

That is just part of being able to do my cool job:

Understanding low earnings but high job satisfaction in the creative industries in the Netherlands¹

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Abstract

Work in the creative industries seems to be characterized by a paradox as it combines (very) low levels of earnings with high levels of job satisfaction. Often this is attributed to creative workers 'just valuing other aspects of their work'. There may be other explanations however, such as labour market conditions and a lack of collective interest representation. In this study we combine these explanations and aim to understand whether and why earnings in the creative industries are lower than might be expected for these workers. We focus on two sub-sectors of the creative industries: graphic design and the games industry. Semi-structured interviews were held with entrepreneurs, freelance workers and employees, as well as institutional-level actors. Results show that workers do not generally perceive their income levels as low at an absolute level, but they do in relative terms. Also, they do point out specific groups as vulnerable with often very low earnings: starting entrepreneurs and freelance workers. These groups are central in the make-up of the sector as many start their own businesses at some point in their career. Workers indicate, however, that they are willing to forego earnings for the sake of working in the sector. This situation can best be understood as an interaction between personal preferences, labour market conditions and lack of interest in collective organisation. In addition, there seems to be a norm that 'true creative workers' should be willing to sacrifice earnings.

1. Introduction

Inspired by Richards Florida's work on the creative class (2002), many governments in the developed world have established policies to support the creative industries with the expectation that it will contribute to economic growth and innovation in general, and more

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specifically to job creation (Chaston & Sadler-Smith, 2012). However, work in the creative industries presents us with an interesting paradox. On the one hand, many want to work in the creative industries, and those who do often state that they do so with pleasure and report high levels of job satisfaction; on the other hand, the creative industries are rife with low job quality, particularly in terms of low earnings and inadequate access to social security (e.g. De Peuter & Dyer-Whiteford, 2005; Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013; Menger, 2017; Neff, Wissinger & Zukin, 2005; Peticca-Harris, Weststar & McKenna, 2015; Thompson, Parker & Cox, 2016).

The literature offers three main arguments to explain this paradox (cf Bellini, Burrioni, Dorigatti, Gherardini & Manzo, 2018). The first concerns personal preferences and intrinsic motivation. Creative workers (including employees, interns, freelancers and business owners) are said to value other, non-monetary aspects of the work such as the possibility to express their creativity and doing what they love so much that they are willing to accept low earnings (Umney & Kretsos, 2015; Umney & la Palme, 2017). A second argument is that the nature of the creative labour market forces workers to accept low earnings. For example, the creative labour market is a portfolio labour market par excellence, which induces workers to accept low-paid jobs in order to increase the chances for getting more work in the future (Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2002; Pettica-Harris et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2016). Thirdly, the limited interest of creative workers in collective organisation is forwarded as an explanation, arguing that the resulting individual nature of employment relations puts workers in a disadvantaged bargaining position (McRobbie, 2009; Umney & La Palme, 2017; Umney & Kretsos, 2015).

In this study we add to the literature by studying these various explanations together and in relation to each other. We discuss low earnings in the private, non-subsidized creative industries in the Netherlands and examine the validity of these three lines of argumentation. We ask three main questions: (1) to what extent do workers in the creative industries consider their earnings to be low?; (2) to what extent are low earnings related to personal preferences, labour market characteristics and/or a lack of collective organisation?; and (3) what are the reasons for large groups of creative workers not to organise collectively?

In the next section we will review the literature concerning the three main arguments in more detail. Section 3 discusses the methodology and data. Section 4 presents the results of our research. Section 5 concludes.

2. Analytical framework

2.1 Worker preferences

The prevalence of low earnings among creative workers is often explained by these workers' preferences and intrinsic motivation, which downplay the importance of earnings as compared to other aspects of work (De Peuter, 2011; Dollinger, Burke & Gump, 2007). De Peuter (2011) distinguishes a number of worker prototypes and categorises creative workers as belonging to the group he names 'the precog', characterised by "self-driven, passionate commitment to work; willingness to work for nothing; perpetual and personally financed reskilling; habituation to material insecurity; obsessive networking, bold enterprising behavior" (De Peuter 2011: 421). Also, creative workers often consider their work hobby as much as work, and are therefore highly intrinsically motivated (Arvidsson, Malossi & Naro, 2010; Siebert & Wilson, 2013; Wright, 2017). Passionate and highly intrinsically motivated, they are therefore willing to compromise on earnings just to have the opportunity to do the work they want to do, or so the argument goes (Wright, 2017).

