Book Review:

The Procrastination Economy: The Big Business of Downtime

Tussey, Ethan
New York: New York University Press, 2018.

Neta Alexander¹
COLGATE UNIVERSITY
nalexander [AT] colgate.edu

In the early 1980s, Nintendo sought to reinvent the gaming industry by introducing its Game and Watch platform and, several years later, the handheld Game Boy. As retold in Ethan Tussey's *The Procrastination Economy: The Big Business of Downtime*, the inspiration for these groundbreaking ideas came to video games designer Gunpei Yokoi when observing “tired and bored commuters playing with their calculators.”² With its easy portability and ever-growing library of games, the Game Boy redefined how an entire generation of young consumers procrastinated, “killed time,” and waited in line.

Tussey's book, however, is not a nostalgic trip down memory lane that simply recounts how dead (or zombie) media such as the Game Boy, transistor radio, the Walkman, or portable TV blurred the distinction between domestic and outdoor entertainment. Instead, this insightful and timely book focuses on how these earlier mobile devices paved the way for the era of smartphones and ubiquitous computing. By studying four quotidian environments—the

workplace, the commute, the waiting room, and the “connected” living room—Tussey’s first book contributes to a growing literature on waiting and temporality as social and political constructs. This recent interest in the history and regimes of waiting—as demonstrated by Helga Tawil Souri (2017), Jason Farman (2018), and the contributors to Manpreet K. Janeja and Andreas Bandak’s edited collection, *Ethnographies of Waiting* (2018)—helps us map the paradox by which waiting is crucial for supporting digital business models that supposedly hail speed and instant gratification.³

Building on a plethora of contemporary thinkers and media scholars, Tussey expands existing theories of on-demand culture to include what he calls “the procrastination economy,” for example, the monetization of “in-between moments,” such as the daily commute or waiting for the doctor, by media and tech companies. Shifting the focus from domestic screens to smartphones, he describes mobile media as “the forefront of the power struggle between a digitally empowered audience and the media conglomerates that seek to harness and commercialize online behavior.”⁴ He goes on to explore how mobile devices shape our experience of space by connecting them to longer histories of portable entertainment. Thanks to portable television sets, for example, “a person is in public space but retreats to a makeshift living room.”⁵

Much like broadcast television, which divided the programming schedule into morning, afternoon, and prime time, digital media companies adopt a business model of “mobile day parts.” Drawing on Lynn Spigel and Max Dawson’s conceptualization of “flexible leisure” and on Nancy Miller’s “snackable media,” Tussey helps us move from established (yet to some extent outdated) models of “flow” to a new model of “snacking.” No longer couch potatoes, the office workers studied by Tussey all snack on media bites during lunch breaks, morning commutes, or the occasional treadmill inferno. While the site-specific case studies offer detailed ethnographies of media production and consumption, it seems that Tussey’s imagined subject is an always-connected consumer, one who happens to live in a buffering-free environment and can afford to pay premium fees for high-speed internet and mobile apps. Despite the emphasis on waiting, questions of accessibility, strategic slowness, or the preciousness of digital infrastructure are mostly not attended to.

Instead, Tussey’s analysis often focuses on the extent to which the procrastination economy can paradoxically enhance—rather than decrease—productivity. Chapter 2, for example, explains that snackable media enable many workers to develop a work-and-reward system by which they allow themselves to play a game on their smartphones or spend time on social media if they were able to finish a task on time. It is not a form of slacking, but rather a model that “helps employees refocus and reward themselves.”⁶ A careful analysis of Fox Sports’s *Lunch with Benefits*—an internet-exclusive program launched in 2009 that offered a weekly recap of games and sports events during the National Football League (NFL) and college football season—enables Tussey to demonstrate how media conglomerates use snacking to expand their brand. Sport programming and late-night shows were early adopters of the snackable media model, as they could easily tap into the daily flow of their viewers: A recap or a short sketch during lunchtime (watched on a smartphone) is seen as an appetizer for the main course—watching the game or the show on TV during prime time. As Tussey is right to observe, the transition from traditional broadcasting to the wild west of the internet was not always smooth: When *Lunch with Benefits* aired a weekly pillow fight between two

bikini-clad models, for example, it challenged decency standards upheld by Fox Television and forced the network to reexamine its approach to digital snacks.

