# Failure in Play: Boredom as Meaningful Ludic Moment

### Sybille Lammes

## Introduction

This chapter is about boredom as a particular kind of failure *in play*. I contend that boredom is not necessary failure of play — rather it breaks with a dominant paradigm in play studies that play is an activity and movement. Such an approach obscures possible translations between play and boredom and feeds into the assumption that boredom is a failure of action that needs to be avoided by players, as well as a failure in how games are designed to keep the ‘flow’ going.

A reconsideration of boredom *in* play is important because we live in an age in which it becomes increasingly untenable to think of play as a delineated practice as it is part of fluid assemblages. This also presents us with instances of hybridization between play and boredom. Furthermore, the tendency to sever play from boredom rests on a moral judgement in which play is applauded and boredom is perceived as a moral failing belonging to the realm of lazy people and under-achievers. This ethical and binary approach reflects our post-capitalist ideology in which play has become a virtue[[1]](#footnote-1) while boredom is something undesirable, despite paradoxically also embedded with the post-capitalist condition.

## But What is Play?

Not only players, but also scholars, easily get lost in play. Definitions of play are manifold: from play more related to games and rules, to play as a state-of-mind,[[2]](#footnote-2) to behavioral approaches (play as flow). The debating of terms is of course part of any scholarly debate and can even be productive. It’s part of the game. Should we, for example, make a difference between play and games (a distinction that not every language allows us to make)? Is play a delineated activity (Huizinga’s magic circle), or should we speak rather of a lusory attitude? Or should we, as some game designers would prefer, approach play as a closed formal structure?

Yet however different the stakes and opinions may be about what play is, isn’t, or should be, there is one particular premise in the field of game and play studies where academics seem to be less at odds about. Their approaches, fields, and disciplines may be diverse, and this may sometimes even lead to contradictory ideas (e.g. is play medium specific?), but there is one trait on which scholars seem to close rank, and that is that play is about *doing* and *action*. For example, Starbuck and Webster write that play is ‘a socio-cultural involvement in activities that give participants pleasure’[[3]](#footnote-3)*,* while play-scholar Miguel Sicart writes that ‘play is brought by people to the complex interrelations with and between things that form daily life’. [[4]](#footnote-4) Game scholar Schell asserts that ‘a game is a problem-solving activity, approached with a playful attitude’,[[5]](#footnote-5) and play designer Jane McGonigal defines play as ‘the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles’.[[6]](#footnote-6) From a communication studies perspective, Bateson understands play as ‘the exchange of the metacommunicative message[…]These actions, in which we now engage’,[[7]](#footnote-7) and Walz states that play is about pleasure and ‘is grounded in and executed through movement’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This small anthology may be somewhat confusing, again showing the width and variety of approaches to play depending on field, theory, and research object. Yet what is striking about these diverse conceptual approaches to the ludic is that they all stress that play is about doing and the pleasure that this doing or acting can bring. To extract the kind of verbs and words predominantly used by game and play scholars from these definitions: activity, attempting, bringing, pleasure, exchange, engage, movement.

Hence what play seems *not* to be about, according to such definitions, is about *not* doing, unattempting, non-engagement, stillness. Although not explicitly indicated in the above, some leading scholars in the field go a step further and firmly state that play fails when activity ceases. Being lost in play, or in the flow, is for them about anything but nothingness or stillness, let alone boredom. Most famously, social psychologist Csikszentmihalyi proposed a theory of play in which one enters a state of flow which ends — and thus fails — when boredom takes over. As he wrote with his colleague Bennett:

Play may stretch over longer or shorter periods of time but is not characterised by boredom or anxiety.[[9]](#footnote-9) (emphasis added)

Similarly, Mathwick and Rigdon, when discussing online searches as play, believe that play falters when boredom takes over**:** ‘Boredom during online information search should be associated with reduced perceptions of play’.[[10]](#footnote-10) Also, according to Walz, the cut-off points of play can be summarized as either over-reaction under-reaction.[[11]](#footnote-11) What is intriguing is that such scholars indicate that when boredom kicks in play always fails. But what if we consider the possibility that play *includes* or *invites* boredom? In other words, does play necessarily cease to exist when boredom takes over as a failure of action?

## Play in Boredom

Many scholars have drawn attention to how our Western culture has become more openly playful since the so-called digital turn and how play has become more interwoven with areas that have traditionally been viewed as non-playful. Some have called this transformation a ludification of our culture[[12]](#footnote-12) and others a gamification[[13]](#footnote-13) of our post-capitalist culture.[[14]](#footnote-14) Pivotal to this cultural transformation is that, through our engagement with digital technologies, play has become less distinguishable from other daily activities or occupations. This ludification and the merging of play with ‘other’ cultural domains can manifests itself in different ways. For example, applied games are often used to improve the quality of life in neighborhoods, or how work in offices has become transformed to ‘playbour’,[[15]](#footnote-15) or how running and exercise that take place on the streets or parks of cities are shared through location-based games.[[16]](#footnote-16) Through the user interfaces of digital media, we engage with the ludic anywhere we are and whatever we do and form dynamic networks of connections. Playfulness has thus left the traditional playground and has become an important part of many other daily activities.

