7/22/2018

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Self STUDY INC.

**Career Life:**

Working in the Video Game Industry

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# Abstract

“Career Life: Working in the Video Game Industry”

Prepared by: Anthony Huber-Winkler

On July 22, 2018, Anthony Huber-Winkler, current student at University of Missouri Saint Louis (UMSL), was approved to conduct a survey into the lives of software developers and designers, in order to better prepare fellow class-mates and teachers in the field. This survey includes information regarding their findings and consequent analysis. Original concerns for the report topic focus specifically on the treatment of employees in the software development work-cycle, but later research indicates a more dangerous trend for those programmers in the video game industry. Internet articles, attributed to the creation of this report, discuss a harmful aspect of the developer community, more commonly referred to as “crunch culture”. The author of this report defines this term as such: “The practice of (often unpaid) over-time work volunteered or mandated from employees in an effort to increase productivity or meet project deadlines.” The author discovered that a majority of the larger companies have begun to expect this type of work from their employees. Unfortunately, many developers have become accustomed to this type of behavior and have either accepted the practice as a normal atmosphere for everyone or have just begun their careers and were completed blindsided once they started working in the industry. Many corporations believe that “crunching” is a solution to solving project planning issues, but these also attribute it to relieving other items, like “technical debt”. (A concept in software development that reflects the implied cost of additional rework caused by choosing an easy solution now instead of using a better approach that would take longer.) They neglect to notice the harmful effects on the mental and physical health of employees, as well as several other precarious career trends. Studies, many collected in this report, show that this culture is neither effective, moral, nor legal. The author strongly recommends that any individual, if not everyone, working in the video game development industry should start requiring proper compensation and safe-working conditions from their employers. The author also recommends that universities and colleges with Computer Science, Information Technology, Project Management, and other applicable degree programs, begin including this threatening topic and successful ways to avoid it into their curriculums.

**Keywords:** “Crunch Culture”, “Technical Debt”, video game development, employee treatment, programmer life

# Introduction

Video game development comprises of the creation, design, preparation, maintenance, and distribution of applications meant for entertainment purposes. They’re multiple genres of video games, from historical strategy games to first person military simulators, and even the more popular ones featuring platform hopping Italian plumbers. The industry employs not only technically rigid code-whispers, but more creative/artistically gifted people also gravitate into the field.

This report plans to demonstrate the struggles and possible remedies in the career lives of individuals currently practicing in the video game industry, with hope to promote a healthier and more productive environment for new-comers into the field. The author would also like to stress that video game development, regardless of the size or reputation of the associated company, refers to **everyone** involved in the video game creation process. This includes (but not limited to): artists, narrative writers, designers, financial advisors, sound engineers, network infrastructure architects, management, human resource agents, and even other support staff personnel.

The research conducted in this report consist mainly of internet articles and testimonials. Several of them are collective reports from personal interviews industry with executives and other anonymous ex-employees. One is a personal blog post from a very concerned spouse that became so famous that it sparked a class-action lawsuit towards the developer. The last article addresses a possible solution that one major company is currently implementing.

The author would recommend a stronger investigation be conducted on the workplace environment for video game developers. Everyone in today’s workforce deserves the right to a safe and healthy work environment and compensation for services rendered. The author would also like to consider modifying the current curriculum taught to new potential professionals to include this topic.

# Methods

The author began their research by conducting several Internet examinations through various means to acquire the appropriate research. They proceeded to collect the following information that lead them to primarily focus on understanding and analyzing “crunch culture”.

The project research permitted as followed:

1. Determine the legitimacy of video game development, specifically in the St. Louis.
2. Assess possible issues from current employees in the field.
3. Investigate “crunch culture”.
4. Analyze potential solutions to the problematic trend.
5. Collect information to generate an appropriate report on the subject matter.

In the following section, we will discuss each task findings and the proceeding investigation information thereafter.

