Abstract: In recent years the concept of performance (in the sense of effort) has come under criticism in Danish societal debates due to its dubious relation to increasingly widespread illnesses such as depression and stress. While acknowledging these potentially harmful consequences, we argue in this article that performance in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, yet it needs to unfold within a particular temporal logic in order to be both possible and not lead to stress. Based on empirical material from a professional handball club and an international software company, we show how immersion in the present moment and the immediate future enhances abilities to perform, and how anthropological studies of time open up for new ways of understanding high performance.

Keywords: performance, temporality, future, immersion, sports, business

'I just woke up in the middle of the night thinking about it.'

This is how Martin, a software developer from the Danish IT company Systematic, describes how he got the idea of thinking about and visualising his and his team members’ everyday work lives through the image of a medieval fortress. The heart of the fortress, ‘the keep’, he explains, is protected by an inner wall and an outer wall. Depending on their current tasks, the individual team members are all placed somewhere inside this fortress. And on the other side of the walls, enemies are circling.

Kasper is undertaking fieldwork at Systematic, and Martin shows him an illustration of their fortress, describes the different stages in which the team can find themselves, such as ‘under siege’ or ‘outer wall breached’, and furthermore what they all need to do in each state. If enemies are attacking, that is if a ‘system test’ finds any bugs (flaws) in the software, he explains, you can just yell ‘man the outer walls’, and then everyone knows what to do. When Kasper asked Martin why he had come up with that particular image, he laughed and said that he had just seen a documentary about medieval fortresses and thought it would be cool to visualise their work process through that. The team starts each new week by placing all team members in the fortress according to their current tasks. The software developers with the most urgent tasks are placed in the ‘keep’ alongside the project leader, or ‘commander’ of the castle as he is now also called. The rest of the team makes sure that enemies (defects, bugs and new assignments) are ‘killed off’ before they reach the developers in the keep. As Martin notes, ‘if the keep is breached, we are in big, big trouble’. We will return to Martin, his commander and their fortress later. First, however, we want to pause for a
moment to ponder the questions that guide this article. Namely, why does a software developer wake up in the middle of the night with the urge to ‘build’ a fortress around himself and his co-workers? And how may temporal logics of professional handball and theories of the near and immediate future help answer this?

The following draws on empirical data from an anthropological PhD project that compares workplace practices and high performance in the software company Systematic and the professional handball club, Bjerringbro-Silkeborg Handball (BSH). The aim of this comparison is to explore how two successful (and very different) team-based organisations practice leadership and teamwork in order to shed light on how stimulating performance environments can be developed, maintained and led (for a more detailed introduction to the comparison, see Helligsøe and Vangkilde 2021). In the present article we focus specifically on a temporal logic that supports the ability to perform, namely a principle of what the coach in the handball club refers to as ‘keeping the snout in the plough furrow’, or what might also be termed being able to focus on the immediate future. Aside from being a general saying in Danish, the principle of the snout in the plough furrow stems from a condition that the coach seeks to create for the handball players, which we will return to shortly.

Drawing on anthropological theory on temporality and the future, we use this empirical material from the handball court to discuss how the logic of the immediate future may fruitfully be applied in business environments otherwise focused on long-term strategies, flexibility and agility (Sharma 2014). We argue that this not only helps us understand why an IT developer has sleepless nights but also contributes to recent debates in Denmark that problematise the call to perform in multiple arenas of life (see Katznelson and Louw 2018; Petersen 2016; Petersen and Krogh 2021). This is so because the empirical cases we present unfold what in the Danish context has come to be known as performance society (præstationssamfundet): an umbrella term coined by the sociologist Anders Petersen (2016) to depict a society in which individuals are continually expected to perform and excel on all levels of their lives, while being mindful of multiple futures at once. You have to achieve at work, in school, at home, socially and physically, and everything you do needs to lead somewhere: good performance at high school will lead to admission into a good university, at university will lead to a good job and at work will lead to a promotion or a raise. Rightly so, this perception of performance has sparked discussions about the negative effects of trying to perform, not least as signs of stress and burnout have increased among high-school students and adult workers alike (Jezek et al 2020: 25). In her study of Danish university students, Lea Trier Krøll has shown how non-medical use of prescription pharmaceuticals has become a way to cope with experiences of stress, particularly the sense of urgency that may erupt when having to perform well enough to achieve good exam results (Krøll 2018). In other recent literature, the pressure to perform has been directly linked with ‘depression’ (Petersen 2016) and ‘stress’ (Nielsen and Lagermann 2017), which unsurprisingly has given ‘performance’ quite a negative ring to it. Our aim in this article is not to call into question the negative effects of societal pressures to perform but, rather, to argue that performance in itself is not necessarily a bad thing. To perform in the sense of trying to make an effort, achieve something, do well in school or in one’s job, is hardly adverse in itself. The condition of stress is widely understood to be
caused by an overwhelming experience of imbalance between one’s resources and the demands of one’s surroundings, and not by the sheer practice of trying to do things well (Jezek et al 2020: 25). As such, the problem may well reside in the fact that while the pressure to perform or achieve results is increasing, the spaces for performances are diminishing. Said differently, rather than throwing performance as such out with the bath water it may be worth considering what the context of performance should look like if it is to be possible.

