

How time flows making games: An ethnographic analysis of experiences of temporality in an indie videogame studio

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Abstract

In research on videogame production, much attention has been given, justifiably, to 'crunch', whereby employees in large studios work extremely long hours for months at a time prior to a game's launch, at the request of management. There has to date been limited research about how duration and urgency are experienced at other periods, and also in the economically and culturally significant 'independent' (or indie) sectors and companies. This article draws on a Deleuzian framework initially developed to analyse experience of temporality in academic research, and applies it to data generated by an ethnography of a UK-based indie game studio, which examined how games are produced as part of a more routine working life. The framework enables a re-examination of how 'passionate' work in the cultural industries is lived day-to-day, and aims to contribute to debates about the politics of time in the games sector, offering analytic resources which expand the vocabulary for expressing desired experiences of time in game work.

Keywords

Cultural industries, Deleuze, ethnography, production studies, temporality, videogames, workplace studies

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‘I wasn’t sure if you were coming, I just emailed and got your Out of Office message saying you were on strike?’ Daisy said. I stammered ‘Yes, I am on strike, but I thought I would come anyway . . .’. I wasn’t sure how to explain that I wasn’t on the picket line that day because I wanted to get started on this ethnography. Research is part of my job, but it is also a pleasure. I had arranged to spend time in Daisy’s videogame studio – let’s call it KPER – for my ‘own’ research.

In the days before, I had been in the snow, outside my university building, taking part in teach-ins about why university employers were cutting pensions by 40 percent, reading blogs on falling academic pay and skyrocketing student debt, and discussing what this all meant for the idea of the university. And it was there and then that the strike turned into a practical exercise in reclaiming authority over how and why we worked. The strike’s slogan, ‘We are the university’, interrupted familiar claims about what paid time paid for, and who paid for it. The exercise had a temporal form. Time wrested from timetables. The organised suspension of organisational rhythms. Unexpectedly, the strike sustained an experience of a certain kind of freedom.

Talking to Daisy, I still was not entirely sure whose clock I was on. Was I breaking the strike? Or was this why I was on strike: to experience work differently, and reclaim its time as my own? However – and this is what this article is actually about – employees at KPER were confronting similar uncertainties about how time measured up and whose time it was. This situation was a product of the studio’s history. When it was set up, it consisted of people who played and made games in their own time: adults who had modded games since the age of 12, people who programmed and made art after working office jobs. Making games was an exercise in leisure. It was still this: many employees went home at 6 pm to make other games. But it was also paid work now, part of a career trajectory, a practice with a future rather than a pastime. And this made for an experience of time which resonated with my own, and other accounts of contemporary work.

This article, then, is a contribution to discussions about work as both pleasure and job. These have featured prominently in game and other creative sectors research. In the literature about game development, the temporality of game work has most often been represented in terms of the intensity of unlimited and unpaid overtime to meet project milestones (e.g. Legault and Ouellet, 2012), and, more rarely, the intensity of creative autonomy struggling towards a desirable future (e.g. Young, 2023). Here, I argue that theorising time explicitly allows for a consideration of the different rhythms of game work: how urgencies and durations are experienced within them according to the desires they express, which are not always coherent with one another or equally shared within a studio. This is intended to make visible the trade-offs between different experiences of time, and also open up possibilities for envisaging intensity in game work in terms other than exploitation or self-exploitation.

The argument is structured as follows: I examine how experiences of temporality and work have sometimes been theorised in cultural studies research. Then, I present a theoretical framework which differentiates between experiences of temporality, and which was originally deployed to analyse experiences of time in academic research. The main part of the article applies this framework to ethnographic data generated in a studio. This allows for an account of everyday paid game work which avoids casting it as either wage-slavery or unfettered self-expression.

Theorising temporality and work

In *The Culture Industry*, Adorno (1972/1991) has an essay about the expression ‘free time’, which he contrasts to its precursor, leisure. Whereas leisure denotes ‘the privilege of an unconstrained, comfortable lifestyle’, free time ‘is shackled to its opposite’: work (p. 187). More specifically, what work becomes under conditions in which its time is owned by someone else. People who labour, and are labour, have ‘free time’ because they need to be able to recover from work, to continue working. ‘Free time’, then, is the opposite of ‘freedom proper’.

Adorno develops Thompson’s (1967) analysis of the relationship between the emergence of industrial capitalism and transformations in the apprehension of time. Thompson argues that it was only with the arrival of the capital-owned factory, and its requirement to synchronise labour, that people began distinguishing between their employer’s and their own time. The ‘employer’ as a social entity consequently elicited a moral injunction: not wasting time. Time became currency; it was spent rather than passed, for employers initially, but subsequently for employees, too. Strikes from the 1850s onwards aimed to secure a 10-hour working day, marking workers’ acceptance of employers’ temporal distinctions, even as they fought over their amount. By then, workers had ‘internalised’ the wage incentive – a formulation suggestive of the relationship between time, industrialisation, desire and identity.

