

IGDA Quality of Life Summit Opening Lecture – Part 1

7 Reasons Why You Should Care About This Stuff *(this means you too, Boss)*

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Since April of 2004, the IGDA's white paper on quality of life has been downloaded thousands of times – and undoubtedly passed along quietly from developer to developer once or twice while the boss wasn't looking. Then, last Fall, the now-famous EA_Spouse LiveJournal entry begat over 3,000 messages of support within a matter of weeks, many of them from fellow developers sharing devastating personal experiences. These events have finally debunked one of the industry's most bizarre and most deeply ingrained myths, namely that game developers are some sort of special breed, apart from the rest of the human race, for whom work-life balance is a meaningless concept.

So this morning, I would like to open up the festivities by addressing the industry's managers, studio owners and publishers, and telling them that poor quality of life practices are not only a detriment to their employees, but also a menace jeopardizing their companies' and the industry's long-term well-being. I will prove it by exposing 7 of our most cherished beliefs about game making and game makers for what they really are, i.e., collective exercises in self-delusional nonsense.

Myth #1: "Crunch works, and nothing else does."

No, it doesn't. In fact, crunching is astoundingly counterproductive. Rod Humble, of the *EverQuest* team – arguably one of the most successful game operations in history – wrote in *Game Developer* magazine [Humble04]:

"It's our experience that late night crunch introduces so many bugs as to make the work almost worthless in the long run."

While I was doing research for the white paper, someone forwarded me an email from a member of Team 17, the famous British developers of the *Worms* series. The email said that the company had implemented a 40-hour workweek some years before and that it hadn't missed a single milestone ever since. Other companies, like Blue Fang Games (*Zoo Tycoon*), Vicarious Visions (*Doom III* for Xbox), Edge of Reality and BreakAway, have thrived while keeping overtime to limited, productive levels. Let no one fool you: It can be done.

Myth #2: "Crunch doesn't cost the company anything."

Recently, the Harvard Group [Branswell05] published a study of medical interns, a class of professionals whose demographic profile and work habits resemble those of game developers. In the U.S., these young doctors are routinely expected to work 60 hours a week, often in two 30-hour shifts. The results of the study should give pause to the supporters of crunch time.

For example, after a long shift, the interns are twice as likely to be involved in serious car accidents than the general population, because a person driving after being awake for 24 hours has the reaction and response time of an individual carrying a 0.1 blood alcohol level – that is, someone who is considered legally drunk almost everywhere in the world.

Furthermore, the study shows that the interns make 36% more medical errors during long shifts than during regular ones, with unsettling consequences for the public's health.

Tight deadlines, the #1 cause of crunch, may pose a health hazard themselves. A Swedish study of 1,381 men and women, published in the December 2004 issue of the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* [Perreault05], shows that the incidence of heart attacks is 6 times higher than usual within 24 hours of a high-pressure deadline.

"Lighter" crunch shifts are no safer. According to Linda Cook of the National Institutes of Health [Cook03], sleeping 4 to 6 hours a night for 14 straight nights – and who hasn't endured much worse during a game's final stretch? – is physiologically equivalent to going 72 hours straight without sleep. Worse: the people affected don't even realize it, just like many drunk drivers feel perfectly fine until too late.

Bottom line: If your company is in crunch mode, drunken zombies may be in the process of checking in vital code or reporting to your most important clients as we speak.

Myth #3: "You have to work harder to succeed!"

Not if the work is planned and designed properly. Not if the workers are well trained, well rested, and given the tools they need to succeed.

On average, says author Daniel Pink [Pink01], "*Americans work 350 hours more per year than Europeans – and 70 hours more per year than even the Japanese, whose language contains a word, *karoshi*, that means 'death from overwork'.*"

For the enlightened company, time off is an investment. Productivity has been a hot topic of study in management science for over a century, and in every single industry that has been examined, maximum long-term output is achieved at 40

hours a week. Why would game development be any different? In other words, not only are people who work twelve hours a day, seven days a week for months at a time taking liberties with their own health, they are actually achieving less, in terms of total output, than they would by working a more reasonable schedule.

Yet, the culture of mandatory workaholicism is alive and well, not only in our field, but all across North America. An Ipsos-Reid survey [Normandin04] has revealed that 76% of Canadian workers are forced to give up as much as 2 weeks of their allotted vacation time every year, while another 10% have to forego 3 vacation weeks or more because they can't get away from the job. Do we really need to work this hard to succeed? After all, Germans (as well as many other Europeans) receive an average of 6 weeks of paid vacation time every year. Yet, few people would complain about the quality of BMWs and Porsches.

Meanwhile, the most popular vehicle in the U.S., the Ford F-150 pick-up truck, was recalled in January 2005 because its ignition system contains a design flaw that has caused several trucks to catch fire, some of them while they were parked inside their owners' garages. So much for that theory.

Myth #4: "Our employees are hardcore; they're willing to pay the price to make games!"

Judging by the content of most (if not all) game development job advertisements, this industry only recruits monomaniacal obsessive-compulsives who have no interest in anything besides games. Personal experience certainly shows that many companies conduct their day-to-day affairs as if this were true.

Yet, the IGDA's white paper on quality of life [IGDA04] reveals that the game-obsessed developer is an endangered species. More than half of the people who expressed a preference in the matter while responding to the white paper's survey said that they viewed game development as merely one career option among many. (When taking into account all of the respondents who expressed no opinion, fewer than one third of developers said that games were their one and only professional passion.)

The concept of the game-obsessed developer, on which we have based our Human Resources model, may or may not have been true when the industry formed its mythology, 20 years ago, but it certainly does not reflect our current workforce, much less the people that we will need to steal away from Google and Pixar in years to come.