Other authors have furthermore added that creative workers' prioritisation of aspects of work other than earnings may be grounded in their value orientations. Specifically, a desire to create reflects creativity as a core value, which is thus valued more than earnings (Dollinger et al., 2007). This value orientation is furthermore related to a strong desire to do 'their own unique thing', i.e. to be able to exercise autonomy over what they create, even if this means earning less (ibid.).

Finally, the importance attached to earnings may also vary with age. Young workers tend to have fewer responsibilities in terms of dependent partners, parents or children, and may not (yet) have a mortgage. Back-up options like temporarily living with one's parents or having a roommate to share costs make it easier to opt for less income for the sake of doing the work you love, as has been observed in the games industry (Bulut, 2015).

2.2 Labour market characteristics

A second line of argument is that the specific labour market characteristics of the creative industries serve to reinforce the prioritisation of work over income. To begin with, creative work is often organised in specific projects with limited time durations, commonly referred to as project-based work. This is an argument for many contracting organisations to contract freelancers and/or temporary workers instead of permanent employees. The pressure to obtain work and sufficient earnings thus falls on the shoulders of the individual, who hops

from project to project and is continuously engaged in securing new projects (McGuigan, 2010; Pettica Harris et al., 2015). In the practice of the creative sector this means that finding work, rather than finding well-paid work, is the main priority, although this is not to say that project-based work is necessarily poorly remunerated (Thompson et al., 2016).

In addition, the creative labour market is very much a portfolio labour market, in which building up a good portfolio – signalled by the inclusion of interesting and high-status projects and clients – is key for gaining status as a creative worker and increasing the chances for future work. Again, it is argued that this encourages creative workers to accept lower earnings just to secure work on a project that will look good in their portfolio. This is especially true under the conditions of an oversupply of labour characteristic of many creative industries (Bulut, 2015; Murdock, 2003; Pettica Harris et al, 2015). Building up a portfolio is the most difficult for new entrants in the labour market, who, for lack of an established reputation and network, are even more pressed to accept very limited or no earnings to get their first jobs (e.g. Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013).

In these ways, the creative labour market pushes workers to become ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ (Foucault 2010; see also Neff, 2012 specifically for the creative industries), constantly positioning themselves as miniature companies in a market competing with other such miniature companies. They continuously invest in their human capital by keeping their knowledge up to date, learning new skills and expanding their networks, and consider this to be their personal responsibility in order to remain marketable (Hennekam & Bennett, 2017; Eikhof & Warhurst, 2013). But where Foucault (2010) saw ‘entrepreneurs of the self’ competing for the maximisation of monetary rewards, creative workers are all too often competing to get jobs at all, preferably on the ‘coolest’ projects, disregarding to an important extent the aspect of earnings.

2.3 Collective organisation

Traditionally, an important mechanism for workers to improve their earnings is to organise collectively in trade unions or comparable organisations, which can then negotiate collective agreements or represent workers’ interests in other ways. There is no inherent contradiction between creative work and trade unions, as demonstrated by, for example, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists and the Screen Actors Guild, both set up in the 1930s and still existing today (jointly under the name SAG-AFTRA). Further examples exist of trade unions for orchestra musicians, architects, and others, as well as trade unions specifically targeting creative workers and organising them along lines of shared interests

through measures of individual service provision. To a certain degree, they have also been found to be successful (Greer, Samaluk & Umney, 2018).

Despite these examples, however, creative workers are often described as being less likely to organise collectively (McRobbie, 2009; Umney & La Palme, 2017). A number of explanations prevail. First of all, workers who evaluate their work first of all in terms of creativity and autonomy may be less likely to join trade unions because these are associated with more ‘traditional’ aspects of job quality such as earnings. Also, workers in the creative industries tend to have fluid careers in terms of employment status, switching between employee, freelancer, and starting companies, often even combining different statuses at the same time (Hennekam & Bennett, 2017). This may make it more difficult for them to identify with unions. Moreover, a labour market full of entrepreneurs of the self would seem to be thoroughly individualised, with little space for collective organisation based on solidarity, a core value for trade unions. It remains an empirical question however to what extent this is indeed the case, considering the above-mentioned examples of successful collective organisation in the creative industries.

