

Problematic Work Practices and Cultures in the Game Industry

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An Overview of a Broken Industry

Video games are the combined effort of a variety of disciplines—art, music, programming, and design to name a few. For a game to achieve the intended experience of the developers, all these pieces must come together cohesively, which can be extremely difficult. But the challenges of game development are being intensified by the exploitative, abusive, and generally problematic work practices taking place within the game industry at large. Across game studios small and large, developers find themselves in the midst of a crunch crisis: working unreasonable amounts of unpaid overtime in order to meet deadlines. Some face blatant sexism on a daily basis, perpetuated by deep issues within gaming and corporate spheres. And others experience both, along with corporate policies that reinforce these practices and leave developers with no legal recourse, spawning a movement for the industry to unionize. These social issues surrounding the technology of making a game will be analyzed through the framework of Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) with the goal of identifying the social structures that make the game industry so unsustainable for its workers. Ultimately, this paper answers the following question: in what ways is the game development work environment problematic and what about the game industry or gaming culture creates these problems?

Discourse and Documentation

To get to the root of the game industry's problems, game development must be examined from a larger perspective than just the technology that creates it, including the larger culture that surrounds it. The most direct method of accomplishing this is using a Discourse Analysis to showcase game development from the point of view of those who are personally involved. This allows for firsthand accounts of the industry work environment and provides unique perspectives on the issues that developers face day to day. There are podcasts of game directors talking about the pressures they have from both their management and their teams, or longtime industry developers detailing their experiences with crunch. There are videos where developers from Telltale Games, a studio that unexpectedly fired all of its workers, tell their stories about how they were treated. These resources provide valuable accounts of life as a game developer and the consequences of the industry's problems. Additionally, Documentary Research is used to analyze scholarly articles regarding gamer culture as well as game development practices. This paper uses articles written on the topics of women in gaming, gamer identity, and game industry labor to explore the context of games and their development at a more critical level. These sources contribute to answering the main research question as they provide explanations for some of the toxic attitudes found in gaming spaces.

Background

Before performing any analysis, however, it is important to establish a background of what the industry currently looks like. Without a doubt, one of the most widespread challenges affecting game developers is the virtually inescapable crunch culture. Crunch is a period of time during development where employees are expected to work significant overtime without pay in order to meet a particular deadline. Nearly all game companies large and small engage in crunch,

yet the practice is controversial and may have adverse effects on its employees. Game Workers Unite, an organization advocating for better labor practices in the industry, describes some of the dangers of crunch on their website's FAQ: "People have described experiencing stomach pains, memory loss, extreme anxiety, loss of family time, divorce, severe burnout, and more." The sources of crunch are also inconsistent—some teams face pressure from management to meet deadlines, while others crunch due to a passion for the project, while others still find themselves in a work culture that guilts those who do not work overtime. Teams may even face a combination of all three sources.

Crunch is far from the only problem affecting game developers. There are also a variety of culture problems that lead to a toxic work environment. These vary from company to company, but trends of sexism, gatekeeping, and exploitation are common themes in the gaming industry. One of the most shocking and relevant examples is the situation that unfolded at Riot Games in August of 2018. An article was published to Kotaku.com exposing the serious problem of sexism within the company. It described horrifying accounts of real experiences women had working at that company, and the oppressive "bro culture" perpetuated by Riot's male staff members (D'Anastasio, C., 2018). This problem goes far beyond Riot, as it is the result of problems of gender discrimination prevalent within gamer culture for years. "We have also seen that the mechanics of the male gamer stereotype lead to a marginalization of women in video game culture. This might lead to negative psychological outcomes such as feeling unwelcome, isolated, or like a misfit in a hobby that is otherwise appealing" (Paaßen, B., Morgenroth, T., & Stratemeyer, M., 2017). The male dominated stereotype of the "gamer," has made it difficult for women to feel comfortable in gaming or game development spheres. And worse still, just eight

months later, a massive walkout was organized at Riot to protest the lack of significant change in response to the article as well as Riot's policies of forced arbitration, a technique that limits the rights of workers by preventing them from taking legal recourse against their company (McNeill, L., 2019). This too is not exclusive to Riot; similar policies are found throughout the industry and in major tech companies as well (Colwill, 2019).