Myth #5: "OK, the boys are unhappy, but it's not as if they had any place else to go!"

Well, if exhausted employees can't find jobs at game development studios with saner practices, they might leave the industry. As a matter of fact, that is exactly what an appalling number of them are already planning to do.

One of the white paper's scariest findings [IGDA04] is that 34.3% of current developers expect to leave the industry within 5 years. If we expand the horizon to 10 years, the proportion reaches 51.2%. Look at the person sitting besides you: If you plan to stick around until the 2015 Quality of Life Summit, he or she won't be there.

And not all of the people jumping ship are going to move to Florida to play shuffleboard. Demographically speaking, game development is still an extremely young industry, with only 18.4% of survey respondents saying they are 35 or older. Even if all of these veterans were among those who left (which would wipe out the ranks of the industry's leads and managers), these figures mean that about a third of our current work force is made up of people under 35 who want to leave for greener pastures before they reach the peak of their careers.

Myth #6: "OK, fine, if the veterans leave, we'll just replace them with rookies."

Sure, there is a seemingly inexhaustible supply of talented kids who would endure any torment just to be able to eke out a marginal living making games. The trouble is they can't get the job done. (At least, not by themselves.)

The Sikorski CH-124 "Sea King" helicopter used to be the pride and joy of the Canadian navy. Originally designed as a daytime submarine hunter, the Sea King has been adapted to search and rescue missions, light troop transport and night-time surveillance operations. Unfortunately, the Sea King was scheduled to be retired in the early 1980's; the 40-odd choppers still in service are now 42 years old and require 30 hours of maintenance for every hour in flight. Keeping them operational is an immensely complicated task, probably comparable in difficulty to some of our trickiest projects.

On February 24th, 2003, a Sea King crashed on the deck of the *HMCS Iroquois* on lift-off, spilling full tanks of fuel and over 2,200 rounds of live ammunition among the ship's crew and equipment. At the time, the ship was four days out of Halifax, headed for a wartime mission in the Persian Gulf. By a miracle, no one was hurt, except for a sailor whose hand was broken by one of the 6 pieces of shrapnel that pierced the ship's hangar's doors.

Recently, the Canadian Armed Forces released the results of an inquiry into the maintenance of the Sea Kings conducted partially as a consequence of this incident [Beeby05]. It turns out that, after cutbacks in military spending forced most of the senior maintenance technicians to retire from the Armed Forces, they were replaced by massively overworked, out-of-their-league rookies. The result: over 75 instances of parts being installed upside down, dirty rags being abandoned inside sensitive machinery, helicopters being sent on missions with empty fuel tanks, and even fuel and oil pipes being mixed up and connected to the wrong intakes. In one case, a live torpedo fell off the helicopter and onto the

deck of the *HMCS Calgary*, then on a mission in the Persian Gulf, because a technician had forgotten to install a safety bolt.

Of course, if some overworked, under-trained game developer makes a mistake, no human lives are put in danger, but the health and well being of your company is at risk every time you push an employee into a situation for which he or she is not prepared.

Myth #7: "Well, we don't have crunch here, so we have nothing to worry about."

While crunch is the 800-pound gorilla in the quality of life landscape and must be dealt with first, there is more to quality of life than free time.

Other issues that deserve attention include:

- Family-friendly policies. Only 7% of the developers who responded to the Quality of Life survey are women, and of those, a staggering 82.9% don't have children yet. How many talented women (and men) will leave the industry or never enter it at all because it is so difficult to balance a family and a game development career? Parents need better health insurance, day care, time off for family emergencies – all things that are easier to get in other fields.
- Healthy work relationships. A CareerBuilder.com survey says that 42% of employees nationwide feel demeaned by their immediate superiors. Compounding the problem in game development studios is the fact that many of our leads and managers lack the proper training, especially in people management skills, or even the desire to occupy such positions of responsibility.
- A healthy, reasonably quiet working environment. Free pizza on crunch nights is cool at 19, but less of an incentive for 35-year old digestive tracts. How about healthier food - and gym memberships? And if you can't afford closed offices, why not buy every employee a pair of \$75 noise-cancelling headphones to dampen the ambient mayhem?
- Job stability, or at least mobility. The prospect of a layoff is extremely stressful. It boggles the mind that an industry that claims to survive on teamwork is so often willing to disband teams at the end of each project just to save a few bucks on non-crunch wages. In cases where layoffs are unavoidable, implementing industry-wide (somewhat) standard job descriptions and/or providing more freelance opportunities would at least let people move from company to company in relatively painless fashion.

In Conclusion

As the greatest philosophical thinker of our time, Dr. Phil, would say, there are only two ways to make someone change their behavior: coercion and persuasion – and one of them doesn't work. Certainly, no coercive solution to the game industry's quality of life problems is apparent:

- We can't force change through collective bargaining, because we have no unions.
- We can't force change through legislation, because the current geopolitical landscape is more averse to regulation than it has ever been since the great depression of the 1930's.
- And I'm pessimistic about our chances of forcing change through class-action lawsuits, because a courtroom battle is never a fair fight when one of the parties can afford to outspend the other by a factor of 1,000 to 1.

Which leaves us with persuasion as the path of least resistance. There is already some anecdotal evidence that last year's white paper has triggered reforms in a number of studios, and little doubt that better sharing of information about a company's quality of life practices will have a significant impact on the number and the quality of the job applications that it will receive. I hope that today's work will help us take several more steps along the way, and I definitely hope that we will NOT need to host another quality of life summit in 2015.

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