Following Isabel Lafuente and Wilson Prata’s call to look at ‘processes of slowing down not as a delay in happening but as a way of intensifying and enriching the present’ (2019: 249) and drawing on studies of focus and presentism (Day et al 1999; Wig and Naguib 2021), we argue in what follows for a rethinking of the common perceptions of achievement in business environments. As we will show, in order to be both possible and not lead to stress, performance needs to unfold within a particular temporal logic. This is a matter of being able and allowed to be absorbed by the present and the task at hand. Performance in this configuration is not a matter of crammed calendars, endless meetings, long-term planning, agility or flexibility; rather, it is a question of being able to keep the snout in the plough furrow. And we argue that it is the lack of being able to do so that makes an IT developer wish to build a fortress around himself and his team.

The Handball Club and the Plough Furrow

Bjerringbro-Silkeborg (BSH) got off to a terrible start in their game against the German club Melsungen in the group stage of the EHF (European Handball Federation) Cup. The Danish home side couldn’t match the attacking strength of the German visitors, who strolled through their defence in the opening stages. Luckily BSH’s attack was on a par with their opposition’s, which enabled them to limit Melsungen’s lead to 16–19 at half-time.

Kasper was watching the match from the stands along with his father. Since childhood, the two have been cheering, shouting, assessing and analysing handball matches from the stands. Today, at half-time, there was an unmistakable sense of unease in the crowd. BSH seemed overmatched on the day and defeat loomed on the horizon. However, within the first ten minutes of the second half (which BSH won 7–2), the home side managed to turn looming defeat into convincing victory. After this explosive start to the second half, BSH never looked like they would lose, and eventually won the game 35–31. After the match, Peter Bredsdorff-Larsen, head coach of BSH and one of Kasper’s key interlocutors, told the local newspaper that this victory was one of the club’s greatest ever achievements on the European scene.

Unsurprisingly, spirits were high at the club’s training ground the following day. Kasper approached Peter with a big smile on his face, ‘You were so good against Melsungen yesterday! I wish I could have been there during the break. Something happened.’ Peter returned his smile, albeit in a kindly, teasing fashion. Intentionally bewildered, he replied, ‘What happened?’ Kasper continued, ‘Well . . . There was just a really big difference between the first and second half’, Kasper continued. Apparently intent on proving a point, Peter asked again, ‘What was the difference?’ As Kasper hes-
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imated, Peter continued in a less challenging tone of voice, ‘It’s just that you’ve joined
the choir of many others who say that there was a difference between the first and
second half. So, I just thought it would be fun to hear about it.’ He continued, with a
gleam in his eye: ‘Everyone makes up their mind by looking at the scoreboard, right?’
Kasper replied, ‘Sure! But didn’t you change anything in the break?’ Peter answered
in a more serious tone of voice, ‘The point is that actually, we didn’t.’ Surprised by his
answer, Kasper asked him to elaborate:

P: What we did really well was the evaluation of the first half. They scored 19 goals, but
we actually thought there were some elements in our 6–0 (a particular style of defence)
that worked so well that, at some point, we would start getting the margins on our side.
So that’s really what it’s all about. [...] So no, it was actually a good example that if you
stay in the plough furrow, then the margins will eventually be on our side.
K: Interesting.
P: Yes, and then our goalkeepers chipped in with a couple of saves too [in the second
half]. And when you look at the quality of the shots, there were some of the goals they
definitely should have saved in the first half as well. [...] So we just had to wait in order
to get that probability on our side. It is actually a really good example of that. Because
the goalkeepers . . . We actually talked to Stefan [the goalkeeper] during the break and
he agreed that we were very close. And it’s very important to hear that because then we
just have to keep going.
K: Yes, because then it will turn.
P: Then it turns! [...] And it’s my job to stay calm and composed. . .

