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Im/possible Boredom: Rethinking the Present of the Gamer Subject

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Abstract

Mobile games downloads have witnessed a surge during the covid-19 lockdown. Gaming is said to provide a much-needed distraction from the crisis whose intensity is felt as shrunk space and paused time. This article concerns the seemingly contradictory modes of attention – bored/disengaged and intensely engaged – during the covid-19 pandemic. It rethinks the relation between boredom and care by zooming in on the present of the gamer subject. Drawing on feminist theorizations of care and time, critical game studies as well as theorizations of boredom, especially in the context of digital games, this article analyses a hyper-casual game called *Helix Jump* and rereads the temporality of the covid-19 narrative in China through the logic of digital gaming. It suggests that boredom should be understood as an im/possibility, that is not antithetical to, but an expression of the as-well-as-possibleness of care.

Keywords

Boredom, Digital Games, Present, Gamer Subject, Covid-19, Care

Gaming in the time of crisis

Swiping left and right, linking the cute images of bears and rabbits, my mum is fully absorbed in a game on her phone. The game is called Craz3 Match, a popular match 3 mobile game in China. She sits still and looks relaxed, moving nothing but her right index finger. Left. Right. Left. Right. Sitting next to her, I anxiously follow the

reports about the virus outbreak on TV. It has been 22 days since we got to know that the novel coronavirus – now called covid-19 – spreads person-to-person, and since Wuhan – a city of more than 10 million residents and the epicentre of the virus outbreak – has been on lockdown. My parents and I, like most other people in China, have been following the instructions to stay indoors most of the time.

First thing every morning, we check the numbers of infected persons, and whether there have been any new confirmed cases in my hometown, a small city in Sichuan province, Southwest China. We follow reports from state media and social media. We discuss how frightening the situation is, how sad it is to see so many people infected and suffer, how helpless it is to see the lack of medical resources for the health workers and the patients, how touching it is to see so many health workers across China volunteer to travel to Wuhan and support the control and prevention work, how worrying it is if the situation does not improve, and when and if the “turning point” will take place.



Figure 1: an image of the gate of the apartment complex in which my parents live. The barbed wire was installed at the end of January. People who do not live in this community are not allowed to enter. Residents’ temperature is checked before entering the community too. Photo taken by myself.

As the images of empty Chinese cities show, it is as if time – marked by the rhythm of the mundane life in the city – has been paused and re-*placed* by the time of crisis – felt through the held breath, and the anxious anticipation of impending infections and death. It is as if time and space have shrunk. The accessibility of *the next* day and *the next* place can no longer be taken for granted in the face of the looming threat of the outbreak (see figure 1). And yet, *at the same time*, this shrunken space and time also feels too spacey and too long, a time of boredom that feels insignificant to and incompatible with the time of the crisis.

Like my mum, many Chinese smartphone users play mobile games to kill time. According to a recent report by the *Financial Times*, a record number of games have been downloaded in China since the outbreak, with an average of 60 million weekly downloads of mobile games by Chinese smartphone users¹. The surge in game downloads is attributed to the long and “empty” hours of staying at home. As Jiahui Wang, who has been self-quarantined at home for 14 days, is quoted saying in a report by CNN, “Every day I’m at home, I’m so bored. I don’t want to use my brain, so I’ll play some light and joyful games.” And as Clement Wen is quoted as saying in the same report, “it does give me more peace of mind and keeps me from looking too much at coronavirus news, whether real or fake”². In these accounts, gaming is said to provide pleasure, relaxation and distraction. It allows an *active dis/engagement* – “don’t want to use my brain” – that results in a sense of calmness – “more peace of my mind”. What is the relation between this form of dis/engagement that separates the time and space of the game and its environment, and the attentiveness to the crisis felt as the shrunken space and paused time?

The seemingly contradictory modes of attention – bored/disengaged and intensely engaged – have also informed how relations of care are depicted in the predominant narratives in China. In these narratives, the carers are the ones who work at the front line of the “war on virus”, such as state officials, experts, health workers, social workers and volunteers. They represent and embody the heroic nation that risks its life to protect its citizens. In video footages that are circulated on Chinese state media and social media platforms, the front-line workers are often seen to be either working till exhaustion, or rushing between wards, hospitals and communities. The intensity of their presence is depicted in stark contrast to the passivity and boredom

of the bodies at home, whose modes of existence during the covid-19 crisis are characterised by the extended time of waiting. The insignificance that is typically attributed to gaming also reinforces the stark contrast between the carer and the cared. Such a configuration of relations of care supports the heteronormative and heroic narrative about the coronavirus crisis in China that justifies the intensified surveillance and censorship, and eclipses other narratives of the virus outbreak.

