

## **“The Passion of the Developer: ea\_spouse in the h\_ouse! A panel on labor relations and quality of life in the industry”**

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Position Paper:  
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Not much has changed in two years. A large portion of the video game industry honestly believes that poor quality of life is a requirement for the business. They have publicly argued that game developers are "passionate" people; that "passion" can only manifest itself in relentless schedules and minimal compensation, like a deranged high school football coach screaming at a player to make a touchdown with a broken leg. They insist that if scheduling or compensation models changed, the passion would evaporate - that suffering is necessary for the industry's existence.

During the Quality of Life Summit at the 2005 Game Developers Conference, one manager slyly tried to get attendees to “agree” on how many hours per week should be considered "acceptable." By lobbing the ball across the aisle, the manager successfully divided developers as they argued for 40, 50, or 60 hours. Until everyone accepts the strong research indicating that a 40-hour week results in better productivity and fewer errors, managers need only feign interest in fixing the problem.

Such misery could be prevented if labor laws were clearer. As it is, ambiguities allow companies to claim that game developers are exempt from comp time and overtime. Employee lawsuits claim otherwise, on the basis that employees "do not perform work that is original or creative and have no management responsibilities and are seldom allowed to use their own judgment." The employees' argument here seems to be that many artists are simply “coloring in between the lines,” so to speak, like Disney production workers coloring a cel that someone else created. Almost negating that distinction is the fact that, depending on the state, managers and administrative employees are usually exempt from overtime rules, but only if they have the power to hire and fire. So an art director may be considered a manager, but can only be classified as exempt if he or she has the management power to hire and fire. Laws for programmers are more ambiguous, and because American lawmakers have not been friends of the game development community over the

years, one wonders if lawmakers would bother touching the issue.

American politicians, quick to stereotype and scapegoat the medium in order to grandstand for the cameras, are eager to introduce legislation against video games, however censorious or unconstitutional. The same politicians who pass laws "protecting" children from games will not consider "protecting" them in more obviously beneficial ways. They believe in causality when a child experiences violent content, but ignore it when parents are held hostage by 80 to 100-hour weeks that cripple their ability to have any kind of meaningful influence on their kids. Many developers and their families are now agitating for improved quality of life, but reports conflict on how much has been accomplished.

Developers have fought admirably for change. Sessions are often held to discuss how the community can encourage change within each company, from the ground up, so to speak. However, the fruitfulness of these discussions depends not on the soundness of their reasoning, but upon the attitudes and long-term vision of management. Reason is pointless if you hit a wall, but walls can be broken with legislative, union-based, or legal solutions.

### **ORGANIZED RESPONSES: LOBBYING AND UNIONS**

For the reasons mentioned above, a legislative solution is the least likely solution. Lobbying could be an expensive, perhaps unwholesome proposition, and no one seems positioned to do it well. The industry's most successful lobbyist (on game censorship issues), the Entertainment Software Association, would find itself in a conflict of interests with industry publishers on this issue. Even an attempt to rally publishers into a think tank would require the belief that standardizing fair work rules, however painful in the short term, is in everyone's long-term best interests. Have we given up on convincing publishers, and can we change the status quo without them?

Publishers may not see the light until unionization is almost upon them. Though unlikely right now, we have seen throughout history that a movement can begin with a single spark and a single person. The story of Norma Rae shows us just how quickly complacency and apathy can change into unforgiving action. Developers, still stuck on the former, would be ashamed to breathe the very notion of the word “union,” but there are small signs that it could be coming.

Irate members of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG) have voiced complaints during sessions at the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3, now nearly defunct with all the biggest publishers having withdrawn); complaints were rightly met with the attitude “get in line.” Nevertheless,

“SAG members voted on July 28 by a margin of 81.2 percent to 18.8 percent to overwhelmingly approve the proposed Interactive Media Agreement recently negotiated with video game producers. In accordance with a national board decision on June 29, the referendum was sent to Screen Actors Guild performers with earnings under the previous three-year agreement with the video game industry—as well as any eligible, paid-up SAG member in good standing who requested a ballot.” [Source: [www.sag.org](http://www.sag.org)]

Union organizers from the Writers Guild of America have been seen in Quality of Life and Credit sessions at the Game Developers Conference, and we have several indications that the Guild will increase its influence. One, the Guild intends to begin an award for video game writing in 2007. This will give the WGA much more visibility and credibility within the game industry should it seek to expand its influence. (<http://www.navgtr.org/id46.html>)

"The New Media Caucus is a growing group of WGA writers currently working in all areas of new media. [Those who have] joined the Caucus as Associate Members [have] become eligible for a variety of guild benefits enjoyed by full WGA members."

"The Interactive Program Contract is a simple one-page agreement that allows WGA members to receive pension and health contributions from game industry companies without requiring those companies to become signatories to the guild. This [contract] has helped numerous writers maintain their health coverage while working on new media projects." [Source: Game Writers Quarterly]

Plus, if the Guild is comfortable nominating writers who don't actually write screenplays, like Mike Leigh, the Guild may take an equally flexible view of the games industry, perhaps someday seeing fit to consider game designers as "authors" and writers of their craft. If successful recruiting designers, the Guild may take the game industry by surprise.

In truth, this would be no different than most crises that hit the game industry. Companies are too often in reactionary positions, either because of a lack of foresight or the unwillingness to take control and lead an issue, instead leaving quality of life for others to fix.