## Determine the legitimacy of video game development, specifically in the St. Louis.

A majority of the professionals in the field recognize that the video game industry has yet to really make a significant foundation in the Mid-West. It’s far more prevalent in areas such as San Francisco and Los Angeles, however Austin and Chicago are certainly establishing their own foot holds. The author attempted to discover whether Saint Louis also had a fledging video game development scene.

Several sources proved that, albeit small, that Saint Louis does indeed have budding environment for software developers as well as video game industry professionals. They were able to determine from “146” anonymous entries with salary information that the typical salary for these individuals is: “$76,016 per year, (which is) 11% below national average”. (Glassdoor) This differed when considering that searching for software developers in Saint Louis rendered this information from “360” entries: “$69,014 per year, (which is) 13% below national average” (Glassdoor) It’s humbling knowing that a specialized career like video game development is actually healthier than the more generic software development profession.

The author was also able to find that even though the video game industry in Saint Louis is still not as prevalent as other areas of America, it’s still becoming a fairly strong profession to consider. “In January, during the annual Global Game Jam, St. Louis had 239 participants and ranked second in the U.S., behind only New York. ‘In a lot of areas, game development tends to be focused on the really big studios,’ says Jonathan Leek, who chaired what is now the St. Louis Game Developer Co-op until 2014. ‘In St. Louis, we’ve been really focused on the little guy.’” (Berger) This primary focus on the smaller independent developer will contribute to the eventual success for any professional living in Saint Louis that would otherwise be unable to relocate to these other major video game hub cities.

## Assess possible issues from current employees in the field.

There are many held beliefs and stereotypical ideas concerning individuals in the IT or software development industry. There are even worse ones for video game develops. Most of society would consider them as do-nothings that just play video games all day. While technically, that maybe correct (at least the latter part), it doesn’t reinforce the fact that these are very creative and technically demanding positions that require a lot of time, effort, and understanding.

One major developer who is thought to really understand the importance of their employees is one of the most influential in the field, and it’s for a reason! Google has been built on the minds and hearts of their professionals and appear to be rewarded well for their hard work. Chris Smith, a Tech Lead/Manager at Google had this to say about reducing his typical work day, “**If you only could work 3-4 hours a day, what would you do during that time?** *I definitely don’t think I could do my job in 3-4 hours a day. I would either have to focus on just people management or technical contribution, but I certainly couldn’t do both. If I had to choose, I would just do the people management side. (I enjoy that more, find it more fulfilling, and am probably, honestly better at it than I am at programming.) So if I had to condense things into a 3-4 hour day, I would probably spend two hours in 1:1s and the other two hours at design reviews and/or reviewing design documents.*” (Justinas) He further mentioned comments about his entire work day and still considered the 1:1 conferences with his employees more valuable to him than his own programming sessions.

Reviewing several additional articles, specifically concerning video game developers, introduced the topic of “crunch culture”. “Among video game developers, it’s called “crunch”: a sudden spike in work hours, as many as 20 a day, that can last for days or weeks on end. During this time, they sleep at work, limit bathroom breaks and cut out anything that pulls their attention away from their screens, including family and even food. Crunch makes the industry roll — but it’s taking a serious toll on its workers.” (Schreier, Video Games Are Destroying the People Who Make Them) The author discovered that this extremely popular trend in the industry is extremely harmful, thus sparking the next series of tasks and the eventual creation of this report.

## Investigate “crunch culture”.

Upon discovering the topic of discussion, the following evidence was discovered:

1. There is a fluid definition for “crunching”.

“(In reference to a major video game developer, TellTale Games) Some former employees reported working 14- to 18-hour days or coming in every day of the week for weeks on end. But where most developers go into “crunch mode” in the final months of a game leading up to its launch, they described it as constant. Because of the episodic nature of Telltale’s games, the studio’s development cycle was a constantly turning wheel. As soon as one episode wrapped, it was on to the next one, over and over with no end in sight. “Everything [was] always on fire,” one source with direct knowledge of the company says. “You never [got] a break.” This sentiment was echoed over and over to The Verge by four different people across several parts of Telltale. Although many employees were sympathetic to the pressure to hit financial goals and meet the strict requirements and late requests of major IP holders, the rapid pace of development caused many employees to feel significant burnout. Eventually, the emails from higher-ups encouraging the staff to push through a particularly rough patch began to feel redundant. “This just feels like last month. And the month before that,” said the same source, describing the reaction to the emails. ‘And the month before that… It was exhausting.’” (Farokhmanesh)