In this article, I aim to challenge the configuration of care that is built upon the opposition between being present and attentive for others and dis/engagement as a form of self-care. I do so by zooming in on the present of the gamer subject. I want to emphasise that I do not downplay the importance of the work done by the people at the front line. Rather, following feminist critical engagements with moral rigidities of hegemonic ethics (see for example de la Bellacasa, 2017), I ask how boredom might be a form of, rather than antithetical to, care. I take inspiration from McKenzie Wark's suggestion to rethink digital game not simply as a form of media among others, nor "a pastime, outside or alongside of life" (2007: 98), but "our contemporaries, the form in which present can be felt and, in being felt, thought through" (2007: 145). Instead of considering gaming simply as a means to entertain and to fill in the empty and boring time, I am interested in considering how time is felt and made sense of, in, through and as the present of the gamer subject. How might for example the time of the crisis be thought of from the perspective of digital games?

This article proceeds as follows: First, I provide a brief overview of the theoretical frameworks that support my analysis of the question of care, boredom and the present of the gamer subject. Second, I analyse a hyper-casual game called Helix Jump. I explain what is specific to the game mechanics and representations of the genre of hyper-casual games, of which Helix Jump is exemplary. I then zoom in on how time and the present of the gamer subject are felt and materialised in the process of playing Helix Jump, and consider how such a process makes visible the im/possibility of boredom. Finally, I return to the time of the covid-19 crisis. The time of gaming is routinely explained through a certain linear temporal logic that locates gaming as an interlude; that is, as an in-between moment among other activities (see for example Anable, 2018). To make the familiar strange, I reread the

temporality of the covid-19 narrative in China through the logic of digital gaming, and ask about the implications of rearticulating care in the time of the crisis.

Care, boredom and the gamer subject

A thorough engagement with the scholarly fields of feminist studies of care, boredom studies and game studies is beyond the scope of this article. In this section, I try to explain how I approach the questions of care, boredom and the gamer subject. I take inspiration from Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's conceptualisation of care as an open-ended "as well as possibleness" (2017: 202). Staying with the tension between the three dimensions of care – "labor/work, affect/affections, ethics/politics" (2017: 5), de la Bellacasa displaces the intentional and self-reflective individual subject from the centre of care. According to de la Bellacasa, care is emergent through and embedded in a web of care and cannot be reduced to a set of normative moral obligations. Furthermore, the contingency and situatedness of care mean that the temporality of care needs to be rethought from the perspectives of everyday lived practices that confound the linear progressiveness of productionist fantasy. De la Bellacasa's following explanation of care time assists my analysis here, I will thus cite it at length:

Care time is not a get-it-while-you-can *now*, which ignores the future and obliterates the past. But even when one cares for the dying, with hope and anxious anticipation, even when care is compelled by urgency to enjoy the fleeting present, charged by past regrets and joys and the weight of accumulated experiences, a certain suspension of feelings of emergency, fear, and future projections – and weighty pasts – is required to focus on caring attention. In particular with regard to anxious futurity, feelings of emergency and fear, as well as temporal projections, need often to be set aside in order to focus and get on with the tasks necessary to everyday caring maintenance. Without this mode of attention, care would be an impossible charge, always at the edge of a break (2017: 207; emphasis in the original).

As de la Bellacasa's description of care time makes clear, care as a mode of attention is a practice that suspends feelings such as fear, anxiety, and perhaps even pleasure about past and future, so carving out the space and time of (being) present. This simultaneity of attention and suspension of care time resonates with the aforementioned active dis/engagement of playing mobile games. As Lisa Baraitser and Laura Salisbury observe in the context of covid-19, care time provides an alternative recursive temporality, experienced for example as a stretch of boredom, that "is likely to be able to know more about the ongoing violence as it holds back from narratives of battles to be won" (2020: 10).

Drawing on de la Bellacasa's and Baraitser's conception of the relation between time and care, I locate the analysis of boredom and the gamer subject in the care time – the suspended present thickened with care-ful attention and "multilateral demands" (de la Bellacasa 2017: 208). My aim is not to redeem boredom – a supposedly "ugly feeling" (Ngai 2005) – as a caring affect, nor to value self-care over and against self-less care that would reproduce the opposition and separation between the individual and the collective, self and other. Rather, in line with the ontological turn in critical studies of care and time, exemplified by for example de la Bellacasa's and Baraitser's respective work, I attempt to rethink boredom, care and time through each other. In what follows, I turn to boredom and the gamer subject.