3. Data and methodology

In an effort to answer the questions raised in the previous two sections, we exploratively studied the attitudes, preferences and practices concerning earnings in the creative industries in the Netherlands, a country where the weight of the creative industry is increasing rapidly and where the government is actively promoting its growth. Within the creative industries we limited ourselves to the private, non-subsidised segment, excluding the subsidised segment where we expect questions related to earnings to be affected by the role played by public money.

From the very diverse private, non-subsidised creative industries we chose two subsectors: the games industry and the graphic design industry. Trade unions are hardly present in these sectors and neither sector has a collective agreement, contrary to the Dutch economy in general in which some 80% of employees are covered by collective agreements (De Beer & Keune, 2017). The two sectors differ from each other, however, on several potentially important dimensions. To begin with the games industry, it is a young industry both in terms of its existence and in terms of the age of its workers. Also, most workers in the games industry are employees: about five per cent are freelancers (Dutch Game Garden,

2018). The industry is characterised by an oversupply of labour, as the number of graduates from games-related educational programmes far exceeds the number of available positions (Koops, 2016). Finally, the games industry completely lacks any kind of collective setting of wages or reference point for freelancer fees.

The graphic design industry is a much older industry with a more balanced age structure. It underwent radical changes as digital media replaced a major share of printed media in the last few decades, and the design work changed accordingly. This not only meant a change in the nature of the work, but also in the place of work. Where workers generally used to be employed by large printing companies, nowadays 23 percent of the workers in the sector are freelancers, and most of the other workers work for independent design studios employing only nine people on average (BNO, 2017). In terms of collective interest representation this means that where workers were previously covered by the collective agreement of the printing companies, today they are not covered by any. Nevertheless, the organisation for professionals in the graphic design industry, the BNO, provides guidelines on working conditions including salary scales, which can be applied on a voluntary basis.

For this study, semi-structured interviews were held with employers, employees and freelance workers in the two sectors (Table 1). Interviewees were found through the internet, personal contacts and snowball sampling. In addition, semi-structured interviews were held with leading figures in national and local institutions representing or affecting these industries, i.e. professional organisations, trade unions, employers' organisations, the ministry of economic affairs, and municipalities. The interviews lasted between 40 and 95 minutes, were recorded with consent and later transcribed *ad verbum*.

The interviews were analysed using MaxQDA. First, a broad coding structure was set up outlining the main categories of interest. Next, given the exploratory nature of the study, open coding was applied to allow topics to emerge from the data. After coding the first three interviews, the coding was discussed with the team of researchers and adjusted according to the issues emerging. Following this first round of coding, all codes were checked internally to ensure consistency. Then a phase of axial coding was entered, structuring and determining the codes given in the open coding phase and combining the codes into groups that each formed a different explanation for low(er) earnings (see appendix for a complete overview of categories, codes and sub-codes). We compared the graphic design industry and the games industry using the 'code frequencies' of the code tree for the two sectors, which allowed for the differences and similarities between the two sectors to show up clearly.

Table 1 – Number of interviews

	Overall creative industries	Graphic design	Games
National level	10	–	–
Local level	5	–	–
Workers' level:			
• <i>Employers</i>	–	4	6
• <i>Freelance</i>	–	5	4
• <i>Employees</i>	–	3	3

4. Results

4.1 Earnings

The literature gives the impression that work in the creative industries provides very low earnings, with the exception of the lucky few. However, the experiences of the interviewees in the two subsectors actually showed much more variation, and earnings are not generally experienced as very poor. The average hourly rates and yearly incomes published by BNO, the professional organisation in the graphic design industry, indeed exceed the modal income of the average person in the Netherlands (BNO, 2019).² Although comparable figures are not available for the games industry, the levels of earnings described by our interviewees show quite some variation, with some reporting very low levels but other reporting rather decent figures. Nevertheless, earnings do appear to be lower than what one would earn in a different (non-creative) industry doing the same kind of work: programmers in the games industry for example claim that they earn some 30% less than they would make in the IT sector.