This approach should be seen as a risk. As insurmountable as it may seem to go from 80 to 40-hour weeks, the cost associated with that difficult transition is but one serious risk to the bottom line should unionization occur. Outcomes can not be assumed, but it's reasonable to assume the risk of additional "forced" union benefits and possible ill-timed strikes from multiple unions. It may

seem far-fetched now, but a few sparks can bring it into perspective.

## SEEING THE FOREST THROUGH THE TREES

In the short term, many companies can't compete without 80 hours of output. They can't afford to double their workforce to solve the problem, but many companies have made little effort to improve processes or adjust business models to reflect a 40-hour goal. Those that have done this have been successful, but not all managers are equipped to handle such drastic transitions on their own.

Management in the game industry is often too young and inexperienced. They've made money a certain way for enough years that they can't see the forest through the trees. They haven't developed the long-term risk assessment skills that are so valuable in more experienced management. What's more, they never get the benefit of those insights and red flags, since young managers tend to hire people like themselves, rather than focus on a diverse workforce.

Many companies, especially publishers, have an opportunity to address quality of life and fair compensation for overtime and comptime. Industry blogger Mike Corey summed it up best with a facetious comment on E3 cancellations, "Look on the bright side: with the money companies save on plane tickets, they can give every developer a fat bonus check," referring of course to up to \$20 million some large publishers are "saving" with no E3. It's a joke, yes, but now is the time to invest in a diverse workforce with more competence and improved production processes. For comparison, consider that Electronic Arts settled two overtime lawsuits for \$15.6 million (for graphic artists) in 2005 and \$14.9 million (for programmers and engineers) in 2006. No one knows how many millions were wasted on legal fees. As reported by *Game Daily Biz*, "EA does not expect the \$14.9 million settlement to have a significant impact on its fiscal fourth quarter 2006 financial results."

Management could benefit from learning how other big companies deal with quality of life and project management. "Google's Douglas Merrill, a corporate technology director with a background in psychology, is firmly convinced that while technology plays a role in keeping projects on track, so do the Ping-Pong tables and the elaborate cafeteria at company headquarters in Mountain View, Calif. - the social settings that get coders away from their desks and talking to each other about their projects. As he explained during a presentation in Phoenix, that's one of the things that made Google successful as a startup, but the challenge is to maintain that quirky culture as the company grows." [Source: *Baseline* July 2006, p. 41]

“Every week, every Google technologist receives an automatically generated e-mail message asking, essentially, what did you do this week and what do you plan to do next week? This homegrown project management system parses the answer it gets back and extracts information to be used for follow-up. So, next week, Merrill explains, the system will ask, “Last week, you said you would do these six things. Did you get them done?” If Google employees found the project tracking system to be a hassle to work with, they probably wouldn't use it, regardless of whether it was supposed to be mandatory, Merrill says. But because it's as easy as reading and responding to an e-mail, “We get pretty high compliance.” [Source: *Baseline* July 2006, p. 47]

There is outside help. People like Larry LaRose ([www.icsolutionsllc.com](http://www.icsolutionsllc.com)) have helped companies like General Motors as a consultant with over 23 years of experience in creating and implementing solutions for impediments which hamper company and employee growth, focusing on procedural recruitment, training, team building, human relations, production processes, multi-site operations, facility planning, and acquisitions and divestitures. Few managers in the game industry can claim 23 years of experience in these areas, and so many can not imagine how to improve processes wean themselves off of 80-hour week business models. But it's their job to know.

Managers are the ones responsible for providing fair quality of life, not the Human Resources department, and not the developers. Managers are often free to outsource talent, but perhaps they should have the guts to outsource a little bit of themselves to fill the gaps in their own talents.

Companies can't compete without 80 hours of output? Wrong. Companies can't compete without effective management willing to look outside themselves for solutions to the world's problems. The risk of maintaining the status quo is to risk behaving in such a way as to attract unions.

Can't compete with 40 hours? Imagine being unionized and trying to compete with countries that are not. Imagine where General Motors would be today had it taken a more proactive view to quality of life before a few sparks changed the industry forever. Imagine not competing at all. Imagine if all game production was outsourced to Europe, Asia, and Australia. Andy Luckey, Co-founder and President of Greater Family, LLC and Senior Creative & Production Advisor for Animation Dimensions (India), Ltd., was kind enough to share that this has already happened in the animation industry. We have pre-production and post-production, but production is mostly gone. That's why Disney is closing studios and why “Tarzan” and “Mulan” were made in Paris.

## “ALL RISE”: IN COURT IF NOT IN UNION

Ruling out legislative solutions and unions, what is left for the individual developer? The answer is an exhausting lawsuit that may cause pause among future employers. A lawsuit should not be entered into quickly. It may or may not be the right decision, depending on your circumstances. Certainly, not everyone will enjoy the same “positive” reaction as ex-EA employee Leander Hasty and Erin Hoffman (a.k.a. ea\_spouse). Filing a lawsuit is a difficult decision, to be sure, but for those unable to afford a lawyer, the decision is easy: No. Still, there is hope.