Walt Williams, a writer who has worked on titles like Mafia II, Star Wars Battlefront II, and most famously, Spec Ops: The Line, has published an excerpt of his book about working in the games industry over on Polygon. It's titled "Why I Worship Crunch," and perhaps unsurprisingly, that's what it's about…

If you're not familiar, crunch is the practice of doing intensive, long hours of game development on a tight schedule. It is brutal on the mind and the body, and it is taken as the norm in many studio situations worldwide…

Williams's piece is a very personal essay about the two sides of the coin of crunch. As Williams told me in a Twitter exchange, at its core, it's about how crunch itself is both seductive and destructive. It is clear that, for Williams, crunch is a way of dealing with the world. Like any kind of intensive activity, it is a way of dissolving the myriad problems of daily life and focusing in on one thing to an extreme. In that way, Williams seems to find crunch therapeutic, despite the fact that it seems to have had a severely negative effect on his life. In some follow-up tweets about the essay, that was the way of reading the essay that he clearly prefers.

At the end of the day, no matter how much an individual loves it, crunch is not about individuals themselves. Crunch is a systemic, top-down solution to the problem of extracting the most labor from game developers; it is a strategy that is implemented on workers, and it is performed widely in most sectors of the industry.

- (Kunzelman)

1. It is very prominent in the industry.
2. Management is not the only source of the issue.

“Developers who were given a six-day-a-week schedule that lasted months typically felt they had two choices: quit or suck it up. “What happens is the people who give a fuck the most are the people who pay the price,” says a former employee. ‘[People who] take a lot of pride in this product are the people who are going to kill themselves. And those are the people you really don’t want killing themselves because they have the most value in the company.’” (Farokhmanesh)

“Modern video games like Mass Effect and Uncharted cost tens of millions of dollars and require the labor of hundreds of people, who can each work 80- or even 100-hour weeks. In game development, crunch is not constrained to the final two or three weeks of a project. A team might crunch at any time, and a crunch might endure for several months. Programmers will stay late on weeknights to squash bugs, artists will use weekends to put the final polish on their characters, and everyone on the team will feel pressured to work extra hours in solidarity with overworked colleagues. In a 2016 survey by the International Game Developers Association, 65 percent of developers said they’d had to crunch, with 52 percent adding that they’d done it more than twice in the previous two years. (Of those who said they did not crunch, 32 percent noted ‘that their job did require periods of long hours, extended work hours or extended overtime that was just not called ‘crunch.’’)” (Schreier, Video Games Are Destroying the People Who Make Them)

1. “Crunching is physically and mentally harmful.

In late 2011, as he was finishing up production on the role-playing game, The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim, the programmer Jean Simonet started feeling severe stomach pains. At first, doctors were perplexed. But on his third emergency room visit, he revealed that he’d been regularly staying at the office late and coming in on weekends to fix bugs and add features that he thought would take Skyrim from good to great, no matter how much sleep he lost along the way.

He took his doctor’s advice and took the next few weeks off work, trying to relax and acclimate to a normal sleep schedule. With this hiatus from crunch, “eventually the pain just disappeared,” he said.

Anecdotes like this are common in the video game industry, which generated $30.4 billion in the United States last year but has a human cost that can’t be calculated. The designer Clint Hocking described suffering memory loss as a result of the stress and anxiety of crunching on a game. Brett Douville, a veteran game programmer, said he once worked so long and for so hard that he found himself temporarily unable to step out of his car.

- (Schreier, Video Games Are Destroying the People Who Make Them)

1. Several developers believe that it would be impossible to live without.

## Analyze potential solutions to the problematic trend.

## Collect information to generate an appropriate report on the subject matter.

# Results

# Recommendations

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