That being said, a few particularly vulnerable groups of workers can be found in both industries: beginning entrepreneurs partnering with others to form their own company, with or without employees (indie game developers frequently opt for this model in the games industry, but it is adopted by others in both industries as well), and freelance workers, particularly starting freelancers. In terms of numbers these groups are quite central to the make-up of the industries, as many workers start a company at some point in their career, and freelance work is high and on the rise in graphic design (BNO, 2017)³. The earnings of

² The 2019 yearly report of BNO gives average hourly rates for 2017 of between 75 and 100 Euro for different types of self-employed and of between 85 and 125 Euro for persons working at design companies. At the same time, it shows that on average only 55% of the hours worked are indeed invoiced, pointing to substantial unpaid work in the sector.

³ The earnings level of interns is also notoriously low. This is also true however for interns in other sectors of the economy and not commonly problematised. It remains an open question whether internships in the creative industries extend beyond the education and training period, in other words, whether beginning workers aren't regularly employed as interns. Indications pointing in this direction were found in the interviews, as interviewees described how companies often make use of interns to keep the costs low and make ends meet. This would mean a third

employees and more established entrepreneurs were described as better, although often still believed to be lower than what could be earned in comparable jobs outside the creative sector.

A direct consequence of low earnings for freelancers and entrepreneurs in both sectors is that most of them neither have an unemployment or disability insurance in place, nor do they save up for retirement. Employees, on the other hand, are automatically covered by unemployment and disability insurance as regulated by law. Most freelancers however indicate that paying for private social security insurance is too expensive, and that investing in their business takes priority. Nonetheless, they did not indicate to feel particularly vulnerable. They often relied on their social network, a partner or parents to fall back on, or regarded the basic level of social assistance in the Netherlands to be enough.

4.2 Understanding low(er) earnings

Analysis of the interviews produced several explanations for the relatively low earnings in the sectors. In the table below the differences between the sectors are highlighted by indicating whether an explanation was found in both sectors or only one of them (Table 2). We will now turn to discussing the explanations one by one. Differences found between the two sectors will be explored under the respective thematic headings.

Table 2: Understanding lower earnings in the graphic design and games industries

	Graphic design	Games
Worker characteristics		
1. Valuing other work dimensions over earnings:		
a) Willingness to accept lower earnings for the sake of fun, creativity and doing what you love	X	X
b) Willingness to accept lower earnings to work on a cool project or at a certain company	X	X
c) Choice for a less profitable business model for the sake of autonomy and/or developing games that may become a success later ('hit')		X
2. Lacking true entrepreneurial spirit and skills	X	X
Labour market conditions		
3. Customer demands		
d) High pressure on costs resulting in low fees and a practice of free pitching	X	
e) Free apps		X
f) Insecurity about what will be a success		X
4. Oversupply of labour and portfolio labour market	X	X

vulnerable group could be added. However, more research is needed to see whether this is the case.

Motivation to organise collectively		
5. Little interest in collective organisation	X	X
6. Culture of the ‘true creative worker’	X	X

Worker characteristic: placing other work dimensions over earnings

By far the majority of the interviewees indicated that they are willing to earn less than they could elsewhere just for the sake of working in the sector. They also stated that they attach more value to aspects of work other than earnings, such as fun, creativity and ‘doing what you love’ (‘a’ in table 2). Many of the workers furthermore stated that they had high intrinsic motivation for doing their particular kind of work, emphasising how that they had aspired to do this work from a young age. They felt a sense of belonging to the sector and considered it an important part of their self-identity.

Employers in the sector also described how they do not attempt to attract workers by promising high earnings, but rather by offering them an attractive place to work in terms of atmosphere and content. According to the interviewed employers, this is what binds these employees to the organisation. As one graphic employee stated:

I would have liked to earn more, but I guess everyone would like to. No, for me it is more important that I like my job.