Legal pressure can be applied without a costly lawsuit. For example, Prepaid Legal Services ([www.prepaidlegal.com](http://www.prepaidlegal.com)), one of America's fastest growing companies, provides unlimited telephone consultations with the best law firms in your region for about \$26 a month. The structure is similar to an HMO; most of the time you will not be using the service, but there are advantages to maintaining it at all times. For example, up to 80 hours of trial *defense* time is included for cases arising out of actions following the date of your membership agreement. They will not *file* a lawsuit for you as part of the service (though there is a discount for services outside the scope of membership benefits), but they will offer advice and even send a letter on the firm's letterhead on your behalf. These firms are not lawsuit-happy; they will help you determine what action is in your best interests. For 5 years I have used the service for any number of legal questions for which they have specialists in each area, and phone calls are always promptly returned.

## VOICES FROM MARS

Lastly, some inspirational gobbley-gook... I was really struck by this scene in the game Doom 3:

**Betruger:** *Do I need to remind you of the groundbreaking work that we're doing here?*

**Councilor Swann:** *No, but I've been authorized by the Board to look at everything.*

**Betruger:** *The Board authorized you? The Board doesn't know the first thing about science. All they want is something to make them more money; some product. Don't worry, they'll get their product.*

**Councilor Swann:** *After how many accidents? Tell me, Doctor Betruger, why are so many workers spooked, complaining, requesting transfers off Mars?*

**Betruger:** *They simply can't handle life here. They're exhausted and overworked. If I had a larger, more competent staff and bigger budget, even these few accidents could have been avoided.*

Sound familiar?

If you look at the past 10 years of Oscar-nominated films, you have 19 movies about writers, 29 movies about actors/performers/entertainers, and 10 movies about other artists... for a total of 58 movies.

Hollywood's product sort of reflects its community. You can tell from its films what issues are important to that community, but video games generally don't reflect their creators for various reasons that we should try to overcome in small ways. I think whatever we can do to make games a more personal form of expression, the more these issues will be taken seriously. The quality of life problem needs to reach that mass audience for maximum awareness.

We're suffering as a community in part because we have no identity outside our community. Not being taken seriously has a major impact on our quality of life. It's hard to recruit good people because the education system largely ignores our needs, because "games education" is rarely taken seriously. It's hard to find politicians willing to do the right thing, because games aren't taken seriously. The Doom 3 scene was not intended to speak to quality of life, but it did. Imagine if the game community decided to tackle the issue in its own language in its own medium.

In the past 10 years, Hollywood found 58 ways to explore itself. Infuse your games with your quality of life, and see what happens. If you think you can't do it, you're wrong. Shigeru Miyamoto explored caves in his youth; it's what gave him the idea to do cave levels in Super Mario World. He's also a constant gardener; it's what gave him the idea to do Pikmin. Tell the world who you are one game at a time. Show us what's important to you in your games. Show us what "the passion of the developer" really means.

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## Friction Costs

### How Immature Production Practices and Poor Quality of Life are Bankrupting the Game Industry

By Jason DellaRoca

So much in business is determined by a simple acronym: ROI (return on investment). Obviously enough, as a businessperson, if you make an investment, you'd like to

receive a return on that investment. In fact, the need for a return on investment is so pervasive, essentially no decision is made without first measuring it, evaluating it and factoring it against ROI from other opportunities. What's an acceptable ROI? It really depends on the investor. To some, making a modest 5% return is a sound business decision. When we get into the 20% range, many would say that's a no-brainer investment. Where's my checkbook?!

In the game industry, most investments are made into new technologies and tools to ensure games have the latest bells and whistles. Other times, investments are made in areas like licensing rights (e.g., for a longstanding successful movie franchise) or market intelligence. All in all, investments are made in the hopes of generating more revenue: Make more and better products, sell more products, etc.

That's all fine and good, but much of the game industry is ignoring (or is ignorant to) a massive investment opportunity...

#### NUTS AND BOLTS

Countless studies performed over decades and across many business sectors have proven time and again that mature project management practices and an emphasis on keeping workers happy can net massive returns. And, we're talking 1,000%-plus massive.

Investing in development practices such as formal code and design inspections, cost and quality estimation tools, and long-range technology planning can bring upwards of 1,000% return on investment over a multi-year time span. [Research has shown](#) that improved software practices pay an average ROI of 500% (including false starts) that is sustainable over many years.

A great deal of this return (or more accurately, savings) comes from improving development lifecycle costs. For example, spending more time in early stage planning and prototyping means unexpected changes and rework can be front-loaded in a project - when change is cheap. Formal production methodologies work to avoid changes late in a project, when the trickle-down impact can be massive - the dreaded beta crunch.

Returns also come from improved production time and more predictable schedules - the stuff producers dream about. No need to explain the benefits here on the gaming front, with so much riding on a holiday shopping window or simultaneous movie launch.

Another area that drives returns is improved quality. Better and smarter production leads to games with fewer bugs and stronger feature sets. Though this is more subjective to

gauge, a less painful production enables developers to infuse the game with more of the "fun bits." More seriously, a front-loaded, iterative pre-production process allows the team to more easily "discover" and fine-tune the **fun**, as opposed to waiting for everything to miraculously come together at the end of a project.

## LAZY BUMS

The desired response is, "Where's my checkbook?!" Right?

Wrong. Unlike writing a check to the bank and getting check + x% back in a year, this is the kind of investment that requires work. And most of us are just too lazy. As one anti-motivation poster said eloquently:

["Hard work often pays off over time, but laziness always pays off now."](#)

Additionally, the game industry is so in the dark when it comes to project management, many really can't imagine that another way exists. ("You mean we don't have to crunch from day one?") Indeed, some developers have flatly stated that they had no idea such process improvement tools and techniques - which have been used for years elsewhere in software development - even existed. A related problem is the fact that the game industry has had much success under the current regime, and no one is willing to gamble their career on killing the goose that laid the golden eggs. Well, [some are](#), but they are in the minority...