The conversation is interrupted by Lars, the assistant coach, who joins them at the
small judges’ table in the handball court with a cup of coff ee in his hand. Peter includes
him in the conversation:

That’s what I’m talking to Kasper about. He has his layman’s considerations about the
match yesterday, and that’s fine, but they fit fairly well with the spectators’ views because
he tells me, ‘It was a transformation’. I mean, between the first and second half. I’m try-
ing to explain to him, and hopefully you can back me up here [addressed to Lars], that
in fact, there was no transformation. It’s business as usual. It’s the snout in the plough
furrow. It’s an ‘OK’ from the goalkeeper that this cannot keep going well for Melsungen
[the opposition]. That is an important point! Don’t you agree with that, Lars?

The conversation continues and they talk about how Peter, Lars and the players can-
not afford to be influenced by emotions from the crowd or reports in the media when
assessing their tactical options during a match.

Along with spectators and commentators, what Peter calls ‘the choir of many oth-
ers’, Kasper was certain that Peter had changed something during the break to ensure
the team would perform much better in the second half. With his questions, Peter
made Kasper realise that his assessment of the match as a spectator had made the mis-
take of focusing on the scoreboard instead of the performance on the court. According
to Peter, the performance was on an upward slope at the end of the first half, but factors
such as probability and sloppy goalkeeping meant that the result did not immediately
follow the performance. This conversation tapped into a recurring theme in Peter and
Kasper’s many talks about the importance of focusing on the performance rather than
the results, as the results can sometimes be misleading. As Peter explained to Kasper in one of their initial conversations, ‘We can play a brilliant game and end up losing or play a horrible game and end up winning. The performance is what you have to try to control, and, if that’s good enough, the result will eventually follow.’ In other words, in order to win handball matches, you need to focus on the tasks at hand and how to deal with them in the best possible way. As Peter and Lars relayed to Kasper in the conversation above, you have to ignore the scoreboard, the league table, the media, the referee, the shouts from the stands and simply focus on the game. You need to keep the snout in the plough furrow. Compare again with Lea Trier Krøll’s study of Danish university students, where it is exactly the focus on the result (of an exam) that causes experiences of stress and removes focus from the actual performance.

Register, Release, Refocus

A similar principle was evident in a conversation Kasper had with Jesper Nøddesbo, one of the players at BSH, during a very challenging (by the anthropologist’s standards) fitness session. Jesper invited Kasper to be his training partner for the day and, in between sit-ups and push-ups, they talked about the mental aspects of being part of professional high-performance environments. Jesper has played at international top level for club and country for the best part of his career, so to say that, as one of the most successful players in Danish handball history, he has a lot of experience playing for winning teams is almost a rude understatement. Though for now that will suffice.

I think what is important to me . . . is to create pockets where I can just be present in the moment. So, when I do fitness training like today, I try to just be in that. If I’m never present in the moment, because I’m thinking about the upcoming game, or thinking about the game I played last week, then I start feeling like a machine that is just going and going, and I’m unable to put any sense of meaning into what I do.

A few weeks later during an interview at Jesper’s house in Aarhus, Kasper picked up on their prior conversation at the gym. ‘So does it also affect your performance on the court, if you can’t be present in the moment?’ Jesper took his time and a sip of coffee before answering:

I think I can give you an example from my first season at the club. I had a cooperation agreement with Huawei, which meant that I had to go to the cinema with two of their clients and two of my fans. It was in Copenhagen, so straight after training I took the seaplane to Copenhagen, went to the cinema and flew back again. The following day we were playing Nordsjælland at home. The trip hadn’t done anything to my physical readiness, but just knowing that I had been away and knowing that my teammates knew, meant that I felt like I had to not only perform but overperform to prove that being in Copenhagen the day before didn’t have any impact on my performance. My wish to overperform ended up taking all of my focus away and became a sort of negative thought spiral. I played a horrible game. It wasn’t so much the physical aspect of travelling to Copenhagen and back, but it was the mental aspect of wanting to overperform that actually made me underperform.
After that experience, I have tried to apply a more mindful approach by having a greater acceptance of myself and the thoughts that are at stake. I’m using a 3R model. Register, release, refocus. That is, register that your thoughts are in a negative spiral that is moving you away from your tasks at hand, and when you register them, you release them. I use different release methods, one is to wipe your face in a towel and when you move your towel away from your face, you leave your thoughts in the towel. Another method is to focus on your breathing, zooming in on the now, and then you can release. And when you release your thoughts, or let them pass by, then you can kind of refocus and return to your tasks at hand, or wherever you know your focus needs to be in your performance. I think it has helped me a lot to think like this. In my everyday life outside of handball as well.

