

Ethan Tussey, **The Procrastination Economy: The Big Business of Downtime**, New York, NY: New York University Press, 2018, 256 pp., \$27.00 (hardcover).

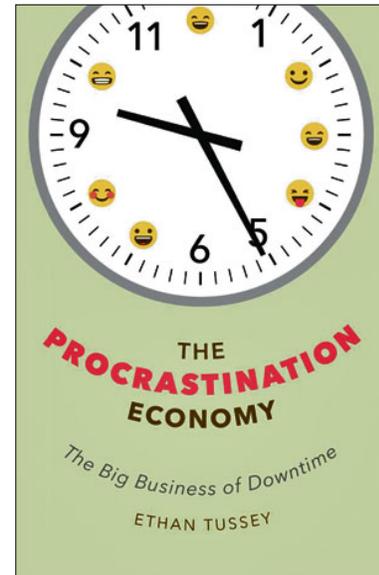
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What made **The Procrastination Economy: The Big Business of Downtime** relevant to me was that I read the book while waiting. Coincidentally, I had temporarily deactivated my Facebook account for a few weeks and had plenty of time on my hands during my “in-between” moments: at a car dealership, a doctor’s appointment, or a post office. Without immediate access to Facebook, I returned to carrying a book with me and opened it anytime I had a few free minutes.

In chapter 1, Tussey reminds the reader that killing time did not start from the commercialization of smartphones. It can be traced back to the emergence of print media. Whether I used my phone screen or read a book, I was “in between,” waiting, passing time, procrastinating, etc. However, reading did not make me part of the procrastination economy to the extent that using mobile digital devices did because they allowed a much more efficient connection between businesses and consumers.

The stance of the first chapter is that media, traditional or new, have always helped audiences pass time, and it serves as a good reminder to take current criticisms of Internet-enabled technologies with a grain of salt. Something, however, is very different about new media, when one considers the interests of commercial organizations that always strive to reach, advertise, and sell to more customers. Mobile devices allow a drastically different level of efficiency in this regard when compared with traditional media. Companies seem to know a lot, if not everything, about us: what we search for, where we are and have been, what we buy, and how we look. One would think that this uncomfortably high degree of the availability of personal information makes targeting narrow and precise as never before. One would also presume that companies have efficiently changed their business strategies to adjust to the idiosyncrasies of new, Internet-based media and their users. Yet, research presented in the book delivers two comforting, in my opinion, ideas. While companies are trying to commercialize the in-between moments, they do not greatly succeed in doing so because, first, they use an old-school understanding of the industry based on economic schemas of traditional entertainment media, and, second, they fail to know who the audiences are, what they do, and what they like.

Tussey examines four spaces that “catch” people in their in-between moments: Workplace (chapter 2), transit (chapter 3), the waiting room (chapter 4), and the living room (chapter 5). Based on the types of content being promoted to media audiences in the four spaces, Tussey draws portraits of these audiences as seen through the lenses of media production companies. Or, perhaps, these are the portrayals that reflect companies’ wishful thinking in what they want their audiences to be. Audience perceptions are rooted in the principles of competition and individualism as the basis of neoliberal ideology. People are lonely individuals



striving to be productive and using media to numb the pain of boring tasks. They are exhausted from work and competition, and thus seek isolation during the in-between moments. Maybe not, Tussey argues. Whether at a lunch break from work, in transit, or while waiting, people choose to socialize using digital media. They also choose to talk about media with others instead of merely consuming media content, be it music, games, or TV shows. While new media are being criticized for decreasing contacts among people in physical public and semipublic spaces (spaces like trains where etiquette implies keeping to oneself so that the silent order is not disturbed by loud conversations), they increase such connection online. This is where businesses seem to miss the mark: They approach online consumers using economic strategies relevant to traditional entertainment media that do not account for new segments empowered by the Internet. This is possibly one of the reasons why digital media continue to be secondary, supplementary in the growing economy of procrastination. They are used by companies to promote and extend traditional media programs. New media are reduced to the tools to regain the attention of distracted audiences, be those Twitter conversations about trending movies and TV shows or mobile game apps that are based off famous television cartoon characters.