On a more practical level, a major challenge to widespread adoption of such improvements is that much of the production research and knowledge about their benefits is not directly from the game industry. For one, this means developers are too ready to dismiss the research as irrelevant (certainly, some of it is). But, more pragmatically, they don't have the time or ability to "translate" and apply lessons from other types of projects to games. Moreover, the game industry has an ongoing and rather serious case of xenophobia, manifested in an unwillingness to adopt or in many cases even examine ideas from the "outside." This behavior is less likely the result of arrogance, than from hacker ethic roots and of caution bred by constant battery from outside forces.

On the whole, everyone is still fighting too many fires related to today's milestone to be looking at a longer-term pay off.

## CHURN AND BURN

Of graver concern is the widely held view that developers are replaceable cogs in the machine. With a rampant

developer-as-commodity attitude, it's no surprise that more isn't done to invest in workers' long-term careers.

No doubt, any discussion of quality of life or saner production schedules framed in an "I don't want to work hard" context is career suicide. Rather, the industry needs to take an approach that proclaims the ROI potential of happy workers running under smart project management.

Ignoring all the massive ROI potential discussed previously, the reality is that driving staff to the point of burnout is bad business. Humanitarian treatment aside, the friction cost of losing, and subsequently finding, replacing and training someone new ranges from \$20,000 to \$100,000-plus per head (the total is a mix of direct costs, like recruiting fees and relocation expenses, and indirect costs, like lost productivity during training or loss of tacit knowledge). An entire team walking out at the end of a project is not unheard of. Kudos to the producer who got the project out, but at what expense?

Let's not even get into the massive costs buried in health care expenses and lost productivity due to sick leave.

## INSIDE OUT

In a nutshell, there are investments to generate money and investments to save money. Both approaches are viable paths to a healthy and profitable company and industry. In that regard, it would be interesting to measure the game industry's actual profitability. We all know about the vast revenue growth (\$10 billion in the U.S.A. and counting), but is the industry as whole turning a profit?

I'd wager that we are breaking even, at best. Too much emphasis has been placed on generating gross revenue (i.e., more and more sales) as opposed to driving for a larger net profit. Spending \$1 million to make \$10 million is better than spending \$35 million to make \$40 million (or in some cases 50 to make 40).

At a time when next-gen budgets are at the \$15 million mark - on the low end of the scale - executives should be salivating at any opportunity to optimize. Simply put, there is an enormous opportunity to generate profits via more efficient production methodologies and treating development staff as investments as opposed to commodities.

## THE BIGGER PICTURE

More fundamental is the notion that immature practices and extreme working conditions are bankrupting the industry's passion - the love for creating games that drives developers to be developers.

When the average career length of the game development workforce is just over five years and over 50% of developers admit they don't plan to hang around for more than 10, [we have a problem](#).

How can an industry truly grow, and an art form evolve, if everyone is gone by the time they hit 30?

How can we grow beyond an [11.5% female](#) workforce when the level of commitment expected all but negates any hope of raising a family?

Why does this kind of stuff matter?

Ask yourself what movies would be like if they were created mostly by people with five years of movie-making experience - and were typically male. Spielberg would have checked out way before creating *E.T.* Same for music, art, books - every art form. J.K. Rowling would never have penned *Harry Potter*. The examples are countless.

Immature production practices and poor quality of life are stealing the industry's ability to innovate and reinvigorate itself with fresh ideas. It's limiting our ability to attract new and diverse talent. It's robbing us of our experienced creators, who leave us with their hard earned tacit knowledge in tow. It's restricting our ability to reach broader audiences and create games with ever more cultural significance.

Investing in developers' careers is investing in the future viability of the game industry and the continued evolution of the medium of games.

What's the return on that investment?

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<http://www.escapistmagazine.com/issue/40/23> ]

## The Passion of the Developer

By Matthew Sakey

Ask a game developer why he includes the ability to shoot people in his games. Then ask Neil Simon why he chose to have a robber steal Marsha Mason's groceries in "The Goodbye Girl." The answer is obvious in the latter case; the robber is a creative device, his role is to create emotional conflict for the character. Quite simply, he "fits." He makes sense. He's a robber in New York City. No questions asked.

Game developers, on the other hand, are often asked to justify their content or even their constitutional rights - an obvious indication that games aren't blessed with the same

"prestige" as a good chick flick. We don't yet live in a society where Will Wright is a guest on Letterman, where audience members in the Ed Sullivan theatre marvel at the legendary showman's demonstration of Spore or the latest interactive Emily Dickinson game.

The frustration of game developers everywhere reached its peak in 2004, when an anonymous blogger calling herself EA\_spouse posted a withering account of her husband's life as an overworked, underpaid Electronic Arts employee on Livejournal.com. For the man she loves, "quality of life" is defined as chronic illness, insomnia and exhaustion - and no comp or overtime: "...Production had accelerated [to] eight hours six days a week... ...[then] another acceleration: twelve hours six days a week, 9am to 10pm."