As a result of these issues, groups have begun pushing for the industry to unionize. Most notably, an organization called Game Workers Unite was formed in 2018 to create a network of developers and unionization resources. This organization aims to solve many of the industry's problems through unionization, explaining, "Effectively, workers are trading their relationships and health so their employers can get more money. Crunch is not sustainable, nor should it be planned. If we accept crunch as "part of the process", then we accept our jobs will never get better." In addition to these groups being formed, discussions are taking place to determine what unionization in gaming would look like. Comparisons have been drawn to the already unionized film industry which could offer insights into how the process could work in the game industry (Colwill, 2019). Others argue that game companies operate more like tech companies which are also resistant to unionizing (Colwill, 2019). There is a lot of work to be done, but the industry seems to be seriously considering unionization now more than ever before.

Social Construction of Technology in Game Development

These problems reveal that there is a larger social context to game development that is contributing to toxic work environments. As a result, the game industry can be analyzed using Social Construction of Technology (SCOT). This framework builds off the concept of social

constructions, which are shared systems of beliefs between connected groups of people. It explains that technologies are shaped in part by the social constructions that surround them, or, in other words, “technology design is an open process that can produce different outcomes depending on the social circumstances of development” (Klein, H., & Kleinman, D., 2002). In this framework, technological frames exist around the creation of an artifact and within the social group which outline the procedures, paradigms, and values belonging to the relevant social group. “A technological frame may promote certain actions and discourage others” (Klein, H., & Kleinman, D., 2002). Thus, these frames influence the way people within a certain social construction behave in that they “structure group members’ thinking, problem solving, strategy formation, and design activities” (Klein, H., & Kleinman, D., 2002). This is significant to the topic of game development because there are clear social groups that surround the creation of a game and their values regarding labor are coming into conflict with each other. These technological frames are composed of commonly shared beliefs, so a possible step toward positive change is to introduce more ethical workplace values into these frames, and phase out the negative social constructions suffocating game development spheres.

While SCOT provides a solid framework for analyzing social values, it has faced criticism for its lack of consideration of the power dynamics between groups. Opponents of SCOT argue that not all social groups have the ability to equally influence the development of an artifact or its surrounding technological frame, saying that it “fails to adequately attend to power asymmetry between groups” (Klein, H., & Kleinman, D., 2002). Additionally, it is possible for social groups relevant to the development of an artifact to become so marginalized by other groups that their input is never considered. As Winner argues, “What about groups that have no

voice but that, nevertheless, will be affected by the results of technological change?” (Winner, 1993). Ultimately, the criticisms sum to SCOT not taking into account the unfortunate inequalities found within our current social systems. This may pose a problem to the aforementioned SCOT solution to the game industry—there is a definitive “power asymmetry” between groups like developers and managers, or managers and publishers. Without this criticism, it would be possible to make the false assumption that all groups are being heard equally. This could not currently be the case within the game industry or a majority of its problems would likely have already been solved. In order for real social change to take effect, we must find a way to reconcile these power differences or at least consider the ways in which one group’s voice may outweigh another’s when determining what ideas are valued when developing a game.

Results & Discussion

Overview

Following the discourse surrounding the game development community, there are three overwhelming issues that have made this industry such an unpleasant place to work: crunch, exploitation, and sexism. Regarding crunch, this thesis explores the various internal and external pressures from management, developers, and their peers that cause developers to participate in this unhealthy style of work. Crunch is a practice that has become normalized in the game industry, and those who want to make games find themselves with no other options but to endure it. Female developers also find themselves having to endure the additional burden of a sexist work culture that rewards the stereotypically male “gamer” and undervalues anyone else. Finally, many developers are being exploited by company policies spawned from a work culture that

allows them to get away with it. A few notable case studies as well as a general sense of unrest from game workers in recent years have sparked interest in forming an industry wide union that comes closer to fruition with each corporate scandal or walkout. What all of these problems have in common is that they are products of the various social constructs surrounding the game industry and its developers, large and small. As a result, this research employs the Social Construction of Technology (SCOT) framework to better understand where these problems originate and identify steps the industry could take toward resolving them.

