

## The Sin of Crunch

The video game development industry has been no stranger to controversy. From developers not being credited in old Atari games during the 2600's reign to women and non-binary people being mistreated en masse since then into most companies in the modern day. Yet, among all the sins of game development, there is none more accepted and more demoralizing than crunch time. Crunch time normally refers to the time before a project is due where developers will put in difficult hours and most of their mental energy into that project to get it in a good enough state in time. However, crunch has been used to refer to any amount of time that overtime is asked of developers, where people's lives are put on hold to work on a game non-stop, sometimes for months or years at a time.<sup>1</sup> Under pressure from publishers, fans, or otherwise, people's work-life balance are completely destroyed for no extra pay, sometimes a conditional bonus, and under threat of losing their livelihoods. Crunch is inherently destructive to the lives of developers, the quality of the games they produce, is prevalent everywhere in the industry, and is encouraged by producers and developer culture alike.

The hours that developers work, and the sacrifice they make to their social life is not without consequence. Many developers find themselves working up to ninety-five hours a week<sup>2</sup>, sometimes sleeping in their office and ordering takeout to avoid commute times. A prolonged time with extended work hours often leads to a lack of sleep, increased stress, and a whole litany of physical and psychological problems.<sup>3</sup> This results in an increased need for a long break from work, sometimes referred to as burnout, which consists of an intense emotional and physical drainage which can often last for months at a time. This burnout is usually felt at the end of a production cycle, and it's considered normal for big companies to take time off during this period of much needed relaxation.<sup>4</sup> Whenever a problem exists, however, there is always a cause.

Time management, scope, and budget restraints are the most influential reasons for crunch in a workplace. For solo developers, like in the case of Stardew Valley, the problems can be as simple as not planning out timeframes for work, or committing to long sessions late at night to tweak a minor thing in the game.<sup>5</sup> For games issued by a publisher, they may demand changes or set certain deadlines for various showcases and other events, or even outright cancel production at any time if they don't like what's being made. All this puts stress on the workers of developers to make a game quickly, cheaply, and with enough apparent quality to avoid redoes or cancellations. For crowdfunded games, they're often heavily constrained by the amount of money donated to them. Additionally, they can overpromise for specific rewards at certain milestones within their crowdfunding campaign. This was the case for Pillars of Eternity by Obsidian, which spent months overworking on aspects of their game which they did not originally plan for, but felt obligated to add because of their promises to donors.<sup>6</sup> All of these issues are possible because of the laws surrounding game development.

The laws in California, where most game development in the U.S. occurs, are set up to allow the exploitation of worker's time. Prior to the year 2000, all game developers were exempt from overtime

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<sup>1</sup> Schreier, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Plant, 2023

<sup>3</sup> Knoop, 2022

<sup>4</sup> Schreier, 2017, Page 83

<sup>5</sup> Schreier, 2017, Chapter 3

<sup>6</sup> Schreier, 2017, Chapter 1

pay thanks to a law which made many white-collar workers exempt. In 2000, a law was introduced in California which made the cutoff for overtime exemption over \$20,000 above the average game developer's salary for computer professionals. This was short lived however, as in 2008, the threshold was reduced to \$5,000 below the average game developer's salary and added specific language which broadened the scope of the amount of people who could be exempt.<sup>7</sup> With the law in favor of overworking professionals in this field, it's not a surprise that the worker's time is the first and main thing sacrificed whenever the budget calls for it.

Budget restraints don't just disrespect developer's time, but often can cause them financial stress as well. The most obvious threat to any developer's wallet is the potential for them to lose their job. Rockstar employees remarked that they feel pressured by the crunch heavy work environment to put in absurd hours, even if it's considered optional by the company, out of fear of losing their post.<sup>8</sup> This same fear was realized by Obsidian when Stormlands was cancelled by Microsoft, and twenty-six employees were chosen to lose their jobs.<sup>9</sup> Not only is the threat to their jobs constant, developers without a consistent salary are forced to struggle under the budget. Sean Velasco, one of the team members behind Shovel Knight, felt this the hardest when he wished to buy coffee creamer from a gas station and his debit and credit card were both declined.<sup>10</sup> This kind of financial stress puts pressure on the person to overwork themselves voluntarily to be able to release the game quickly to be able to afford basic things such as food and housing. When development is riddled with this sort of stress and pressure, it's a wonder that games get made at all.