EA\_spouse's blistering indictment of the industry dumped fuel on the smoldering push for global unionization. This possibility - viewed by most insiders as both inevitable and ruinous - looms ever larger. There is a growing sense that developers are justified in their concerns but searching for the solution down the wrong path, leading to silent apathy and philosophical divisions. Developers feel resigned to their fate, and the answer for most of them has been to leave (a normal career in the industry is only 5-10 years)ii.

The two issues - game content and industry quality of life - may be intertwined. Game developers may produce violent content as a way to unconsciously exorcise their anger at increasingly dismal working conditions. Alternatively, they may be worked to such unhealthy extremes that they're simply too exhausted to innovate beyond the clichés of crazy weapons and crazier boob sizes that any zombie can churn into the market. Either way, the overwork, lack of recompense, and desensitizing day-to-day exposure to abusive management eventually takes its toll and has some effect on the final product.

## MY BOSS IS CAPTAIN CRUNCH

Greed and ignorance also fuel the quality of life problem. An alarmingly large portion of the industry honestly believes that privation is part of the business, that if it were to change, games would go away. It's the standard retort of many studio heads and publishers confronted with evidence that crunch times are harmful. They have publicly argued that game developers are "passionate" people; that "passion" can only manifest itself in relentless schedules and minimal compensation, like a deranged high school football coach screaming at a player to make a touchdown with a broken leg. They insist that if scheduling or compensation models changed, the passion would evaporate - that poor quality of life is necessary for the industry's existence.

During the Quality of Life Summit at the 2005 Game Developers Conference, one manager slyly tried to get

attendees to agree how many hours per week should be considered "acceptable." By lobbing the ball across the aisle, the manager successfully divided developers as they argued for 40, 50, or 60 hours. Until everyone accepts the strong research<sup>iii</sup> indicating that a 40-hour week results in better productivity and fewer errors, managers need only feign interest in fixing the problem. In more than one instance employees have sued publishers for unpaid comp time<sup>iv</sup>, but the industry's stalling tactics practically guarantee that the plaintiffs will run out of money before anything is truly decided.

### **READ MY LIPS: SAVE THE CHILDREN, SLAVE THE PARENTS**

Such misery could be prevented if labor laws were clearer. As it is, ambiguities allow companies to claim that game developers are exempt from such benefits. Unfortunately, American lawmakers have not been friends of the development community over the years. American politicians, quick to stereotype and scapegoat the medium in order to grandstand for the cameras, are eager to introduce legislation against video games, however censorious or unconstitutional. The same politicians who pass laws "protecting" children from games will not consider "protecting" them in more obviously beneficial ways. They believe in causality when a child experiences violent content, but ignore it when a child's parent is held hostage by 80 to 100-hour weeks that cripple that parent's ability to provide direction and a sense of personal responsibility in a child.

Many developers and their families are now agitating for improved quality of life<sup>v</sup>, but reports conflict on how much has been accomplished<sup>vi</sup>. Meanwhile, overworked, under-compensated drones amass war stories of evil corporations, making it hardly ironic that so many games in our history feature evil corporations, not to mention corollary themes - slavery, psychological oppression, and violent confrontations with "boss" enemies. These themes appear more and more in games from the last decade.

### **"I WAS EMPLOYEE OF THE YEAR, AND NOW I'M DEAD MEAT."**

Abe's Oddyssey has a deeply sympathetic alien slave as its central character in a futuristic, industrial world of alien races. Employees at development studio Oddworld Inhabitants knew this game had to be a hit or the company would fold. As with Final Fantasy, team members were prepared for the project to be their last. Perhaps the employees could relate when Abe says, "I was Employee of the Year, and now I'm dead meat." What crystallizes the connection to the company's predicament, however, is Abe's revelation that the antagonists "were scared because profits were grim." Oddworld, as it happened, was a major hit and spawned a franchise that only recently met its

demise when Oddworld Inhabitants retired from the realm of game development.

Beyond Good & Evil offers a more subtle, psychological theme of cultural subjugation through a convoluted web of deceit obscuring truth behind a militant occupation of Hillys. The people in this province are depicted as a mindless, apathetic population, unwilling or unable to absorb the revolutionary message disseminated by the protagonist. They aren't convinced that the oppressive DomZ occupiers are evil, and even if they are, they believe themselves powerless to do anything. The lethargy is finally shattered by the protagonist's broadcast of evidence so damning that even the most indifferent must question the status quo. "The Hillians have spontaneously shown their support," says a character in the game. It wasn't until EA\_spouse transmitted her similarly devastating testimonial that the gaming press began to cover the quality of life disaster, though it had been eating away at the core of the business for years.

In Half-Life 2, an alien horror called the Combine invades and conquers Earth. People are herded into urban concentration camps. Procreation is blocked with arousal-dampening energy fields. Drugs in the water erase memories of the past. Agitprop read by human collaborators blares from ubiquitous monitors as cattle prod-wielding riot police prowl the crumbling alleyways. The Combine has made life good, say the viewcreens. The Combine keeps us safe. The Combine is watching over us. The Combine knows what humanity needs. Stop asking questions. Conform. Quit bitching. The lethargy and indifference is such that people practically oppress themselves.

Consider this exchange between two characters in DOOM 3.

Dr. Betruger: Do I need to remind you of the groundbreaking work that we're doing here?

Councilor Swann: No, but I've been authorized by the Board to look at everything.