In this excerpt, Jesper talks about his need to keep distractions at a distance and focus on the present moment when he needs to perform at his best. In order to keep his thoughts from entering what he calls a ‘negative thought spiral’ that can harm his level of performance, he uses different techniques to be present in the moment, like leaving his thoughts in the towel or focusing on his breathing. In other words, he is shielding himself from thoughts and impressions that might distract him from focusing solely on solving his tasks at hand in the best possible way.

**Temporality and the Immediate Future**

With the metaphor of the plough furrow, Peter highlights two temporal aspects. First, that everything happening concurrently with the here-and-now should be kept out of focus; that is, other things that are happening on the side, and that might create a disturbance, have to be obliterated in order to allow players to be absorbed in what they are doing. Second, while the plough furrow obviously leads somewhere, what is most important is not the far future but the immediate future – that which is right in front of you. But exactly what kind of future is this? What distinguishes the far from the immediate?

Since Nancy Munn’s landmark article ‘The cultural anthropology of time’, in which she argues that the future had been mostly absent in anthropological studies of temporality (1992: 116), we have witnessed a virtual explosion of studies of futurity within the discipline. As recently noted by Rebecca Bryant and Daniel Knight, themes such as anticipation, expectation, speculation, potentiality and hope have become increasingly prominent (2019: 2, see also Zeitlyn 2020). The aspect of futurity we are interested in here is the very near or immediate future: an area that according to Jane Guyer has been evacuated both in the public domain and within theory (2007: 409), and one that according to Travis Jones et al may be experienced as a realm of ‘tasks that must be completed’ and thus ‘less enthusiastic and less tinged with optimism’ (2019: 153, 166).

Classic studies on temporality have often seen the immediate future as a place where disadvantaged individuals or groups may be trapped, or where strategies become difficult (e.g. Bourdieu 2000; De Certeau 1988). Yet, as more recent studies have shown, this is not always the case. The immediate future may also be both a place of freedom and a place where the problem is not a lack of strategies or options, but an overload of these. In their introduction to the volume *Lilies of the Field* (1999),
Sophie Day, Evthymios Papataxiarchis and Michael Stewart argue that while living in the present with no regard for the future has often been read as a marginal condition of people who are stuck, this is not necessarily always the case. Rather, through their cross-cultural comparison of Aegean Greek peasants, London prostitutes and Hungarian Roma, among others, they convincingly show how these groups deliberately take up a seemingly anti-economic stance by living in the present in order to secure a greater sense of freedom. Groups such as these, they argue, do not adopt ‘notions of work, productivity and long-term planning’ but instead live for the moment with a ‘specific set of attitudes towards time, person, and community’ (1999: 1). In doing so, they transform the short term ‘into a transcendent escape from time itself, a quasi-ritual status outside durational time’ (1999: 2), and this enables them to invert a seemingly marginal position to one of autonomy.

While Day et al describe a being in the present that is communal in scale, it can also be found in even smaller scales. For instance, Ståle Wig and Nefissa Naguib (2021) have recently conducted a teaching experiment related to ‘deep reading’. With reference to Theodora Sutton’s (2020) work on digital detoxing, they depart from the fact that numerous people around the world increasingly have become accustomed to digital technologies and social media disturbing daily life in ways that have become harmful to our ability to focus. In their own small study, they began an undergraduate course in political anthropology by asking the students the simple question, ‘when was the last time you read a book without checking your phone’, which proved to be rare. As an experiment, they therefore created a simple set-up where they and the students sat together in a room and read without the possibility of being disturbed; that is, doing ‘deep reading’ that was ‘undistracted, sustained, tedious, meditative, and in the end, rewarding’ (Wig and Naguib 2021: np). Although some students described afterwards that they felt something similar to withdrawal symptoms by not having their phones at hand, they also managed to read more in one sitting than they ever had before, and some students even chose to continue the practice during other courses the following semester.

