SUMMARY

BORED AND BRILLIANT
MANOUSH ZOMORODI

Summary of Bored and Brilliant by Manoush Zomorodi

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Bored and Brilliant (2017) invites readers to embrace the unique power of a state that's rarely viewed in a positive light: boredom.

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Introduction

How often are you bored? Not just "I've binge-watched this same show a thousand times, there's nothing new on Netflix"-bored, but well and truly deprived of anything to do? Chances are, that's a pretty rare occasion for you. Because for most of us, even when we're not actively engaged in something we enjoy, we're still mindlessly performing some other task like scrolling through our Facebook feed, searching new shows on Netflix, or spacing out with YouTube in the background. And although it might surprise you, that's actually not an effective way of being bored! Because yes, being bored is actually good and it's something you should actively try to be.

That may sound mind-boggling, but that's exactly why this book exists. Because through this summary, you'll learn about the value of boredom and why:

- Candy Crush isn't just a waste of time
- How boredom can improve your memory; and
- How to take a "fake-ation."

A Lack of Boredom is Actually Hurting Our Creativity

How would you describe your definition of hell? Would it be something flaming and painful or perhaps a simple Sunday afternoon with literally nothing to do? If the internet was out, your phone was dead, there were no books around, and the TV was disconnected, would that be all it took to convince you that you'd been sentenced to an eternity of torment? If that sounds about right for you, you're not alone. In fact, boredom is so universally despised that a study conducted by the University of Virginia decided to measure people's distaste for being bored through an experiment. In the experiment, participants were exposed to three different types of stimuli: music, pictures, and mild electric shocks. Participants were then asked if they would be willing to pay to stop the electric shocks and 75% agreed that they would.

But here's where it gets a little weird: after being faced with that question, the participants were given 15 minutes to think about their choices. When the researchers left the room, they gave the participants a button that would administer a shock if they pressed it. But after only 15 minutes alone with nothing to do, one-third of the participants who said they'd pay to stop the shocks started shocking themselves in an effort to keep themselves from getting bored. So, what does this tell us about our relationship with boredom? Perhaps the most important thing it tells us is that most people would actually prefer the pain of an electric shock to being bored. And that's really a shame, because boredom can actually generate some amazing benefits.

For example, did you know that boredom can boost your creativity? If you don't believe me, just think back to the last argument you had. Because you know that moment when you finish an argument and then-- in the shower or on your way up the stairs, when your mind's doing nothing but re-playing the conversation in your head-- you think of the perfect comeback? If that happens to you as often as it happens to me, you might have noticed

a common theme: you think up all your best lines when your mind isn't otherwise engaged. Or, in other words, when you're bored. That's because our brains don't shut off when we're not actively engaged in doing something. In fact, the times when we're bored are actually when our brains are at their most creative!

Technology is Altering Our Minds (No, Really!)

Whether you're walking down the street or riding the subway, whether you're there for a couple of minutes or a few hours, you can see them: the masses of people glued to their phone screens. And although a lot of people today are resistant to technology and disapprove of its advances, Zomorodi has a different criticism: our smartphones are literally altering the way we think and act. How so? Well, for starters, studies show that technology has disrupted our ability to read and process information. Author Mike Rosenwald discovered that while studying the problem of shortened attention spans in readers. And after investigating the reasons why people were having trouble getting lost in a long book, he discovered that the internet has literally changed the way we read!

Because we're now so used to bite-sized news snippets and clickbait links that invite us to stop what we're reading and follow this new train of thought, we now find it more difficult to read linearly and consistently stick with one story. To make matters worse-- and even more ironic-- a survey of readers showed that only 30% of people who began Rosenwald's article about his research managed to complete it. But the internet isn't the only culprit; screens in general are also reducing our reading comprehension. A study conducted by Anne Magen, a professor at the University of Stavanger in Norway, discovered that although the emotional reading experience was very similar for those who read a physical book and those who read on an e-reader, their reading comprehension was vastly different.