Betruger: The Board authorized you? The Board doesn't know the first thing about science. All they want is something to make them more money; some product. Don't worry, they'll get their product.

Swann: After how many accidents? Tell me, Doctor Betruger, why are so many workers spooked, complaining, requesting transfers off Mars?

Betruger: They simply can't handle life here. They're exhausted and overworked. If I had a larger, more competent staff and bigger budget, even these few accidents could have been avoided.

According to this argument, something else is being said between the lines. Replace "the board" with "the publisher," "science" with "games" and "accidents" with "bugs." The thesis is unexpected and potentially misleading - games may simply be violent because they're violent - but it would be ill-advised to casually ignore the possibility of a link between game content and poor working conditions in all cases. Good cheese, after all, comes from happy cows.

id Software, the studio behind DOOM 3, has developed a long-documented reputation for demanding ridiculous hours from its employees, and for firing them without warning. Games might simply reflect the frustrations of those creating them. Flashy characters, full of confidence, heroism and willingness to apply brutality to any problem may just be a mechanism of escape from those frustrations.

### **DELUSIONS OF GRANDIA**

The quality of life problem begins and ends with crunch, those increasingly-required 80 or 100-hour weeks. Eliminate it (by law or policy), or properly compensate those who endure it, and the problem is solved. Crunch exists in the first place because game development lacks optimized processes capable of achieving the aggressive milestones demanded by the industry production cycle. And there is that persistent belief that long hours are crucial to the creative process. Once the industry lets go of the ridiculously misguided notion that crunch is positive, the solution will be simple: adopt formalized, proven development and quality processes to manage production<sup>viii</sup>. An assortment of methods are used elsewhere in software development, yet professional game developers freely admit that they didn't even realize such solutions exist. Two studios that have implemented formal systems, Vicarious Visions and Blue Fang Games, have brought crunch under control and are consistently releasing successful titles on time and under budget.

Despite claims to the contrary, the truth is that passion and creativity alike are more effectively destroyed by draconian working conditions than by efficiency and fair hours. Quality of life is akin to global warming in that sense. During this year's G8 Summit, British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced that, despite universal commitments to increase aid to Africa, he could not get President Bush to back his global warming agenda to reduce emissions. Everyone agrees that certain emissions are harmful. The debate lies in whether or not that harm has global effects. There's no denying that crunch is harmful. But many, faced with the choice between doing what is right and what is easy, prefer to leave the problem for others to fix. It begs the question, "Are you a Bush developer, or a Blair developer?"

### **IT TAKES A VILLAGE**

With so many developers desensitized and demoralized by the brutality of their quality of life, it's not terribly surprising that games are correspondingly brutal. Developers battle against savage requirements in increasingly hostile communities. The problem is that some in our village: the parents, politicians, and managers most of all, are unsympathetic to that fact. They would rather play the blame game - the most interactive game of all.

Awareness of the turmoil in the development community, and of the possibility that maligned game content is but a symptom of a much more serious problem, may not change the opinion of the casual observer. Even dedicated gamers have little interest in industry quality of life, perhaps because they haven't connected it with stinkers like Enter the Matrix or no-show laughingstocks like Duke Nukem Forever. But whether or not they realize it, the issue has become so serious that, left unchecked, it could collapse the industry again.

Many developers have fallen in the line of duty, and their contributions are unlikely to be remembered based on what we've seen so far. Perhaps in the months and years to come this will change. But our best possible future is the one that regards crunch as an evanescent memory of the industry's naïve youth.

\*\*\* Matthew Sakey's monthly column, "Culture Clash," is published at the International Game Developers Association ([www.igda.org/columns.clash](http://www.igda.org/columns.clash)). An outspoken game scholar and theorist, his work has appeared in many magazines and websites. He consults with universities to develop game studies curricula and works with corporations to leverage games-based learning technologies. For more information, visit [www.matthewsakey.net](http://www.matthewsakey.net) or email [matthewsakey@comcast.net](mailto:matthewsakey@comcast.net). Thomas J. Allen contributed to this work.



# Crunch and Relief

By Naoko Takamoto

The song list in the Karaoke Revolution series is by no means indicative of my personal musical tastes. Crunch is certainly not indicative of my preferred work cycle. If you or anyone you know would enjoy singing “That’s Amore” 6 days a week, 10 hours a day, have them call me. I was more than happy to do this last year. I was excited when they announced that we would be crunching. Let me explain why.

I wanted more than anything to work for Harmonix. I wanted more than anything to be a valuable employee at Harmonix. I had no family obligations beyond occasional dinners and phone conversations, and my focus was to nail down a career path in a field that I was “passionate” about. Crunch is an opportunity for people in that position to make their mark. Now, this is not a validation for overworking employees, regardless of whether or not they have families. I am not married, nor do I have children. Yes, the decisions made by the company about my time table will only affect me, but that doesn’t make my time out of the office less valuable. No one wants their life to halt so that some mystery entity with no face beyond a logo can reap the benefits of your hard work.