The Procrastination Economy provides a synthesis of primary research and literature review on the topic. Tussey presents primary data from ethnographic observation, survey, case study of a casual game, and analysis of content from online forum discussions. The book will interest readers from the general public as well as academia. As a scholar who studies media multitasking using the social scientific approach that often aims to quantify the nature of the media multitasking habit and its effects, I was thrilled to read about this phenomenon from the cultural studies perspective. Academic readers might ask for additional details about the methods of data collection. What, for example, were the selection criteria for companies where the observations of employees were conducted? Why was special attention paid to the "outlier" game, *The Simpsons: Tapped Out*, and not to more popular casual games used in waiting spaces? What was the demographic breakdown of survey respondents who commuted with the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), and how did smartphone preferences differ by demographic factors? The author mentions, for example, how the music preferences of African American commuters differed from other commuters and, what is particularly important, from what the commute music streaming channels offered. There is tremendous potential to build upon this finding. That is, it is not only the commuters in general that the music streaming services did not see but it is also specific segments of commuters whose media preferences were not being acknowledged when irrelevant content was provided to them.

Chapter 5 discusses the dynamics of the connected living room, illustrating well how the Internet and mobile screens empower instead of shutting down. Mobile devices break the patriarchy of the traditional living room by allowing access to the content of interest regardless of who holds the remote control and chooses TV programs to watch. This issue, not surprisingly, is closely intertwined with the topic of gender roles in a household. The intricate relationship between gender and media use in the living room are examined thoroughly in the chapter, which I see as the most successful and engaging chapter of the book. What I wish the reader had more of is a pronounced focus on cross-gender communication throughout the rest of the book. For example, chapter 2 addresses "media snacking" at the workplace. To discover patterns of how employees use snippets of media content throughout the workday, Tussey observed three commercial organizations in California, including a website-production company and an IT support company. How many of the employees in these companies were female? Did cross-gender communication affect work and break flows? Did female employees facilitate and engage in the discussions of an episode of *South Park* or late-night shows? Who

dominated the conversations and who followed? Furthermore, chapter 2 focuses on the case of *Lunch with Benefits*, an Internet program that intended to catch and please working audiences during lunch breaks. The program did not succeed, as it was made using "old-school" television tricks. It targeted the "demographic of 18- to 49-year-old men" (p. 62) and used borderline offensive, sexualized content to attract attention of these viewers (something that used to ensure success in the golden age of television). Trying to reach lunch audiences on the Internet, companies did not recognize that today these audiences are different. They are younger and more sarcastic. The next question is: Are they also more gender-mixed, and was it reflected in the routines of the observed workplaces?

In chapter 4, talking about playing casual games while waiting, Tussey describes an "honest" game, *The Simpsons: Tapped Out*, that monetizes procrastination, in-between moments, and yet, sends satiric messages to the audience about the very nature of this economy. As Homer Simpson puts it, "Let's all be distracted by fun games while rich people control our future" (p. 131). Tussey calls this game product an "extreme" (similar to *The Simpsons* show on TV). *Tapped Out* is full of "self"-analysis and, hopefully, allows players to exit the state of fatigue created by waiting and see how they are being used as part of the money-making (or promotion-making) machine. Most casual games do not remind players about the "structure of delay and waiting" (p. 137) that allows casual games to prosper. The system privileges those who can afford paying to move to the next level. Those who don't pay in dollars are at a disadvantage. They pay with their time and attention to irrelevant information. They wait to watch an ad, to unlock access to another level, to get more lives, and for another player make a move. While the scale of the difference between those who can and "cannot afford to avoid waiting" (p. 137) is not drastic (both probably represent a relatively well-doing demographic group of digital screen users), it offers an interesting take on the concept of digital divide. What are the consequences of casual game playing when one is continuously at a disadvantage as he or she delays gratification, interrupts the flow, and is exposed to irrelevant advertising information?

My final thoughts are related to the catchy term "procrastination economy," especially the "procrastination" part of it. One can define procrastination as something that is deliberately delayed despite the urgency of a task. It implies that a procrastinator has some control over the process of delaying and doing something else, useless (or "goal-less") but entertaining. Thus, can we truly call being in an in-between moment procrastination? Is watching a show while working procrastination? Is waiting (i.e., delaying something that is out of one's control) procrastination? Is switching from one work task to another work task (e.g., checking work email) procrastination? At the same time, we could wonder what is not procrastination these days. Work and nonwork, tasks to complete and tasks to continue are intertwined to the extent that the daily routines cannot be easily divided into work, home, leisure, and in-between activities anymore. The understanding of contemporary economy structure, thus, is in urgent need of redefinition. In this regard, there is one more important and optimistic contribution of *The Procrastination Economy* to the existing literature. While being distracted by our gleamy mobile screens from what we are "supposed" to do in strictly defined settings (i.e., being productive at work, passively consuming entertainment at home, and isolating ourselves from others during long commutes), we build and maintain online communities, and by doing this, we refuse to be lonely.