Boredom is a complex and ambivalent phenomenon (see for example Haladyn and Gardiner, 2016). As Tina Kendall observes, "boredom is everywhere and nowhere; boredom is a collective affective sensibility, at the same time that human subjects are losing the ability to reflect on, or even *feel* it; boredom coerces our involvement within networked circuits of data and information-processing – even though we are aware that such activities are profoundly tedious and even pointless – but without offering the opportunities for critical reflection or cultural resistance that were once delegated to boredom" (2018: 83; emphasis in original).

Digital games, especially the genre of casual games, are considered to offer tactile responses to and monetise the ambivalent experiences of boredom. For example, time management casual games such as *Diner Dash* are seen to be embedded in the post-Fordist condition of work where the line between work and leisure has become increasingly blurred. As Aubrey Anable notes, as a form, casual games bring to mind

the bored worker sitting by the desk who is at the same time overwhelmed by the multiple and fragmented tasks at work. Casual games offer “microflow activities” (Soderman, 2017: 46) and “rhythmic interludes” (Anable, 2018: 1617) for the interstitial moments between different tasks at work, or between home and work, that make everyday life more manageable. Moreover, they not only mirror the individual emotional experiences of fragmented temporality (multiple tasks take place within the same time period), but are also constitutive of and make palpable the broader affective system, characterised by the simultaneously stressful and fragmented rhythms and the intensified feeling of disinterestedness and boredom.

The form of boredom that casual games respond to and produce is typically considered vulgar. Its relation to and difference from profound boredom has been much analysed in boredom studies. Whereas profound boredom is said to produce the analytical and philosophical subject, vulgar boredom is conceived of as shallow, passive, and reproduces sameness and apathy. Importantly, as Scott C. Richmond shows, the shallowness of vulgar boredom could be rethought in terms of care, that provides the possibility to “be with ourselves for a while, in a way that is neither overorganized, subjected to productivity or uplift or pedagogy, nor intensive, taking the exacerbated or heightened state of modernist or Romantic aesthetic response as its model” (2015: 31).

Richmond’s account of vulgar boredom affords an analysis of the ways in which playing mobile games during the pandemic is a practice of care, as it provides the space and time, however temporary, to turn away from the need to be “present (or not) to, or for, someone else” and towards “an experience of I-ness” (Richmond, 2015: 33). The emphasis on the durational and extensive aspect of care resonates with de la Bellacasa’s and Baraitser’s conception of care time. However, whereas the latter puts primacy on care-ful attention and thinking (otherwise) and does not differentiate between vulgar and profound boredom, the former underscores a state of in/attention and dis/interestedness, in which a more engaged relation with the other may or may not take place.

The difference between these conceptions sheds light on the problem of the individual subject, and its corollary issue the relation between self and other, that is considered separable in Richmond’s work, and entangled in de la Bellacasa’s and

Baraitser's theorisation. It seems to me that despite the received difference in its orientation – towards oneself or towards the other – the presence of the individual subject is not itself in question in these accounts. If care time is one of unbecoming, as Baraitser writes, and if vulgar boredom makes felt a mode of presentness that is non-productive, as Richmond notes, then surely the subject's own undoing or unbecoming is a possibility, and even necessity, in practices of care. I am interested in rethinking the presence of the caring subject – its being-itself – that is necessitated by the “as well as possibleness” of care. To do so, I turn to Wark's theorisation of boredom and the gamer subject.

For Wark, digital games are not simply “props” (Richmond, 2015: 32) that mediate between the player and the device, between code and image, between the individual emotional experiences and the structure of feeling. Instead, they are constitutive of the world as the game space, that is structured by the either/or logic of winning and losing, that is the phallogocentric logic of presence/absence. In this account, the gamer is everyone, and not merely the one who plays games. As Wark writes, “The digital always addresses its subject as a gamer, a manager, a calculator and competitor who has value only in relation to a mark, a score. The digital inscribes game-space within the subject itself” (2007: 55-56).

In line with the reconsideration of digital games in ontological terms, Wark shifts the conception of the relation between boredom and the gamer subject from the question of affective response and value extraction to the problem of being. As Wark writes, boredom leaves “nothing but indifference, neither one nor the other, the grunge of time, the lint that sticks to all things digital” (2007: 94). Conceived of as a non-relation, boredom is simultaneously the condition of possibility and the threat of the digital game space. According to Wark, “Digital object, digital subject – these are by-products of a boredom that, seeking respite from nothingness, projects its lines across all space and time, turning it into a topology of commodity space and military space” (2007: 50).