The Crunch Crisis

Without a doubt, the largest and most pervasive problem throughout the game industry is the hotly debated issue of crunch. It is a fascinating problem because there is no consistent reason it occurs from company to company, but it is found industry-wide. However, before discussing the different reasons for such a problem, it is important to note that crunch in this context does not necessarily refer to short spans of time where people have to work overtime. This is fairly common across many industries and is not limited to game development. The real problem is when crunch becomes so integrated into the work culture that it is expected of employees for the majority of their time at the company, as highlighted in the game industry by this recent poll: “81% of polled game developers had crunched at some point over the previous two years. (50% felt crunch was expected in their workplaces and a “normal part of the job.”)” (Schreier, J.).

The most obvious source of crunch is pressure from upper management. Game development moves quickly, and hard deadlines are set by publishers to ensure the success of the game. However, the workflow of game development is very creative and often iterative—in

other words, developers are “experimenting and prototyping and changing [the] game until [they] learn what works best. Inevitably, that means throwing out work that’s already done, and even more inevitably, that means that an entire team will have to put extra hours into a game” (Schreier, J.). This style of work is often what makes a game better creatively, but also makes it difficult to consistently hit hard deadlines. This puts project managers in a very difficult position: they can either ask for more time, miss the deadline, or cut features—all of which may result in losing funding from publishers and having the project cancelled, putting every developer out of work. Or, they can crunch to finish it on time, at the expense of their developers (Schreier, J.). This leads to a workstyle creep when publishers see that these features can be completed in a shorter window of time, and proceed to give shorter time frames in the future—continuing the cycle. As technology has improved and games have grown more complex, periods of crunch are now the norm to keep up with the current state of the art. In her article *Every Game You Like Is Built on the Backs of Workers. Video Game Creators Are Burned Out and Desperate for Change*, author Alana Semuels explains how, in the past, “that crunch period was typically limited to the weeks before a game's release date. But conditions are worsening in part because the underlying technology powering video games is changing, altering players' expectations.” Overall, more pressure is being put on developers from management than ever before, leading to a culture where such a terrible work life balance is simply a fact of life.

But why do employees accept being consistently overworked for no extra compensation as a fact of life? Why put in 80+ hour work-weeks, sleep in the office, and push yourself to your physical and mental limits for what, at the end of the day, is just a job? One explanation comes from developers at Rockstar games. “The temperament from these guys has always been: It

should be a privilege to serve in this organization...And if you don't agree with that, there's a long line of people waiting to take your place" (Schreier, J.). This attitude is further reinforced by Rockstar's outrageous policy of taking a developer's name off the credits if they leave the project before the end. Clearly, fear is a motivator. This idea that your job is constantly being sought after means that by not crunching, you are making yourself a target to be replaced by someone who will.

Another source of crunch is actually from the developers themselves. In an industry composed of passionate creatives, it is not uncommon for some developers to work long hours simply because they want to. This seems harmless, as there is no policy dictating that workers must put that amount of time in, but this puts pressure on other developers who are unable to work those hours and can put unnecessary strain on a team. In his Kotaku article, *The Horrible World of Video Game Crunch*, Jason Schrier, a prominent writer on the subject of crunch, explains: "Many of the game developers I interviewed for this story said that when some members of their teams voluntarily crunched while others didn't, the crunchers would grow to resent the people who left at 6 or 7pm every day. Even in studios where crunch is never mandatory, a divide like this can rip teams apart—unless there's a manager forcing people to go home." Passionate workers are not necessarily a bad thing, but in an industry that has significant issues with overworking its employees, they can be part of the problem.

