Why do video game developers play—or not play—video games during leisure time?

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INTRODUCTION
Video game developers are often passionate creative workers (Lysova and Khapova 2019; Peticca-Harris et al. 2015) whose 'always-on' regime of cultural production blurs the line between work and leisure from an individual perspective. Obsessive, passionate work can spill over into leisure activities, preventing disengagement from the work-related context and causing burnout (Vallerand et al. 2010). Overwork is a recognised issue in the video game industry (Peticca-Harris et al. 2015); however, less attention is given to how leisure activities are used for work-related purposes, affecting those involved in digital creative work. In this paper, we examine why—or why not—video game developers play video games as a leisure activity focusing on two types of leisure: disengaging and instrumental. Disengaging leisure experiences provide a sense of disconnection from work and life pressures (Vallerand et al. 2010). Instrumental leisure experiences generate meaning of contributing something to work practices (Banks 2009).

In the video game industry, passionate commitment to playing video games is not mandatory but 'widely regarded as supportive of being a qualified and credible video game developer' (Styhre 2020, p. 87) and may enhance employability (Kerr and Kelleher 2015). While the recent study by Olli Sotamaa (2021) categorised the functions of playing as the game developers perceive them, this paper further examines how instrumental and disengaging modes of playing video games contribute to digital creative workers' subjective well-being (SWB). The two-year study conducted in the Australian context in 2019–2021 examined digital creative workers in the video game industry, analysing qualitative data from 35 interviews with video game developers. Digital creative workers are employed in creative occupations (e.g., conceptual artist and game designer) and make digital products with a symbolic or aesthetic value using digital technologies and processes (Banks and Hesmondhalgh 2009; Goldsmith 2014).

The applied SWB bottom-up theories emphasise the role of external events for the reported well-being (Diener et al. 1999). They allow exploring blurred leisure-work of playing video games, focusing on the arising experiences, i.e., what participants think and feel while doing leisure activity. Experiences result in positive and negative affects from the events and contribute to life satisfaction — the key components of the SWB (Newman et al. 2014). The paper explores how experiences arising from playing video games contribute to the SWB of video game developers.

The study is significant due to the four main findings in relation to how video game developers experience video games as a leisure activity. First, playing video games positively disengage participants from work with moderate pressures when playing time does not remind them about tasks and deadlines. However, disengaging capacity of video games is limited due to their digital character, which is broader than screen experience. Consistently interacting with the laws of the virtual world at work, video game developers seek non-digital experiences that allow 'mental calibration'. For example, while woodworking, the game designer cannot click the 'Undo' button and needs to 'just slow it down and be precise'. Second, playing video games may be disengaging but invoke negative affects due to worries about playing other's game instead of working on a personal game project that looks more meaningful. Third, instrumental leisure experiences invoke positive affects if the level of work pressure is not significant. Then, while playing, video game developers learn, find references, develop ideas and network with peers, although still having a sense of leisure. Professional background raises the threshold of experiences, and study participants often need to play 'groundbreaking' games to gain enjoyment. Sometimes, the instrumental rationality of playing a video game is unclear, although the very sense of usefulness comforts passionate workers. Fourth, obligation towards playing a game enhances the negative affect of instrumental leisure. Video game developers may have to select genres similar to the projects they develop or with a strong feature to upskill, e.g., in marketing. Treating the game as a learning exercise results in 'half doing research' and 'half enjoying the game' or eliminates the sense of leisure and turns gaming into a continuation of work.

The findings further normalise the view on the video game industry as a heterogeneous field employing diverse creative workers (Keogh 2019), for whom playing video games is not a must leisure option and which differently affects their SWB depending on the context and motivation. Although video game production blurs job titles, the participants claimed the most desirable roles which matched their identities. There is anecdotal evidence from the interviews showing that certain roles in video game production gravitate to instrumental or disengaging video game playing. Further research may focus on relationships between the occupational roles and effects of playing video games for the video game developers' SWB.

BIO
Raman Voranau is a Masters by Research student at the University of South Australia, UniSA Business. He was engaged in arts administration within public museums and an event agency in Belarus. While working in a not-for-profit organisation, he facilitated early-career creative workers, which inspired his current study about video game developers' leisure and work experiences.

Dr Ruth Rentschler OAM is Professor Arts & Cultural Leadership, University of South Australia. She has published widely. Publications relate to the overarching themes of social inclusion, diversity and the arts in quality journals, industry reports and research books. She maintains a keen interest in arts and technology. She has a strong service record both in universities and in the community, serving on nonprofit boards, editorial boards and as doctoral symposium chair.

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Dr Sandra Barker is a Senior Lecturer at the University of South Australia, UniSA Business. She teaches courses related to managerial decision making, business communication and business operation. Sandra is an executive member of the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education and has a significant research interest in technology enhanced learning. Outside of work she works with youth theatre projects and is on the board of a large local sporting organization.

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