Along these lines, Wark suggests that the gamer subject emerges through an intuitive relation to the algorithm and the structure of the digital. Wark understands algorithm in two interrelated senses. First, it is “a finite set of instructions for accomplishing some task, which transforms an initial starting condition into recognizable end

condition” (Wark, 2007: 6). Second, algorithm and code are said to follow the phallogocentric logic that values the “the good (father, sun, capital)” (Derrida quoted in Wark; 2007: 141). As Wark writes, “The algorithms of writing, calculation, navigation, and the game, at first separately and then coming together, create a topology” (2007: 141). Along these lines, Wark suggests that the algorithm of the game is all encompassing, valuing everything in terms of scores.

The emphasis on intuitive knowledge to the relation between the appearance in the game and the algorithm – “allegorithm” (Wark, 2007; Galloway, 2006: 90) – affords an account of the affective and embodied experience of the gaming present. According to Alexander Galloway, “To play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to interpret a game means to interpret its algorithm (to discover its parallel allegorithm)” (2006: 91). This analysis of allegorithm resonates with what Rebecca Coleman calls “infra-structures of feeling” (2018: 609). As Coleman makes explicit, “the term *infra-structure* draws attention to the technological and institutional linkages or systems which are often overlooked but are central to the organization and functioning of social and cultural life” (2018: 610; emphasis in original). It is through these systems and linkages that the “affectivity of the present is encountered, experienced and arranged” (Coleman, 2018: 610)³.

Wark’s gamer theory provides the license for examining how the present of the subject emerges in the world as the game space. And yet, this account separates the algorithm and code of a game from its content, which is considered irrelevant. For example, according to Wark, the storyline of a game is an alibi and that the image does not matter, because “[u]nderneath it is a game like any other game, built out of arbitrary rules that one makes one’s own” (2007: 101). As Aubrey Anable (2018) asserts, the computation/representation split in game studies is informed by and reinforces the gendered hierarchies in gaming culture. It is perhaps for this reason that there are two kinds of time in Wark’s conception of the digital game space.

On the one hand, there is a spatialized time, which is cut into identical and saveable chunks and bits – a repeating present – within the game. And on the other hand, there is an indifferent time that flows, and whose “mortal flaw” (Wark, 2007: 9) marks the limit of the game space. As Wark writes, “The digital creates a timeless

space that can be saved by making all the time equivalent. It is a time without violence. What is saved does not suffer from erosion or decomposition or decay. It always comes back as the same – unless the system crashes and the digital can no longer impose its code, in which case it may never come back at all” (2007: 48-49). It seems to me that at work in Wark’s theorisation of the two kinds of time is the distinction installed *a priori* between the disembodied and immaterial time – a timeless and infinite space – and the embodied and material time – a finite and continuous time. This *a priori* separation is interesting given that Wark’s gamer theory is about rethinking the present from the perspective of the game. If the game ultimately includes everything, as Wark suggests, what constitutes this line that separates and distinguishes these two forms of time?

In an attempt to eschew the representation and computation divide, and to rethink time in and through digital games, I supplement Wark’s conception of gamer subject with Anable’s (2018) theorisation of digital games as affective systems that zoom in on the enactments at the interface between bodies, platforms, codes, sounds and images, where affect is registered and made felt. In what follows, I analyse a hyper-casual game called Helix Jump. My aim is, to paraphrase Wark, to make the familiar time strange, in, through and as the game, and to ask about its implications for the question of care.

The present of the gamer subject

The game that I choose to analyse in this article is a hyper-casual game called Helix Jump, published by Voodoo. In selecting this game to focus on, two aspects are significant. First, hyper-casual games differ from casual games that have been much analysed in game studies in the sense that they typically have no storyline, no clear beginning nor endings, no progression such as from self-discovery, to skill learning, to defeating enemies and saving the world⁴. In many cases, hyper-casual games do not use complex art styles or construct easily identifiable characters. However, as I will show, even in such cases where representation and aesthetic styles of the game seem to matter the least, they are constitutive of what game coders and designers call a good feel that makes the game addictive.



Figure 2: A screenshot of Helix Jump Game.
@Voodoo

Second, the genre of hyper-casual games is one of the most popular types of mobile games during recent years. Helix Jump is one of the urtexts of hyper-casual games which was the most downloaded mobile game in 2018 with 25.6 million daily players. The popularity of the Helix Jump game in particular and the hyper-casual game genre in general speak of the affective appeal of games that are simple, repetitive and seem to require the least investment, in terms of time (short levels) and meaning (the lack of story line and a sense of progress). Taking inspiration from Wark's gamer theory, I analyse the game allegorically. That is, I consider the intuitive knowledge of the relation between the appearance in the game

and the underlying algorithm as a double – an algorithm – of the relation between the appearance and its underlying algorithm in the game space. I also complicate Wark's approach by considering the specificities of the images, the game mechanics, the materiality of the device and the affective and embodied practices of playing.