Since the digital turn we can also observe a surge of different playful engagements that combine play with boredom. Waiting for a connection, getting lost in *Grand Theft Auto*, waiting for our turn on Tinder: it seems to become increasingly tricky to think of play as always being the opposite of boredom and of boredom as a failure of play. This is, for example, foregrounded in so-called casual games, like *Candy Crush*, *Mini Metro*, *Farm Heroes*, or *Bejeweled*. These are games with simple rules, that you can dip in and out of while waiting or passing time. Such games are often not very complex and are easy to learn and can be played to manage — so not necessarily to counter — boredom, while on the go.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In addition, social platforms and apps have affordances that make users oscillate between inert play and risky play. Dating apps are an interesting case in this respect. As a user of Tinder aptly explained, ‘But sometimes I also swipe in a public-private place, such as in idle moments, when I commute, for example’, and ‘It is a little guilty experience, I guess, and a little paradoxical. I feel it is between casting or fishing and playing roulette. I do not know… Tinder sucks […] (laughs)’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Here we see that users play the game of Tindering to pass time during idle moments. It is described as an oscillation between the act of fishing (as a slow and sometimes boring pastime) and roulette (as a heightened, risky, and exciting activity).

## Failing Awareness

Media scholar David Berry suggests that there is an intricate relation between the repetition, automation, and hyper-connectivity within contemporary cultures and the ways we experience boredom.[[19]](#footnote-19) Or, as Heidegger famously wrote in relation to modernity:

The man of today has no more time for anything, and yet, when he has free time, it immediately becomes too long. He must kill long periods of time by whiling them away through pastimes [...] In this ‘ennui’ nothing appeals to us anymore, everything has as much or as little value as everything else, because a deep boredom penetrates our existence to the core. Is this possibly our final condition, that a deep boredom, like an insidious fog, creeps to and from in the bottomless depths of our existence?[[20]](#footnote-20)

What Heidegger describes can help to substantiate the paradox of ludo-boredom[[21]](#footnote-21) at this time and age further. Indeed, already when Heidegger was writing about our modern existence, there was this ontological paradox at work in which we need to have leisure time but don’t know how to deal with it when we have time off. We have no time to do anything else but work, but we also fail to know what to do when we are not working.

Translated to our times, as Berry points out, one could say that this ennui has taken a new turn. We are now alienated from a *computerized* and automated world, not in touch with how this determines our actions and how dependent we are on the networks of control in which we are embedded. We are never offline and always in the matrix, therefore not noticing that we are part of it.[[22]](#footnote-22) We are hyperactive, hyper-embedded, and hyperconnected, without even noticing it and we need to be bored *and* play to be weaned off this. Yet — and this is crucial — what we engage in when we try to disengage is all too often a reverberation of work. We mimic the tedious practices of labor in our free time.

What we can learn from Heidegger — but also from Horkheimer and Adorno — is that work and play bleed into each other and that we often mimic boring chores we do for work in our time off work.[[23]](#footnote-23) Hence crushing candies, minding cattle, driving trucks, clicking buttons, swiping screens, looking at others playing on YouTube. One could assert that neologisms like ‘playbor’ or ‘weisure’ literally capitalize on this idea that play is the prolongation of work, hinting at a merging of play and labor or work and leisure and propagating a lifestyle in which work is fun and play is work.

Play is a way to counter our culture of habit and repetition, but can at the same time reinforce a late-capitalist mentality.[[24]](#footnote-24) So, *play-repetition* is a way to keep things nicely ticking over and not make ideologies fail. It is trying to keep boredom at bay, but inviting it back in through the backdoor. Over and over again we do the same tasks, and we replicate that in play, from Tindering to *Candy Crush*, *Harvest Moon*, and maybe even sometimes in breathing in and out for meditation or while swimming. Play and boredom can become merged or hybridized through such repetitions, which may result in a failure of awareness, but not necessarily in failure of play or ideology.

## Waiting as Ludo-Boredom

Yet sometime things do not go as we expect them to go. The technologies we use to play fail, for example. No connection with the server, an error in the software, a flat battery, a stolen phone, a wet phone, a white spot without reception. But also waiting: waiting for our turn in a conversation on a new media platform, when playing a turn-based game, when fishing for possible date. When we allow or have to allow waiting in play and we don’t engage in Tindering, Facebook scrolling, or clicking cows, a state of being emerges which is different from repetition.

Unlike repetition, waiting during play, I would argue, opens up space for a far more reflective state in which boredom and play can merge. This can, for example, be a place in which to develop a new strategy, or to stand as an invisible still hunter waiting for prey, but also for a play scholar to analyse what’s happening.[[25]](#footnote-25) These moments are important points of reflection and can lead to creative and reflective thinking. This may be what Benjamin meant when he asserted that ‘boredom is the dream bird that hatches the egg of experience’.[[26]](#footnote-26) It may also be related to recent research that suggests we underestimate the creative merit of boredom, often just dismissing it as a failure of doing. We are, after all, culturally conditioned to think of boredom as a negative condition that is for the underachievers, the losers, and the inert. We are conditioned to thin of boredom *as the opposite of happiness.*

Yet as philosopher Elpidorou pointed out, it may be a very good thing to be bored: ‘In the absence of boredom, one would remain trapped in unfulfilling situations, and miss out on many emotionally, cognitively, and socially rewarding experiences’.[[27]](#footnote-27) ‘Boredom is both a warning that we are not doing what we want to be doing and a “push” that motivates us to switch goals and projects.’[[28]](#footnote-28) From this perspective, one could not only conclude that play and boredom have more in common — as they share this capacity to push us to new creative interventions — but also that the dichotomy that is often introduced in play-studies between boredom and play partly rests on a moral judgment that applauds play and disapproves of boredom, and sees it as a non-desired state of being, a state of failure.

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