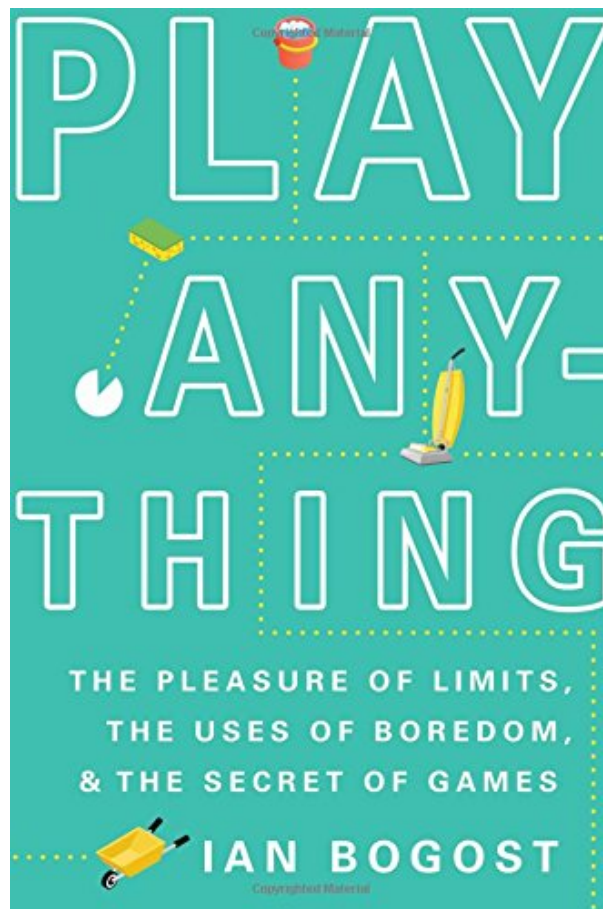
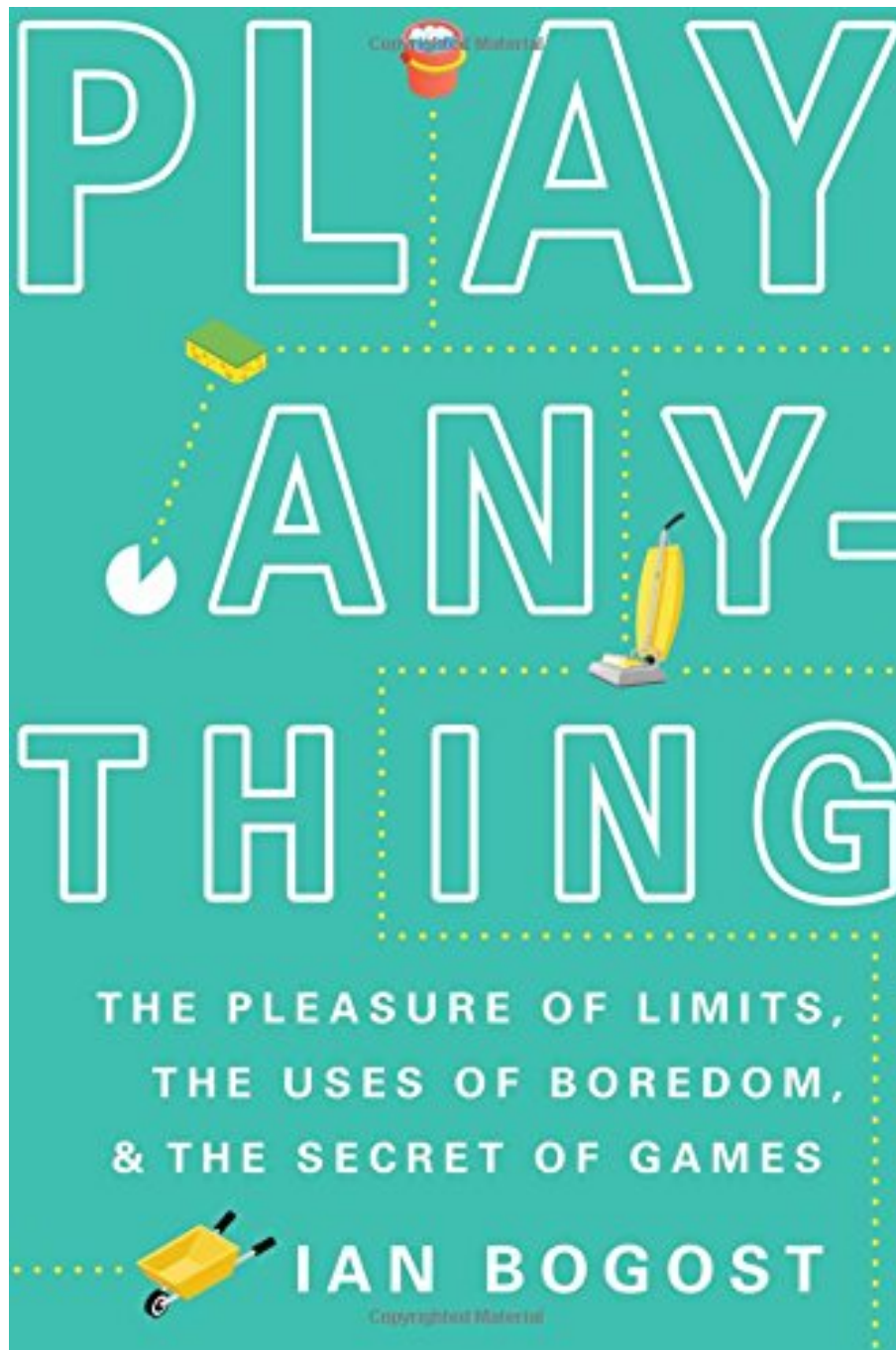