It is not just passion that motivates some workers to stay late and work those long hours. In fact, the reasons can often be more psychological. Tanya Short is a game developer and director at Kitfox Games and is an active voice speaking out against the crunch crisis. In her piece *The Curious Appeal of Crunch*, she details ten reasons why developers voluntarily choose

to crunch, of which it is worth exploring a small subset for the purposes of this research. She begins by discussing the “Honeymoon Phase” of game development, where everyone is excited to work on the project and crunches almost accidentally. “The only real danger here is that eventually, when the honeymoon ends, 12 hours of work a day has begun to feel 'normal' and going back to 8 hours feels like slacking off” (Short). This theme of feeling like you are slacking off by not crunching is a strong force behind many of the ten reasons she provides. Another interesting perspective is that crunch creates “camaraderie.” If everyone else around you is crunching and experiencing hardship, it is something to bond over that brings everyone closer together—which means that those who want to be a team player are now pressured to crunch in solidarity. Finally, the last point she makes is that crunching is the only way that “good” games are ever finished. Looking around the industry, she notices a “superiority complex, stating that crunch is simply how good games are made. After all, if *Uncharted 4*, *Fez*, and *Fallout 4* used crunch in their process, who are we to question?” (Short). This one is the most concerning, because the games she cites here are all incredible award-winning experiences by big-budget and indie teams alike, and anyone looking for industry changing games made without crunching will be hard pressed to actually find one. In an episode of Kotaku’s *Splitscreen* podcast, game studio Iron Galaxy is interviewed about their strict anti-crunch policies. However, they themselves imply that they are not really looking to necessarily make high caliber titles, they simply establish a way that they want to work and look for publishers and partners that will accept it (Schrier, J., Hamilton, K., & Myers, M.). The answer to the question of whether or not crunching is required to make a “good” game is unfortunately still unclear.

Iron Galaxy's approach to crunch offers important insight to what it may take to change the industry. Games are a technological artifact, and the studios surrounding them are a form of social construct. Furthermore, the ways in which these studios interact with each other and with publishers creates an even higher-level social construct. So far we have seen how this higher construct influences the lower one—managers do not want to make their teams crunch, but competition from other studios or pressure from publishers can make them feel there is no other choice. Iron Galaxy is a rare example of a social group from this lower level actually influencing the upper level. They have mandated how they will work, and outside sources can choose whether or not to work with them. A common criticism of the social construction of technology framework is that certain social groups can be easily sidelined who still may be affected by the decisions of other more powerful social groups (Winner). What Iron Galaxy has shown is that game studios are not one of these forgotten social groups; with enough effort, it is possible to change the social constructions surrounding the game industry from within.

Sexism & Gamer Culture

Rampant toxicity is another problem that has caused many developers to leave the industry, particularly women. The amount of sexism in the game industry is shameful, and is likely a direct result of the same attitudes in gaming culture as a whole. Riot Games provides an effective case study, as their workplace culture is a fantastic example of everything wrong with the game industry. In August of 2018, an extensive article was published to Kotaku.com titled *Inside the Culture of Sexism at Riot Games* by author Cecilia D'Anastasio. In her research, she interviewed developers across genders who work for Riot Games, and asked them about their experiences working there. The accounts provided by the women at Riot were horrifying,

whereas the men faced none of the same experiences. Incidents of sexual harassment, “bro culture,” and workplace discrimination only scratch the surface of the problems at this company, and Riot is far from the only culprit in game development. As she sums up at the end of her article: “Riot is just one company, but two dozen current and former employees have personally experienced or witnessed how its culture and structure—ones shared across the ranks of gaming, infosec, hardware, software, and digital marketplace companies and tech giants—disadvantaged women” (D’Anastasio).

The common theme of the article is that women are consistently disregarded in gaming spaces and passed over in favor of their male coworkers. For example, it describes a particular incident where a female employee and a male employee pitched exactly the same idea, one with much more success than the other. In regards to scenarios like these, she states “they fall into a pattern: A woman performs a manager’s job for a while, without getting a pay raise or title change, only to watch Riot promote an apparently less experienced man over her” (D’Anastasio). This has a lot to do with Riot’s strong emphasis “gamers.” Or as the head of the company once put it, “Here at Riot Games, we hire gamers,” he said in his talk to an audience of Riot employees, audio of which was obtained by *Kotaku*. “If you’re not a core gamer, you need to over-index in another area.” Whether it is finance, development facilities, player support, he said, “I don’t give a shit. You’re better if you’re a gamer” (D’Anastasio). Aside from the obvious, the reason this is a particularly problematic hiring process is because the term “gamer” has taken on a stereotypically male connotation and has been historically used to gatekeep women from gaming spaces.