Graphic 8, employee

Not only did workers indicate a preparedness to earn less than in other sectors, they also showed a willingness to forego immediate earnings for the sake of working on particularly ‘cool projects’ or at particular companies (‘b’ in table 2). Employees described how they accepted lower salaries in order to get into A-rated companies, the ones with the large, cool, cutting-edge projects that look good in your portfolio, but also into companies with socially relevant projects workers felt sympathy for. Similar mechanisms were at work for entrepreneurs and freelance workers. They strived to be part of the coolest projects, even to the detriment of earnings, and also regularly accepted jobs for reduced fees from companies with social goals in order to contribute to society, but also because they frequently offer creatively challenging jobs. As an employer in the graphic design industry mentioned:

We try to work according to the principle that we only accept clients that are willing to pay a certain budget or for clients that do not have much money but whom we believe to be a nice organisation or a nice project.

Graphic 2, employer

Particularly in the games industry, business owners and indie game developers deliberately opted for less profitable (in the short run) business models for the sake of more autonomy to develop their own projects without having to make concessions (see ‘c’ in table

2). For example, indie game developers professed that the freedom to do “their own thing” made up for poor earnings, sometimes even below the statutory minimum-wage level. A business owner of a larger company also favoured a business model that allowed them to maintain maximum autonomy in shaping both the direction of the company and the games they develop, rather than going for a larger earning potential. The desire for this kind of autonomy appears to be widespread among workers in the games industry, as it is common for employees and freelancers who work for hire to have their own “indie” projects besides their jobs or assignments, dedicating one day a week or their weekends and evenings to it. At the same time, they all share the hope that, although they are aware that chances are slim, they will one day develop a very successful game, a ‘hit’, that will bring in loads of money. The dream to make a living off of your own project is illustrated by this quote from a freelance worker in the games industry:

I have the freedom to work on my own projects. That is very important. It is my goal. To be able to develop my own projects in the end and to make those generate money. To live from my own projects, to realize my dreams. That is very enjoyable.

Games 5, freelance worker

This desire for autonomy and the dreaming of a hit were less apparent in the graphic design industry where work on independent products is much less common.

Worker characteristics: lacking true entrepreneurial spirit and skills

The interviews showed that low financial returns are not only the result of worker preferences. Another important cause is a lack of business skills and entrepreneurial attitudes among freelance workers and entrepreneurs in the sector. Even if they are often motivated and very good at the creative work they do, they find it difficult to run their own business or to effectively sell their product. The interviewees stated that this is caused by a lack of interest in the business side of things and a lack of talent for sales, but is also the result of educational programmes not paying sufficient attention to business skills. A representative of the creative industries at the national level describes the situation as follows:

They are really, highly intrinsically motivated, so they can't think of anything else than making games. They love doing that, and in that journey where they want to build beautiful games, they really forget about business, and some of them even hate to do it.

National 5

Labour market conditions: customer demands

In the graphic design industry, increasingly assertive client demands have made it increasingly difficult for workers to earn a decent income. The clients frequently put pressure

on the price, which interviewees blame on a lack of awareness of the real added value of their work, especially since digital packages such as Photoshop give non-professionals the possibility to create their own designs. All too often designers give in to this pressure, both because they prefer working cheaply over not working at all and because of a lack of business skills. Another problematic practice described by interviewees is ‘free pitching,’ where clients invite several companies and/or freelance workers to ‘pitch’ for an assignment, but only pay the party who wins the assignment. This results in a lot of unpaid work for graphic designers preparing the pitches (see also footnote 2). As a graphic design employer explained:

Our work is not always valued by the customer. This also has to do with the practices in our sector to agree to work for very low budgets or to participate in free pitching. [...] Customers often think “we are a very cool company, so we can pay the creative less”. And often the creatives agree to this. I think this is a disadvantage of working in the sector, the free pitching etc. But we also let it happen to ourselves. Customers with a small budget nevertheless inviting six different companies to develop a proposal. I think this is ridiculous.

Graphic 2, employer

In the games industry, interviewees observed that customers do not expect and do not wish to pay for the games they play on their mobile devices, the fastest-growing section of the games industry, where mainly the indie companies are active. Ways to earn money through such games is either by offering paid add-ons or through advertisements. However, allowing advertisements in your game is often considered “not done” among indie game developers, which leaves them fewer options to earn money, as described by one freelance worker:

For indie developers, it is a taboo. Advertisements? You wouldn’t think about having advertisements in your game, surely? It is a moral issue. And having app purchases to increase the content of the game, it is like the devil for some. That makes it really hard.