Prolonged crunch delays games over quality issues. Humans are capable of incredible things, but unlike machines, we experience fatigue. After about a month of prolonged crunch time, productivity drops into the negatives,<sup>11</sup> meaning that more work will need to be done in order to fix the mistakes made during that time than work that has been done fixing previous mistakes. As workers become more fatigued after spending extended hours at their desks, the quality of their work decreases and thus the quality of the games they're producing decreases as well. Obviously, nobody wants to ship a heavily flawed and buggy game (unless your name is Todd Howard) so studios will assign even more time to their employees to resolve the issues the game is facing. This, in turn, begins a cycle of bug fixing causing more bugs that takes a lot of work hours to resolve, and when publishers have set deadlines, or a company or person is feeling pressure to release a game that fans funded, it can be difficult to impossible to extend the release date far enough to resolve all of the known issues. When the release date is not pushed to meet the demand for more time, this results in games being released with numerous flaws and flopping as a result. The chances of avoiding these sorts of issues is small.

Crunch is a universal issue for all game developers. Although the amount of people who claim to have experienced crunch has gone down in recent years,<sup>12</sup> 50% of AAA workers have claimed to experienced crunch within the last two years.<sup>13</sup> These figures may be flawed, however, as it can be

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<sup>7</sup> Thomsen, 2021

<sup>8</sup> Schreier, 2018

<sup>9</sup> Schreier, 2017, Page 4

<sup>10</sup> Schreier, 2017, Page 186

<sup>11</sup> Knoop, 2022

<sup>12</sup> IGDA, 2021

<sup>13</sup> Plant, 2023

difficult to know exactly how prevalent crunch is when the studios demand secrecy about their practices. Additionally, developers may not fill out surveys like the ones paraphrased here when they are stuck in the exhausting loop of working nonstop and then trying to get what little sleep is possible for them. Still, surveys have always pointed toward a trend of far too much crunch being implemented within the industry, and now it has become an expectation of developers.

There are solutions to this problem. Talks of unionization have always been there, but even now, attempts to unionize have been small or ineffective. If unionization were successful, even at just two or three big studios, the foundations of an improvement would be quickly laid out, and progress would be made toward a universal solution.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, if the law which allows overtime exemption within California were amended to reflect a salary higher than that of the average computer professional employee again, as it had been set between 2000 and 2008, then companies could be held responsible for paying their employees appropriate compensation. Both of these methods discourage the practice at larger studios, but do not address budget restraints or personal choice of crowdfunded and independent game development. For crowdfunded games, the use of continual-payment services such as Patreon could prove useful as a method of still receiving funds after their initial campaign, helping as the scope of their games becomes more apparent and daunting. This would have to go alongside continual promotional material, however, to attract new donors. This is where a lot of studios underestimate the power of down-to-earth developer diaries, which keep people up to date on the happenings of your game, letting it stay in their minds without needing to put together a fancy demo every week or two. Although this method doesn't stop crunch entirely, it would reduce the financial pressure that facilitates it. For individual creators which don't rely on outside funding and are not as beholden to legislation, there is no better solution than mental health awareness and its prevalence in game developer circles. While it's not a concrete solution, solo developers are the least influenced of all developers, and thus only they and the people they're close to may discourage them from crunch.

Crunch is prevalent throughout game development. It is harmful to the developers and the games they create but can be tackled. Game development, like many other industries, is not without flaws. While there will always be ways to improve upon these flaws, it is up to us within the industry to do so without being discouraged by how daunting a task it may be.

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<sup>14</sup> Thomsen, 2021

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