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## The Boredonomicon: A Document from a Speculative Future

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It is a pleasure to be here at this year's annual meeting, in the Year of our Internet two thousand, two hundred and twenty-two.

You know the disease of boredom has long been eradicated. Tiresome jobs are done by computers. Our majority live in leisure, and algorithmic selection caters to our every whim. As soon as our envelope measures a decline in engagement, it serves us a new image, bullet point, or video short. Content precisely calculated to stanch any hint of restlessness. By now about half the population is implanted with a Neurasense, which is even more effective to this regard.

To be sure, some of the world's poor still use so-called "smart devices," but even these serve well enough to keep boredom at bay. Boredom is a malady of humanity's troubled past.

Yet we still know the concept of boredom, and that is what I wish to explore in this presentation. Some scientists and philosophers, from the 19th century to the 21st, fruitlessly attempted to prove that there was some value in boredom. I believe this is analogous to the ancient wives' tale about how getting sick will help you fend off future infection. Nietzsche and Heidegger saw connections between boredom and one's deepest self, and psychology experiments showed links between boredom and good mental health.<sup>1</sup>

Andreas Elpidorou wrote a book in 2020, an auspicious year, in which he argued that it is boredom that makes it possible for us to cultivate personal meaning and live a good life—this because boredom propels us toward activities we value and are interested in. On the cover of Elpidorou's book on this topic there is a paper airplane.<sup>2</sup>

Now mind, these scholars were writing in the years B.I.E., Before the Internet Era. In Elpidorou's case, it may be possible that he knew something of the internet. Yet even if so, the primitive state of the network in those years was nothing compared to what we would see at the turn of the latest century, and so it could be hardly called the Internet Era.

In any event, the maverick perspectives of these philosophers gave rise to the Tedia, which are religious communities dedicated to the nameless God of Boredom. If you have never heard of the Tedia, then consider it my pleasure to inform you. The members of the Tedia occupy themselves with being bored. The first Tedium was founded as soon as 2086 as a way for people to gesture toward the supposed virtue of boredom without having to actually experience it themselves.

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche made scattered references to boredom throughout many works. For a summary, see Reginster (2007). Heidegger discusses boredom in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1983/2001). For an overview of psychological work on boredom, see Danckert et al. (2018).

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, there is another philosophical book on boredom with a paper airplane on the cover: *A Philosophy of Boredom*, by Lars Svendsen (2005).

One could draw an analogy to Christianity in the B.I.E. Middle Ages, in which monks in monasteries were permanently pious so that the lay person wouldn't have to trouble themselves about God more than once or twice a year, such as on the Festival of the Rabbit or that of the Luminescent Tree.<sup>3</sup>

Today, there are some people who still think there is some value in boredom—and what poor, small-minded creatures they are. But even these people do not wish to trouble themselves with actually undergoing boredom. (It is one of history's curious turns: In those B.I.E. Middle Ages, boredom or "acedia" was considered a deadly sin; being bored while undertaking worship of God was said to be a spiritual failing.<sup>4</sup> Today's monks in the Tedia call it a spiritual failing not to be bored.)

The monks of the Tedious Order live in plain monasteries. There is not the slightest decoration. The buildings are even architected in such a way that the rooms have no corners, and they are lit such that there are no shadows. Their food is without salt, the necessary minerals and vitamins being provided through patches.

Now to what the monks do. They are allowed to meditate, so long as their meditation does not become interesting. Their central practice is writing longhand on paper, creating a document called the *Boredonomicon*, the suffix *-nomicon* being used since ancient times to denote a collection of knowledge.

Each edition of the *Boredonomicon* begins blank. Over the course of two or three dull weeks on average, a monk will fill the book with their experiences of boredom. (Some monks report that it is challenging to remain bored for long. Penance is done in sensory deprivation chambers. In some cases, chemical intervention proves necessary.)

The *Boredonomicon* is not one book, but it is collectively that all these written volumes comprise the *Boredonomicon*, which is the infinite Word of the Nameless God of Boredom. Some of the more arid volumes find their way into facsimile and mass distribution, and sometimes they are excerpted in small booklets.

As with many sacred texts, the *Boredonomicon* rarely if ever are opened so far as page three. Choice quotations from the *Boredonomicon* are printed on tunics and inked into laypeople's flesh—but of course never so much text as to induce a restive state. But I must reiterate it is not the contents in any way that make this document, but rather the spiritual process of its creation. Some might even say, the uninspired spiritual process of its creation.

Now, I have obtained a rare excerpt of the *Boredonomicon* from the polity of Greater China. This was penned by a monk in the Landuo Monastery just this

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<sup>3</sup> On the "two speeds" of Christianity in the Middle Ages, see Taylor (2007).

