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Testing
Lessons
from
Labor
Triage



Out of the Rut

by Michael Bolton

I'm testing, and I just realized that I'm bored. This is a Bad Thing. I'll have to do something about it. I'll sneak a few moments of *disposable time*, defined as "the time that you can afford to waste without getting into trouble." No tester that I know of is really supervised every minute of every day. We have moments in which we might try a new test idea, do some side research, look briefly at a different area of the product, or just do something else for a while.

If it turns out that I've wasted disposable time, it's OK; by definition I can afford to waste it. But maybe I'll learn something cool. I ruffle through the piles of paper on my desk, and I find a copy of *The New Yorker* magazine. The first article that I turn to is a review of a new TV series about psychotherapy [1]. To my surprise and delight, in the very first paragraph, it says, "... boredom isn't the same thing as being in stasis. Being bored doesn't mean there's nothing to do ... It means that something big ... is keeping us from doing what we want to do, from playing outside, from expressing ourselves, from moving forward." That reminds me of the cover of a recent *Scientific American Mind* magazine [2]. More shuffling in the pile, and then there, on the cover: BORED. The cover story says that boredom is triggered by repetition, minute and fragmented tasks, insufficient motivation, the absence of a need for intellectual engagement, and low levels of arousal (the psychologists' way of saying "the absence of things that wake us up"). These pathologies can build on each other. Without motivation, I lose engagement, and without engagement, motivation becomes more difficult.

The article also suggests that repression of a person's drives and desires leads to aimlessness and disconnection from the task at hand. If our work lacks meaning or purpose over time, we may experience existential boredom or ennui. I often hear from testers who



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feel this way. Not surprisingly, they report that they are mandated to repeat heavily scripted tests and that they're not learning, not discovering new problems, and not finding bugs. They don't feel as though they're in control of their own testing process. Now I have a question I can ask myself: What can I do to retake control? Here are some heuristics.

Trade assignments. When I'm testing, I'm strongly motivated to explore and to exercise my own judgment as to what to do next, based on what I've just observed and evaluated. Some people may be more comfortable with a more directed, routine, confirmatory process, and some of that kind of work might be important in certain contexts. On a diversified team, someone else might be a better choice for that kind of work than I am. On a well-managed or self-organizing team, we might be able to trade assignments to play to our strengths. The downside of simply trading off work is that I might deprive myself of an opportunity to learn something valuable.

Exploit variation. When I'm feeling bored, I try to change the work in subtle but interesting ways. In a 2005 paper [3], James and Jon Bach identified a number of polarities in exploration—examples include doing vs. describing, careful vs. quick, working with the product

vs. working with the developer, design vs. execution, data gathering vs. data analysis, and solo work vs. team effort. When I'm bored, I pause, note whatever approach I'm using at the moment, and try going the other way. The same paper suggests branching and backtracking—deliberately choosing a different path of execution, and then aborting it and backing up several steps. This can be very useful for revealing state-based bugs. The downside of variation is that too much of it might take me off my charter or testing mission.

Collaborate. Chatting with a programmer, asking a user about workflows or pitfalls, or pairing with another tester are all ways in which I've refocused productively. A conversation—one with a whiteboard is almost always engaging—might allow me to model the system, see new risks, and take a different approach. One risk of collaborating is that, when we're both looking at the same area, we might lose the opportunity to spread out into testing different areas of the system—but I've always been impressed at the way two people see different things when looking at the same screen or whiteboard.

Focus on something else. Maybe I'm bored because I've been paying attention to one thing too closely, to the same

thing for too long, or to the wrong thing. In this case, I run a risk of falling into *inattentional blindness*, a psychological phenomenon wherein we can miss significant things that are happening right in front of our eyes [4]. I've found that consistent alternation between focusing and defocusing—looking at some detail, then looking at the big picture, then looking at some other detail—helps keep me engaged and helps me see a different set of potential problems.

Put the machine to work. If it's genuinely better done by a machine, get a machine to do it. If I'm doing something that is monotonous and repetitive that includes a decision that the machine can make, there's a good chance that some little tool I cobble together will be extensible or reusable. Moreover, I need to exercise programming skill regularly, or I get rusty quickly. The risk is that automating a task limits my observations to things that I can program the machine to observe, greatly reducing my ability to spot an unanticipated problem. I have to consider opportunity cost. That reminds me to ...

Assess cost vs. value. My boredom might be a subconscious trigger that I'm doing something that's not terribly valuable. Maybe I'm whacking on an empty piñata and the value of what I'm doing no longer supports the cost of doing it. Perhaps it's not just uninteresting to me but uninteresting to my client, too. That leads me to the ...

Mission check. Maybe I should have a chat with my client or manager to make sure that we agree that I'm doing something worthwhile. Their perception of risk might not match what I've been observing in the product. If my client isn't currently available, I might change my focus to recording so that I'm prepared when she comes back. I like to manage this by using session-based test management and time-boxing my testing charters. In organizations that don't use this approach, I'll deliberately change charters on my own every ninety minutes or so. That helps keep me fresh, because the end of a session marks a good time to ...

Just take a break. Go for a walk, read a magazine, take a bike ride, grab a coffee, get a snack, run an errand, or

have a shower. Over the years, I've noticed a lot of people who are virtually chained to their desks. They claim it's because they have important work to do and that they can keep flow going. Fair enough, but if they're genuinely in flow, they're engaged—not bored. Making some change to clear out the cobwebs is important, too, sometimes. Just now for instance, I've glanced at one magazine, read an article in another, reflected on my process, and come up with some ways to make my testing more engaging and more valuable. Now, back to work.

Here's a key heuristic: Testing is *only* boring if you're not doing it well. Maybe you're bored because the information you're seeking is trivial, you're not in control of your own process, you're not learning anything new, the tests that you're running and the observations you're making are rote and mechanical (and therefore probably best left to automation), or you're stuck in a rut. Testing is *interesting and fun* when you feel like you're seeking important information, when you get to make choices about your process, when you're learning, and when the tests and observations are something that you believe only a human—and maybe only *you*—could do as well as you can. {end}

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What do you do to get around them?**

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