

The Dark Shadows of Mismanagement: Unmasking the Noire of Team Bondi's Demise

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It's all fun and games until the developers are hurt. Characterized by Big Tech (FAANG companies: Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, and Google) the tech industry often portray themselves as "work hard, play hard" companies; where, the office is a place to collaborate and develop products and services. It is also a place to adorn your cubical with miniatures, have Nerf gun fights, and after a meeting relax with a deep tissue massage from the on-site masseuse. By extension video game studios like Electronic Arts, Nintendo, Blizzard Entertainment, and Ubisoft (to name a few) all market themselves in the same light, "work hard, play hard" culture, as Big Tech. However, at times the reality gap between what is advertised and marketed versus what is experienced cannot be more divided. The video game industry has witnessed numerous success stories, but it has also encountered its fair share of controversies and challenges. One such case is the mismanagement of Team Bondi, a game development studio that, despite investing over a hundred million dollars in production over an eight-year period, ultimately sold off all its assets and filed for bankruptcy following the release of their sole game, "L.A. Noire."

**Problem statement:**

The problem with Team Bondi's mismanagement, specifically, is their unreasonable demands imposed on developers. These demands exacerbate unethical behaviors within the organization and generate conflicts with fundamental aspects of human nature.

**Thesis statement:**

The most important lesson from Team Bondi's mismanagement is their unreasonable demand of developers. This is important because it creates a toxic work environment, imposes 80-hour weeks on their developers, and results in the production of an inferior quality product.

**Forecast statement:**

If game development studios continue to perpetuate unreasonable demands on developers, exacerbating unethical behaviors and conflicts with human nature, the industry will witness a perpetuation of toxic work environments, continued imposition of excessive work hours, and a continued decline in the quality of products. By examining these issues, we gain valuable insights into the importance of ethical leadership and employee well-being in the game development industry.

**Ethical Framework/Perspective:**

Ethical frameworks provide guidelines for organizations to cultivate ethical behavior, create a positive work culture, and align their practices with fundamental aspects of human nature. The mismanagement at Team Bondi, as stated in the thesis, exacerbated unethical behaviors within the organization and conflicted with human nature.

According to Collins and Kanashiro, ethical organizations prioritize the well-being of their employees, promote fairness, and uphold transparency and accountability (Kanashiro, section 1.3). Team Bondi's mismanagement can be seen as a violation of these principles. By imposing excessive work hours and creating a toxic work environment, the organization neglected the well-being and work-life balance of their developers. This conflicts with the ethical imperative to treat employees with dignity and respect; furthermore, the mismanagement at Team Bondi demonstrates a lack of transparency and accountability. Ethical organizations strive for open communication, honesty, and fairness. However, Team Bondi's unreasonable demands and unethical behaviors suggest a failure in fostering a transparent and accountable work environment.

By applying ethical frameworks, such as the consequentialist approach where whether something is good or bad depends on its outcomes (The Ethics Centre), it becomes apparent that Team Bondi's mismanagement deviated from ethical best practices outlined by Collins and Kanashiro. The organization's actions created a toxic work environment, imposed excessive work hours, and compromised the quality of their product.

While additional and specific ethical frameworks and perspectives from Collins and Kanashiro's "Business Ethics: Best Practices for Designing and Managing Ethical Organizations" could provide a more in-depth analysis and support, the consequentialist approach highlights the ethical ramifications of their actions. By evaluating the outcomes and consequences of their unreasonable demands, it becomes clear why their mismanagement ultimately led to their downfall.

### **Case Description and Application:**

#### **Argument 1:**

Ran by a tyrannical boss who would circumvent his leads and shout at individual employees in the middle of the office at the slightest provocation (Floyd). Team Bondi's mismanagement created a toxic work environment through several practices and behaviors that negatively impacted the well-being and morale of their employees. A tactic Team Bondi leveraged, common in the video game development industry, is to exploit job insecurity. Job insecurity refers to the fear or uncertainty experienced by employees regarding the continuity or stability of their employment (Doyle). When anyone complains about the long hours or unreasonable management, employees are told that they are "lucky" to be working in the gaming industry. Daniel Floyd would account from people in industry he had met they would tell him that "during the first two or three years of their career, they were essentially intimidated into

going above and beyond, all to compensate for bad business practices, or incompetence from above. They were regularly told 'you will never find another job in this industry if you quit.'" (Floyd). By exploiting job insecurity, Team Bondi intensified the negative impact of their unreasonable demands, leading to heightened stress, anxiety, and reduced job satisfaction among employees. The constant fear of unemployment and uncertain prospects added another layer of toxicity to the work environment, ultimately contributing to the team's diminished well-being and productivity.