Adorno extends this analysis further. Labour extends an economic logic to all time. Even hobbies are sucked into the vortex of compulsory productivity: ‘do-it-yourself pseudo-activities’ sustain only a simulation of freedom. They kill time (Adorno decries camping and sun-bathing as modern vacuous barbarities). They cannot realise workers’ intentions, because their imagination has been so truncated, and the value of freedom so belittled, that they have been deprived of the faculty even to desire it. In Adorno’s (1991) poetic language, ‘the contraband of modes of behaviour proper to the domain of work, which will not let people out of its power, is being smuggled into the realm of free time’ (p. 190). The argument demolishes any idea of ‘work-life balance’.

In a characteristic dialectical move, Adorno evokes a third possibility: his own job. University teaching and writing cannot be defined in opposition to free time:

there is no hard and fast opposition between my work itself and what I do apart from it. If free time really was to become just that state of affairs in which everyone could enjoy what was once the prerogative of a few . . . then I would picture it after my own experience. (p. 189)

The passage illustrates the complacency of an academic marxism which secures its intellectual position by pointing out ideological mystification elsewhere. However, it also preserves a picture of leisure in, at, with and through working. However closely framed, an image of ‘freedom proper’ as a temporal experience is maintained.

It is this image which has become harder to decipher in more recent accounts of work, especially ‘passionate’ work in the cultural industries (Chia, 2019; Harvey and Shepherd, 2017; McRobbie, 2016). When Ross (2003) delved into the then emerging ‘New Economy’, for instance, he discovered a world of egalitarian appearances haunted by the spectre of capital. When clock time is usurped by project time, hobby made job description, office hours flexible, and hierarchies redundant, the experience of time is split into two: front of

house features self-management, self-defined futures, and collegiality lived as family; but behind this lie bottomless 70hours+ weeks, eradicated promotion pathways, unilateral executive decision-making about lay-offs, and family time reduced to support mechanism for work: 'Perhaps the most insidious occupational hazard of no-collar work is that it can enlist employees' freest thoughts and impulses in the service of salaried time' (p. 19).

A common explanatory mechanism across Adorno and Ross is misrecognition of the reality of exploitation, and this appears in the most recent scholarship too (e.g. Cote and Harris, 2023). Gregg's (2011) landmark study on work and affect, for instance, refers to 'temporal subordination' effected by the deceptive recruitment of passion and hobbies as sources of value. Reading her analysis of the temporal extension of professional presence through email makes sensible how nearly everyone I know works longer than the hours we are contracted for, and how this has been achieved with none of the opposition characteristic of an earlier labour movement.

However, seeing the workplace primarily in terms of a subordination-domination dualism minimises space for exploring what makes for better work, and what forms of work might be more desirable than others (Dejours, 2013). Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011) make this point in exploring what constitutes 'good work' in the creative industries, arguing that seeing work exclusively in terms of exploitation is limiting, in part because it recruits mystification and simulation as explanatory mechanisms (see also Banks, 2013).

This feature of cultural work research is particularly pronounced in Game Studies. Kerr's (2017) overview of the global industry indicates that working conditions have been described largely within the range of the profiteering to the tyrannical. Attention has been placed on the sector's exploitation of workers' desires to normalise extremely long working hours and precarious employment contracts (Bulut, 2020; Consalvo, 2008; Cote and Harris, 2021; Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter, 2009; Kerr and Kelleher, 2015; O'Donnell, 2014). For some, such criticism is important to convey that 'making video games is not a dream job' (Schreier, 2019). And this motivation is justified, by numerous horrific tales from researchers and employees about 100+ hour weeks (known as 'crunch' in the sector) and mass lay-offs after a game is released.

However, the prevalence of this narrative means that other experiences of temporality have been neglected, and the willingness of game workers to work sometimes then explained as misrecognition (Cote and Harris, 2021, 2023; Jackson, 2019; Peticca-Harries et al., 2015). This may help prevent dreaming, but it does not throw much light on everyday work (i.e. not crunch) or on what makes it desirable as living. Schreier's (2019) critique is a call for unionisation, and what he demands is more money for game workers before they are fired, and more humane ways of having them fired. This is vital and yet also little to ask for. There is nothing comparable, here, to Adorno's vision of a leisurely working life. And unionisation per se, as ongoing university strikes in the United Kingdom suggest, does not necessarily hold the answer to good working time – although it does force the question to be raised.