Having said this, I now turn to the Helix Jump game. The game is about making sure a colourful ball falls all the way down on to the ground. On its way down, the ball needs to pass through the gaps of platforms that potentially interrupt its journey to the ground. Ink that matches the colour of the ball leaks out from the ball and splashes out on to the platform. The task of the player is to let the ball fall through the gaps of platforms. When landing on a platform is inevitable, the player should try to make the ball land on the part of a platform that is "safe", which is distinguished from the "wrong" part of a platform marked by a different colour. For example, as is

shown in figure 2, the safe part of the platform is in the colour green, whereas the fatal part is in the colour yellow. The colour of the ball and the platform change at every level.

The game is simple. The ball falls by itself. There is no storyline, no enemies, no twists and turns of a plot, no climax nor final victory. The ball falls. By moving the finger/s⁵ left and right on the touch screen, the gamer rotates the platforms so as to allow the ball to fall through the gaps or to land on the safe parts of the platforms. Once the ball reaches the ground, a level is passed. And then another level begins. The ball falls. The gamer moves their finger/s left and right. And repeat. If the ball lands on the wrong part of the platform, the ball stops falling, stays flattened and still on the platform. The screen becomes blurry and the colour fades. The death of the ball is made ever more visible when contrasted against the falling white particles in the background. Time flows and is indifferent to the death of the ball and the end of the level. At the bottom of the screen, a line that reads “tap to replay” (see figure 2) appears.

The genre of hyper-causal games is in fact not new. In the game industry, it is typically conceded that the genre of digital hyper-casual games can be traced back to the 70s. The most essential characteristics of hyper-casual games include “flat learning curve, no time restraints, and simple mechanics”⁶. The game mechanics of *Helix Jump* is falling, which is considered one of the most addictive mechanics of hyper-casual games. As one article on *mobilefreetoplay* explains, “Rising and falling mechanics provide interesting journeys for their players. The constant progression of the level leads to the feeling of progression without a change in the mechanic of goal. To keep people entertained the level itself must develop... The player’s focus is on dealing with the next challenge along the progression and less about accuracy. There are many ways to win these levels, a little luck is often needed over timing or skill. Your only goal is to protect an object from a single point of failure”.⁷

There is no clear indication of the levelling up of gaming skills. In fact, the levels of hyper-casual games can be, and often are, generated randomly using level generators provided by game engines such as Unity. What is required is the intuitive knowledge about the falling mechanics and the rule of the game, made visible and bodily felt through the relation between the player’s input – the right and left movement of the

finger/s, and the rhythmic movement on the screen. The goal is not so much to win, but to sustain the nextness – the next gap, the next platform, the next fall, the next level⁸. Following Richmond, the nextness of hyper-casual games could be considered an expression of vulgar boredom, that is felt as extensive attunements in a suspended present in which time does not unfold⁹.

Wark's theorisation of nextness shifts the temporality of boredom to another register. For Wark, nextness is not simply characteristic of a certain genre of digital games, but is the temporality of the algorithm of *the* game – a repetitious “tempo of making, breaking, and remaking alterity, the bounds of one and zero, presence and absence” (2007: 91). Its operation is conditioned upon and threatened by boredom, understood as absolute indifference, neither presence nor absence, neither yes nor no. In this account, boredom is generative, not in the sense that profound boredom allows creativity as opposed to the banal apathy and disinterestedness of vulgar boredom, but it demands and produces necessity; that is, the necessity of difference, significance, the becoming present of presence, and the capacity of relating and of registering affect.

In view of this, it could be said that boredom is im/possible. That is, it is *necessarily* displaced and maintained. Hyper-casual games provide insights into this double movement of displacement and maintenance. The short-bursts and repetitive levels, the feeling of reward that is quickly established by the simple game mechanics, the visible relation between the player's embodied input and the display on the screen, and the haptic feedback, enable a short period of attention and of being present that displace the sense of boredom. At the same time, the repetitive game play and the lack of complicated progressive narrative that make hyper-casual games interesting also make them boring after a while. But this boredom is in fact anticipated, desired and maintained by the hyper-casual game developers so that the players are always on the look out for new games.