This indicates a couple of things: first, that our ability to engage with print media is waning, and secondly, that even the simple act of reading on a screen disrupts our train of thought. And when you really stop to think about it, that's pretty scary stuff! Even scarier is the fact that digital photography and our cultural obsession with documenting every moment is also altering our memory. And although we want to capture and preserve every moment, to hold onto a copy of that one point in time so we can look back on it and remember it fondly, the sad truth is that the moments we

document in elaborate photoshoots are actually the moments we most struggle to remember. Linda Henkel, a researcher at Fairview University, proved this when she conducted an experiment that had participants tour a museum. The participants were told to take pictures of some objects and simply observe others closely, and when they were interviewed at the end of their tour, Henkel found that their minds retained more information about the objects they'd observed without photographing.

Our Attention is a Commodity

Quick-- what's one thing that drug dealers and tech moguls have in common? If your first answer was, 'Too much money!" you're not wrong, but that's not quite the answer we were looking for. In fact, the answer is a little more surprising, a subtle difference that we might not have picked up on. Scarily enough, their main commonality is that they both call their customers "users." The implication that we use technology like a drug is not coincidental. Because if you've ever struggled to put down your smartphone or felt that you simply had to have the latest iPhone upgrade, you can easily see how we've come to crave technology as much as any chemical fix. That's not coincidental either and it's exactly how tech companies like it.

That's because they know how to exploit our instincts and maintain our attention so we remain addicted to consuming their products. It works by employing something called the endowed progress effect. The principle of the endowed progress effect asserts that we like to prioritize tasks we believe we're close to completing. It's why we like checklists and bullet journals and aesthetically pleasing ways to chart our progress towards a goal. So, because we're hardwired to strive for completion, human beings are very responsive to anything which gives us a positive little "You're almost finished!" reminder. That's why networking sites like LinkedIn are so effective. Because they employ a "profile completion" feature which reminds us of our progress as we update our information, we're motivated to stay involved with the social platform and keep filling out our profile so we can chase that little surge of validation.

On the surface, that might seem fairly innocent, but digital marketing expert Nir Eyal argues that it's actually a bit more sinister and serves as a form of subtle manipulation or mind control. Arguing that the pursuit of approval, validation, and completion on social media can be as addictive as drugs or alcohol, Eyal cites statistics which prove that between 2 and 5% of technology users actually develop severe addictions. This is why he asserts that digital devices and social media platforms should be marketed with a

"potentially addictive" warning. Because many addictive substances are legally held to this standard and it helps to keep us safe; why shouldn't the same standard apply to technological "drugs" as well?

However, tech companies don't stop at exploiting our innate instincts; they also aim to re-wire our brains in such a way that they form new habits as well. For example, just think about how often you run out of lives on Candy Crush! It happens all the time and we know it motivates us to get better at the game and keep playing, but have you ever thought about why the game is designed with such a limited supply of lives? In fact, this is another example of gaming companies tapping into our brain's innate instincts-- in this case, our inclination to value limited resources-- to trick us into valuing the game. This, combined with our frequent losses and intermittent rewards, motivates us to keep playing, and this forms new habits which can also be addictive.

But although each of these facts are scary and we should be aware of how they impact our relationship with technology, the upside is that some tech features can also be used for good; some companies have even found a way to incorporate positive feelings like a sense of comfort into their brand. Uber, for example, uses its awareness of the human desire for safety and security to make its users associate comfort with taking advantage of their service. That's why, when you request a ride, Uber shows you exactly where your driver is and what they look like. This sense of security can also be habit-forming, albeit in a good way, because if customers feel safe, they'll be more likely to use Uber in the future.

The Benefits of Unplugging

You might have noticed that disconnecting from technology has become almost as much of a trend as engaging with it. More and more people are on hiatus from social media to improve their mental health while many retreats, cafes, and bookshops proudly advertise their "tech-free" policies or even forbidding the use of phones altogether. And if that seems a little extreme to you, you might be wondering how much good a no-phone zone can really do. The benefits are actually more extensive than you'd think! For starters, disconnecting from technology can help you form more meaningful connections with others in real life.

This was proven in a study conducted by researchers at Virginia Tech, in which participants were paired and asked to talk to each other for ten minutes. Because the participants weren't given instructions on what to do with their phones during the experiments, they displayed a variety of different choices. Some chose to put their phones away altogether; some laid theirs on the table, while others kept their phones close by holding them in their hands. Researchers noticed that the placement of these mobile devices had a significant impact on their results. When phones were present, for example, empathy levels between partners plummeted. And interestingly enough, even if the discussion partners knew each other very well, the presence of a phone caused their empathy levels to drop below those of the device-free partners who were complete strangers!

