of intensity that may be experienced as pleasant or soothing as shifts in the tempo of one's attention. Casual gameplay may well form a bridge between one's different tasks and obligations where the familiar rhythm of play offers an affective pause or reorientation of sorts, speaking of it as affective lifts or shifts, or that which Aubrey Anable (2018) addresses as "rhythmic interludes between various activities and as emotional mediators bridging the gaps, pauses, and glitches that are part of our everyday digital work lives" (91).

Microevents, such as a play of Angry Birds, are brief, geared towards diversion, and easily dismissed as meaningless and banal—not least since this, of course, is precisely what they are. As Anable (2018) points out, super-casual gameplay can be both all-consuming and blank in the sense that we refuse to attach meaning to it yet devote plenty of time to the activity in question. Casual, by definition, stands for the opposite of the hard-core, the immersed, and the committed. It signifies relaxed and unconcerned, and that which is not regular or permanent. The casual fills out gaps, comes with a distracted sense of focus, can be easily discarded without much thought, and does not involve much investment.

Alan McKee (McKee 2016, 22) points out that once the concept of entertainment was distinguished from the notion of culture in the 19th century, it was singled out as vulgar and offensive to good taste. This has explicitly to do with social class but also with aesthetics, namely short formats, from music hall numbers to popular magazines' miscellanea and casual game-play sessions. And as numerous critics have pointed out, entertainment understood as mass culture tends to be understood as femininised: unimaginative, safe, sentimental, serial, insignificant, and boring. Casual games approached with a generally dismissive attitude fit this continuum (Anable 2018). Anable further suggests that the feelings of guilt, stress, shame, and boredom connected to such games, and their association with procrastination, contribute to their low cultural status.

It should nevertheless be noted that distinctions do exist between different casual games, with Candy Crush Saga, examined by Anable, occupying the lower tiers and *The New York Times*-owned Wordle and Spelling Bee holding degrees of cultural value—if not necessarily prestige—by virtue of being reliant on language skills and degrees of savviness over persistent swiping. Games associated with "brain jog"—that is, exercise—entail productivity in comparison to those deemed a complete waste of time, so that, balancing the two, casual gaming is steeped within the logics of advanced capitalism in ambiguous ways. Yet the logic of constant advancement does not apply to casual gaming in any horizontal vein: a game can just start anew, time after time.

The ease with which popular literature, music, film, and games can be consumed have long contributed to diagnoses of their addictive, drug-like qualities. And certainly being "hooked" on an app or game is precisely that which their designers wish for users to do. The notion of addiction is widely used in popular discourse to describe dependencies on, attachments to, and investments made in digital devices and apps that are used both

habitually and repeatedly. As I have previously argued, diagnoses of addiction can in fact be applied to virtually any activity that is geared toward enjoyment and that draws us back again and again (Paasonen 2021, 29–33, 2022a, 3–5).

Returning to Schüll's discussion of digital gambling machines, she shows how their repetitive rhythms allow for compulsive gamblers to enter mechanical zones as affective non-spaces. In the interviews she conducted among gamblers, the opportunity of winning was, perhaps counter-intuitively, not positioned as the primary motivation for, or the highlight of machine play. Rather, it was the engagement with the machines themselves, the pleasures of sensory, tactile interactions with them that were detailed. Gamblers wanted to stay on the machine zone for as long as possible, as these altered rhythms of experience were the activity's compelling hook.

Extending considerations of machine zones from compulsive gambling to much more casual modes of play, their appeal can equally be seen as an issue of rhythms that are at once somatic, affective, and cognitive, and which involve both repetition and oscillation. This appeal also encompasses the feel of the device and the interface, game sounds, motions of fingers, and eyes taking all this in. Within tactile interactions with devices and interfaces we are, in Schüll's terms, both playing the machine and being played by it. Casual gaming involves more or less momentary assemblages of people, devices, apps, sites, interface design, and game dynamics that give rise to rhythms and intensities of experience. And this is where much of its appeal and pleasure lies. Even as casual games involve fleeting, not-so-invested engagements, their specific rhythms can lull gamers into long sessions where one is zoned both in and out. That is, the fleetingly casual can become quite the binge.

Consider an anecdote. In circa 1997, a friend of mine removed Tetris from his desktop computer in order to get some work done, then recovered it, then used the eraser function to truly have it gone from the hard drive; then spent a considerable amount of time trying to undo this function and get back to playing. Well aware of the absurdity involved in the effort, he was nevertheless adamant about restoring the game in a context where software could not necessarily be easily downloaded, and where the options of online play were limited. When this same friend later got a smart phone, he—in an interconnected anecdote—played Tetris on it for 14 hours straight before removing the app. The most successful of casual games with long lifespans, such as Tetris, are undoubtedly compelling and addictive. Such addictive qualities are connected to interface design but equally to the dynamics of

gameplay and the affective modulations, or zones, that they allow for. Compelling aspects do scale.

A game of Tetris, online solitaire, or 2048, played over and over again, comes with both focus and a sense of distraction so as to be at once boring, engrossing, obsessive, relaxing, and frustrating—all under the abstract banner of the casual. There can be great focus involved. Alternatively, one can play without much focus at all, thinking about other things as one's fingers move along routine paths, swiping and clicking in the modes of "in/attention and dis/interestedness" that Liu (2020) describes. A casual game can be played as a microflow event à la Csikszentmihalyi (1975) as a break from boredom—a little affective pick-me-up of sorts. It can be played to fill out or kill time when nothing much is happening or when time threatens to go by too slowly for comfort. Gameplay can afford releases from work tasks requiring intense attention or extensive sociability, or it can take place in a distracted way, as in multi-tasking when simultaneously doing something else. The game itself may be experienced as dull and boring in its repetitiveness, limited in its range of actions and options, yet as argued above, there can also be comfort to such blandness, and the patterns that it takes.