Similarly, during Kasper’s previous fieldwork among ultrarunners in the American Rocky Mountains in Boulder, Colorado, it became clear how the runners experienced the disappearance of the world around them while running, and that exactly this was key to their performance (Helligsøe 2018). One runner, Gregg, noted on an 888-km mountain race how:

> It was kind of nice, you know, usually you are worried about this and worried about that, but you know, the whole time I’m out here, I only have one thing to worry about. It’s not like, ‘oh I need to go do this errand and I need to have this work meeting’ or something like that. There’s none of that, it’s just, I got one thing to do. And so, it’s not stressful, right, whereas every day you’ve got things you’re doing and that’s kind of a stressful thing . . .

Comparing time as we do here, it should be noted, is not a matter of comparing minutes and hours, but of comparing particular experiences of time (Frederiksen and Dalsgaard 2014) – in this case, the experience of the immediate future. Hence, in terms of a thing such as resources, there are obvious differences between a handball club, an IT com-
pany, Greek peasants and Norwegian university students. But the point of comparison here is a particular texture of time, to paraphrase Michael Flaherty (2010). Hence, despite coming from diverse contexts, what the studies mentioned show is that the ability to be in the present, to be absorbed in a temporality, and focus on the immediate future can be highly productive or enhancing for the people and tasks involved. This resonates with widespread contemporary tendencies among a diverse group of people, including consultants, Buddhists, mindfulness coaches and psychologists all emphasising ‘the power of now’ (e.g. Tolle 2004), and is also evident in the empirical material from the handball court where the ability to keep the snout in the plough furrow and focus only on the immediately forthcoming, and not the long-term goals, is what can turn a match around. How, then, does this translate into a business environment?

**The Fortification of Immersion against Disturbances**

Time management in business environments has often been a matter of optimising workers. As Sarah Sharma has shown, this can be exemplified via the recent trend of introducing yoga in offices. Yet, as she argues, ‘yoga at the desk is an extension of a set of previously calculated, strategic initiatives used in offices for keeping workers at the desk all day. But the strategy does not revolve around a conception of time and space. Instead, the strategy works through recalibration’ (2014: 95). A good example of this is Amazon’s initiative ‘AmaZen’, a small box for warehouse workers to enter during breaks and practice mindfulness in order to avoid stress. It is, however, the ability to be absorbed during work, and not as a break from work, that seems to work.

In the opening paragraphs of this article, we heard about Martin, his commander and their fortress. We learned how, in this team, the software developers with the most urgent tasks were placed in the inner ‘keep’ of the fortress, with the rest of the team ready to defend them from any disturbances (or ‘enemies’) in the form of new assignments, defects and bugs. Also in the ‘keep’ is Morten, the commander, the project leader who is responsible for the team’s overall performance. He too likes the idea of thinking about their everyday work through the metaphor of a medieval fortress. As a manager, Morten explains, he is sometimes criticised for changing the team’s priorities and introducing new and unexpected assignments (something he occasionally has to do to accommodate the wishes of customers or his own manager in the grand organisational hierarchy). By starting each week with a short discussion of who is in the keep and who is defending the walls of the fortress, however, the individual team members know what to expect in terms of possible disturbances and changes in priorities for the coming week. That mental preparation, Morten explains, the fact that the developers who are defending the walls know that they are likely to be disturbed, is extremely important to the wellbeing of the individual team members. This goes for the developers inside the keep as well, Morten continues:

> Twice now, I have experienced that a developer has come to me and said, ‘I cannot make this task in time, if I get disturbed, I cannot make it’, and then I have been able to say, ‘don’t worry, you are in the keep with me. That means that the rest of the team is doing everything it can to protect you’. That has worked extremely well for us!
It is interesting to note that the team’s rhetoric, when speaking about the metaphor of the medieval fortress, is entirely defensive. They talk about *defending* the walls of their fortress and *protecting* the team members in the inner keep. This way of talking raises the question, the metaphor of the medieval fortress aside, of what it is that actually needs protecting.

According to Martin, the main reason why he thought of the idea of the fortress was that he and his colleagues experienced a lot of interruptions in their daily work, which made it difficult for them to focus on their main tasks of writing code and developing products. These interruptions often came in the form of defects, bugs, customer requests, questions from colleagues, updates to the manager and a range of different internal meetings. The experience of being disturbed and having a lot of ‘context shifts’ was widespread in the teams at Systematic in which Kasper conducted his fieldwork. Consider, for example, the following transcript from an internal meeting where a team of developers talked about the problem of having too many ‘context shifts’.