Deleuzian temporalities

The synchronous troubling of time at my university and in my fieldwork suggested the possibility of using a common measure of temporal experience: Lapping's (2016) study

of academics' experience of time is set against a broader question about how temporal experiences are changing under contemporary conditions of governmentality and the troubles created by de-synchronised rhythms. She uses ideas from Deleuze (1995, 2004), who described a historical shift from disciplinary societies, in which organisation is achieved through the internalisation of social norms, to societies of control, in which social order is achieved through the imposition of external rules.

Societies of control produce experiences of 'chronological time', a temporality structured by measures determined externally to those who live by them, on a continuous basis, and effective to the extent that the desires they impose are treated as legitimate. So, in academic research, in the United Kingdom, there are various timetables according to which progress is measured, be that research assessment exercises every 4 years, grant calendars set by funders, timed impact indicators determined by the government, or promotion pathways setting an expected tempo for research bids (Lapping, 2016). Work and life are paced to the rhythm of someone else's clock.

Disciplinary societies produce experiences of 'teleological time'. Temporal measures are the work of a society with which one identifies as a member, by contributing to but also accepting and internalising its rhythms. Temporality is ritualistic rather than regular, differentiated by condensational moments of collective experience. In academic research, this is the temporality set by disciplines: the time of doing work suitable to be defended at doctoral level, contribute through publication, or participate in conferences (Lapping, 2016). Temporality is produced by identifying a clock as one's own – one's teleology.

Using Deleuze's (2004) evocation of 'aion', Lapping creates a third category: 'narcissistic time', an experience of suspension in both chronology and teleology. It emerges as a moment of disruption and hesitation, an upheaval of timelines, which opens up the possibility of uncharted direction. Lapping attends to how her participants talk about research happening moment by moment, as thought meanders, connections are made, and interpretation is in that state of suspended possibility before taking form. It is that time of trying to make sense of books or practices one is thinking with and through, the condition of possibility for something else than previously existing structures of time, thought and identity to emerge. It is in this respect that it might be experienced as a kind of free time at, with and through working, because it harbours the possibility of changed positions, capacities and identities (Rancière, 1989).

Applying the temporal categories at KPER

In 2018, over 9 months, I spent approximately 40 days in KPER's one-room office in London, observing and participating in work activities, talking to employees, attending socials in the office and the pub, going to events and shows, and playing games under development. The studio was in a period of transition, and the potential hold of Lapping's categories emerged when differences were evoked about how the company made games now, as opposed to before.

Initially set up by a collective working online, KPER's first game started out as a voluntary enterprise performed in spare time by enthusiasts distributed across global time zones including Australia, Brazil, Norway, the United States and the United Kingdom. Now, the studio generated revenue from sales, and paid salaries to around

20 employees, most of whom worked in the same location, to develop its second game. Many of the same people, most in their 20s, a fairly even mix of men and women, worked across both periods.

In conversation, employees evoked making the studio's first game in terms characteristic of teleological time. The game's concept was expressed in relation to the interests of an existing game community, of which the volunteers were members. Tasks were identified as part of an evolving consensus, with their completion largely self-determined. Everyone did a bit of everything – writing, level design, programming, art, community management – the boundaries between roles weakly differentiated. When funding was generated through an early access programme (by which players gain access to an early version of the game in return for a reduced price), the game was 'published' every night, with progress indexed by a commitment to respond to players' feedback. Publication, then, was a community ritual, rather than a schedule which divided time optimally for a pre-determined end goal.

In discussing the present, employees emphasised the need to mitigate the temporal excesses of that first period (see also Weststar and Dubois, 2023, for an account of this in terms of a servitisation model of game development, in which players have continuous input into production). As its remedy, they evoked features of chronological temporality. Time was now divided according to the requirements of an external market, rather than the capricious demands of crowdfunders. The desire was to make a game which was well-crafted according to industry standards, and intuitively coherent to anyone, rather than cohering only with a history of individuals' contributions. Design plans and schedules were drawn up, from 2-week 'sprints' of itemised, individualised tasks, to objectives stretching out into a determinate future of several months. And people were paid, which meant that development time was differentiated from its other by office hours.

This characterisation implies a historical shift. Yet both temporal experiences co-existed in the present – as it does in academic work. Life at KPER meant negotiating between these temporalities, with difficulties arising when they became de-synchronised. For example, when, towards the end of the making of the studio's first game, and when various measures for co-ordinating work had been introduced in order to, finally, release it, work was described as working *for* it rather than *on* it.

