

Beyond necessity and passion: Crunch as a habitus in the field of video game production

Juan Francisco Torres-Díaz

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Departament de Psicologia Social, Campus UAB, 08913
Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès)
juanfrancisco.torres@autonoma.cat

Joel Feliu

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Departament de Psicologia Social, Campus UAB, 08913
Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès)
joel.feliu@uab.cat

Adriana Gil-Juárez

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
Departament de Psicologia Bàsica, Evolutiva i de l'Educació, Campus UAB, 08913
Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès)
adriana.gil.juarez@uab.cat

INTRODUCTION

Crunch (defined as a production period during which video game creators work between 60 and 90 hours per week, typically without additional compensation) has been a pervasive practice in the industry for decades (Edholm et al., 2017). For many developers, crunch is perceived as both “natural” and inevitable, supposedly arising from the very “nature” of the video game industry (Cote & Harris, 2020). The most common explanations highlight material conditions and production logics specific to the field: the high competitiveness of the market, which imposes extremely compressed schedules (Potterger, 2020); the control exerted by publishers; the challenges inherent in planning creative processes (Cote & Harris, 2020); and the resulting shortcomings in time management (Edholm et al., 2017).

HABITUS AND THE NORMALIZATION OF CRUNCH

Cote and Harris (2020) argue that, due to its sustained repetition, crunch has ceased to function as an occasional response to structural problems and has instead solidified into a shared *habitus* among video game creators. According to Bourdieu (1992), the material and structural conditions associated with a given social position, when reproduced over time, generate a habitus (a system of durable dispositions that orient individuals to act, feel, and think in particular ways).

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Within the field of video game production, crunch has thus become a normalized and expected response to the pressures of development. This disposition is even valorized as a desirable trait for those seeking to enter the industry, closely tied to the narrative of “passion” for games (Consalvo, 2008). Through this association, a discursive, material, and affective framework emerges; one that is internalized, reproduced, and at times justified by the very agents who inhabit the field. To such an extent, in fact, that when crunch is perceived as voluntary and driven by passion, it may even be framed by creators themselves as a form of “good crunch” (Cote and Harris, 2023).

As in any field, agents, whether individuals or organizations, who do not align with the dominant disposition toward crunch and passion risk marginalization or exclusion. Here, passion functions not merely as an individual sentiment but as a normative affect embedded in the *habitus* of game development; an affective disposition that renders precarity meaningful, even desirable. Consalvo (2008) shows that this affective *disposition* is unevenly distributed: women, people of color, and LGBTQBI+ developers are more frequently pushed to embody these *habitus* while facing greater penalties when they do not, contributing to their higher rates of departure from the industry.

METHODOLOGY

Ethnographic fieldwork was conducted with the indie development team *Frog Studio*¹ between May and October of this 2024, accompanying the studio throughout its participation in a video game incubator in Barcelona. This setting provided a privileged site for observing processes of professional socialization and the incorporation of dispositions associated with the field of video game production; particularly those linked to crunch, passion, and the normalization of precarity. In parallel, the first author took part as staff in international events such as Gamescom 2024, as well as in national and local events including IndieDev Day 2024 in Barcelona.

To complement the participant observation, eight in-depth interviews were conducted with indie video game creators based in Barcelona. Interviewees were selected based on availability and their privileged position within the field, as all were present at Gamescom 2025. Each interview lasted over an hour and focused on participants’ professional trajectories, working conditions, and perceptions of crunch within the industry.

RESULTS

All interviewees reported having experienced crunch at some point during the development process. In line with Edholm et al. (2017), indie studios tended to experience more intense and prolonged periods of crunch than their AAA counterparts. The most common explanations referred to a lack of financial resources and compressed production schedules, which required creators to occupy multiple roles simultaneously; often assuming the workload of three or four positions at once. Among our participants, female developers tended to occupy a greater number of roles on average than their male counterparts, a condition that, while not directly causing crunch, appeared to increase the likelihood of work overload and, consequently, of engaging in crunch practices.

However, beyond these material constraints, interviewees highlighted dynamics of affective coercion within their teams. Some members continued working outside regular hours, motivated by a sense of “passion,” and although no explicit mandate was issued, this behavior generated implicit pressure for others to match these efforts, even when they disagreed with the practice. Such affective expectations contributed to the normalization of crunch as a shared disposition; one that participants described as difficult to resist without feeling guilt within the team.

The consequences of this predisposition were particularly serious for creators like C., a producer at *Frog Studio*, who not only worked additional hours at the studio but also shouldered the double burden of domestic labor and caregiving. As a result, C. expressed increasing doubts about remaining in the field of video game production. This experience reflects a broader pattern described by many women (Consalvo, 2008) and queer or LGBTQ+ developers (Rutberg, 2020), who characterize crunch as a material and affective system that is especially exclusionary and hostile toward those who cannot—or refuse to—embody the passionate, self-sacrificing habitus expected within the field of video game production.

CONCLUSIONS.

Over the past decade, unions, labor initiatives, and legal frameworks have emerged seeking to regulate the working conditions of creators and eliminate crunch within video game production (Pottenger, 2020). These efforts may improve the material conditions of workers and address some of the structural factors that enable crunch. However, because crunch has become a naturalized and affectively reproduced *disposition* among creators; sustained not only by labor demands, but also by narratives of passion and peer pressure; we suggest that future research focus on the affective logic underpinning crunch and on its disproportionate effects on female creators, LGBTQ+ communities, and workers in regions such as India and Latin America, where outsourcing practices are especially prevalent.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Both the name of the study and the names of each participant are pseudonyms.