‘But we have already tried changing that!’ one of the older developers moaned. ‘Maybe we can do something individually?’ another team member suggested. No one answered. Then a third one said, ‘The problem is too many meetings. When you have seven meetings a day with half an hour in between, the day is gone, and you didn’t really do anything.’ The project leader tried to be constructive, ‘We could try to set up some rules. For example, that you only answer emails once a day?’ He looked around in the room. ‘Is that service minded?’, the older developer rhetorically asked while looking down at the table. Visibly annoyed, the project leader continued with his voice slightly raised, ‘But if we are being disturbed a lot and getting distracted, we need to do something about it!’ Pressed on time, the team had to move on with the agenda, and decided to have another internal meeting to discuss what to do to minimise context shifts.

The problem of interruptions and context shifts seems to be that it is difficult to get into a proper rhythm or ‘flow’, as several software developers termed the experience of being able to immerse themselves in their work. Perhaps then what really needs protecting in the developer teams at Systematic is the opportunity to be absorbed in one’s work. To stay in the warfare metaphor, several software developers at Systematic generally consider immersion to be under attack by disturbances. As an answer to this, Martin and his team built a fortress around the team members with the most urgent tasks. Not to avoid disturbances, as it is not in their power to do so, but to control them and make sure that they themselves decide who is disturbed and who is allowed to be absorbed by their tasks at hand.

**High Performance and the Immediate Future**

Going back to Jesper Nøddesbo and his thoughts on performing on the handball court, we are starting to see a pattern. Jesper told the story of how he flew to Copenhagen and back to go to the cinema the day before a match. His determination to prove that the trip had no effect on his performance on the court ended up taking away his focus, which, according to his own assessment, made him underperform. Following that experience, he became more aware of his need to be present in the moment when he
had to perform on the court. He took a more mindful approach and learned different
techniques to shield himself from thoughts and impressions that might distract him
from focusing on his performance on the court.

As mentioned above, this way of almost forcing oneself to be present in the
moment resembles the practices of the ultrarunners among whom Kasper conducted
fieldwork in Boulder, Colorado, back in 2015. What they sought, perhaps more than
anything else, was the deep immersion they gained from running long distances in the
mountains. Like Kyle, who became a close friend of Kasper, explained, ‘In your every-
day, you can distract yourself, but in long races you run out of distractions. Especially
during the night when you only have your headlamp and your thoughts’ (Helligsøe
2016: 50). Kyle and the other ultrarunners cherished the feeling of total absorption
they gained from running long distances. They saw it as a pleasant escape from their
everyday lives, which (as Greg said in the quote above) were often filled with errands
and obligations. To be fair, the world of errands, obligations and disturbances is what
many of us find ourselves in on a daily basis. This is true of handball players, software
developers and, according to Wig and Naguib (2021), numerous other people around
the world who are increasingly being disturbed by social media (see also Sutton 2020).
As mentioned, the students in their experiment on ‘deep reading’ even experienced
withdrawal symptoms when the disturbances, in the form of their phones, were taken
away from them. However, they also managed to read more in one sitting than they
ever had before.

This relationship between absence of disturbances and better performances that
Jesper Nøddesbo, his coaches Peter and Lars, and the students in Wig and Naguib’s
deep reading experiment experience is also evident among the software developers at
Systematic. One thing that several of them have in common is an experience that time
flies when they get to immerse themselves in the activity of writing code. In the words
of Esben, a developer in Morten and Martin’s team:

> When I’m writing code, I feel like time is just flying by. For instance, yesterday, I was
pretty much just writing code all day. I got in around 9 am and then all of a sudden it was
4:30 pm and I had to go home. That happens all the time when I code.