I will explore these experiences of time in more detail, drawing on employees' words and field notes. I will leave an illustration of narcissistic time to the end, as this temporality interrupts the other two rather than standing on its own. My aim is to highlight how time flows within these temporalities, how they produce duration or urgency, and the symptoms of de-synchronisation between them.

Chronological time

The best way of illustrating the experience of chronological time is to focus on how the producer, Annabelle, described her job. Her formal title was Art Director. The title 'producer' did not exist at KPER. In the indie 'space', as Whitson et al. (2021) indicate, 'the term "producer" carries negative associations with hierarchical, risk-averse and creatively stifling large-scale game production' (p. 609), prioritising project management over collaborative autonomy, using external metrics of success such as sales over

collective processes, and valorising the product itself (the game) as an end goal over the participative practice of making games together and sharing them with others. In temporal terms, then, being indie means rejecting experiences of chronological time and privileging ones of teleological time.

Annabelle was conscious of the potential negative connotations of her role, describing it as a function which had been necessary rather than aspired to, thereby conveying that the work, and its associated ethics, were lived as obligation rather than inclination. In describing what she did, she emphasised the establishment of pace, dictated by the needs of the project:

Annabelle: The way that I have ended up doing my job, to make sure that I know approximately where we are on the road map, where we are headed and what parts are doing well and what parts are not doing so well. Making sure no one is stuck, really, that we always have momentum forwards with the project. I think occasionally people will get a bit stuck with their work, as in maybe they don't know what they're doing, maybe they need feedback, maybe they are a bit burnt out on the task, maybe they are in between tasks and they're trying to figure out what the next stage is that they are supposed to do – it's just like constantly making sure that all those little situations that come up for everyone are resolved quickly. So that – yeah, that is kind of what I do on a day-to-day basis. And then I just look at our backlog a lot. And worry. Trying to figure out what to prioritise for this sprint or the sprint after and if I can put anything to the side. I have like a stretch list in the backlog where basically I put things that – worst case scenario, if things fall off and we don't have time for it, it's ok, I put stuff there.

Developing a game here means progressing along a road map. Work gives momentum to this forward movement: it is an energy which is harnessed, or which dissipates in relation to a trajectory. Time does not simply pass: it has currency because of its contribution to reaching stages. People get stuck, do not progress to a next stage, and do not know what they are supposed to do, temporal states which exist insofar as they are working for the project and putting in the labour required to push it forward. It is their work insofar as it is theirs to be done.

The games which KPER developed were pitched by employees and elaborated on through discussion – in a way Whitson et al.'s interviewees characterised as typically 'indie'. Annabelle's account illustrates how her role involved drawing a distinction between this ongoing activity and a game's temporal requirements, such that the value of the former was identified according to the latter. Her reference to worrying shows that the project is not lived as hers to determine. Its temporal demands are made external, and also determinate. This creates the emotional labour of worrying about the efficient use of time, a burden which, in assuming, she also removed from others. She conveys a somewhat oppressive sense that time cannot be wasted: she measures it out in repeating 'sprints' of work. The unrelenting sense of urgency this terminology evokes was not visibly shared more widely. In taking on the role of producer, she was then also delegated the desire and ethical responsibility to use time thriftily and feel its passing with solicitude.

It is the distinction between a project's schedule and their own time which Whitson et al.'s indie developers are said to reject, because it transforms, experientially, the work of making games into making money. But Annabelle's justification was not financial. It pertained to maintaining safety and creativity through temporal boundaries:

Annabelle: So I think the idea of introducing any sort of hierarchy or structure can come across as quite uncreative or maybe people worry that their freedom is going to be taken away from them. But for me and knowing what it was like working as an artist at [the work-for-hire studio] and feeling so safe and happy with my work, not having to worry about anything because I knew someone else had to worry about these things and I could just do my job and relax. And I missed that a lot. I missed just knowing that I can trust my producer to direct the project and all I had to do was do my task every sprint and I don't have to feel responsible for anything else.

Temporal and organisational structure are aligned here, justified in terms of the experience of safety and happiness, consequent to the demarcation of difference between what one is responsible for and what one is not. It was because someone else set a schedule that Annabelle experienced creative independence in her previous job. The subservience of an artist's time to a project's schedule, here, sustains freedom by creating an autonomous domain within it. Hierarchical control is then exercised legitimately over the borders of that domain. The danger which Annabelle fears is unbounded time. The imposition of a chronological temporality, as well as the organisational hierarchy which audits it, is lived as a form of containment, defending against time passing indefinitely, in no direction.