The gaming industry can take several measures to defend itself against job insecurity and foster a more secure and supportive work environment for its employees in a few ways: One, transparent communication: game development studios should prioritize open and transparent communication with their employees. This includes providing regular updates on the company's financial health, project status, and potential changes that may impact job security. By keeping employees informed, it helps reduce uncertainty and build trust within the organization; two, implement fair Employment Practices: Implementing fair employment practices, such as offering permanent or long-term contracts instead of relying solely on project-based or contractual arrangements, can help alleviate job insecurity. Providing job stability and a sense of long-term commitment to employees can foster a more positive work environment; and three, promote skill development and career growth by providing opportunities for skill development and career growth within the organization is crucial for combating job insecurity. Offering training programs, mentorship initiatives, and clear paths for advancement can demonstrate the studio's commitment to the professional development of its employees. When individuals see avenues for growth, they are more likely to feel secure in their positions.

By implementing these strategies, the gaming industry can work towards defending itself against job insecurity, promoting a healthier work environment, and ensuring the well-being of its employees. Prioritizing transparency, fairness, career growth, and employee support will contribute to a more sustainable and ethical industry.

### **Argument 2:**

Known for its critically acclaimed title "L.A. Noire," Team Bondi gained notoriety not only for its creative achievements but also for its enforcement of "crunch", a term used in the games industry to describe periods of extreme workload (Edholm et al.), onto its developers. Crunch has become a common phenomenon in the gaming industry. However, Team Bondi's implementation of crunch went beyond industry norms, leading to ethical problems that cannot be overlooked. The enforcement of crunch by Team Bondi and its ethical implications, highlighting the negative impact it had on the well-being of developers and the broader ethical concerns it raises.

Team Bondi's management, under the leadership of Brendan McNamara, imposed grueling working conditions on its developers during the production of "L.A. Noire" (Fandom). Reports and testimonies from former employees shed light on a work culture characterized by relentless pressure, excessive working hours, and a disregard for work-life balance. The studio's insistence on crunch extended for prolonged periods, creating a toxic work environment that had severe consequences for the mental and physical health of its employees.

The ethical problems associated with Team Bondi's enforcement of crunch can be examined from various perspectives. First and foremost is the violation of the well-being and dignity of the developers. The relentless pressure to meet deadlines and deliver results led to

heightened stress, exhaustion, and burnout among the team. Working excessive hours for extended periods not only compromised the physical health of the developers but also infringed upon their right to a balanced and fulfilling personal life.

In addition, the imposition of crunch raises concerns about fair employment practices. While crunch is unfortunately prevalent in the gaming industry, Team Bondi's approach went to extreme lengths, blurring the line between dedication and exploitation. Developers faced unreasonable demands that often went beyond their contractual obligations, leaving them little room for autonomy and control over their own work-life balance. This raises questions about the ethical responsibility of companies towards their employees, particularly in ensuring fair treatment and promoting a healthy work environment.

Having a work-life balance is important for physical and mental well-being of employees. When management ignores the well-being of their work force it leads to burnout, a reduction in productivity, weakened work relationships, denies personal growth, and reduced sustained long-term career satisfaction. Striking a balance between work and personal life allows individuals to lead fulfilling, healthy, and meaningful lives.

### **Argument 03**

The extreme working conditions endured by Team Bondi's developers may have compromised their ability to produce their best work. Fatigue and stress can reduce one's creativity, attention to detail, and overall productivity. Conflicts with fundamental aspects of human nature in Team Bondi's management practices lead to negative consequences for their employees, including diminished well-being, reduced motivation, and lower quality output. Recognizing and aligning with human nature's core needs, such as work-life balance, trust, and ethical considerations, is crucial for creating a healthy and productive work environment.

A work-life balance plays a crucial role in promoting overall well-being and enhancing various aspects of a person's life. It allows individuals to allocate time for both physical and mental wellness. Regular physical activity and proper self-care contribute to better physical health, increased energy levels, improved sleep patterns, and reduced risk of health issues such as obesity, heart disease, and chronic stress-related illnesses; also, time for one's mental well-being helps individuals manage stress levels, prevent burnout, and maintain positive mental health. By creating a space for personal activities, hobbies, and relaxation, work-life balance promotes emotional resilience, reduces anxiety and depression symptoms, and enhances overall psychological well-being.

