

Crunch time

The downside of late nights and pizza

No matter how carefully planned the development schedule, everyone will work 24/7 over the last month of a game project. **Steven Goodwin** considers the unsavoury side effects...

Most of us have two jobs. One is developing games. The other is running a home. When the games job starts taking up more time, one of two things happen: either the home life gets neglected, or it begins to overlap with what is sometimes called 'real work'.

There are many jobs involved in running a home, and those of us without housekeepers – such as non-senior management – find it difficult to manage them all. We have bills to pay (for credit cards, water, electricity, gas, council tax, insurance and various other necessities), laundry and cleaning to do, rubbish to take out, shopping to buy, dinners to cook, children to look after and gardens to keep. These generally get postponed to the evening, or weekend.

And that's when we're not crunching.

A FULL ENGLISH BREAKFAST

Most full-time game industry employees leave for work before the shops open and return home after they've closed. Adding a crowbar to your shopping list may be the only way you'll get fed.

Still, there's usually one late night supermarket nearby. My nearest, for example, shuts at 11pm. As long as I leave the office by 9.30pm, stumble across town, catch the right bus, avoid the slow train and suffer no untoward delays, I can get home by 10.30pm. It's then a 15-minute walk to the supermarket. Any

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later than 10.45pm and the security guard welcomes me to the store with a catchy: "We're closed now, Sir."

At least when I do make it to the supermarket before closing time the only food left is half price. So that's one advantage.

There are two solutions to this problem. Either live near work (does anyone sub-director level get paid enough to do this, especially in London?), or buy food whilst at work and take it home. The latter only works if the company fridge-freezer is secure, and the ubiquitous games company fridge is usually as safe as one in a student house. That's students of kleptomania.

And other personal chores can only be delayed for so long. How long is determined by the gap between the initial bill and the final reminder. Processing these bills should be a first in, first out affair, but during crunch time they get forgotten under the weight of 'Issue 5631 – Enemy walks backwards' or "When did I last eat?"

This concentrates all your chores into short bursts of activity – all of them at work, when you're expected to be at your desk. Working. If you're not, someone complains. If you leave your desk, someone mentions the lunch 'hour', and complains. This can also happen when you need to visit the bank, in person, during

the day. But chores are not the only activity that gets shifted around. Your entire life gets postponed in this manner, in what is known as living in Time Shift [see box].

Naturally, there are knock-on effects. Stress builds up when you can't remember which bills have been paid and which have been postponed (and when you don't have any time left to organise yourself better). Your health deteriorates through irregular eating, your dust-ridden home ("What day is it? When are the refuse collections?"), your unwashed clothes ("I hate laundrettes!"), shorter breaks and skipped breakfasts.

And you can't watch television!

TV is important. It's an easy method to escape the drudgery of modern life. Depending on what you watch, you can become an East End gangster, a starship captain, or (if you watch Five) a plumber who fixes washing machines for lonely housewives called Shannon Tweed.

If you're working 16 hours a day where's your escape? Where's the time to relax and just chill out?

Better time management is obviously the answer. But if the development team were capable of managing their own time, they wouldn't need leads or be given schedules, right? Meanwhile, the management who are able to make time for their chores have enough money to pay a housekeeper. So the solution is obvious: management should cook and clean for the staff.

CORN CRUNCH

When you're working hard, your work suffers. There are many studies that show you can only cope with increased workloads for short periods of time.

After that, your productivity decreases and you do less work, despite longer hours. This is especially true when you're fixing bugs late at night and you don't think the consequences through. "I'm too busy to think – I'm working!"

Working late also negates the extra bonuses that come from hiring professionals. Many developers, especially programmers, work on personal projects in their spare time. Programmers produce new ideas, clever solutions and interesting demos on new, emerging, and innovative technologies, for no reward. *Napster*, for instance, was a clever solution to the problem of having a big hard drive, and not enough MP3s to fill it.

These out-of-hours solutions are usually more creative than their in-work code. Look at Linux. By Linux I mean the operating system, not the cute little penguin (he's the mascot; called Tux). Linux was written by a bunch of programmers in their spare time. It rivals (and in most situations beats) the commercial offerings from Microsoft, Sun, HP and SGI to name but a few. If someone is tired from coding when they get home, that innovation is lost. If their spare time no longer exists, there are no new ideas forthcoming. They are also less likely to read books, buy journals, surf the web, or try and mirror flipcode. You could try learning new techniques by surfing the web (or reading books) whilst *max* re-renders a cut scene, or the compiler mutters silently about 'ruddy header file changes'. You could – but most people would think that you weren't working, and complain.