I guess this is where being a grown up comes in; making compromises, choosing your battles, taking one for the team, raising the bar, pushing the envelope, insert alternate cliché here. It’s hard to work in an industry where dropping such phrases is commonplace, and not feel like you’re working for ‘the man’. But you are. You just don’t want to feel that way. I got lucky. ‘The man’ that I work for actually sits down the hall from me, and laughs when I run by him screaming with a slip n’ slide dragging behind me. Conversely, it helps me to see him in his office when I get in the morning, and still at his desk when I leave after a 10 hour shift of my own volition. The mysterious part of ‘the man’ that I fear is gone. He’s one of us, not cracking a whip while sipping margaritas in the shade. Harmonix is a small company. We’re all musicians who are relatively tech savvy. Our dev teams are tiny, our dev cycles are short, and none of us really know how to properly adjust our chairs. We make games that, until recently, no one else was really making. And although no one is ever ecstatic to be working long hours, it’s okay because here we actually see what we’re working so hard for. It’s okay because we understand that crunch is a last resort (I think the use of the word *resort* here is oxymoronic). It’s okay because we feel such an ownership over our games that we don’t want to ship with that bug that no one will notice; as if it’s an album we’re working on together. So it was okay when people in QA started to unravel, and felt the need to do crazy things to stay sane

enough to keep working. And it was great to find out that the other people in the office enjoyed our unraveling. You feel good about yourself, and that’s what you want in any job, regardless of duty or pay.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not pro crunch. Crunching should not be expected in the industry. ‘Crunch Relief’ was not an answer to anything, just a means to get by. It was an attempt to give something back to everyone who was working so hard, and maybe indulge in working to the breaking point a little. Wait, what? The breaking point? Yeah, that’s when you find your lead programmer under their desk in the fetal position singing “That’s Amore” to their shoes.

Here is an email sent to the company entitled “Crunch Relief Part III”.

This email was followed by a 4 person 2 lap race around the office on those oversized balls with the handles on them.

English is the Rubik’s Cube of all languages. There are so many phrases available to explain our current status. Before I continue down this road any further, I would like to point out that our behavior is completely normal given the circumstances. You spend a week locked up in a room with DeVron and Phil and tell me how you come out. They try to whistle duets. They try on my clothes. But I digress.

English is the Rubik’s Cube of all languages. There are many phrases available to explain our current status. Some may say that we have ‘*gone bananas*’. What the hell does that mean? Bananas?! Then there is ‘*gone nuts*’. Why is everyone so obsessed with food? Moving on, there is the ever so common phrase ‘*hey you guys have lost it*’. I think this is the IT factor that the judges on American Idol constantly wax idiotic about, so to those of you who have said this to any of us, thank you for thinking that we had IT to begin with. We are very flattered.

My favorite phrase is “bouncing off the walls”.

That’s right people. Today’s the rehearsal, tomorrow’s the show. Find out which pony you want to bet on. Maybe you would like to be a pony. 2 laps. No biting or throwing bananas.

# Quality of Life in the Video Game Industry – A Position Paper

By: **Andy Luckey**, Cofounder & President, Greater Family, LLC

## QUALITY OF LIFE DEFINED

“Quality of Life” is so abstract that to take a position on it requires substantial narrowing of the definition’s scope. For the purpose of this paper “Quality of Life” shall cover the following aspects:

### 1) Fair Compensation for Time Worked.

Substantial debate has erupted in the video game industry of late regarding the question “are we, members of the industry, properly compensated for the hours we work?” In a general sense I believe the answer is “yes.” In a global economy the price of labor comes strictly at a supply and demand level. In other words, when there is a shortage of workers to produce a given product, a developer must make the decision either to automate a process (not always possible), pay higher wages to attract more workers or outsource the work to someone who has the labor available to do it at an affordable price.

There is a general perception that the only successful approach is the second – to raise wages. Not all processes can be automated at least within the available time and budgetary constraints. In other words: If you need “x” done by software and/or hardware, theoretically that goal could be met. But if it’s a handful of Ph.D.’s working in a lab somewhere that has to solve it – the current product won’t ship before the proceeds of their work is available. Raising wages does, indeed, attract more workers. But a substantial training curve limits the number of workers that could be bought at any price. Moreover, price increases often will not cover higher labor. Outsourcing is a viable alternative that many pursue but, again, the learning curve is steep and sufficiently competent overseas teams are rare. Accordingly, the market economically generates a fair wage under the “if I don’t get paid enough I’ll go somewhere else” principle.

### 2) Reasonable Scheduling of Work Hours.

“The Crunch” has become a time honored tradition in the game industry. There’s almost a romantic passion for “the crunch.” That said, when employees work hours in excess of what they physically and mentally can tolerate both health (physical and mental) and productivity are impacted. Regretfully, there is a widely accepted practice of proposing games to be produced in shorter than realistic schedules and less than realistic budgets. The result of this is that teams need to work overtime to make up for the lack

of funding for additional members and the unrealistically short deadline. Indeed, even with “the crunch” many products ship late and over budget. This is both an issue of planning and realistic man hour and cost models on the part of management.

### 3) Creative Job Satisfaction.

Only part of the satisfaction from work in video games comes from monetary compensation. A good part of satisfaction has to do with the quality of product, moral of the team and recognition both publicly and internally. Developers are wise to acknowledge team members and let them know “we care.”

## UNIQUE ASPECTS OF THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY

The game industry is one just now coming into maturity. To date it has been something of wild frontier where things come together, often through chaos, to result in a product. Over time, certain rules and procedures have come into place that makes the process more manageable. But, unlike the motion picture business for example, the game business has few hard-and-fast rules. Another issue that limits the industry is its very youth. As a result of the industry being young there are few “grey hairs” to consult with and those that do exist are in their 40’s and 50’s and just getting grey at the temples.