PLAY ANYTHING: THE PLEASURE OF LIMITS, THE USES OF BOREDOM, AND THE SECRET OF GAMES BY IAN BOGOST



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Review

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How filling life with play-whether soccer or lawn mowing, counting sheep or tossing Angry Birds-forges a new path for creativity and joy in our impatient age

Life is boring: filled with meetings and traffic, errands and emails. Nothing we'd ever call fun. But what if we've gotten fun wrong? In *Play Anything*, visionary game designer and philosopher Ian Bogost shows how we can overcome our daily anxiety; transforming the boring, ordinary world around us into one of endless, playful possibilities.

The key to this playful mindset lies in discovering the secret truth of fun and games. *Play Anything*, reveals that games appeal to us not because they are fun, but because they set limitations. Soccer wouldn't be soccer if it wasn't composed of two teams of eleven players using only their feet, heads, and torsos to get a ball into a goal; Tetris wouldn't be Tetris without falling pieces in characteristic shapes. Such rules seem needless, arbitrary, and difficult. Yet it is the limitations that make games enjoyable, just like it's the hard things in life that give it meaning.

Play is what happens when we accept these limitations, narrow our focus, and, consequently, have fun. Which is also how to live a good life. Manipulating a soccer ball into a goal is no different than treating ordinary circumstances- like grocery shopping, lawn mowing, and making PowerPoints-as sources for meaning and joy. We can "play anything" by filling our days with attention and discipline, devotion and love for the world as it really is, beyond our desires and fears.

Ranging from Internet culture to moral philosophy, ancient poetry to modern consumerism, Bogost shows us how today's chaotic world can only be tamed-and enjoyed-when we first impose boundaries on ourselves.

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Most helpful customer reviews

21 of 22 people found the following review helpful.

The World as Artwork

By Frank Lantz

Here's a game I like to play. Next time you are in an art gallery, turn away from the paintings and look at the people. Look at them as if that was the show. Look at the other visitors in the gallery exactly the same way you would look at the art, as if they had been put there to be seen, admired, analyzed, and understood. This game is harder than it looks. We don't realize how many different ways of looking there are, and how different they are. But if you are able to successfully play this game you will learn some things. First, you will learn how ruthlessly we look at art, how rapacious and haughty and impatient and demanding we are. What is this? Where did it come from? What's going on here? What does it mean? Do I like it? Is it worth my time? Turning our art gaze on our fellow humans is shocking, embarrassing, you will instantly want to recoil back to the polite and diplomatic gaze we use for each other. Don't. Because if you persist in this rude game you will learn something else. Humans are amazing. Judged as artworks, random people are deeply, desperately, heartbreakingly beautiful. They are strange, surprising, fascinating. They are overloaded with complex patterns, the primal pleasures of platonic geometry mixed with the playful, self-referential curves of postmodern signifier-tricks. Looked at as artworks, humans are bottomless pools of hypnotic meaning – masterpieces of light and shadow, color and shape, symbol, signal and noise.

You can do the same thing just walking down the street, or in a coffee shop, or a business meeting, or standing in line at a bank. It doesn't have to be people. It can just be a random street corner with its ordinary surfaces, and all the banal details of the regular world. If you can trick yourself into looking at things as if, as if they were someone's work, as if they had been arranged with a purpose, you may find yourself overwhelmed with the world's haunting beauty – the subtle echoes of shape and pattern, the way the light hits the bricks at just the right angle, the suspenseful mystery of an errant shadow, the perfect punchline of an upended cup.

This is the trick that Ian Bogost plays on himself, and us, in Play Anything. And according to this book it's the trick that games are playing on us all.

This is a strange book, at first glance it looks a bit like self-help, pop psychology, or life advice, but it's far weirder and more interesting than that. One of the early voices and key figures in the history of game studies, Bogost's entire career has involved trying to figure out the tricky relationship between games and the world, starting with the primary question – what would it mean to take games seriously? How should we approach games as a topic for serious cultural criticism? For a long time, Bogost's answer to that question involved thinking through the many ways games can be about the world. As a critic, and as a designer, he has emphasized how games, like other forms of media, can reflect the world – expressing ideas, operating

rhetorically, conveying arguments through dynamic models and interactive systems. He has celebrated their power to communicate and persuade and cautioned against their enthusiastic adoption by the snake oil salesmen who would apply them as a magic elixir for shaping behavior.