And if that's what the presence of mobile devices can do to our empathy, just take a look at what it does to our study habits. After reading about some cutting-edge research conducted by Princeton and UCLA, NYU professor Laura Noren decided to act on their findings. Because the studies posited that taking handwritten notes improves our ability to retain information-- and, conversely, that digital note-taking decreases it- Noren implemented this practice in her classroom by banning the use of laptops in class. Within just a few class sessions, she found that students were

significantly more engaged and more willing to participate in class discussions!

Studies like these prove that taking a break from technology can be much like taking a break from work-- and we all know how vital that is! Just take a look at how that fact impacted BCG Consulting. Because the work was so intense and consultants were on call 24/7, the host of bright, eager employees the firm had been so proud of all burned out in under five years. That's when economist Leslie Perlow stepped in with a solution: she proposed that the company should select a midweek day on which consultants would not be allowed to work. And although her initial focus group of consultants panicked at first, they soon found that a work detox was the break they didn't know they needed. Once BCG's management implemented this as a long-term solution, they found it revolutionized their company culture and rejuvenated their employees! So, as you can see, taking a break from technology is often more important than we realize.

Mobile Games Can be Helpful or a Hindrance

The difference lies simply in how we play them. Because although it's easy to get addicted to Candy Crush or to brush it off as a waste of time, the most accurate perception of mobile games lies somewhere in-between these extremes. In fact, according to author and game developer Jane McGonigal, there are correct and incorrect ways to engage with mobile games. For example, if we play them in brief spurts-- like during commercial breaks or while we're waiting in a lobby-- we create important distinctions between the games and our reality and we view them as temporary amusements. But if playing the game becomes our primary activity and real life starts to feel irrelevant by comparison, that's when we know we've gone too far.

And by the same token, it's important we teach our children healthy gaming habits rather than banning them from technology altogether. That's what computer teacher Joel Levin learned when he introduced his four-year-old daughter to Minecraft. Although many parents might have objected that she was too young and he was setting her up for a technology addiction, Levim recognized that the game's focus on exploring new worlds could be a powerful teaching aid. And when his daughter's relationship with Minecraft proved him right-- the game taught her how to spell her first word!-- he took it a step farther by introducing his class to Minecraft. This experiment was so successful that he actually wound up developing an educational version of the game with Minecraft's creators!

Today, their resulting product, MinecraftEdu, helps students in over 7,000 classrooms and 40 countries around the world to learn about math, language skills, social studies, and more! And as you can see from this example, technology has the power to produce an amazing amount of good in our world. Because technology itself isn't the problem; its ability to help or harm lies solely in how we use it. And that's why it's vital that we model healthy digital behavior for our children and our peers.

Kids Are Uniquely Vulnerable to Technology

That sounds like something we've all heard a lot, doesn't it? From parents ranting about TV and video games "rotting your kids' brains" to studies which seem to flip-flop back and forth about whether technology helps or hurts your kids, if we've learned one key thing, it's that our children are uniquely vulnerable. And it makes sense, because we all know how much kids like excitement and flashing lights, and digital entertainment offers that in spades. Naturally, this presents a host of unique dangers, many of which are so significant that even leading tech giants like Steve Jobs refuse to let their kids use devices they've created!

That might sound overly strict, but there's actually some very sound logic behind these policies. One contributing factor is the research of Dr. Mary Helen Immordino Yang, who studies the way kids interact with social media. Her research demonstrates that children who spend a significant amount of time on social media display lower levels of empathy and critical thinking skills when it comes to solving real-world problems. That's scary enough on its own, but social media also has a profound impact on teens' ability to form opinions. For example, in a study conducted at UCLA, researcher Lauren Sherman created a fake Instagram feed and invited participants from her focus group of teenagers rate the pictures. Through the study, Sherman would shuffle around the number of likes a picture had gotten. And in so doing, she learned that no matter how she the number of likes a picture had gotten, kids always gravitated toward the pictures that were considered most popular.