Hyper-casual games are known to require very short time for development. The simplicity of the games means that hyper-casual game developers could manage to release dozens of new games in a month. This short duration of production is among the key factors that make hyper-casual games highly profitable. In this sense, hyper-casual games could be said to be exemplary of the attention economy that maintains

and monetises boredom. They also provide the interface for registering and managing the increased sense of uncertainty and disturbances that are characteristic of the precarious life conditions in late capitalism. For Wark, the perpetual double movement of maintaining and displacing boredom means that the gamer subject is trapped in a present that is endless. As Wark quotes Roland Barthes, “It does not reveal, does not transform, does not develop, does not educate, does not sublimate, does not accomplish, recuperates nothing, save for the present itself, cut up, glistening, repeated” (Barthes quoted in Wark, 2007: 92).

Interestingly, despite its different valuations – as lack or as a time and space for care, this extended present is located before, beyond and outside time in these different accounts. By taking Wark’s assertion of boredom as a radical no-thing – that is, in a non-relation to the logic of presence/absence, either/or – to its logical conclusion, the sense of particularism of an individual entity (whether that being time or the individual subject), which undergirds the oppositional interpretation of boredom, loses its identifying outlines. In what follows, I complicate the relation between time and boredom by thinking through the embodied and affective experiences of playing *Helix Jump*.

As the game starts, I immediately get stressed. At the top of the screen, a purple ball bounces up and down. Purple ink splashes out on to the platform. It feels like blood, leaking out from the ball, which seems to hint that the ball is dying and needs to get down to the ground as soon as possible. The falling particles in the background suggest time is running, running out for the ball. However, before I begin to play, an advertisement pops up in the lower right corner of the screen. It is a cross promotion. The game company advertises its games within the space of its own game, so as to save on the cost of advertising. I get distracted by the advertisement. It interrupts the temporality of the game – the bouncing of the ball and the flowing of time made visible by the falling particles.

Focusing again on the ball, and trying to ignore the advertisement, I finally begin to play. Moving my right thumb left and right, the platforms start to rotate. First gap is moved to the right place. And the ball starts to fall, fast. I feel my breathing starts to accelerate. Moving my right thumb left and right, the ball lands on another platform and starts bouncing. Purple ink leaks out. I feel my breathing becomes short. Moving

my right thumb left and right. How far to the left? How far to the right? I panic, seeing that the ball is about to land on the wrong place of the platform. I feel I start to hold my breath. The ball dies. It stops bouncing and lies flattened out on a platform. Purple ink splashes out. Colourful particles pop up on the screen, as if to suggest that the end is not real, time is absent, and all there is is the next, over and over. Tap to restart. The game invites me. However, the tapping of the restart button does not immediately lead to replaying the level, but to a pop-up of a game advertisement that displays on the entire mobile screen and disrupts the gameplay. The pop-up window can only be closed when a timer runs out.

In the Helix Jump game, the simple shapes and colours, the easy game mechanics, the short duration of each level, and the repetitive movement of the finger/s, produce “a veritable synesthesia, a blending of the senses” (Wark, 2007: 78)¹⁰. My sense of presence is materialised in and emergent through the nextness – a wrong spot of the platform, a gap that needs to be turned to the right place – that is repetitive. This extensive present is, however, more multi-layered than the one described by Richmond. It is shaped by changes in the movement of my thumb, my gaze (whether looking at the ball or the advertisement), and my changing affective and physical states. Playing Helix Jump feels stressful, as I must target each platform so that the ball can fall through within a very short time. Boredom is maintained and displaced within the game. It is displaced by the intense feeling of being present in trying to let the ball fall, and maintained by the repetitive game play and the interruption and waiting brought about by the pop-up in-game advertisements.

Richmond is right to suggest that playing casual, and in this case hyper-casual, games does not entail as intensive engagements with the game as hardcore gaming. Nevertheless, it still demands attention to my bodily movement and how it impacts the movement on the screen. More than simply a flat and extensive temporality, the nextness of the present *involves*, implicates and is felt through and displaced by multiple temporalities *at the same time* – the flow of time made visible by the falling particles in the background, the rhythm of the ball’s bouncing, the fall and the death of the ball, the interruptive and waiting time of different kinds of advertisements, the repetitious timeless time of the game itself, the changing rhythm of my breath and of the movement of my fingers. The presence of *I* is dis/continuous – emergent,

scattered and displaced – in this process. This is not simply because I feel “stuck with myself... relieved of wanting, waiting, or acting” (Richmond, 2015: 32), but because the multiple rhythmic relations that are felt as embodied and affective demands – necessities – also realize multiple and incongruent senses of I/me.