Trust is a fundamental element of human nature and a cornerstone of effective teamwork and collaboration. Reports of poor communication, lack of collaboration, and micromanagement in Team Bondi's management practices suggest a breakdown of trust between the developers and their managers. When trust is lacking, it creates a negative work environment where individuals may be hesitant to share ideas, seek help, or take risks. This lack of trust can stifle innovation, hinder problem-solving, and ultimately contribute to lower quality output.

Human nature is marked by an innate sense of ethics and moral values. Unethical management practices, such as imposing excessive work hours, disregarding employee well-being, and fostering a toxic work environment, conflict with this sense of ethics. When employees are confronted with ethical conflicts, it can cause significant emotional distress, internal conflicts, and a decline in their overall well-being. Such negative consequences can undoubtedly impact their ability to deliver high-quality work.



As a result, the game's quality and user experience has been compromised, ultimately affecting the satisfaction of consumers who expected a polished and enjoyable gaming experience. To create a healthy and productive work environment, it is crucial for managers to recognize and align with the fundamental aspects of human nature. Prioritizing work-life balance, fostering trust and collaboration, and upholding ethical considerations can help cultivate an environment where developers can thrive, resulting in higher motivation, enhanced creativity, and improved overall output quality.

### **Recommendation:**

No business or creative venture plan to end in bankruptcy or a shutdown of an art studio. To address the unethical behaviors within Team Bondi and align with fundamental aspects of human nature, Team Bondi, and the gaming development as a whole can benefit moving away from traditional project management and adopt the Agile methodology. Traditional, also known as "waterfall", project management assumes that every work task and flow can be scoped, estimated, and time blocked during the course of the project as quoted in Atlassian's article "Agile vs. waterfall project management" the waterfall method "entails a clearly defined sequence of execution with project phases that do not advance until a phase receives final approval. Once a phase is completed, it can be difficult and costly to revisit a previous stage" (Atlassian). In contrast, the Agile method of project management is a whole change in work culture where decisions are derived by the project team and product owner, the interface between the project team and stakeholders, and tight and frequent feedback loops within the team and the customers. A team is "agile" when they take an "iterative approach to delivering a project, which focuses on continuous releases that incorporate customer feedback. The ability to adjust during each iteration promotes velocity and adaptability. Agile involves breaking the project into phases

and emphasizes continuous collaboration and improvement. Teams follow a cycle of planning, executing, and evaluating" (Atlassian).

By applying Agile project management, it could have improved Team Bondi, and the industry, fixing a toxic work environment, 80-hour weeks, and the production of an inferior quality product. Agile can do so in three ways: by improving work-life balance, iterative development and feedback loops, and by continuous improvement and reflection.

One, Agile promotes sustainable development practices and emphasizes the importance of work-life balance by implementing sprints, time-boxed iterations, with realistic goals, agile helps teams avoid excessive work hours and burnout. It encourages a healthier and more balanced approach to work, leading to improved employee well-being and productivity. Two, Agile's iterative and incremental approach allows for frequent customer feedback and early detection of issues by delivering working software in short cycles, teams can identify and address quality concerns, make necessary adjustments, and continuously enhance the product. This helps prevent the production of inferior quality products and improves overall customer satisfaction; and three, it emphasizes a culture of continuous improvement through regular retrospectives. These retrospectives provide an opportunity for the team to reflect on their processes, identify areas for improvement, and implement changes. This iterative feedback loop helps address issues contributing to a toxic work environment and facilitates the adoption of more effective and efficient practices.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, if game development studios continue to perpetuate unreasonable demands on developers as was done Team Bondi's development studio, exacerbating unethical behaviors and conflicts with human nature, the industry will witness a perpetuation of toxic work

environments, continued imposition of excessive work hours, and a continued decline in the quality of products. By examining these issues, we gain valuable insights into the importance of ethical leadership and employee well-being in the game development industry.

A toxic work environment creates a constant fear of unemployment and uncertain prospects added another layer of toxicity to the work environment, ultimately contributing to the team's diminished well-being and productivity. An imposed crunch development leads to unsustainable and unbalanced development practices that emphasis on working long hours and prioritizing immediate deadlines over other important aspects of software development. And, The extreme working conditions endured by Team Bondi's developers may have compromised their ability to produce their best work. Fatigue and stress can reduce one's creativity, attention to detail, and overall productivity.

It's important to note that implementing Agile practices alone may not completely fix all issues in a toxic work environment. Organizational culture, leadership support, and addressing underlying systemic problems are also crucial. Agile serves as a framework that supports healthier work practices and facilitates the identification and resolution of issues, but a holistic approach is necessary for sustained improvement.

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