Still, one big advantage of less spare time (or downtime as I now hear people saying) is that developers have less time to question



their motives at work. If they had time to think, most developers would realise that their entire life – morning, noon and night – had become geared towards the game and nothing else. If people realised that, they might become more questioning.

Fortunately, they don't.

FROSTY FLAKES

Invariably, your relationship with your wife or girlfriend (or sometimes your wife *and* girlfriend) suffers when you spend more time at work than at home (though this rarely applies to programmers). A typical scenario might be:

Girlfriend/boyfriend: Is your work more important than me?

You: No! Of course not, darling!

Girlfriend/boyfriend: Then why are you there 'til midnight? Tell them no!

You: Er, but I've got two A bugs...

Girlfriend/boyfriend: One being that you missed my birthday, yesterday, perchance?

You: Oops!

When you live with your partner, it doesn't necessarily make things easier. Sure, there might be someone else to take the children to school. Or the dentist, doctor or zoo. And there's

certainly someone else to do the cleaning, laundry, shopping and bill paying (and so solving all the problems listed above).

But that in turn just adds more pressure and tension into the relationship that shouldn't be there. It also gives your partner more reasons to argue with you: "Why don't YOU do XYZ, for a change?" And, speaking as a man, giving my girlfriend more reasons to argue with me is not a milestone I want to hit. When you fantasise about a working path-finding routine more often than your girlfriend's lingerie, you need a break.

Family life can also suffer. When every day is a workday, it is so very easy to forget birthdays (Sorry, William) and anniversaries. And when every week becomes a work week (the definition being a week losing cohesion when weekends don't exist), have you remembered to phone mum in the last seven days? The last 14? If you find yourself having to bring the kids into work because that's the closest to quality time you will get with them, you need a break.

And what about your friends? Even if you manage to sneak out of the office early one night or are given an evening off, it can be difficult to convince your mates (that you've forsaken for so long) to drop everything and come out with such little notice.

Sometimes you won't even get the token evening off, and have to orchestrate the 'producer dance' to escape.

The producer dance is a method whereby you arrange for the producer (or another such authority figure that dishes out 'fix by

LIVING IN TIME SHIFT

During crunch time, all the tasks you would normally do at 7pm (shopping, TV, dinner), get shifted to 8pm. The tasks from 8pm get moved to 9pm. And so on. Eventually some tasks get dropped, postponed to the following day, or squashed into the remaining seven and half seconds at the end of the day.

This is Time Shift.

Television, cinema and theatre (remember, we all need escapism!) will therefore get crammed into lunch breaks, or moved to the weekend.

Watching a two hour film in a lunch 'hour' is more costly, as the Odeon lacks installment plans. Note: don't watch *Lord of the Rings* this way.

An average week might include an art gallery visit, two films, seven hours of television, and a new work of fiction. After cramming all this into a single weekend you'll be so drained by Monday morning that your work will suffer. Again.

- ▶ the morning' requests, even though they were unaware of them an hour ago) to leave the room, so you can go home without retribution. The easiest method is to convince them to smoke. Then, when they leave through one door, you leave by the other.

In some cases, a more extreme version of the producer dance is required. What happens here is that a person in room A calls the producer into their room. Whilst there, someone else in room A emails someone in room B. The people in room B then leave. One person from room B remains behind, waiting for everybody else to clear the building. They then call the producer into room B to help with their question. And while the producer is in room B, everyone in room A leaves. There's no point in continuing work with a team of one, so the last person in room B leaves too.

If your team finds itself contemplating the producer dance, you all need a break.

CRUNCHY NUT CORN FLAKES

Peer pressure is a terrible thing. In the playground we succumb to bullies and peer pressure without considering the consequences. In adulthood we learn not to follow the group, and tread our own path. Our friends are those that tread the same path as us.

So why is it then that when you put sane, intelligent individuals into a games company, they will suddenly stay until one in the morning just because someone else does? Management say it is 'teamwork'. Management also say that: "'Teamwork' is a lot of people doing what I say."

