“My significant other works for Electronic Arts, and I'm what you might call a disgruntled spouse” (EA Spouse). This quote is the first sentence in an anonymous letter that would spark the first major discussion of something known as “Crunch” within the video game development industry. The author known simply as “ea_spouse”, on November 10th 2004, at 12:01 AM posted a lengthy rant about how their partner has been overworked by EA, a major game company, to the point that it was affecting their partner’s health, both mental and physical, and straining the relationship that those two shared. Anyone reading this probably has not heard of the Crunch Crisis, or the EA Spouse Letter, and that is precisely the issue. What do the terms Crunch, and Crunch Crisis mean? How does the overworking of employees during periods of Crunch affect their mental health? And why is this issue something that most people have never heard of? Through the lens of the following research the answers are simple, the overworking of employees, usually near the end of a game’s development, is seen as common and acceptable practice despite the significant impacts it has on the employees’ health.

The easiest way to begin to understand this topic is to first understand what crunch is. Crunch is usually described as developers working insane overtime shifts, usually close to a games release, and usually with no compensation for this overtime. In his article titled “The Horrible World of Video Game Crunch”, Jason Schreir writes “Few would take issue with a boss asking his or her employees to work late for a few days or even a week toward the end of a project. It’s when these requests become excessive or even normalized—when standard 40-hour
weeks morph into 60, 80, 100 on a regular basis—that it turns into a bigger problem” (Schreier, “The Horrible World…”). According to Schreier, overtime on its own is not a bad thing and while annoying, it isn’t as extreme as the 60+ hours that crunch warrants. And with such extreme over time shifts, those who already have a hard time finding time for their family, friends, or hobbies outside of work will have even less or no time for that, and health issues will begin to pop up more frequently.

Elaborating on the overtime shifts and just how many people have to work them, in the Canadian Journal of Communication Vol 31, there is an article titled ““EA Spouse” and the Crisis of Video Game Labour: Enjoyment, Exclusion, Exploitation, Exodus” that brings up some more specific statistics about just how many people work crunch overtime shifts. It states “But the IGDA survey reports that almost 60% work 46 hours or more a week, and nearly 20% work over 55 hours… during crunch time, 35% of respondents reported working 65-80 hours a week, with 13% doing more than 80 hours…” (Dyer-Witherfold, pages 607-608). These are some large numbers, especially with over half of the employees working overtime outside of the crunch window, especially when considering almost 0% of these employees receive compensation in any way, no increase in pay, sick days, or even their base wage. Some developers work double what most people do, and for no added bonus. With this new information if one were to look at the letter they’d see that the EA Spouse has written “The current mandatory hours are 9am to 10pm -- seven days a week -- with the occasional Saturday evening off for good behavior (at 6:30pm). This averages out to an eighty-five hour work week” (EA Spouse). This means that
their significant other was in the 13% that were reported working more than 80 hours, and really puts into perspective the level of frustration and the extremity of the situation considering that they were in the most extreme percentile. They then go on to say things such as “The stress is taking its toll. After a certain number of hours spent working the eyes start to lose focus…” and “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:...The time just goes away” (EA Spouse).

Crunch also affects the health of the employees who are forced to work these unreasonable shifts. As seen above, there are definitely some physical negative impacts such as eye strain, headaches, upset stomach, mental fatigue, and sleep deprivation; but what about the mental health of these employees? In a study from the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Elisabeth Kleppa, Bjarte Sanne, and Grethe S. Tell found that “In the Hordaland Health Study, working overtime was associated with increased levels of anxiety and depression, and findings suggested a dose-response relationship between work hours and anxiety or depression scores” (“Working Overtime is Associated With…”). So not only are there physical health concerns that go along with extreme overtime shifts, but also scientifically proven mental health issues too. These mental health concerns aren’t minor either. As is the nature of a dose-response relationship, the more overtime a worker has to work, the more anxiety and depression they are at risk of experiencing. Looking back on the EA Spouse Letter, the partner that was working 85 hour weeks on average, they were at risk of major amounts of
anxiety and depression. Also found in this study was, those who only work about 20 hours a week and are struggling to make ends meet, are just as anxious and depressed as those who work for 60 hours a week. Almost everyone has experienced what it feels like to be short on money or having a rough month and trying to make ends meet, and having that same anxiety and depression while at the same time being overworked seems just as upsetting and difficult. The Spouse and their partner are part of this group too, writing “The love of my life comes home late at night complaining of a headache that will not go away and a chronically upset stomach, and my happy supportive smile is running out” (EA Spouse). Not only is the partner who works at EA getting physically ill, but now the spouse is starting to become mentally exhausted from it. This is one of the only times the spouse even goes into first person apart from the introduction and conclusion. The fact that they have broken their own pattern of writing to point out how they are affected is significant, and is exemplified even more when the reader realizes that this letter was published at 12:01 AM, probably when their spouse returned from another overtime shift.