Analyzing the term “gamer” is significant to understanding the experiences of women in gaming. When you use the word “gamer,” the stereotypical gender of such a person is thought of as male, despite women playing just as many games as men. The problem is that male “gamers” have marginalized women by using genre to classify a difference between people who play certain types of games and “true gamers”: “Although women might play games, they are not considered *true* gamers. This is because women allegedly only play casually, playing ‘inferior games’ ... As such, women supposedly exhibit less dedication and skill with respect to gaming” (Paaßen, B., Morgenroth, T., & Stratemeyer, M.). So, unless someone plays a certain type of skill based game and is good enough to compete with a “true gamer,” they are barred from the gaming community. This problem is not actually limited to women, but it is usually the way “gamers” exclude them. Furthermore, this exclusion leads to women feeling uncomfortable in gaming and less likely to identify themselves as female in spaces where they can remain anonymous. This perpetuates the male gamer stereotype at no fault of their own, considering that making themselves visible leaves them susceptible to harassment and exclusion (Paaßen, B., Morgenroth, T., & Stratemeyer, M.).

Ultimately when game companies only value “gamers,” and when that culture rarely considers women to be “true gamers,” companies like Riot who clearly do not value their female employees, come into being. And while Riot is deservedly in the hot seat, this culture is present throughout all game development companies to some degree and needs to change. The authors of *What is a True Gamer? The Male Gamer Stereotype and the Marginalization of Women in Video Game Culture* provide one solution: “more women need to be visible in performing the gamer role in order for the gamer stereotype to change. A more visible representation of women in

gaming would likely lead to a higher number of female role models being available to girls and women.” (Paaßen, B., Morgenroth, T., & Stratemeyer, M.). To continue the discussion of social construction of technology, this solution would involve integrating more women into the social constructions to collapse the problematic “values” of that social group. The more women that participate in this social group, the more difficult it will be for these beliefs to persist. Hopefully this integration can abolish the arbitrary and discriminatory lines between people who play games.

Exploitation

Developers also find themselves in a position where their companies are able to exploit them, and they have little to no recourse. The ethics of massive amounts of unpaid overtime aside, there are further ways in which developers are being taken advantage of. This research highlights two case studies that exemplify this: the unexpected closure of Telltale Games and the company-wide walkout at Riot Games.

In the fall of 2018, Telltale games - a game studio responsible for employing just under 300 employees - closed its doors. The closing alone was not unusual; game companies come and go and while it is difficult for those working there at the time, developers are able to transition to new companies without too much interruption to their finances and careers. However, in this particular case, the way in which Telltale decided to handle the closure reflects a clear lack of concern for the people it employed. Telltale shut down without any notice, laid off everyone except for a small subset needed for the closure, and offered zero severance to the people they let go. Developers showed up to work in the morning and were out of a job by the end of the day with no assistance or time to plan for the future. A recent documentary about the situation

describes the toll this sudden mass firing had on the employees: “For some it was psychological. For others it involved pulling children out of school, changing careers, or moving cities” (Jayne, J., & Martinez, E.). People’s entire lives were uprooted and there was nothing they could do about it.

More recently, in the summer of 2019, employees at Riot games staged a company-wide walkout to protest the many cultural and labor related issues within the company (and the industry at large), with a focus on Riot’s policy of forced arbitration. This policy is explained as “a provision that requires workers to waive their right to a day in a court, barring them from suing their employer and, in many cases, participating in class action lawsuits” (McNeill, L.). Forced arbitration is problematic because it strips employees of any legal recourse to defend themselves if a company is treating them unfairly. This means that issues of discrimination in gender, pay, and hiring—all which are problems in the game industry—are much harder to resolve legally and are allowed to continue.