As I see it, the relation between time and boredom (the time of boredom and the boredom of time) needs to be reconsidered through a radical involvement – thick implicatedness – that de la Bellacasa identifies as the defining feature of care. That is, instead of locating boredom as a duration before, beyond and outside of time, and in so doing either rendering it as lack and insignificant or attributing it with the capacity to maintain, repair and care, I suggest that boredom materialises and is displaced in, through, with and as time. Likewise, instead of considering that there are two forms of time (one digital and chrononormative, the other unconscious and material), I suggest they are expressions of the temporalization of time, felt as the embodied and affective enactments at and of the interface, that the game *is*. If boredom is the involving and involved non-relation that is the condition of possibility of necessity – the necessity of being, including the being of time – and its undoing, then time itself could be said to be bored and boring.

Caring gamer subject

How can this account of the present of the gamer subject be applied to the question of boredom and care in the time of crisis? In the above section, I have analysed boredom and the temporalization of time within the digital game. In what follows, I take cues from Wark’s theorisation of game space and return to the question of boredom and care that are presented at the beginning of the article. In analysing the time of the crisis through the lens of the game space, I do not mean to flatten the difference between the digital game and the coronavirus outbreak. Rather, my aim is to make visible and challenge the phallogocentric logic of presence/absence, either/or, that structures the gamespace, and to propose modes of rearticulating care by rethinking its relation to boredom.

January 24th, 2020 is a day that many people in China will not forget. It was the day before the Chinese Lunar New Year. It was also the day when the city of Wuhan was

locked down. This year's New Year festival season is not marked by the usual important dates – New Year's Eve on January 24th, the lunar New Year on January 25th, the Lantern Festival on February 8th. Instead, it is marked by changing numbers of the infected cases and death, shown on the screen of smart phones and on the screen of TVs. The time of the festival season is replaced by the time of the outbreak – felt as the stuck and paused time of the quarantine, as the extended time of waiting, as the urgent time of the crisis in which the threat of death is imminent. Boredom, as Wark writes, “is a spacey feeling, of being spaced out. What is boring is a space in which either one cannot act, or one's actions amount to nothing... When you are bored, even home feels like a waiting room... What displaces boredom is the capacity to act in a way that transforms a situation” (2007: 100).

As I mentioned in the beginning of the article, in the Chinese context, the bored bodies, who are absent from the frontline where the war against virus is said to take place, are considered the ones being cared for. In the game space of the war on virus, the score is based on the changes in the infection rate. However, as many social media users write, the numbers are numbing. They render invisible the sufferings of people, who may or may not be infected, and whose infection may or may not be counted. They also give the illusion that the outbreak is simply an on and off event, in which death is subsumed as a number in the timeless time of the game, in which the affects and effects that exceed the numerical measurement become elided.

In her diary about the lockdown in Wuhan, which is read by hundreds of thousands of people on Chinese social media WeChat, the famous author Fang Fang, writes, “There is a saying in Wuhan: there are those who die from being too busy, and those who die from being too bored. Situating this saying in the current context, the similarity between these two forms of death is all the more obvious. The bored people are under enormous emotional pressure. The busy people are under enormous physical pressure. Everyone is gritting their teeth. Together, they maintain and hold up the city of Wuhan” (my translation)¹¹. Here the busy ones include the health workers, community workers, police and volunteers in Wuhan, who have been working intensively since the outbreak. The bored ones are the residents that are either stuck at home or isolated in the hospitals. As Fang Fang writes, both groups

are under a lot of pressure. They are both doing the work to maintain the city of Wuhan.

Fang Fang is one of the most vocal voices against the heroic war on virus narrative of the Chinese state. For example, the above quoted passage is a critique of the narrative that depicts the virus outbreak as simply an unfortunate accident that is an on and off event – a game – and that positions the bored bodies at home as the cared for by the state and the national body. As Fang Fang notes, absolute boredom results in no-thingness, death, and therefore cannot be experienced *as such*. In other words, the boredom experienced by the bodies at home is an im/possibility, felt as the sense of enormous emotional pressure, and experienced as the extensive present of maintenance. In my translation of the quote, I use “maintain and hold up” to translate “扛着”, which is literally translated as shouldering. It resonates with Baraitser’s theorisation of the double actions of maintenance along both horizontal and vertical axes. As Baraitser writes, “It is not revolutionary time, but the lateral time of ‘on-go’ that tries to sustain an elongated present. ... To maintain is to underpin, or prop up from below, to hold up when something or someone is flagging. The time of maintenance lies therefore at the intersection between the lateral axis of stumbling blindly on, and the vertical axis of holding up, orientating us towards a future, even when that future is uncertain, or may not be our own” (2017: 66 -67).