Media Zones

Casual games are mechanical in the dictionary sense, to follow *OED*: "operated by a machine or machinery"; "relating to machines or machinery"; "done without thought or spontaneity"; "automatic". The pleasures of casual games involve mechanical speeds and automated functions that allow for variation within a mass of repetitions; they entail recurring and familiar rhythms and allow for easy entries into machine zones in both intermittent and extended sessions of play. Repetition then entails brevity of focus and event but also encompasses more winding rhythms, as in starting a new game immediately after the previous one, undoing and redoing one's moves until getting things right, or progressing from one level to another where things remain both different and somewhat similar. In short, machine zones involve repetition with a difference since no two gameplays are likely to be exactly identical.

There is the low-key thrill of clearing a game of solitaire, first passing a word puzzle, or gaining a new personal top score. Then there are the small disappointments of game overs, the "no more moves left", the "nice tries", and the offers to try again. Across all this, the tempo of machine zones invites players in, subtly moving their bodies from one state to

another. As in Sianne Ngai's (2012) analysis of contemporary aesthetic categories where the interesting feeds boredom, where aggression and tenderness intermingle, and where playfulness fuses with desperation and fun with unfun, casual gameplay is made of mixed feelings so that the rays of interest constantly cut into dullness, and back again. Following Ngai, Anable (2018) points out how the notion of casual applied in this context downplays the games' overall zaniness: the experience of being confronted or overwhelmed by too many things at once. Casual games can "wrest us from our everyday rhythms, to make our bodies move in ways that confound efficiency and productivity, a kind of radical arrhythmia" (73).

A monotonous casual game does not necessarily bore, just as not doing much does not automatically result in ennui. Similarly, a slow and lengthy ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) video where little happens can bore, relax, or give euphoric tingles to its viewers (Klausen 2021), possibly simultaneously so, just as an art house film meandering on with a languid phase can feel simply engrossing, or give rise to disengaged stupor. Boredom then needs not to be seen as being in causal connection with the speeds and lengths of media—their tempo or duration—just as its emergence in mediated engagements is hard to predict, bearing in mind Spinoza's (1992) observation that "the human body can be affected now in one way, now in another, and consequently it can be affected in different ways at different times by one and the same object" (133). The fast and short can bore, as can the slow and long. It all depends.

An affective intensity that is enlivening can involve uneasy ripples while boredom can yield degrees of excitement, just as distractions can bore, fascinate, irritate, or enchant—possibly simultaneously so—pointing to a need to move beyond binary modes of thought clearly distinguishing positive and negative affect in how we understand human experience or, in this instance, human–computer interaction in practices of casual gameplay. Such ambiguity characterises much mundane media use, from the scrolling of news feeds to the casual glimpsing of a television screen and to instances of immersion in Zoom conversation. The pursuits and sensations of enjoyment connected to this are no simple matter. In their serendipitous intensities, the pleasures that media yield are, in Miguel Sicart's (2014, 3) phrasing, not merely synonymous with fun but can come with ambiguous, even dark hues. Furthermore, as Richard Coyne (2016) points out, "we can be bored with pleasure, angry at being fearful, worried that we don't care, optimistic about depression, curious about our own

insistent questioning, and enjoy being confused" (99). In other words, there is ambiguity to how we feel, or how we feel about the things we feel.

Considering casual games as intermittent, mechanical, and repetitive microevents involving both repetitive rhythm and oscillating intensities of experience helps in unpacking some of their appeal, and the functions that they serve within the everyday. This is not simply an issue of brief escapes or positive affective modulations aiming to alleviate looming boredom, in that their mechanical rhythms come with their own kinds of boredoms and there is ambiguity to the pushes and pulls involved. This point is similar to the one made by Sharif Mowlabocus (2016) in connection with hook-up app users describing scrolling and swiping beyond the aim of finding a match, this becoming something of a "a mindless activity: a distracted rhythm that appears 'meditative' and 'comforting'". Beyond mobile phone cultures and the half-distracted, half-focused routines of scrolling connected to them, affective modulations and attunements are part and parcel of media use, from opting for films and series to watch according to interest and mood, choosing podcasts and music playlists, or turning on the radio for ambient background company. Such affective attunements—the zoning in and out—can be fleeting and low in their levels of engagement, yet this does not render them insignificant.

To foreground ambiguity when considering the mundane rhythms of media audiences means framings things in terms of *both*/*and*, rather than *either*/*or*; as amalgamations of feeling and orientation where the habitual meets the fascinating, and where desires for mechanical rhythms yield nuggets of pleasure so that the flat and the more intense intermesh. Boredom, considered through this lens, is obviously not one thing. Varying in its dynamics—or in its degrees of blandness and irritation—boredom intermeshes and plays with a range of affective intensities, here fading away, here growing into an engulfing sense of lethargy, and here emerging as calming and comforting sort of blandness. Boredom then needs to be approached with contextual care sensitive to such multiplicity, and it is as involving not merely the negative affective register that we are to understand the forms that media uses take, how, and for what ends.

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