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EA: The Human Story

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My significant other works for Electronic Arts, and I'm what you might call a disgruntled spouse.

EA's bright and shiny new corporate trademark is "Challenge Everything." Where this applies is not exactly clear. Churning out one licensed football game after another doesn't sound like challenging much of anything to me; it sounds like a money farm. To any EA executive that happens to read this, I have a good challenge for you: how about safe and sane labor practices for the people on whose backs you walk for your millions?

I am retaining some anonymity here because I have no illusions about what the consequences would be for my family if I was explicit. However, I also feel no impetus to shy away from sharing our story, because I know that it is too common to stick out among those of the thousands of engineers, artists, and designers that EA employs.

Our adventures with Electronic Arts began less than a year ago. The small game studio that my partner worked for collapsed as a result of foul play on the part of a big publisher -- another common story. Electronic Arts offered a job, the salary was right and the benefits were good, so my SO took it. I remember that they asked him in one of the interviews: "how do you feel about working long hours?" It's just a part of the game industry -- few studios can avoid a crunch as deadlines loom, so we thought nothing of it. When asked for specifics about what "working long hours" meant, the interviewers coughed and glossed on to the next question; now we know why.

Within weeks production had accelerated into a 'mild' crunch: eight hours six days a week. Not bad. Months remained until any real crunch would start, and the team was told that this "pre-crunch" was to prevent a big crunch toward the end; at this point any other need for a crunch seemed unlikely, as the project was dead on schedule. I don't know how many of the developers bought EA's explanation for the extended hours; we were new and naive so we did. The producers even set a deadline; they gave a specific date for the end of the crunch, which was still months away from the title's shipping date, so it seemed safe. That date came and went. And went, and went. When the next news came it was not about a reprieve; it was another acceleration: twelve hours six days a week, 9am to 10pm.

Weeks passed. Again the producers had given a termination date on this crunch that again they failed. Throughout this period the project remained on schedule. The long hours started to take its toll on the team; people grew irritable and some started to get ill. People dropped out in droves for a couple of days at a time, but then the team seemed to reach equilibrium again and they plowed ahead. The managers stopped even talking about a day when the hours would go back to normal.

Now, it seems, is the "real" crunch, the one that the producers of this title so wisely prepared their team for by running them into the ground ahead of time. The current mandatory hours are 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. Complaints that these once more extended hours combined with the team's existing fatigue would result in a greater number of mistakes made and an even greater amount of wasted energy were ignored.

The stress is taking its toll. After a certain number of hours spent working the eyes start to lose focus; after a certain number of weeks with only one day off fatigue starts to accrue and accumulate exponentially. There is a reason why there are two days in a weekend -- bad things happen to one's physical, emotional, and mental health if these days are cut short. The team is rapidly beginning to introduce as many flaws as they are removing.

And the kicker: for the honor of this treatment EA salaried employees receive a) no overtime; b) no compensation time! ('comp' time is the equalization of time off for overtime -- any hours spent during a crunch accrue into days off after the product has shipped); c) no additional sick or vacation leave. The time just goes away. Additionally, EA recently announced that, although in the past they have offered essentially a type of comp time in the form of a few weeks off at the end of a project, they no longer wish to do this, and employees shouldn't expect it. Further, since the production of various games is scattered, there was a concern on the part of the employees that developers would leave one crunch only to join another. EA's response was that they

would attempt to minimize this, but would make no guarantees. This is unthinkable; they are pushing the team to individual physical health limits, and literally giving them nothing for it. Comp time is a staple in this industry, but EA as a corporation wishes to "minimize" this reprieve. One would think that the proper way to minimize comp time is to avoid crunch, but this brutal crunch has been on for months, and nary a whisper about any compensation leave, nor indeed of any end of this treatment.

This crunch also differs from crunch time in a smaller studio in that it was not an emergency effort to save a project from failure. Every step of the way, the project remained on schedule. 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. 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.