Martin gave a similar answer when simply asked whether he liked to write code:

> I love it. Time just flies by when you code. [...] It’s just really cool when you know
where you’re going, there isn’t too much clarification, there aren’t any meetings, and
you can just sit there and then all of a sudden four hours have gone by, and you’ve
managed to do so much work, right. Because you’re really I’m really efficient when
I get a chance to dive into it. [...] From when you hear about a ‘feature’ [small piece of
software] until you actually get to work in that feature. That can take years. Customers
have to sign off on it and stuff like that. It takes a long time to clarify. But then when
you’re sitting with a single ‘story’ [slightly bigger piece of software] and just have to. . .
Now you just have to make this page show something specific. You know what you need
to do, and you don’t have to ask anybody. You’ve clarified what has to be clarified. And
then you can just eat away at the code . . . (Martin is laughing as he finishes his sentence)

For Esben, Martin and several of their colleagues, writing code was experienced as an
enjoyable activity, whereas all the clarifications and disturbances around it were often
described as something one just had to do in order to finally be able to focus solely on the immediate future and ‘eat away at the code’. This obviously varied from developer to developer. Some liked all the processes and clarification, but most of the developers Kasper met just really liked to code.

However, as we have described above, pockets of immersion in the activity of writing code can be hard to create. Different kinds of disturbances and context shifts make it difficult to focus on the task at hand for an extended period of time. We argue that this is the reason why Martin, Esben, Morten and the rest of their team came up with a way to create a working milieu that allows some of the developers to solely focus on the immediate future and direct all of their attention to the activity of writing code in the present moment.

It is important to note though, that performance, in the sense of immersing oneself in the present moment and immediate future of that performance, is not restricted to the boundaries of the individual. Performance, we argue, is inherently social. At the handball club, this almost goes without saying. Though Jesper Nøddesbo and his teammates have individual ways of thinking about and mentally preparing for a match, it makes no sense to talk about the performance of an individual player in isolation. You cannot score a goal unless someone passes you the ball. Though sometimes overlooked, we argue that the same goes for software developers at Systematic, albeit to different degrees and in different ways. All developers work in teams and have regular social exchanges throughout the day. They take decisions together, organise their time together and help each other out in multiple ways. Whenever a developer has written a piece of code, someone else assesses it and ensures its quality, and as we have seen above, you need your team members to protect you from disturbances and allow for immersion in the performance. Though the practice of playing handball and writing code are both inherently social, the temporality and intensity of the activities differ. The former is often characterised by intense social and bodily involvement in a flow of rapid exchanges on the court, while the latter has less frequent, less intense, though equally important, social exchanges usually over longer stretches of time. Simply put, the immediate impressions you get from walking on to a handball court and into an office space are very different. However, inspired by Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold’s (2007) thoughts on the creation of ideas, we argue that there would be no performances (in handball, in software development or elsewhere) were it not for the multitude of people that in one way or another contribute to and enable them. Only when we look back in time do performances sometimes appear as the creations of single individuals (e.g. Dalsgaard and Frederiksen 2013).

Conclusion

In *The Principles of Psychology*, William James writes, ‘Millions of items . . . are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no interest for me. My experience is what I agree to attend to’ (1981 [1890]: 380). Though few today would argue that we exclusively experience what we agree to attend
to, James’ notion is illuminating nonetheless as it highlights the self-determination that is a part of shaping our experience. Such self-determination is exercised by Jesper Nøddesbo when he forces his attention into the present moment and by the ultrarunners when they exhaust themselves to the point where they cannot focus on anything but the present moment and the immediate future. It is also displayed by Martin and his team when they create a working milieu that allows selected developers to be completely immersed in the activity of writing code. It is worth noting, however, that a key feature in studies of people who manage to inhabit and immerse themselves in the immediate future, such as the earlier mentioned study of marginal groups by Day, Papataxiarchis and Stewart, as well as Wig and Neguib’s reading experiment with Norwegian students, is that it is done with others. There is certainly self-determinacy, but there is also an aspect of solidarity that both runs through these studies and our own empirical material. While the question of solidarity is inherent to being on a handball team, it is something the software developers themselves try to work on by building walls around themselves as a group.

With the examples of what one might call time work (Flaherty et al 2020) presented in this article, we hope to have shown how handball players and software developers identify immersion in the present moment and the immediate future as a particular type of temporal experience that enhances their performances on the court or in front of the monitor writing code. Following Peter Bredsドルフ-Larsen, we have termed this experience of time ‘keeping the snout in the plough furrow’. With this metaphor, we have highlighted the temporal logic of high performance among handball players and software developers which seems to be that everything happening concurrently with the here-and-now of the task at hand should be kept out of focus, and attention should be on the present moment and the immediate future. This does not mean that the far future, or horizon, does not exist; it is just not seen as realistic (and thus not relevant) to act towards this since the temporal period connecting the immediate and the far future is too unforeseeable (see also Frederiksen 2020). Indeed, according to Peter, it can be downright harmful to focus on the far future when performing in the present moment – at least that is what he hints at when he talks about focusing on the performance instead of the result. As he explained to Kasper in one of their many conversations, ‘Why should we worry about our position in the league table, even though we are one or two places lower than we would like to be? The only thing we can change is our own performance.’ In other words, focusing on their position in the league table, which has no importance before the final part of the season, would only serve to disturb their focus of winning their next match in the immediate future.

