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**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 very 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 employers 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 completely blindsided once they started working in the industry. Many corporations believe that “crunching” is a solution for solving project planning issues, but they also attribute it to relieving other items, like “technical debt”. (A concept in software development that reflects the implied cost of additional reworks caused by choosing an easy solution now instead of using a better approach that might 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 non-effective, immoral, and illegal. 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 curriculum.

**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. There are 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, however even more creative and 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. It’s important to note 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 consists mainly of internet articles and testimonials. Several of them are collective reports from personal interviews from industry professionals, executives, and other anonymous ex-employees. One collected resource is from a personal blog post by 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 with their staff.

The author of this report would strongly recommend that an 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 initial internet research conducted for this report yielded very little consistent and reliable information. Accounts from various companies were sparse and misleading. It wasn’t until certain sources hinted at a common term\trend that lead to a new primary focus on understanding and analyzing “crunch culture”.

The project research permitted as followed:

1. Determine the legitimacy of video game development, specifically in the local region.
2. Assess possible issues from current employees in the field.
3. Investigate “crunch culture”.
4. Analyze potential solutions to the problematic trend.

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 local region.

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. Upon further investigation, this study was able to determine that Saint Louis also had a fledging video game development scene.

Several sources proved that, albeit small, 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.

Additional career exploration indicated 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 principal 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 developers. 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. While it is most likely an uncommon practice, the best investment a company can spend is on their employees.

This is when the information turned significantly into a different and harrowing direction. Several 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) This discovery of an extremely popular trend in the industry is extremely harmful, sparked the next series of tasks and the eventual creation of this report.

## Investigate “crunch culture”.

Upon determining the topic of this discussion, the following evidence was revealed:

### There is no fluid definition for “crunching”.

There is a notable confusion between developers and their management on the topic of “crunching”. The standard definition of “crunch” remains the same: The practice of (often unpaid) over-time work volunteered or mandated from employees to increase productivity or meet project deadlines. It is however disputed upon the allowances, limitations, and occurrences of these hyper work sessions. Most newcomers and observers in this field would say that that the occasional period is effective, especially when it means conquering a frustrating obstacle or problem, but to some it’s not a choice, rather a condition of employment. “There’s no one way to define crunch. It can come in thousands of shapes and sizes, varying based on the schedule, the type of game, the scale of a team, the deadlines, the contracts, the personnel, the publisher, the leadership, the amount of money in the bank, and many other factors. Often, gamers equate crunch with the final weeks in a game’s development, when everyone on a team has to go into overdrive to ensure they hit their release date—‘crunch time’ is a euphemism for the very last minute of a project. But in reality, according to many of the game developers I talked to for this story, crunch is always there, hanging over studios like a big gloomy rain cloud. Plenty of the people who make video games say they have to crunch all year long.” (Schreier, The Horrible World Of Video Game Crunch) With such loose regulations on workloads in the software development industry, it’s worrisome that leadership can take advantage of their employees in this fashion. This type of employee exploitation and the violation of their trust is horrible.

The environment of the industry hasn’t changed the perceptions of “crunch time” either. Dozens of accredited and wildly successful developers even support the practice. They’ve grown accustomed to the work and some even thrive in the emersion. They dive deep into their code and only come up for air when they physically can’t continue, thus days or weeks go by without them ever even leaving the office. “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… 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.” (Kunzelman) Truly being passionate about one’s work is the honest sign to a healthy career. It promotes growth, higher learning, and enlightenment. It eases the stress that our many daily trials and tribulations bring. Adversity is motivation. Inspiration is motivation. Creativity is motivation. It’s very unfortunate that so many would seek to profit and consequently feed on that motivation… that passion.

There are those that feel otherwise however, “Destiny 2 will mark the end of Bungie's struggle to eliminate enforced crunch, according to head of engineering Luke Timmins, a process that started with the ‘brutal’ experience of finishing and shipping Halo 2… ‘It almost killed us, and those of us that were left basically vowed, ‘never again.’ ‘Never again can we put ourselves through that.’ The strain of that time led to a new way of thinking about crunch within Bungie. ‘There's the crunch you want to do,’ Timmins said, ‘and there's the crunch you *have* to do.’ The latter, where employees are required to work 50 or more hours a week to ship the game, is the more ‘nefarious’ form of crunch. However, while the former is mostly driven by positivity and passion, it can still result in a negative outcome for both the individual and the company.” (Handrahan) The company appears to have recognized the harsh truths behind “crunching” and has taken steps to avoid the slippery slopes into old habits. Honestly though, anyone in management or leadership that does not recognize the true worth of their workers and how fragile they can become, does not deserve their employment.