Games 5, freelance worker

About the only other way of earning money as an indie game developer is to produce a game that becomes a huge success. This is an infrequent occurrence however, meaning that many workers put in a lot of effort to produce games of which most will never yield much in terms of earnings.

Labour market conditions: an oversupply of labour and portfolio labour market

The interviewed workers indicate that structural characteristics of the labour markets in the games and graphic design industries also contribute to poorer earnings and working conditions. Both industries know an oversupply of labour in the Netherlands, albeit for

different reasons: the graphic design industry has suffered a severe reduction of available jobs due to the economic crisis, whereas the games industry has an oversupply of graduates with games-related degrees. Under such conditions, starting your own company becomes a common way of entering the sector, either as a freelance worker (graphic design) or an indie game developer. Unsurprisingly in a context of many start-ups, the entrepreneurial risk associated with starting your own company contributes crucially to lower earnings. Even though the risk itself is not specific to the sector, the scale at which workers take this risk just to have a chance to work in the sector does seem to play a role.

The oversupply of labour in both sectors furthermore affects the bargaining position of those who have managed to find a position as an employee. After all, employers do not have to offer high salaries to attract good employees. The employees interviewed in the games industry for example indicate that they tend not to actively bargain about their salary with future employers but just accept their offer, the reasons being that money is not their prime motivation and that they feel lucky enough to have found a job in the industry in the first place. This is not equally true for all positions however. According to the interviewees, programmers in the games industry generally have little difficulty in finding a position, and have a good bargaining position because of the scarcity of their skills.

A labour market with an oversupply of labour makes it even more important for workers to distinguish themselves from competitors in order to secure positions and freelance jobs. In both industries the portfolio is an important means to this end. This is yet another reason why employees often do not bargain about their salary but just accept the offer: being able to add the work experience or the name of a certain company to their portfolio is valuable for their long-term career prospects, and more important to them than what they might earn in the short run.

Motivation to organise collectively

Very few of the interviewees indicate any motivation for or interest in organising collectively. Many have never even considered it. To many workers, making their career a success has top priority. This is considered an individual responsibility, and workers perceive no benefit in collective organisation. However, they do consider the expansion of the respective sectors as a collective goal that will serve their individual needs. In this context they do see a role for the professional organisations which are active in the sub-sectors, as a graphic design employer states:

It would be good if they would do some missionary work. That they would show to business the strength of our sector and what we can contribute. Then maybe they get the idea to hire a local company.

Graphic 2, employer

Very few of the workers mention social security or a better bargaining position for wage or fee negotiations as interests potentially defended by collective organisations. The trade unions in the sector blame workers' lack of interest in these 'traditional' working conditions for their difficulties in organising the graphic design and games industries. According to them, individual creativity is prioritised by these workers, which is not conducive to great working conditions or realising a decent income, as voiced by a trade union representative:

It is more essential to produce work, to develop a game or to make animations, to draw, than to earn money. And that's the tricky part. It makes our position relatively weak because there tends to be low interest in organising, but also, well, people tend to take the job anyway.

Representative of a trade union

Culture of the 'true creative worker'

During the interviews it became clear that workers in the creative industry saw the willingness to earn less as a sign of being a 'true creative worker'. It was seen as an asset of those working in these industries. Employers made active use of this image of the true creative: it was mentioned by some of the employers as a strategy to select the sincerely intrinsically motivated people. On the contrary, wanting a higher salary signalled to these employers that the worker does not possess the qualities they desire in an employee: they perceived them as not sufficiently motivated and having a too relaxed attitude towards the work. As illustrated by this games employer:

I felt guilty at first that everyone had to take a step back, but at the same time it was convenient, because I want the intrinsically motivated people who really, really want to do something for our target groups. It became a kind of test or check to see whether someone is willing to give up earnings by choosing this job.

Games 1, employer

Discussion and conclusion

In this study we set out to understand whether and why earnings in the creative industries are (relatively) low. First of all, we established that workers do not perceive the overall level of earnings in their sectors to be particularly low, and this is indeed often true in absolute terms. However, it is true in relative terms, as workers in comparable jobs in other sectors tend to earn more. Moreover, we identified several particularly vulnerable groups generally

confronted with very low earnings that may be even below the level of the minimum wage: freelancers and beginning entrepreneurs (as mentioned, there are indications that interns are also particularly vulnerable, but more research is required on this group). These findings show, in line with Thompson et al. (2016), that the dominant view in the literature that earnings in the creative industries are uniformly low needs to be more nuanced, both distinguishing between relative and absolute levels of earnings, and between better and worse-off groups within the sector.