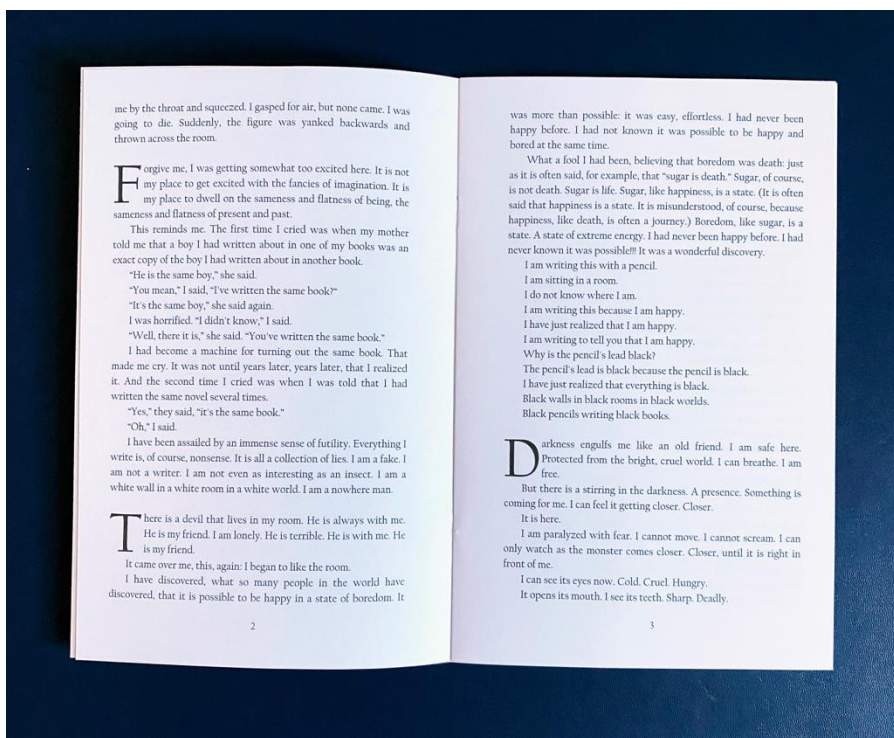
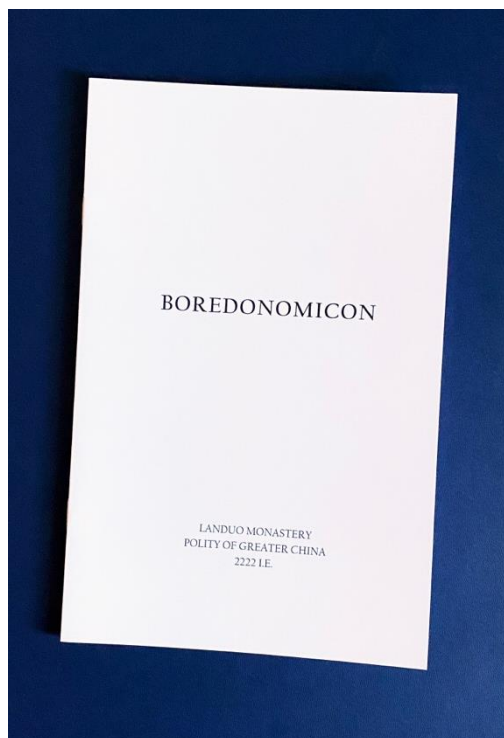
<sup>4</sup> Again, see Taylor (2007).

year, and as such it is a rare treat to be able to view it. This *Boredonomicon* is what I propose to share with you, the Document Academy, at this year's meeting.

It is my hope that, in the context of this meeting, such a document will not prove as boring as it might elsewhere. Of course, if you do find yourself bored by it, I trust you may appropriately medicate yourself with your digital envelope.

I have printed several copies, which you can find here. Please help yourself to one, and may it aid you in whatever spiritual quest on which you find yourself. You may of course keep it as a token of remembrance from this meeting.

Now, as a scholar I would also ask you a particular favor. Here is a drop-box for pieces of paper. As you spend time at this meeting, you will undoubtedly find yourself bored from time to time, some of you more often than not. Perhaps you will find yourself having doodled at the time, or written a grocery list, or perhaps even unwittingly penned a few lines of the *Boredonomicon*. If you could, please, rip out those pieces of paper and deposit them into this box whenever you can. I would like to compare these fragments of the *Boredonomicon* to others that have been discovered throughout the world. Thank you.



## Designer's Statement

The *Boredonomicon* is a work of speculative design. While commercial design is used to create products that solve problems or make life easier, speculative design is used to reflect on problems, raise questions and provoke debate. Speculative design “is a form of dissent expressed through alternative design proposals. It aims to be inspirational, infectious, and catalytic, zooming out and stepping back to address values and ethics” (Dunne & Raby, 2013, p. 160).

In this speculative design project, I chose to reflect on the meaning and value of boredom in human life, and how digital technologies are reshaping (and perhaps foreclosing) the experience of boredom. Responding to the conference theme of Document Disease, I decided to frame boredom as a disease—not a far cry, really, from the unease with which we experience boredom already. I created a document from a speculative future in which the disease of boredom is simultaneously highly valued—to a spiritual degree—but also practically impossible, thanks to digital technologies.

I also sought to reflect on a puzzle from document theory: Is a document better defined by its physical properties (e.g., its form, the printed text) or the human practices undertaken to create it and through which it circulates?<sup>5</sup> In my imagined future, the *Boredonomicon* is defined not by its text or format, but by the spiritual practice<sup>6</sup> undergone to create it; moreover, “the” *Boredonomicon* is the collective name for all the diverse scraps of text created out of boredom. This raises some interesting questions. For any given item, do we call it an excerpt, an example, or something else? And where else might we find analogous examples in human life? Could we speak of, for example, the *Gratitude Journal* as a collective of all recordings of gratitude humanity-wide? What about the *Police Report*?

The *Boredonomicon* presented at this year's meeting of the Document Academy is a short story of sorts, printed as an eight-page zine. I wrote the text in collaboration with Sudowrite, an AI writing assistant that uses GPT-3 to accomplish writing tasks including text generation. The zine was printed by Mixam. At the meeting, I also collected a number of *Boredonomicon* fragments produced by attendees in a drop-box that was available throughout the meeting, which will be used in a future project.

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<sup>5</sup> To put this in the terms of the WEMI model, is a document always defined at the levels of Manifestation/Item, or could it be defined at the Work level? See O'Neill & Žumer (2018).

<sup>6</sup> Here I am thinking of the intersection of document theory and contemporary genre theory, which considers genre to be a form of social action (see Andersen, 2015).

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