

Research shines light into darker side of gaming industry

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In its early days, the video game industry was perceived as a fun, high-tech business where young creative types were 'paid to play games all day.' Then, in 2004, in [an open letter](#) to Electronic Arts (EA) executives, a disgruntled partner of an EA employee brought the darker side of the industry to light in an anonymous blog post. Her exposé told of seven-day, 80-hour work weeks, uncompensated overtime and a management mantra of 'put-up, shut-up or leave.'

"The post was quite damning," recalled Johanna Weststar, a DAN Management and Organizational Studies professor. "A wholesale criticism around the work practices of EA – and the entire gaming industry – bled into health and relationship concerns."

Weststar, who was working on her PhD in Industrial Relations and Human Resources at the time, was intrigued, and intent to learn more about videogame developers, an understudied group of workers. Five years later, she got her chance.

The 'EA Spouse,' Erin Hoffman, is credited for initiating a quality-of-life movement in the gaming industry. Her tell-all prompted 5,000 responses from developers sharing similar experiences, and the first industry quality-of-life survey in 2004.

A call for a follow-up survey in 2009 brought Weststar into the fold. Along with fellow researcher Marie-Josée Legault of T luq University, Weststar partnered with the International Game Developers Association

(IGDA) to author the 2009 survey and analyze the data, as she did for the subsequent Developer Satisfaction Surveys of 2014 and 2015.

"The survey data allows us to track the working conditions of the videogame industry, which helps inform our academic work on work/life balance, equity, compensation, representation and unionization. The conversations we have with the developers help the industry be better informed, with industry leaders and developers consciously using that data to set their advocacy and intervention agendas," Weststar explained.

And advocacy remains important for a unique group that sits at the intersection of information and communications technology and cultural entertainment.

"You would think these highly skilled, relatively well-paid developers would have a community voice. But in reality, they have no more voice than those workers we typically see as marginalized in our society," Weststar said.

One of the most controversial issues revealed in the EA Spouse post was 'crunch' – a sustained period of working long hours without compensation.

"We think the use of the word, 'crunch' is deliberate. Management doesn't want to say, 'overtime' because that word has very direct implications that we all understand, like pay for extra hours. Whereas, 'crunch' has become an acceptable industry term that describes what happens when you 'just have to meet a milestone.'"

California law – similar to Ontario – exempts businesses from having to pay overtime to certain 'specialty' employees, including software programmers, leaving developers without a lot of recourse. In the case of EA, a lawsuit seeking overtime resulted in a payout and reclassification,

allowing employees to be entitled to compensation, but that didn't mean crunch became a forgotten trend.

In fact, as Weststar and Legault reported to industry representatives at an IGDA leadership summit this past fall, there are still studios practicing intense crunch, with 60 per cent of developers still not compensated for crunch hours in 2014.

While some insiders attribute crunch to poor project management, others, including many developers, feel it is simply part of the project-based nature of game development. In a global game market, where revenue is about \$65 billion, game publishers impose a lot of downward pressure to get a product out inline with expensive marketing campaigns, while often making changes – in some cases to main characters – very late in the game.

"There is still an ethos of 'this is how you make games' and many developers have internalized that view, and are willing to sacrifice everything – including their mental and physical health, and their relationships – for 'the love of the game.'

"This is not an industry that ages well," continued Weststar, noting when employees decide to start families, or are ready for a healthier work/life balance, they feel their only option is to leave the business entirely.

"If the [gaming industry](#) really wants to mature, and become long-term and stable, they need to face the issues around working conditions – and not just 'crunch' but other important issues such as sexism and violence."

Weststar hopes to continue playing a part in those informed decisions, collecting data that will help the industry set future targets and benchmarks in the hiring of women and in other key areas, including diversity, gender and harassment.

She and Legault host a website, gameqol.org, where they post reports that have stemmed from the IGDA's quality-of-life surveys. They also contribute to [Gamasutra, a premiere online gaming magazine](#), where they challenge the developer community to reflect on critical issues, and question if current systems sufficiently address their workplace challenges.

"Video game developers are very creative people, making very complex products," Weststar said. "But, in the end," she concedes with a smile, "they're just making video games. Do they really need to work under extreme conditions or can we push for a climate that's a little more humane and reasonable?"

NOT ALL FUN AND GAMES

An excerpt from an open letter to Electronic Arts (EA) executives from a disgruntled partner of an EA [video game](#) developer on the issue of 'crunch' – a sustained period of working long working hours without compensation:

Now, it seems, is the 'real' crunch, the one that the producers of this title so wisely prepared their team for by running them into the ground ahead of time. The current mandatory hours are 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. – seven days a week – with the occasional Saturday evening off for good behavior (at 6:30 p.m.). This averages out to an 85-hour work week. Complaints that these once more extended hours combined with the team's existing fatigue would result in a greater number of mistakes made and an even greater amount of wasted energy were ignored.

The stress is taking its toll. After a certain number of hours spent working the eyes start to lose focus; after a certain number of weeks with only one day off fatigue starts to accrue and accumulate exponentially. There is a reason why there are two days in a weekend –

bad things happen to one's physical, emotional and mental health if these days are cut short. The team is rapidly beginning to introduce as many flaws as they are removing.

And the kicker: For the honor of this treatment, EA salaried employees receive (a) no overtime; (b) no compensation time; (c) no additional sick or vacation leave. The time just goes away. Additionally, EA recently announced that, although in the past they have offered essentially a type of comp time in the form of a few weeks off at the end of a project, they no longer wish to do this, and employees shouldn't expect it. ... Comp time is a staple in this industry, but EA as a corporation wishes to 'minimize' this reprieve. One would think that the proper way to minimize comp time is to avoid crunch, but this brutal crunch has been on for months, and nary a whisper about any compensation leave, nor indeed of any end of this treatment.

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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