It is within this temporality, then, that 'crunch' was preempted. Annabelle's work prevented the long hours culture noted by Ross and Whitson et al.: she left the office at 6, and rarely contributed to online chats out of hours.

In its differentiation between work and 'free time', however, a chronological temporality established contrast where continuity might have been felt. The idea that making games involves playing them all day has been decisively punctured, but making them requires playing them, if only to maintain fluency in a rapidly evolving language. None of this was done in paid hours. Several employees regretted that they no longer had time to play games, and relied on memories from earlier years. And when games were played in office hours, it was to analyse them, for example, finding features to replicate. KPER's own games were played as test of their reliability only, leading to the occasional expression of sadness that they could not be played as leisure.

A chronological temporality also generated uncertainty about whether an activity was work or play. Most employees made games or ran Twitter, Twitch, and YouTube channels in their free time. It was because of these voluntary activities that many had gotten a job at KPER, and how the studio retained its indie reputation. But pursuing these activities sometimes affected the perceived quality of work, for instance, when external interests seemed more important to employees than their duties. This uncertainty was addressed in various ways, including humorous reprimands, regularly updated terms and conditions, enforced leave, and ad hoc performance reviews. It was an uncertainty which, however, kept returning.

Teleological time

I never left on time in my old job – I’d come in about 9 am, which is OK, I did that here for a while before I realised nobody else came in early [laughs] and I officially finished my day at 6, but I was there until at least 8 every night, and then I would be expected to do emails until midnight every night. Because PlayStation would be like ‘we need this in 5 minutes’ Whereas I think KPER is so sociable, like all the socials they do, everyone hangs out together in the evenings. It’s really nice. It’s like a family [laughs] and they have all been so welcoming. Like we went to the pub and had dinner last Friday, which was really nice. (Rebecca, the recently appointed marketing strategist)

There are two scenes here. In the first, Rebecca’s previous workplace in which she organised global marketing campaigns for PlayStation products, office hours are named in their breach, with no time of inaccessibility. The second scene features being accessible to colleagues for dinner and socials. This time is evoked as collectively created and chosen. It is not an intrusion into home life, but an extension of it. It is family time. It is nice. And being nice pertains to the ethics of a personal relationship, rather than that of the employment contract.

The contrast captures something of the difference between chronological and teleological time. Teleological time is lived as a history and a future of group membership, with time measured out through periods of social significance, from which one derives identity. As Rebecca went on to say subsequently, crunch does not happen in this temporality (she meant at KPER), as an experience of working hours imposed rather than wanted. The concept of ‘work-life balance’ also has little relevance (Chia, 2021).

In some accounts, this experience of time is a case of *legerdemain*, with the moral value of palliative care (Cote and Harris, 2023; McRobbie, 2002). At KPER, teleological time seemed more of a mixed bag, in which oppositions between, say, family and team-building time, were not always easy to make sense of. It was not a case of misrecognition. It was a phenomenon which involved careful negotiation (Banks, 2013) – something which Rebecca does above through laughter.

Duration was experienced, within this temporality, in reference to a life lived, rather than work tasks and hours. For instance, when I talked to employees about how they came to be working in the games sector, none answered by talking about the intrinsic appeal of the ongoing work itself; this was evoked, in fact, as sometimes tedious and repetitive, in terms of grinding away at code or art assets for years. Stories of origins and, by implication, of enduring purpose, almost always began with reference to childhood. The origin of the present lay in a pastime realised out of school hours, in the street, at night online, with friends. Many of the stories featured oppositional adults: parents who did not believe games sustained jobs, teachers who advised developing more academic knowledge. The stories also often featured oppositional peers: fellow students who could afford to make art without also making a living, colleagues who liked corporate suits.

These early experiences of marginality extended to game making, which was initially done in the interstices between other primary activities: during school nights, in between university coursework, after work performed for pay. Game-making was what you did when you should have been doing, and were told to be doing, something else. In no account did the present appear as the outcome of a series of strategic choices or a

capitalisation on skills. It was always highly contingent. Positions were applied for after a friend happened to see a tweet, acquaintances were made in shared housing, friends were made in crowded online forums.

There is a kind of mythic structure to these stories of origins (Bjorklund and Keipi, 2020). They evoke coincidences and chance encounters, which somehow allow destiny to be realised, outsiders to find kin, and an adventure to be embarked upon. These are conventions for stories of origins in game websites and books, which foreground shared love of a socially transgressive medium over individualising talent (Schreier, 2017). Employees told me a story they had told many times before, for interviews on blogs, and at conferences. The story might be heard as a form of ‘relational labour’ (Baym, 2015): the work of fostering relationships with a community which is also a market. In games, although not exclusively so, that work involves expressing love of a minority medium. The way in which KPER employees made sense of their past and present, then, was also how they made sense of their players.