At the same time, we did find that it is common for workers in the sector to make compromises concerning their earnings, although some compromise more than others. We show that this can be understood as the result of a combination of three factors: personal preferences, labour market conditions, and a lack of collective organisation. We moreover found that these factors reinforce each other and therefore should not be considered in isolation. For example, considering together creative workers' great passion for their profession with the oversupply of labour in their specific labour market helps to understand why so many workers start their own business, even if they lack a specific desire to run a business as well as the skills to do so effectively, and are aware of the chances of low earnings. The centrality of entrepreneurship, in turn, reduces the likelihood that workers will organise collectively (cf Neff, 2012), while the lack of collective organisation results in a weaker bargaining position for workers when negotiating about earnings.

This study furthermore unearthed a fourth explanation for lower earnings in the sector that had not been included in our original research design: a behavioural norm regarding the 'true creative worker'. We found in our interviews a notion of the 'true creative worker' as one willing to forego earnings for the pleasure of the work. This is illustrated for example by employers describing how they use the willingness to earn less as an indicator for the selection of good employees. More research is needed to better understand the extent to which such a norm exists and what it means for earnings, and possibly for entrepreneurial success.

There are many similarities between the graphic design industry and the games industry when it comes to understanding the prevalence of lower absolute and relative earnings. Nevertheless, there are some important differences. Firstly, whereas customer demands make it difficult to earn money in both sectors, the nature of the problematic demands differ. Secondly, and most noticeably, we found a stronger desire in the games industry for autonomy and for being able 'to do your own thing'. Business owners in this industry consciously choose for less profitable business models because it provides greater

autonomy and allows them to work on their own games. For the same reason employees often develop their own side-projects beside their jobs. An important driver behind these projects is the hope that their own game will become a ‘hit’, which in the meantime leads to the investment of great efforts for very insecure returns. We did not find this mechanism to play a role in the graphic design industry, possibly because of the different nature of the products: games are commercialised and may (or may not) generate profits, while graphic design products are mainly produced on demand for specific clients. The context of individual projects in the games industry puts additional emphasis on individual responsibility for success. This makes collective interest organisation even more unlikely, an additional explanation (besides the age of the sector and its employees) for the lack of any collective regulation of earnings, where the graphic design industry does have a voluntary guideline for the level of salaries.

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Appendix

Worker characteristics

1. Valuing other work dimensions over earnings:
 - a) **Willingness to accept lower earnings for the sake of fun, creativity and doing what you love**
 - Earning money less important
 - Not much needed
 - Creativity centered
 - Intrinsic motivation
 - Passion
 - Informal and good atmosphere
 - b) **Willingness to accept lower earnings to work on a cool project or at a certain company**
 - Strong pull factor/sexy
 - Charity projects/societal relevance
 - c) **Choice for a less prosperous business model for the sake of autonomy and/or developing games that may become a success later ('hit')**
 - Self-realization important
 - Autonomy valued
 - Provides freedom and flexibility
2. Lacking true entrepreneurial spirit and skills
 - Lousy business models
 - Not professional
 - No mindset for earning money
 - Difficult to sell/earn money/ lacking entrepreneurial skills
 - Difficult outside representation

Labour market conditions

3. Customer demands
 - d) **Low costs resulting in low fees and a practice of free pitching**
 - Difficult to ask high fees
 - We agree to work for low tariffs easily
 - Practice of free pitching
 - e) **Free apps**
 - Indie culture
 - f) **Insecure what will be a success**
 - Hit driven
4. Oversupply of labour and portfolio labour market
 - Solo-self-employed not a free choice
 - Good portfolio needed
 - Competitive

Motivation to organise at a collective level

5. Little interest in collective organisation
 - Do not want to be organised
 - Never considered/thought about it
 - (No) need for a C.A.
 - Important to have a voice as a sector
6. Culture of the 'true creative worker'
 - Selection of employees based on willingness to forego earnings