Merging industry studies with cultural analysis, the main contribution of *The Procrastination Economy* is mapping the constant negotiation between content producers (such as Fox) and consumers. Moving beyond the misleading binary of passive consumers versus active producers, the book shines a light on how mobile media could be expanded, misused, and critiqued by its users. These tensions are brought to life in a rich analysis of the mobile game *The Simpsons: Tapped Out*, in which players-turned-city-planners are invited to design their own version of the animated Springfield. Updating Anna McCarthy's work on waiting rooms and "ambient television," chapter 4 studies mobile games such as *The Simpsons* to demonstrate how they offer a sense of agency and control in places that force players into a waiting limbo. In Tussey's analysis,

the player [of *The Simpsons: Tapped Out*] decides what goes where, what gets prioritized, and how resources are allocated, all while sitting in a location such as a waiting room, when the player is most keenly questioning the allocation of resources in an environment that is outside his or her control.⁷

With its critical intertextuality and jokes on how mobile games might ruin your life, *The Simpsons: Tapped Out* simultaneously critiques the casual game industry while employing its most successful business models (e.g., cross-promotion of the game and the television show to strengthen the brand, and a "freemium" model, allowing the player to purchase donuts—the game's currency—by paying via credit card). In short, players avoid the affective economy of waiting—those unwanted feeling of helplessness and contingency—by investing their time and money in a game that mocks and critiques the gaming industry.

Such case studies provide a model for the industry studies we need in an age characterized by the monetization of every waking moment. At the same time, the variety of case studies and examples makes it more difficult to isolate the organizing principle of what Tussey calls procrastination. Surprisingly, the term itself isn't clearly defined. This omission is unfortunate, as this is an etymologically rich term: derived from the Latin verb *procrastinare*—to put off until tomorrow, "procrastination" also builds on the ancient Greek word *akrasia*: doing something against our better judgment. As Charlotte Lieberman recently asserted,

Procrastination isn't a unique character flaw or a mysterious curse on your ability to manage time, but a way of coping with challenging emotions and negative moods induced by certain tasks—boredom, anxiety, insecurity, frustration, resentment, self-doubt and beyond . . . Procrastination is an emotion regulation problem, not a time management problem.⁸

In that sense, many of the activities described by Tussey—like playing games or taking a train to work—do not neatly align with the idea of procrastination. Commuting and waiting for a doctor are not only productive but also essential; they therefore do not go against our better judgment. Playing games, on the other hand, can provide a sense of pleasure, belonging, and community. How can we draw a distinction between gaming as an extension of the workday and its logic, and gaming as a subversive rejection of capitalist productivity?

It might therefore be more accurate to refer to the economy Tussey describes as the "in-between economy" (granted, a less catchy term than the original). Furthermore, the

abundant and inconsistent use of the term “procrastination” throughout the book might give the wrong impression that Tussey adopts the very same obsession with productivity that he convincingly critiques. By emphasizing how snackable media enhances productivity, Tussey misses an opportunity to challenge and historicize the ways in which productivity has become the organizing principle of digital capitalism (a task recently taken by Melisa Gregg in her excellent book, *Counterproductive*).⁹ A more careful consideration of the “productivity imperative” studied by Gregg and many others could have helped Tussey provide not only a useful analysis of new production and consumption regimes but also a deeper understanding of how the monetization of in-between moments produces the very same challenging emotions of boredom, anxiety, and shame it promises to eradicate.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Procrastination Economy* is an important addition to the growing literature on digital and mobile media. Thanks to Tussey’s accessible and lucid writing style, it can appeal to different audiences and be used as a textbook in media courses. The insights regarding the way media shape our understanding of space, time, and control are extremely valuable to anyone who wishes to better understand how “the tired and bored commuters playing with their calculators” have given rise to a billion-dollar industry expending our living rooms to include every environment we might encounter.

¹ Neta Alexander is an assistant professor in the Film and Media Studies Department at Colgate University, New York. She serves as an assistant editor of the *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* (JCMS), and her articles have appeared in *Cinema Journal*, *Film Quarterly*, *Media Fields Journal*, and *Flow Journal*, among other publications. Her work focuses on digital culture, film and media, and science and technology studies. Her first book, *Failure*, co-written with Arjun Appadurai, will be published by Polity Books this fall.

² Qtd. in Ethan Tussey, *The Procrastination Economy: The Big Business of Downtime* (NY: New York University Press, 2018), 26.

³ See: Helga Tawil-Souri, “Checkpoint Time,” *Qui Parle: Critical Humanities and Social Sciences*, 26 (2, 2017), 383–422; Jason Farman, *Delayed Response: The Art of Waiting From the Ancient to the Instant World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Manpreet K. Janeja and Andreas Bandak, ed., *Ethnographies of Waiting* (NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018).

⁴ Tussey, *The Procrastination Economy*, 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁸ Charlotte Lieberman, “Why You Procrastinate (It Has Nothing to Do With Self-Control),” *New York Times*, March 25, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/25/smarter-living/why-you-procrastinate-it-has-nothing-to-do-with-self-control.html>.

⁹ Melissa Gregg, *Counterproductive: Time Management in the Knowledge Economy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).