For instance, this is how the origins of KPER’s second game was articulated – it is from a conversation between myself and two employees, Daisy (brand manager) and Cody (CEO):

- Daisy: We wanted to play a game like *Pixel Magic* [released in 2001], and you looked for one, and there hadn’t been one for a long time. You noticed that there was a lot of conversation online by people saying ‘*Pixel Magic* was a long time ago and there hasn’t been anything that good since’. And that is when we thought, let’s make one then. So it’s not cynical, like, these people would all buy it.
- Cody: No, no, no
- Daisy: To me, it’s like, this would make all these people so happy, because this would make me so happy. And that’s where it came from, I remember.

Here, the boundaries between employees, and between employees and players, are weak, and games are made because ‘we’ want to play them. This ‘we’ was signalled through KPER’s game aesthetic, which harked back to the earliest days of digital game design (2001 is a long time ago in games), and beyond that, to the 19th century Arts and Crafts movement (Juul, 2014), in which a nostalgic, anti-industrial attitude and personal creation is expressive of a way of life, against the division of labour and financial concerns underpinning mass market production. Design here is archeological work, a dusting off of ancient texts symbolic of a common history. This is how employees talked about their games at sales conferences, but it was a story also told in the studio, on collective occasions like this conversation. What is made ‘cynical’, or morally abject, is desire for a future with no honouring of a unifying history.

Making games, making community and making money are thereby made indistinguishable. Work is vocation, not labour. This is how I made sense of what, at first, appeared a contradiction: the rejection of ‘crunch’; and the long hours that many employees often spent making ‘their own’ games, or meeting up evenings and weekends. This seemed to leave little time for non-work relationships. But to many employees, it is what gave work meaning, precisely because it was not a 10–6 job (see also Keogh, 2019).

Making games consecrated a bohemian existence (Bourdieu, 1993), in which economic rewards are abjured in favour of dedication to higher, collective values.

The availability of digital tools to produce and share media has been celebrated as an instance of ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, 1992), in which there is no longer a time of media production and then one of reception, but rather ongoing synchrony. This perspective captures some aspects of KPER’s relationship with its players: the work of its community manager, as well as that which all employees carried out contributing to forums, can be read as maintaining an experience of teleological synchrony. But the desire for synchrony also produced urgency: when published release dates for KPER’s second game were missed, employees faced the ire of fans on its forums, a product of de-synchronisation between chronological and teleological temporalities. Urgency manifested in various forms, including working late nights and weekends over months:

On Telegram, at 1 am on a Sunday morning, Cody posts an animation he has created in which the game characters explain the delayed publishing date. I’m struck by how much time this would have taken to make. Gabriel, Filipe and Dale respond with feedback on the animation between 1 and 2 am. Cody says he has already posted the video on KPER’s website, bypassing internal review. Further exchanges take place until 4.30 am. (Field notes)

Explaining lateness in forums highlighted the importance of stemming impatience and its consequence: players falling away in the wake of diverging temporal desires.

Urgency was also experienced through the apprehension of a longer chronological timescale – the delayed development of KPER’s third game:

Daisy said she was frustrated, because it was perfectly timed when it was initially planned. There were no other games like it, and the intended audience was still very much into its sources of inspiration such as *Harry Potter*, *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, and Studio Ghibli films. Whereas by the time it comes out, things will probably have moved on. It probably won’t do as well as it might have done. People will have become bored with *Buffy*. (Field notes)

The ‘things’ that may move on are the childhood attachments to a canon constitutive of KPER as community. If nostalgia turns to boredom, the third game would be late before it even began, with development behind its teleological timescale even if the chronological schedule were respected.

It was during these experiences of de-synchronisation that community became external market: unpredictable, impossible to satisfy, subject to an ethic of control rather than participation.

It was as market that KPER’s players were felt to constrain the emergence of new trajectories: games which deviated from canon. KPER could not, several felt, start making games in a substantially different style, because it would take too long, and be too expensive, to establish a new basis for shared value. So it was when employees evoked a future different from KPER’s that their own, independent projects were lived as urgent and necessary rather than voluntary. Age then also became a pressing consideration: being 30, when work begins in childhood, is middle-aged, a sign of impending irrelevance. When one’s community is identified by its opposition to responsible adults, anxiety arises as responsibilities accrue.