These case studies show that there are clear patterns of exploitation, and examining the industry through the lens of social construction of technology reveals that this is ultimately a social issue. The social construction surrounding the game industry is an environment that constantly reminds its participants that they are privileged to be a part of it, and that if they are dissatisfied, they will be replaced by someone who is more grateful to be there. Employees subject themselves to unfair policies like forced arbitration in the first place because “...employees have little choice but to sign arbitration agreements. (Their only other option is to decline the job, passing it to one of the other myriad developers looking for work in gaming.)” (McNeill, L.). These companies have created a social construction that takes advantage of the

fact that for many developers, making games is a dream job. These are highly skilled individuals getting the opportunity to work on their passions—passions that have been leveraged into an excuse for companies to treat their employees poorly. “Because of this cultural practice, the industry is able to disassociate game development from labor—the work is not work, it is play ... game development confers a high-level of prestige that leads many workers to accept long, unpaid hours and unstable employment” (McNeill, L.). As a result of this social construction, developers feel that they are unable to speak out about these policies at the risk of losing their jobs, and thus nothing changes.

The solution then, is to change the construction to give developers more of a voice. For many, this means a push for the game industry to unionize. As it stands, developers have no real way to take legal action against mistreatment. Employees at Telltale attempted to take matters into their own hands by filing a class action lawsuit against the company, “which would mean that Telltale would have to give each of the 275 employees salary and benefits for a full 60 days following their termination, if the plaintiffs win the lawsuit,” (Sarkar, S) but the case was ultimately dismissed. However, with a union, the situation they found themselves in would have been impossible from the start. Organizations like Game Workers Unite have stepped in to fill this need for representation and are currently working toward connecting developers interested in unionizing. Ultimately, in addition to providing the ability to fight back against exploitation, many developers in favor of unionization also believe that it will improve the quality of the games they make, saying: “if there are more protections in place against post-launch layoffs, talented developers who would otherwise burn out and leave the game industry will have a chance to be fostered and trained, bringing their contributions to the table and pushing the

medium forward for us all...the amount of energy they can put toward our games will only increase” (Colwill, T.). At the time of this research, the effort to unionize is still underway but the support only seems to be growing. Studies are reporting “that an incredible 82 percent said they’d endorse an industrywide game development union.” If this many developers are truly onboard, significant social reconstruction may take place within the game industry in the very near future, improving not only the issues of exploitation, but all of the cultural problems covered in this thesis.

Limitations

The past few years have been instrumental in bringing issues of workers’ rights to light within the game industry. But, because this is all so recent, many of these stories and struggles are still unfolding, creating some limitations to this research. To begin, most of the companies described are still around and their work climates are constantly evolving. It is also difficult to get a completely accurate picture of a company’s culture without actually experiencing it firsthand; the best alternatives are articles like D’Anastasio’s piece on Riot that offer a highly researched dive into a specific company—which are few and far between. Furthermore, developers who still work for these companies are limited in how much they can report in fear of losing their jobs, and many of the developers from these sources are kept anonymous. Finally, the three core problems with the game industry have been generalized to cover the most ground, but there exist many more nuanced subproblems and other, entirely different problems that could not be covered here.

Future Work

To get the most complete picture of the status of the game industry, it would be advantageous in future work for researchers to get more firsthand accounts of people who have worked in game companies. Additionally, following the progress of the industry's movement toward unionization could yield interesting new areas to explore as new strides forward are made. Finally, there is so much to explore in the debate over the necessity of crunch to produce high profile award winning gaming experiences and the benefit of answering that question could have large ramifications on how games are developed in the future.

Conclusion

From this research, it is clear that the game industry has at least three major problems to solve - crunch, sexism, and exploitation, all caused by underlying social values that disenfranchise workers and/or discriminate against groups of them. More broadly, this paper demonstrates the importance of considering the social and interpersonal aspects of creating technological artifacts. Nothing should be more fun than teaming up with passionate, highly skilled people, and pooling abilities to make something creative like a video game. However, the social issues that have arisen from this line of work make game development an industry to avoid. By better understanding the experiences of developers and their work cultures, and by analyzing gaming from a social perspective using SCOT or other frameworks, perhaps one day some of the fun can return to an industry so passionate about creating fun for others.

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