## THE IMPACT OF GLOBAL OUTSOURCING ON THE INDUSTRY

Many industry leaders take the cavalier attitude that the game industry cannot and will not outsource substantially to offshore contractors. That position, in my opinion, is both dangerously naïve and contrary to the state of the business today. In fact large amounts of work are being outsourced to Asia. Particularly prolific in this movement is India which is tech savvy and very adaptable to new types of products and procedures. Developers would do well to embrace this globalization instead of resist it. By way of comparison: The T.V. animation industry workers went on strike in the early 80’s complaining about job security and pay. The major producers sent their work to the Far East, mostly Japan at that time. The work stayed in Asia and never came back. Game producers are wise to keep their vulnerability in mind.

## PATHS FORWARD

The “take away” points of improvement to increase quality of life are:

1. Realistic labor projection models that take into account historic man-hours per task and the fact that people don’t work at 100% efficiency (80% is pretty high). In other

words just because John Doe could do “x” in “y” period of time in theory – doesn’t mean that he can in actuality. Projections of 65-80% efficiency are realistic in my experience.

2. Improved communication between management and team members.

3 Realistic attitudes toward globalization in the industry: In other words embrace the extended team family overseas – don’t resent them. Modern economics prove beyond a doubt that isolationism and jingoism simply aren’t productive approaches.

## PANELIST BIOGRAPHIES



**Erin Hoffman** a.k.a. ea\_spouse was 23 years old when she posted a 1,962-word blog on Live Journal that successfully brought Quality of Life issues to the public eye in November 2004, by chronicling her husband’s five months of 6 and 7-day "crunch" periods and as much as 13-hour workdays. The awareness led to six lawsuits against three companies and a web site [www.gamewatch.org](http://www.gamewatch.org)



**Thomas J. Allen** directs the awards program for NAViGaTR, an organization that celebrates game art,

technology and production by recognizing developer talent in 48 categories ([www.navgtr.org](http://www.navgtr.org)). *Develop* magazine recently published an article based on his co-authored work entitled "The Passion of the Developer." He also works with venture capitalists who want to be introduced to the video game industry for new and unique investment opportunities and can be reached at [tallen@navgtr.org](mailto:tallen@navgtr.org).



**Jason Della Rocca** is the executive director of the International Game Developers Association (IGDA), a professional society connecting developers with their peers, promoting professional development, and advocating on issues that affect the developer community -- such as quality of life, creative freedoms, workforce diversity and credit standards. Jason has been a member of the game development community for over a decade, and has spent time at Matrox Graphics, Quazal and Silicon Graphics. Jason can be reached via [jason-at-igda-dot-org](mailto:jason-at-igda-dot-org).



**Matthew Sakey's** monthly column, "Culture Clash," is published by the International Game Developers Association, where he has gained a reputation as an outspoken game scholar, theorist, and Quality of Life advocate. *Develop* magazine recently published an article based on his co-authored work entitled "The Passion of the Developer." He consults with universities to develop game studies curricula and works with corporations to leverage games-based learning technologies. For more information, visit [www.matthewsakey.net](http://www.matthewsakey.net) or email [matthewsakey@comcast.net](mailto:matthewsakey@comcast.net).



**Naoko Takamoto** is an Associate Producer at Harmonix Music, Inc in . For the past 3 years, Naoko has been playing the *Karaoke Revolution* series looking for bugs. Naoko was Audio QA Lead and Console Lead for *Karaoke Revolution Party*, released last holiday season. She has also co-hosted a syndicated radio show through Clear Channel and was tapped as a vocalist for the game *Amplitude* (2003). She has become notorious for co-creating her company's hilarious "crunch relief" programs.

[www.harmonixmusic.com](http://www.harmonixmusic.com)



**Helen McWilliams** graduated summa cum laude from in 2001 with a degree in American Studies. She was first hired as a QA tester at Harmonix on *EyeToy: Antigrav* for PS2. McWilliams became the Xbox Lead on *Karaoke Revolution Party*, followed by Associate Producer on *Karaoke Revolution Country*, and is currently working as Associate Producer on *Guitar Hero II*. She has become notorious for co-creating her company's hilarious "crunch relief" programs. [www.harmonixmusic.com](http://www.harmonixmusic.com)



**Andy Luckey**, Co-founder and President of Greater Family, LLC, a family media company with studios in Ridgefield, CT and London. He's concurrently the Senior Creative and Production Advisor for Animation Dimensions, Ltd. an animation and video game producer, in Mumbai, India. Mr. Luckey's family has been in the business of producing animation and video games for over half-a-century. Andy's career started at his family's studio in San Francisco, run by his father Bud Luckey, which produced Sesame Street Shorts, Animated Commercials and early vector-line computer animation. He later went on to be a Producer of more than 200 episodes of animated TV series most notably the "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles." He's been involved in the video game industry since the late 80's with credits including the video game derivative of Walt Disney's Aladdin for Virgin Interactive. Prior to co-founding Greater Family he has held key positions at Murakami Wolf Swenson (now Fred Wolf Films), Virgin Interactive, Radical Entertainment, The Krislin Company and two years as the interim CEO of the biometric research firm SYMAXXIS. Andy has managed sizeable production teams on three continents in seven countries. Mr. Luckey holds a Bachelor of Arts in Broadcasting from the California State University, Northridge and a Master of Divinity from Biola University's Talbot School of Theology.