Most people are in the games industry because they want to be, but that doesn't mean everyone in the team has the same vested interest in the product. The lead designer is likely to have a great vested interest because it's his baby. He's the director on the film set. He's going to be tweaking parameters until it ships, given the chance. The producer is vested, too. It's his career on the line.

He's like the producer of a film, trying to make everything run smoothly and within budget. The lead programmer and artist also need to be available, to answer questions and cure ailments for the producer, designer, and anyone else left in the building. They are the medics – on call 24/7.

All of the above individuals will usually work later. And later. And later. Until their days are completely out of sync with the rest of the team. And then the rest of the team will, through peer pressure (ahem, sorry, teamwork), work later too.

Consider why people are doing late nights. If it's because they're hoping for more money (in the form of bonuses, or a better salary next year) then make sure their calculators have been confiscated so that they are unable to work out that, hour for hour, they can earn more by working on the cold meat counter at Tesco.

Some do work hard to further their career. This is a good thing and should be encouraged. Not only are they putting in a lot of effort now, but they can be promoted to lead and senior roles where they'll have to work even longer hours in the future. They'll be the first in and last out of the office. They'll have more projects to oversee, and more bouts of crunch time to handle. Within five years they'll be completely burnt out, and unable to work for any competing company. A masterstroke.

Some work hard for the game. But we've covered those individuals – they're usually the leads that actually wanted the power to lead in the first place, and so they rarely get any sympathy for it.

SNAP, CRACKLE AND POP

Finally, with the game finished and the publisher happy, it's time to relax. Hopefully.

There's still the matter of taking time off in lieu. Hopefully this will match the overtime you've put in. But it won't. It never does.

"Consider why people are doing late nights..."

CRUNCHING: WORK THAT STOMACH

Irregular eating habits are par for the course during the crunch, and they do nothing for your health but prepare you for a career in Sumo wrestling. Or darts.

- Skip the 'three squares a day' rule as you don't have time for meals. Snack continuously instead.
- You can always make use of a McBrekkie when you run out of milk, and get home too late to go shopping. Note: breakfast menus generally stop at 11am, so don't worry about getting that extra sleep.
- Restaurants that deliver: The four main food groups are always catered for: pizza, curry, Chinese and sushi. Fortunately, the health food shops don't deliver, so there's no chance of slipping into an (inferior) diet.
- You can get extra five minute breaks by smoking more often.

A diet such as this can cause mood swings, depression and anxiety. In short, all the characteristics required during crunch time.

Which means all the friends you neglected, all the films you missed and the limited season theatre outings have to be crammed into whatever time the boss deems suitable to give you. Lo and behold, you're living in Time Shift again. But you lose the time twice. Because you're so busy catching up with friends, you no longer have any free time left to do the things you'd planned to "once this sorry mess is over".

One of those things might have been to start an evening course in French. But since the course started in September and you were busy crunching to get the game out for Christmas, you've missed the enrolment window. Never mind. Employees with fewer skills are cheaper and less prone to contact with employment agencies. And besides, French is just English. Mispronounced. Spoken slowly, loudly, and with over-emphasised mouth movements.

Another, often more visible problem, is that of re-motivation. It can take a long time to return to work with any degree of enthusiasm. So much so that in some circumstances, the next project might start to slip sooner than expected, and the crunch will begin earlier.

Perhaps team members will decide to leave because they're "not doing that again".

They might not even leave straight away. They might spend a few months coasting at work, whilst taking the company dollar, leaving once they find something else (or the pressure begins to build again).

Another problem is personal frictions caused by the crunch. This could happen at home, or work. (The ones at home are usually invisible, as only friends care about those anyway – and you never see them.) Frictions within work could cause the once strong partnerships and even teams to disintegrate and break-up, making the next project just that little bit harder again.

NO END IN SIGHT

It's unlikely that crunch times will end any time soon (pun intended). All we can hope is that they are managed better, with less intrusion on the private lives of those involved.

Some of the issues here have been exaggerated, cynical, satirical and sharp, I don't deny that. But many a true word is spoken in jest. If you have spotted those words, then you must have been there, and you have my sympathy.

If you haven't, then you have lived a charmed life in games. Can I have a job with you, please? ■

MINIBIO



Steven Goodwin has been employed within the industry for the last nine years, his most recently bankrupted company being Computer Artworks where he worked as a senior programmer in the Core Technologies group. He can be reached at goodwin_steven@hotmail.com. Steven has had more late night take-away meals during crunch time than you've had hot dinners. Literally.