### It is very prominent in the industry.

The common misconception for many professionals in the field already is that there is not an alternative to “crunching”. Most of them have fought hard for their positions and are afraid to leave their jobs. They are prideful in the teams that they’ve joined, especially when working on these bigger title video games. “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 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) These are gamers who have invested so much more than just their time into these games. It’s no longer just a hobby for them. It’s their livelihood.

It wasn’t just small teams affected by this “crunch” culture either. Smaller independent companies also utilize the work trend for their workflow as well. Telltale Games was a small development firm that had only a few select titles under them and it wasn’t until they released, (inspired by a popular television series with the same name) “The Walking Dead: A Telltale Saga”, did they really begin transforming their work environment. “[[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) As such, their turnover skyrocketed, their quality plummeted, and the money began to run thin. They produced several additional titles and then the company hit its lowest point. They brought in a new CEO and laid off 50% of their employees in the process. Imagine working for this long only to walk into work that day, where everyone is crowded in the conference room. Then your name is called and they escort you into an office and they begin telling you about severance terms.

### 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 [[expletive]] 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)

“Some developers say they’ve felt compelled to stay extra hours at the office just because other people were doing it too. Several told me they just couldn’t shake the notion that more hours directly equate to higher-quality games—after all, more hours means more work, which means more features, polish, and testing.” (Schreier, The Horrible World Of Video Game Crunch)

### “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)

“‘You’d get a lot of people coming right out of school, going, ‘Oh I really want to prove myself, and I really want to make sure that they see that I’m contributing,’’ says a source familiar with the company. ‘The thing that broke my heart the most was seeing new team members that were just so gung-ho and optimistic and excited to be at Telltale get overused and abused because they did not feel comfortable drawing the line in the sand to say, ‘This is my limit.’ They either worked themselves out and would get sick or would become bitter.’… ‘I remember hearing one of my bosses say, ‘I love that we can just shout at each other and curse at each other in a meeting. It’s totally great,’’ says one former employee. ‘I [didn’t] feel that way at all… I don’t want to work every day where I have to yell at people and scream to have my voice heard… I think a lot of people burned out that way.’” (Farokhmanesh)

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

“‘People think that making games is easy,’ said Marcin Iwinski, a co-chief executive and co-founder of CD Projekt Red, the Polish developer of a 2015 game, The Witcher 3. ‘It’s hard-core work. It can destroy your life.’ Mr. Iwinski, like many other top video game creators, sees crunch as a necessary evil. He and other developers say because of the rapid evolution of video game technology, among other reasons, the time it takes to complete basic tasks can vary drastically from project to project, which makes it difficult to plan accurate schedules.” (Schreier, Video Games Are Destroying the People Who Make Them)

“No one works in the game industry unless they love what they do. No one on that team is interested in producing an inferior product. My heart bleeds for this team precisely BECAUSE they are brilliant, talented individuals out to create something great. They are and were more than willing to work hard for the success of the title. But that good will has only been met with abuse. Amazingly, Electronic Arts was listed #91 on Fortune magazine’s "100 Best Companies to Work For" in 2003. EA’s attitude toward this -- which is actually a part of company policy, it now appears -- has been (in an anonymous quotation that I’ve heard repeated by multiple managers), ‘If they don't like it, they can work someplace else.’ Put up or shut up and leave: this is the core of EA's Human Resources policy. The concept of ethics or compassion or even intelligence with regard to getting the most out of one’s workforce never enters the equation: if they don’t want to sacrifice their lives and their health and their talent so that a multibillion dollar corporation can continue its Godzilla-stomp through the game industry, they can work someplace else.” (EASpouse)

## Analyze potential solutions to the problematic trend.

“With Halo 3, Bungie started to think about ‘people management as a craft’ in greater detail, laying the foundations of a new philosophy intended to improve trust and communication within the company. The ‘bedrock’ of this new approach to management were ‘one-on-ones’ - mandatory weekly meetings for every employee and the manager assigned to them… ‘You should take this seriously, but it’s not free,’ Timmins said. ‘If I’m a manager, every report I have is about 10% of my time... It’s really hard, and you’re constantly going to have that pressure: ‘Can’t we just skip one on ones? Can’t we just skip your goals for this period?’ ‘The answer is no. People management is more important than that one extra feature.’” (Handrahan)

# Results

This report has given context for a drastic solution to an awful situation. As the rise for expectations continue, video games developers will continue to tax their employees in this fashion. The time and dedication it takes to make a game from just a concept to a living breathing entity requires a lot from their employees, but the price for this work will remain static.

It is well known in the industry that the price for video games will not increase any higher than the $60.00 price tag. In fact, the price for video games has significantly decreased, some are even free. The “fermium” video game model does well to

# Recommendations

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