When it comes to the crunch - Unpaid overtime in the games industry

Shane Mason, a Solidarity Federation member, libcom poster and games industry worker writes about the practice of 'Crunch Time' - the long hours of unpaid overtime in the games industry and the reasons behind it.

Imagine if you had to give your company over fifteen hours of extra unpaid work a week. Imagine if you hadn't been able to cook yourself a proper meal in over two months. Imagine if you came home late at night and left for work early in the morning, that's if you even leave work at all. Welcome to the modern games industry!

The above is what is meant by the term 'crunch time', a phrase all too familiar to those in or around the games industry. Technically crunch time is any form of overtime (almost always unpaid) required by a game studio in order to complete a project on time. In reality however there are differing types of overtime, dependent on the country a company operates in, the particular labour laws they work under and whether or not they are owned by a large company. The type of crunching I do is technically voluntary. I say 'technically' because even though I could theoretically refuse to do any overtime, you can bet that I wouldn’t last very long with the company if I didn’t. Overtime may not be obligatory, but it is expected.

The other type of crunch time is mandatory unpaid overtime. This is every bit as soul-destroying as it sounds. Very common in North American games studios and those owned and run by big companies and publishers (such as EA, Activision, etc) where it is colloquially known as a ‘Death March’. In this case the company bosses have decided that the game will come out on release date X, with no schedule slippage allowed for. This is usually done for monetary reasons, where fears of a shrinking profit margin have grown too much for executives to bear. This decision inevitably means that huge amounts of work have to be compressed into incredibly small amounts of time. The solution to this problem is inevitably ‘Crunch Time’. This will usually involve working till late into the night (in extreme cases working overnight with little to no sleep), subsisting almost entirely on what cheap food (often junk) the company will provide and sometimes even going without weekend breaks – all without any pay.

This is not an exaggeration. For the upcoming first-person-shooter game ‘Homefront’ publisher THQ has said that the New-York based studio ‘Kaos’ has been put into a ‘seven-day’ crunch period for two months.
in order to meet their scheduled release date of March 8th, 2011. So this dev team have been working unpaid overtime, without weekends for two months. Yet this is not the worst the industry has to offer. EA’s CEO, John Riccitiello, admitted that they had the Vancouver-based Black Box studio on a near constant crunch churning out yearly additions to EA’s Need for Speed franchise for five years. He says that ‘those days are gone’ and that they now have the team on much healthier ‘bi-annual cycle’. While it’s true that doing a bi-annual release schedule is much less stressful than doing a game yearly, someone had better tell Riccitiello’s findings to the EA Sports division. Those studios are still churning out a game a year for their respective franchises, and I’d be surprised if they weren’t being crunched just as hard as the devs at Black Box were.

There have been one or two voices raised against the practice of crunch time, but they are often few and far between. We work in that most desirable of things, a creative industry. It’s common knowledge that for every single job in the games industry there are hundreds of people just waiting for their chance to get in – often influenced by very idealistic concepts of how the industry actually is. Combine this with a deliberately atomised work culture based around small, insular teams and there’s not much room for dissent. No one wants to be the one to put their head above the parapet. Yet even when arguments against crunch time are made, they often miss the heart of the matter.

The first argument often made is based around how crunching affects our ‘Quality of life’. This is most definitely an issue, as being on crunch time is an awful sensation. Your life becomes an endless cycle of work, sleep and take-away food. You may stop getting the chance to see your friends, families and loved ones. Your working environment can become filled with stress, tension and hair-trigger tempers. The negative effect that crunch time has on day-to-day life is certainly one of the worst things about it, but focusing on this as the only part of the problem is kind of missing the point. It implies that working long hours unpaid would be absolutely fine if it could just be made more pleasant. Yet the stresses and strains of crunch time are inherently intertwined with it. The game developer’s quality of life doesn’t take a hit because he is doing badly managed unpaid overtime, it’s because he’s doing that much unpaid overtime in the first place.

The second type of argument comes from the ‘pragmatic management school’ of thinking. It puts forth the rather radical idea that perhaps this level of rapid, intense overtime isn’t very good for productivity. I can tell you this is true from personal experience. When you’re undergoing a particularly bad crunch time you can just completely zone out. The food makes you feel ill, the lack of sleep makes you distracted, and it takes you a lot longer to do even the simplest of tasks you would otherwise have sailed through.

Yet this argument assumes that crunch time is something that companies should ideally avoid as being ‘bad for business’. You will often hear it said that crunch time happens because of ‘bad planning’. That the schedule was put together way too tight from the outset at which point management will turn around in desperation and decree crunch time in order to cover their own ineptitude. Yet this ignores the huge amounts of money made by big game companies who use crunch time the most. You don’t make those sort of profits without knowing exactly what you’re doing. Crunch time is used as a deliberate part of the game development cycle precisely because it works from the perspective of those who make their money at the top. Why was the schedule made so tight in the first place? Well, to save money on development costs and get a new title into stores as quick as possible. This drive to push games out quickly in order to maximise profits is what also drives companies to crunch their developers. Forcing such a large amount of free labour out of workers is another way to make more money out of a project, even if it is to the detriment of those workers’ lives and even to the quality of the project itself.

This is the true issue with crunch time, that it is a form of blatant economic exploitation. The quality of life issues suffered by developers when crunching are symptoms of a much deeper disease. Games industry workers will often say that they put up with crunch time because they love games and love working with them. Of course we do. Yet look at other creative industries, such as film or television. Those who work in their respective mediums love them just as much as we love ours, yet also get paid for the hours they
work. It is not a radical demand that someone be paid for the work they do - whether they love that work or not. If we truly love games we should want to fight to end an industrial practice that harms not only us as workers, economically, physically and mentally, but also damages the games we make, by cutting creative endeavours down to fit a timescale defined by profit alone.

Yet even though the culture of crunch-time is currently ingrained in the industry, we do not have to put up with it. The only reason that companies get away with demanding their employees work crunch time is because we the workers put up with it. If every games industry worker refused to work a single hour's overtime, what would happen? If crunch time was as necessary and inherent in the industry as companies claim, then the industry would simply die. We all know that wouldn't happen. What would be far more likely to happen would be that companies would learn that they could no longer leave the workforce out of the equation when planning new projects. Schedules would have to be re-thought to take account of workers unwilling to suffer so much purely for the profits of their bosses. Unpaid overtime is only so common in the games industry because we allow it to be. If enough industry workers banded together and refused to do it, it would become unworkable and would no longer be so ubiquitous.

We're obviously a long, long way away from anything like that happening in the industry, yet it helps to illustrate the point. We, as games industry workers, could choose to end crunch time if we truly wanted it to happen. It would need workers to stand together and support each other, both within a studio and across the whole industry, but it could be done. Our bosses can only dictate our lives and living conditions in this way if we allow them to do it. If we stand together and support one another, then we can be the ones to make the decisions, we can be the ones in control of our own lives. We want to work in an industry that helps produce the games we are passionate about, not just profits wrung from another late night with no pay.

We do this job because we love games. Let us work for our passion, not for our bosses' profits.

*From [http://www.solfed.org.uk](http://www.solfed.org.uk)*