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Video Games Are Destroying the People Who Make Them

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By JASON SCHREIER   OCT. 25, 2017

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.

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.

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.' ")

While many jobs are demanding, the conditions in this industry are uniquely unforgiving. Most game developers in the United States do not receive extra compensation for extra hours. They may gaze with envy at their colleagues in the film industry, where unions help regulate hours and ensure overtime pay. Their income pales in comparison to what's offered in other fields with reputations for brutal hours, like banking and law. The average American game developer earned $83,060 in 2013, according to a Gamasutra survey, or less than half the pay of a first-year associate at a New York law firm.

While I was reporting for a book on how video games are made, veteran game makers told me stories of lost family time, relationship strains and such severe burnout that they considered leaving for other industries.

"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.

A growing faction of game developers, however, argues that it's possible to make good games without crunching. Tanya X. Short, a co-founder of the independent studio Kitfox Games, asked colleagues to sign an online pledge against excessive overtime. The pledge, which was published last year, has been signed by over 500 game developers.

"Crunch trades short-term gains for long-term suffering," said Ms. Short in an email.

To avoid long-term deleterious effects, game developers must commit to stop facilitating a culture in which crunch is the norm. The occasional long night or weekend at the office can be useful and even exhilarating, but as a constant, it is damaging. No video game is worth burnout, brain damage or overnight stays at the hospital.

Those of us who cover the video game industry can see that the current conditions are unsustainable. Too many of the people who make games have left for more lucrative, less stressful industries. Too many who have stayed have suffered the physical and mental consequences. Game developers need to insist — to their bosses and, most important, to themselves — that health comes first.

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