This isn’t an isolated case either, just this year a game launched titles *Anthem*, and it launched to pretty negative reviews. Jason Schreier did some digging and found out a lot about the development cycle of this game titled “How BioWare’s *Anthem* Went Wrong”. The whole article is a very interesting read and dives deep into a lot of issues presented in this paper, but the main quote that supports the mental health epidemic says “Many say they or their co-workers had to take ‘stress leave’—a doctor-mandated period of weeks or even months worth of vacation for their mental health. One former BioWare developer told me they would frequently find a private room in the office, shut the door, and just cry. ‘People were so angry and sad all the
time,’ they said. Said another: ‘Depression and anxiety are an epidemic within

Bioware’” (Schreier, “How BioWare…”). The word epidemic is a strong but fitting word for the

situation described. People have to take a medical leave so they don’t have a mental health crisis

and employees find closets to cry in, and this all happened 15 years after the release of the EA

Spouse Letter.

So why does history repeat itself over and over again within the video game industry and
the crunch crisis? Honestly all of the answers are upsetting. One may be that the executives at the
top of the ladder need something changed by the same deadline, so everyone crunches to keep
their jobs, but that is the best case scenario for why it happens. In Schreier’s article “The

Horrible World of Video Game Crunch”, a co-founder of an indie game studio says “Many
teams...seem to start a project already calculating in crunch to the schedule for added content or

productivity, which is bizarrely short-sighted and disgusting” and told Schreier “One of the

issues, she says, is that the people on top of the food chain view crunch as something standard

and inevitable rather than a toxic, avoidable practice” (Schreier, “The Horrible World…”).

Crunch happens because in this wildly competitive industry, more often than not the companies

that crunch survive. But the crunch really isn’t necessary, and it has survived through the natural

selection competition of this industry. It is similar to the Appendix in the human body, we have
evolved and kept it, but can very easily live without it and all it really does is potentially cause
issues. The EA Spouse knew that too, 15 years ago when they said “Crunching neither
accelerated this nor slowed it down; its effect on the actual product was not measurable. The \
extended hours were deliberate and planned; the management knew what they were doing as they did it” (EA Spouse). In 15 years the industry has not made any progress on this issue.

Crunching does not change the development speed of a game, leads to physical and mental health issues, and does not result in employees getting paid more. Simply put, crunch should not exist, and with enough public outcry or boycotting of studios participating in this practice they would be forced to change their ways. This hasn't happened however, and as long as people continue to buy games and support crunch culture, then studios will continue to implement it. The EA Spouse Letter was a cry for help and a cry for change, and there are many more just like it. In his article “Depression, anxiety and burnout: How 'crunch culture' is hurting video game studios”, Tom Hoggins writes, “But this is no time to be complacent; it is in everyone’s best interests to learn the lessons here. Not just at Bioware and the industry at large but us too, the players…”(Hoggins). He is absolutely right just as countless others are about needing to take action about it, and that isn’t a hard thing to do. The easiest thing to do honestly, is for the public not to let this fade into obscurity for another decade and a half. Yes there are many more drastic steps that can be taken such as unionizing, but for the general population the best thing that can be done is continuing the conversation. The minute that this conversation fades from the eyes of the public, it will be another 15 year “Game Over” for the employees and their families, waiting for society to hit “Continue” on this conversation. Until this becomes a mainstream discussion for change, crunch will remain, and many other peoples’ partners will continue to suffer through work, and many more “happy supportive smiles” will run out.

Works Cited