In her diary, Fang Fang describes the experience of being bored, waiting for the lockdown to end, as well as the mundane practices of maintenance such as feeding her 13-year-old dog. She also writes about conversations that she has with her families and friends on social media, which aren’t always related to the outbreak, as well as the history of the city of Wuhan, and the people in it. While embedded in the game of war on virus, the lived practices of enduring boredom during the lockdown described in Fang Fang’s diary make visible other modes of relating than the dominant configuration of relations of care. The multiple affective rhythms – extended time of waiting, stress and anxiety due to concerns about the virus outbreak, the restless feeling of being stuck at home, the aging of her dog and herself, the temporal aspect of her diet necessitated by her diabetic condition, the blooming of flowers, the weaving together of history of Wuhan and the current

moment of lockdown – afforded by the genre of diary also make felt the thick involvement of the boring present of care time.

As Fang Fang explains, in writing the lockdown diary, she wishes to provide an interface for individual and collective remembering, for grasping the affects and effects of the outbreak that exceed the numerical measurement of infections and death, and for challenging the configuration of care that justifies the intensified surveillance and control in China. The multiple forms of care in, through and as boredom troubles the separation between self-care and self-less care that informs the heroic narrative of the war on virus. As Baraitser and Salisbury note in the context of the pandemic, the recursive temporality might “allow us to know more about the ever-present possibility of failures of care that get written out of discourses of healthcare heroism – to know how such failures occur, what they might communicate and something about how such failures could be contained, delayed or mitigated” (2020: 10).

Watching the flowers bloom, feeding her dog, or reporting the challenges faced by residents, volunteers and community workers, Fang Fang’s dairy records both vulgar and profound boredom, all the while making visible the ways in which their received difference is produced along gendered lines. In rethinking the generativity of boredom in, through and as its im/possibility, I suggest that the bored bodies are not simply the ones being cared for. The boredom and mundane activities that are described in Fang Fang’s diary and the surge in the playing of digital games during the outbreak in China should be considered as manifestations of care, understood in terms of a radical open-ended “as well as possibleness” whose time is the thick involvement felt as boring and bored.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/f1704f82-5238-11ea-8841-482eed0038b1>, last accessed 20.02.2020.

² https://edition.cnn.com/2020/02/13/intl_business/gaming-china-coronavirus/index.html, last accessed 14.02.2020.

³ The way in which the digital game is approached is different in these two accounts. Whereas in Wark’s conception of gamer theory, the digital game *is* the actualization of either/or logic, in the framework proposed by Coleman, the digital game is seen as part of today’s digital media consisted of a range of platforms and devices. For the discussion at hand, I am more interested in the

emphasis on intuition, feeling and affect in these accounts, and not the different approach to games in these two frameworks.

- ⁴ In this article, I follow the definition of hyper-casual games that is provided by the mobile game industry.
- ⁵ I use finger/s here because some smart phone gamers prefer to use one finger, where others prefer to use fingers on both hands.
- ⁶ <https://clevertap.com/blog/hyper-casual-games/>, last accessed 20.02.2020.
- ⁷ <https://mobilefreetoplay.com/top-10-game-mechanics-for-hyper-casual-games/>, last accessed 10.02.2020.
- ⁸ According to Coleman, nextness is a specific temporality of the digital media. As she writes, “Of significance to an attention to the present, the flow of Netflix can be seen to create a temporality where the progression from past to present is suspended, and nextness or pre-emergence becomes absorbed within a kind of stretched or expanded present” (2018: 613).
- ⁹ It is perhaps not surprising that recently hyper-casual games have been marketed as a therapeutic and relaxing tool. Reasons for this include: first, the game does not progress in terms of a story line, but through short levels. Gamers can choose to play for a short period of time, for example when taking the bus, when taking a quick bathroom break at work, when waiting for an event to start; second, many hyper-casual games can be played on the smartphone. This means that in contrast to other video games that require game consoles such as PlayStation and Xbox, hyper-casual games on smart phones can be easily accessed anywhere; third, unlike more complex games that take a lot of time to load the story before each play, hyper-casual games can be launched quickly – they are simply a tap away; last but not least, the nextness, which entertains, excites, and exercises the attention of the gamer, is said to be at the same time calming.
- ¹⁰ Recently, many mobile games on iPhone incorporate haptic feedbacks. For example, the phone vibrates when the gamer hits the right target. It has been said that the haptic feedback provides a stronger rhythmic attunement with the game.
- ¹¹ The original Chinese text is, “武汉人喜欢说一句话：忙的忙死，闲的闲死，现在对比，似乎更加鲜明。闲人心里压力大，忙人身体压力大。大家都在咬紧牙关，共同扛着武汉。” This paragraph is quoted from Fang Fang’s diary, which I read on Weibo on my smartphone. I don’t yet know how to access it without the mobile app.

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