De-synchronisation also meant pay was experienced, for some, as slight. Sector norms determined salary according to job title. Pay for programmers in the indie sector is lower than in other fields, and this could be lived as voluntary tribute, to make indie games. Because pay for artists is not necessarily higher elsewhere, salary was perceived to ignore what was offered voluntarily, and an adoption of market values in a studio which was meant to reject them. The claim that games were not being made only for money raised a question about what employees were being paid for, and for that to be lived sometimes as gift, sometimes as retainer.

Narcissistic time

Lapping develops the category of narcissistic time to capture the experiential intensity of research. She evokes it as an experience of hanging possibilities, handling working materials – books, data, articles – and feeling relations to them take shape. Lapping emphasises that this experience disrupts linear, chronological and teleological timelines, because it opens up the possibility of unmapped directions, in thought and being.

Her description provides a language for moments which were hard for employees to put into words, but which seemed intensely meaningful. Moments that often arose at night:

Todd [level designer]: Cody made it very clear he doesn't want KPER to have a crunch culture. I don't know how familiar you are with crunch culture?

Caroline: Yes, it's working ridiculous hours previous to launch.

Todd: I mean, it hasn't stopped me sometimes staying in the evenings, staying in the office an extra couple of hours here and there, because I really want to finish this one thing I'm working on, but I was never asked, I was never made to do extra hours that I didn't want to do, so there will be cases where it's like, I would like this to be the best it can be so I know I need to give it a couple more hours, but they also need me on this other thing the next day so I'll just stay back a little bit and finish it off properly, the way I want to do it. But Cody has been getting increasingly firm on 'ok, office hours are ending now, go home, go actually relax'. But I've still been guilty of tinkering with side projects that no one has asked me to do because I'm curious to find out: 'can I do this, can I do that?'

Todd often had to take naps in the day because he did not sleep at night. He was regularly reprimanded on Telegram for 'tinkering' at 2 am, by Cody, also at 2 am. And Todd here is aware of his transgression: crunching is forbidden. He introduces its idea into the conversation not me – which suggests that the desire he evokes, the rapture of design work, is seductive partly because it is forbidden. It is a guilty pleasure.

So what is he guilty of? He wants to find something out: 'can I do this, can I do that?' pointing to an enigma which invites exploration. The material and the subjective are

inseparable: what is he capable of, with and through working materials? The endeavour to reveal virtuosity in the software is absorbing and self-absorbing, revealing unsuspected forms in both an 'I' and its coded matter. Attention is placed on the possibilities of the present – rather than a history or future – which transgress existing structures of time: the office hours, the hours assigned for his tasks, and the project's road map. This side project deviates from what is externally imposed and consensually agreed.

When other employees talked about working at night on their own projects, they sometimes conveyed a similar compulsion, expressed through negatives: they did not do it for professional development, nor as an extension of their job, but rather to experiment with what could be achieved; for instance, establishing a Twitch channel to explore how it might sustain new experiences of game-playing. Such experiments were a struggle to describe, because they were at the edges of what could be thought.

Not all instances of 'narcissistic temporality' were at night. Below, Dale, an artist, remembers the first time he met other KPER employees at a convention. By that time, he had been contributing to KPER's first game for over a year:

Dale: It was the point at which I knew what I wanted to do in my life. I wasn't working in games at the time. I was studying animation, probably looking to work in TV and film. And at the convention, we had a stall, and we were demoing a game and people were playing it for the first time and just that experience made it very clear this is what I need to do for the rest of my life. Like absolutely 100%. Just the experience of, like: you've created something, and people are playing through that, and drawing their own experiences from that – that was like, this is what I need to do.

Dale describes a revelatory conjuncture when he knew what he wanted to do with his life. There is something in 'just the/that experience' which goes beyond what is happening: people playing what he/'we' had created, a moment, which, chronologically, lasted 3 days. This moment condenses the significance of what he has been doing for years: studying animation. The use of the continuous past and present ('we were demoing a game and people were playing it', 'people are playing through that, and drawing their own experiences from that') confines temporal progression, initiating a recurrent eternity. Previous career plans, of working in TV and film, are disrupted. An unchartered future reveals itself, evoked, as with Todd, in terms closer to compulsion than enjoyment: this is what I need to do.

These are instances of narcissistic temporality experienced by individuals, but there were also collective examples. They attended to the significance of being part of a project which conceals the intensity of relationships, and engenders collective thoughts and actions. Below, Hester (COO) and Daisy are talking about why they joined KPER. Both left secure jobs in larger companies, where they might have had more predictable career trajectories. Hester describes what she was doing before realising what her role could be:

Hester: So I started just listening to conversations for 3-4 days, and it was fascinating. I'd been on forums before, I'd been part of a community before, but this was different, it was really intense. The way people talked to each other. It was Chinese, so I thought these guys know each

other, these people are friends, and that comes across, but they are also working really hard, there was this drive, there was this intense quality. So I had to find my place among them.