No one works in the game industry unless they love what they do. No one on that team is interested in producing an inferior product. My heart bleeds for this team precisely BECAUSE they are brilliant, talented individuals out to create something great. They are and were more than willing to work hard for the success of the title. But that good will has only been met with abuse. Amazingly, Electronic Arts was listed #91 on Fortune magazine's "100 Best Companies to Work For" in 2003.

EA's attitude toward this -- which is actually a part of company policy, it now appears -- has been (in an anonymous quotation that I've heard repeated by multiple managers), "If they don't like it, they can work someplace else." Put up or shut up and leave: this is the core of EA's Human Resources policy. The concept of ethics or compassion or even intelligence with regard to getting the most out of one's workforce never enters the equation: if they don't want to sacrifice their lives and their health and their talent so that a multibillion dollar corporation can continue its Godzilla-stomp through the game industry, they can work someplace else.

But can they?

The EA Mambo, paired with other giants such as Vivendi, Sony, and Microsoft, is rapidly either crushing or absorbing the vast majority of the business in game development. A few standalone studios that made their fortunes in previous eras -- Blizzard, Bioware, and Id come to mind -- manage to still survive, but 2004 saw the collapse of dozens of small game studios, no longer able to acquire contracts in the face of rapid and massive consolidation of game publishing companies. This is an epidemic hardly unfamiliar to anyone working in the industry. Though, of course, it is always the option of talent to go outside the industry, perhaps venturing into the booming commercial software development arena. (Read my tired attempt at sarcasm.)

To put some of this in perspective, I myself consider some figures. If EA truly believes that it needs to push its employees this hard -- I actually believe that they don't, and that it is a skewed operations perspective alone that results in the severity of their crunching, coupled with a certain expected amount of the inefficiency involved in running an enterprise as large as theirs -- the solution therefore should be to hire more engineers, or artists, or designers, as the case may be. Never should it be an option to punish one's workforce with ninety hour weeks; in any other industry the company in question would find itself sued out of business so fast its stock wouldn't even have time to tank. In its first weekend, Madden 2005 grossed \$65 million. EA's annual revenue is approximately \$2.5 billion. This company is not strapped for cash; their labor practices are inexcusable.

The interesting thing about this is an assumption that most of the employees seem to be operating under. Whenever the subject of hours come up, inevitably, it seems, someone mentions 'exemption'. They refer to a California law that supposedly exempts businesses from having to pay overtime to certain 'specialty' employees, including software programmers. This is Senate Bill 88. However, Senate Bill 88 specifically does not apply to the entertainment industry -- television, motion picture, and theater industries are specifically mentioned. Further, even in software, there is a pay minimum on the exemption: those exempt must be paid at least \$90,000 annually. I can assure you that the majority of EA employees are in fact not in this pay bracket; ergo, these practices are not only unethical, they are illegal.

I look at our situation and I ask 'us': why do you stay? And the answer is that in all likelihood we won't; and in all likelihood if we had known that this would be the result of working for EA, we would have stayed far away in the first place. But all along the way there were deceptions, there were promises, there were assurances -- there was a big fancy office building with an expensive fish tank -- all of which in the end look like an elaborate scheme to keep a crop of employees on the project just long enough to get it shipped. And then if they need to, they hire in a new batch, fresh and ready to hear more promises that will not be kept; EA's turnover rate in engineering is approximately 50%. This is how EA works. So now we know, now we can move on, right? That seems to be what happens to everyone else. But it's not enough. Because in the end, regardless of what happens with our particular situation, this kind of "business" isn't right, and people need to know about it, which is why I write this today.

If I could get EA CEO Larry Probst on the phone, there are a few things I would ask him. "What's your salary?" would be merely a point of curiosity. The main thing I want

to know is, Larry: you do realize what you're doing to your people, right? And you do realize that they ARE people, with physical limits, emotional lives, and families, right? Voices and talents and senses of humor and all that? That when you keep our husbands and wives and children in the office for ninety hours a week, sending them home exhausted and numb and frustrated with their lives, it's not just them you're hurting, but everyone around them, everyone who loves them? When you make your profit calculations and your cost analyses, you know that a great measure of that cost is being paid in raw human dignity, right?

Right?

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