Living in the near or immediate future, Guyer writes, is ‘the process of implicating oneself in the ongoing life of the social and material world that used to be encompassed under an expansively inclusive concept of “reasoning”’ (2007: 409). And, even though the immediate future may have been evacuated ‘as a feature of social and collective doctrines’, it is still inhabited. Moreover, while the focus may have moved to the long term, to strategies and goals, there are still things going on at, around and ahead of the plough furrow. This presence may be in the form of a constant flow of
emails, notifications or upcoming meetings. And in the midst of all these, achievement and high performance are expected to take place. Indeed, the so-called ‘achievement society’ in many ways mirrors the way spectators, according to Peter, view a handball game. They focus on the scoreboard, the league table, the media, shouts from the stand and magical transformations expected to take place during conversations in the locker room between the first and second half. But none of these things support high performance. On the contrary, like defects, bugs, customer requests, internal meetings and context shifts for the IT developers, or cell phones, expectations from parents, grades, and thoughts of university admission for students, these are disturbances that inhibit achievement. A key lesson to be learned from the handball court, for business environments and elsewhere, is thus that what may make individuals or groups want to evacuate the immediate future is a lack of opportunity to actually inhabit it, even though the immediate future is sometimes exactly the realm in which high performance is possible. Hence, while some people may wake up in the middle of the night with a beating heart in fear of the tasks that have to be carried out in the morning, the IT developer, Martin, wakes up with the idea of building a castle, so that the immediate future for him and his co-workers can be defended, and they can find a plough furrow in which to actually achieve something.

KASPER PAPE HELLIGSØE holds a PhD from the Department of Anthropology, School of Culture and Society, Aarhus University. In his PhD project he explored the development and retention of sustainable performance environments in team-based organisations through a comparison of a professional handball club and a software company in Denmark. His research focuses on leadership, teamwork, temporality and collaboration in and with team-based organisations. Email: kph@cas.au.dk; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6370-3921.

MARTIN DEMANT FREDERIKSEN is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the Department of Culture and Society, Aarhus University. He works in the interface of anthropology and contemporary archaeology, and his current research focuses on emptiness, temporality and coastal infrastructures in Croatia and Denmark, and on subcultures and urban reconstructions in Georgia. He is author of Young Men, Time, and Boredom in the Republic of Georgia (2011), Georgian Portraits: Essays on the Afterlives of a Revolution (with Katrine B. Gotfredsen, 2017) and An Anthropology of Nothing in Particular (2018). Email: demant@cas.au.dk; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8032-2899.

Notes

1. By the term ‘high performance’, we refer to a level of individual or team performance that is understood to be continuously high in a given context (whether a handball club, a software company or any other organisation).
2. The saying (‘holde næsen i plovfuren’) denotes to work with, or focus on, one thing at the expense of others (ordnet.dk, accessed 16 November 2021).
References


Garder la tête dans le sillon de la charrue. Performance de haut niveau et futur immédiat chez les développeurs informatiques et les joueurs de handball professionnels au Danemark

Résumé : Ces dernières années, le concept de performance (dans le sens d’effort) a été critiqué dans les débats sociétaux au Danemark en raison de sa corrélation évidente avec la généralisation de pathologies comme la dépression et le stress. Tout en reconnaissant ses conséquences potentiellement nocives, nous proposons dans cet article de considérer que la performance en elle-même n’est pas nécessairement une mauvaise chose, mais qu’elle doit en revanche se dérouler selon une logique temporelle particulière afin d’être à la fois possible et de ne pas conduire au stress. Basé sur une étude empirique conduite dans un club de handball professionnel et une compagnie internationale de software, cet article montre comment l’immersion dans le moment présent et le futur immédiat augmente la capacité à performer. Il montre aussi comment les études anthropologiques du temps ouvrent de nouvelles manières de comprendre la haute performance

Mots-Clés : performance ; temporalité ; futur ; immersion ; sports ; business