So, how can we combat these negative developments in our children? The possible solution lies somewhere in the middle of two extremes. One option might be to ban technology completely, which is what Waldorf schools attempt to do. Operating on the principle that technology is harmful to development, Waldorf schools restrict students' access to all technology prior to seventh grade. But if that approach sounds a little extreme, another alternative might be to teach children constructive ways to establish their

own limits. That's what a creative staff member named Matt Smith dared to do during his time at Longacre Leadership Camp when he lifted the camp's summer-long ban on technology and decided to allow it after the first week of camp.

At first, this policy generated a surge in digital activity from campers, but after the first week, Smith noticed that it decreased significantly as campers began self-policing. Preferring to engage with each other and the activities at camp, the kids helped each other stay accountable, even calling out their fellow campers when they spent too much time on their phones or disengaged through using earbuds too often. This experiment proves that if we can simply give kids guidance on safe and healthy tech practices, they can learn to enforce their own limits and set appropriate boundaries.

The Bored and Brilliant Challenge

So, now that we've talked about the importance of forming healthy tech habits, let's take a look at how we can apply them in our lives. One of the best ways to start is by engaging in the Bored and Brilliant Challenge, a weeklong program that encourages users to redevelop their habits and usage of technology by completing a new mini-challenge each day. Let's take a look at the first four days. For starters, you'll focus on self-observation. The first day is all about taking note of your digital habits and you can do this with the aid of apps like Moment (for iPhone) or Space (for Android). These apps will show you how many times a day you unlock your phone and how much time you spend using it. For the purpose of this day, you're not altering any behaviors yet, you're simply assessing what you do.

Day two begins with the next step: avoiding technology use on the go. This might be the most common way we overuse our tech, because it's just so tempting. So, for this day, whenever you're waiting in an elevator, riding the bus, or hanging around between meetings, resist the urge to pull out your phone. No podcasts, no music, no social media-- nothing. Use these moments of downtime to really disengage without relying on your phone as a crutch. On day three, take your fast a step farther and avoid taking any pictures for the entire day. Instead of digitally capturing moments, focus on preserving them with your mind. And if you want to really challenge yourself, avoid sharing or liking any photos for the duration of the day as well!

Day four is where it gets a little trickier because this is "delete an app" day. And not just any app-- your go-to app. The one you click on first when you're wasting time in the bathroom, the one you could mindlessly scroll through all day. Whatever that app is for you, today it needs to be totally gone (and not re-downloaded!) This might be really uncomfortable for a little while, but it's not only worth it, it's also a gateway to the second part of the challenge, which is all about creating healthier digital habits.

Improve Your Digital Habits

Now that you've taken some positive steps toward creating healthy habits, the good news is that you've already done the hard part by laying the groundwork. Now all you've got to do is maintain it! So, start day five by taking a "fakeation"-- a fake vacation where you don't physically go anywhere, you just give yourself a break from all digital devices and distractions. Whether it lasts for half an hour or the whole day, whether you use it to work on a project that could use your undivided attention or simply give yourself a window of time that's free from push notifications, your fakeation should be a time of peace and restoration. You can even make the process less stressful for yourself by setting up an out-of-office auto-reply message that lets people know you'll be unavailable for a short time. That way, you don't have to worry about coming back to a hundred panicked messages from friends, family, and work!

Now it's time for day six of your challenge, which is probably the simplest. On day six, take an unplugged foray into any public space without your digital devices and simply engage with your surroundings. Take mental notes about what you hear, smell, and see, and be on the lookout for little details in life you might otherwise miss out on altogether.

This will help you prepare for day seven, when all your days of hard work will come together and blossom. Because this is the day where you identify a single issue in your life that's been causing you anxiety and distress. Once you've done that, spend 30 minutes by yourself with no distractions, and fill a sheet of paper with as many ones and zeros as you can fit on the page. That probably sounds like the most mindless activity you can imagine and you're right! But that's what makes it perfect. Because once you're bored out of your mind, your creativity will be sufficiently stimulated that you can start to brainstorm bold new solutions for the problem you identified earlier!

Final Summary

The Bored and Brilliant Challenge won't solve all your problems overnight, but it will provide you with a handy toolkit for unplugging from technology, engaging your creativity, and restoring your mental health.

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