Daisy:

That is very relatable actually, the way you describe meeting everyone and seeing, just like the magic between them, it was so exciting, that was one of the big draws from when I was getting to know everyone, they just talked about what they are doing all the time, the game is part of their life, so knowing them socially is like being involved with that, and it's all around you, and it's so exciting, and I couldn't be away from it, and I used to spend all the time I could around you guys until I worked here.

Hester and Daisy represent the centrifugal force which pulled them in to a circle made up of friends, but not just friends, but also the collective doing of something which eludes naming. It was Chinese (here, meaning it was incomprehensible) and magic (also meaning it was incomprehensible). Both inputs have a similar structure. They evoke sensations, of magnetic incandescence and intense voluptuous excitement, which then lead to the claiming of a position and identity: 'So I had to find my place', 'until I worked here'. Hester's reference to fascination and Daisy's to magic articulate such sensations as disruptive: they mesmerise and hold spellbound. Neither speaker refers to what they brought with them, suggesting an experience of merging ('among them', 'you guys') rather than adding. Daisy evokes an initiation into a world where boundaries are re-made, between game and life, between working and living.

Time's up

Theorising time as an experience, rather than an objective and singular measure, has allowed for an account of duration, urgency and timelessness which attends to their emergence in relation to different points of identification. These points articulate different desires. This has allowed for some exploration of what makes for desirable or good time at work, in the lived experiences of game workers. I have related what is desired to an idea of 'free time', or freedom, to draw out the ethical and political consequences of studying experiences of temporality.

The categories used in the analysis are not normative, but rather serve two main purposes. First, they highlight multiplicity in experiences of time, without reducing this to the binary of real versus simulation. This opposition has tended to render game work as a reality of managerial control, if not exploitation, hiding behind a simulation of ardently, if not naively, passionate choice. Attending to some of the painful consequences of de-synchronisation between temporal frames suggests a different way of accounting for the difficulties of enduring urgency and duration. In this respect, this article has been an attempt to expand possibilities for understanding the intensities of game work time beyond the rationale of helping them 'see through to the reality of their situation' (Weststar and Dubois, 2023: 981). This is not to deny that there is exploitation in game development. But there is also more than just this and its mirror opposite. Exploitation in game development was not ignored at KPER; it was discussed frequently, because it was a common topic on game-related social media. How to make games collaboratively, commercially

and as some kind of leisurely life was an ongoing concern, precisely because of the commitment to avoid the well-reported pitfalls of working in a commercial studio.

Second, the categories of analysis invite a consideration of how desired time arises in game work, without equating this with non-work time. This is important, since the focus in research about games work has historically been on oppressive experiences of time and, consequently then also, on efforts to contain work time. And while unionisation here is an important strategy to secure more liveable work hours in the sector, it should also be an occasion to consider what desirable forms of life work time might sustain; what kinds of durations and urgencies; and also opportunities to transgress and redirect both. There have been several accounts of the pleasures of time spent making games, which emphasise creative autonomy, but to date, such accounts have tended to oppose the freedom of game making to development as a paid job, if only by virtue of their choices, and the accessibility, over research settings (Keogh, 2019; Young, 2023). I have described some ways in which employees experienced autonomy at work: the different meanings it had, how it emerged as a possibility and also how it was frustrated. This seems important, as a first step at least, in clarifying what unionisation can and should aim to achieve, precisely because more pay and fewer hours are not what game makers always prioritise over the pleasures of making games, as these same studies have repeatedly shown (Keogh, 2019; Young, 2023). Further research is needed, arguably, on the pleasures of making games and also making a living, to extend conditions for autonomy, in different measures of time and also in the highly varied spaces of the games sector. This was one of the ambitions of Lapping's work with respect to the study of academic research: to articulate how it became pleasurable and also how this pleasure turned into an opposite. Just as university trade unions need to know what demands to make for better working conditions, so does the emerging union movement in the global games sector.

It is worth noting, then, that the content of each category of analysis is specific to KPER, and may not apply to other studios. Time flowed at KPER in a way which reflected and produced its distinct history and present circumstances. However, it operates in an environment shared in some respects with other studios. It would be interesting, then, to examine how the categories applied in some of the AAA studios which have been the focus of earlier ethnographies of game work (O'Donnell, 2014), as well as indie studios in other contexts (Keogh, 2021; Whitson et al., 2021). The analytic approach may offer a basis for analyses of temporality in the games sector which examine phenomena other than crunch, and which may also help to theorise crunch in some new ways.

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Biographical note

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