This book marks something of a radical break with these concerns. In *Play Anything* games are treated less as things that work on or through or about or against the world and more as aspects of the world itself, invitations to experience the world as it is, not as we imagine, not for our sake, not in our interest, but on its own terms – blunt, indifferent, but also endlessly fascinating and sublime. The way a ball bounces, the way tetronimoies fit together, the way code functions. This new perspective is not a reversal of Bogost's earlier concerns but it feels like the results of a dedicated effort to get beneath them, to discover something foundational about the underlying nature of play and games. His success in this effort suggests that this book belongs beside Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*, Suits' *The Grasshopper*, and Sutton-Smith's *The Ambiguity of Play* as a key work in the field. It is probably Bogost's best book to date, and that's saying something.

It is also (and probably not unrelatedly) his most personal book. The threads that tie the book together are drawn from his life, his work, his family, his habits and hobbies. Bogost is a writer known for calculated erudition and acerbic wit and this book has both, but it has more. It is weird and warm; human, worldly. It is as if, contemplating the central thesis that games provide an opportunity to confront the stubborn truth of the world, he decided to let the lived reality of his own life guide his thinking. Rather than grand theory-spinning we get close observation of games and life as they actually are. Not idealized, not demonized, not disappointing, or frustrating, or thrilling, or boring or amazing or fantastic. Not life-changing, just life. But look at life, look at the ways it moves and doesn't move. The world, with its limited degrees of freedom, unfolds into intricate arabesques more marvelous than any grand theory could contain. This is the secret of games as Bogost has come to understand them.

In addition to being deeply personal, *Play Anything* is also deeply philosophical. For those of us who have followed Bogost's forays into Object Oriented Ontology without every quite understanding how they relate to his work on games, this book closes the loop, providing an intuitive and satisfying connection. The way that games draw us in to trace the convoluted surfaces of objects and rules and materials and code and the brute facts of their behaviors and interactions provides a model for a way of looking at the world beyond the demands of our egos and the distortions of our desires. (The apparent contradiction that OOO itself is an intensely human project, fully subordinate to our egos and desires, it just another one of those facts about the world that we can play with and admire.)

It has long been a habit of many ambitious game creators and critics to expound on the glorious potential of games while disparaging their current status. This book suggests a different way of thinking about games' potential. It is not up to games to evolve into a more beautiful form, one more pleasing to us, more full of meaning. It is up to us to rise to the challenge they present – the challenge to inhabit the world's corners, to see how they work and how we work inside them. The beauty of games is the play of close attention, and it's all around us, waiting for us to look.

21 of 23 people found the following review helpful.

It could be a book.... well, this book is for you regardless of who you are.

By Nick LaLone

Play Anything is a book that is hard to describe.

It could be a book for those looking to understand how to escape their misery.

It could be a book for game designers looking to connect more intimately with culture in their designs.

It could be a book for academics who want to understand how play is intimately connected to culture itself.

It could be a book for a parent who wants to understand their children better.

It could be a book for those who just cannot fathom millennials.

It could be a book for millennials who want to understand themselves.

It could be a book for David Foster Wallace fans.

It could be any of those things and more...or less.

Play anything is a book that manages to cross disciplinary lines, publics, fandoms, and all along the way, offer a simple, unintuitive position on the function of play as a function and creator of culture itself. I say unintuitive because much of the book is going to be counter to the lived experience. It must be counter, it must be unintuitive because intuitively, the tedium and boorish nature of everything we do is constantly defined as those things we shouldn't do. For us, those of us living those lives, the constraints of our everyday life (supermarket lines, getting gas, cooking food) are those things we cannot fathom. They are simply acts performed and tolerated throughout the day so we can do something "fun."

Yet, much like a fish who cannot comprehend water, it is those constraints that offer us a way to experience, to play with.

It is something fascinating to think about. If you are an academic who researches games, I believe this book might be one of the more important pieces to hit game studies in quite some time. For me, I have long been frustrated that the concept of "magic circle" has been dissected from the definition of play. I have been frustrated that play's significance for culture has been mostly ignored. Game studies isn't about games, but about culture itself.

Do yourself a favor and head into this book as quickly as possible.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

Great idea-sharing potential, very poor delivery

By Shawn Pierce

For the first time in a long time I started a book without finishing it.

The idea of starting a book without finishing it does not frazzle me as I would prefer not to be a slave to be a book that is leading me nowhere. However, I do consider myself able to bring out key details and ideas despite annoyances with a book or writing style.

I struggled with Bogost's writing style. He proclaimed his wonderful ideas (and they were really great ideas - no sarcasm) but in a way that was repetitive and boring. There were many insights that came up and interested me, but so much of it was weighed down by the cloudy presentation he gave in his book.

Also, despite his repetitive style, I continually found myself having to go back to the beginning of the chapter's to identify the definitions he gave to his key terms: boredom, fun, and games. I loved his definitions and they fit into a holistic worldview (one that I encourage) but they were muddled with so much extra verbiage that I couldn't see the forest for the trees or vice versa.

Overall, this is a book that has great idea-sharing potential. But it just doesn't deliver those ideas through a great medium.

For a more cogent presentation of Bogost's ideas, I would recommend checking out an interview between Bogost and Brett McKay of the Art of Manliness podcast.

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