

Traitements médiatiques des conflits sociaux liés à la pratique du « crunch » dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo américaine : comparaison entre sites de presse généralistes et vidéoludiques américains, sur base de trois études de cas entre 2004 et 2020

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*Traitements médiatiques des conflits sociaux liés à la pratique du « crunch »
dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo américaine : comparaison entre sites de presse
généralistes et vidéoludiques américains, sur base de trois études de cas entre
2004 et 2020*

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vue de l'obtention du grade de Master en Journalisme,
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Introduction

Le jeu vidéo est aujourd'hui comparable tant en termes d'influence générale que de chiffre d'affaire, au cinéma et est ainsi, depuis plusieurs années maintenant, un objet culturel majeur. Ces sommes sont ensuite réinjectées dans des développements demandant de plus en plus de ressources humaines, technologiques et financières.

Depuis le début des années 80, une presse jeu vidéo a accompagné ce média, a en partie façonné la culture vidéoludique et a constitué un index de son évolution (Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Du côté de la presse généraliste, on y a vu ces dernières années une mise en avant de l'objet jeu vidéo, comme peut en témoigner la couverture de *M Le mag*, le magazine du *Monde* du 8 mai 2020, dédiée au jeu vidéo *Animal Crossing New Horizons* (Lamy, 2020). La place du jeu vidéo en tant qu'objet demeure assez marginale bien que des espaces dédiés émergent au sein de certaines rédactions, à l'instar de la rubrique *Pixels* du *Monde* ou, en Belgique, du magazine *Geeko* du *Soir*. Aux Etats-Unis, les expériences du genre semblent assez peu fréquentes, nous pouvons cependant remarquer que des grands journaux évoquent le jeu vidéo aux côtés d'autres formes d'expression dans les rubriques culturelles. Ainsi, nous pouvons observer, à titre d'exemple, que le *New York Times* et le *Washington Post* disposent d'une rubrique « *Gaming* »¹ pour le premier et d'une page référençant les « *gaming reviews* »² pour le second.

Mais au-delà de la représentation de l'objet jeu vidéo dans la presse généraliste, elle s'est également occupée des problématiques qui concernent les conditions de travail dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo. Par exemple, entre 2018 et 2020, la presse française a couvert deux affaires traitant du sujet. La première est la série *Crunch investigation*, réalisée conjointement par *Mediapart* et *Canard PC*, organe de presse vidéoludique. Cette série avait pour ambition de couvrir toutes les problématiques des conditions de travail de l'industrie du jeu vidéo française. Cette série a mis en lumière l'affaire « *Quantic Dream* », affaire envoyée aux prud'hommes dans laquelle des anciens salariés du studio *Quantic Dream* reprochaient des photomontages injurieux. William Audureau, journaliste au *Monde* avait

¹ THE NEW YORK TIMES, « *Gaming* », in *The New York Times*, [en ligne] <https://www.nytimes.com/spotlight/gaming-video-games> .

² THE WASHINGTON POST, « *Gaming Reviews* », in *The Washington Post*, [en ligne] <https://www.washingtonpost.com/video-games/reviews/> .

également la charge de l'affaire, et les trois organismes se sont accordés sur une liste de questions communes à envoyer à la direction du studio français (Le Fou, 2020).

Le 2 juillet 2020, le journal *Libération* titre en première page *Ubisoft, le harcèlement aux manettes*. Le journal a en effet enquêté sur la culture d'entreprise du studio français et des pressions et agressions sexuelles qui ont lieu dans son siège de Montreuil. De la même manière, un portrait du directeur créatif Michel Ancel³, travaillant pour *Ubisoft Montpellier*, par *Libération* publié le 25 septembre 2020 a cité des témoignages faisant état de méthodes de gestion décrites comme « toxiques » (Cario & Chapuis, 2020).

En considérant cette rencontre entre ces deux pôles, nous avons décidé d'étudier la question de la couverture médiatique de la problématique du *crunch*, c'est-à-dire « une période de crise apparemment inhabituelle dans l'agenda de production »⁴ (Dyer-Withford & de Peuter, 2006), dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo en opérant tout d'abord une comparaison entre sites de presses généralistes et vidéoludiques au cours de trois cas médiatisés entre 2004 et 2020.

Malgré sa longévité, la presse jeu vidéo semble avoir été un objet relativement peu abordé dans les travaux académiques, et quand cela a été le cas, elle a souvent fait l'objet de comparaison avec le pôle généraliste du champ journalistique, au sens de Pierre Bourdieu (1994) (Carlson, 2009 ; Nieborg & Sihvonon, 2009). Ce travail s'articulera également autour d'une comparaison similaire : en choisissant le sujet de la couverture médiatique de la pratique du *crunch* dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo permet *a priori* d'arriver à un possible point de rencontre entre ces deux pôles. En ce qu'elle concerne l'objet de prédilection de la presse vidéoludique en ligne, les journalistes de cette dernière étant en effet enclins à travailler sur le sujet. Mais dans la mesure où ces problèmes concernent des situations sociales concrètes et potentiellement difficiles à vivre pour les travailleurs, la presse généraliste en ligne peut également traiter le sujet comme elle traiterait un événement similaire dans un autre type d'industrie. L'enquête *Crunch Investigation* en France demeure à ce titre un exemple tout à fait parlant de cette rencontre entre ces deux pôles.

³ Créateur des saga *Rayman* et *Beyond Good & Evil*, jouissant d'un certain succès d'estime auprès des joueurs.

⁴ Cette « période de crise » s'accompagne en outre de cadences de travail soutenues et de nombreuses heures supplémentaires. Des situations précises seront détaillées plus loin dans ce travail.

L'un des centres névralgiques de l'industrie du jeu vidéo (et des technologies de l'information et de la communication en général) étant les Etats Unis, il a paru intéressant d'opérer cette comparaison dans un contexte américain. Ainsi, l'objet du présent travail seront les sites presses généralistes et vidéoludiques américaines en ligne, traitant de sujets américains.

Plus précisément, l'un des éléments qui occupera l'étude de notre objet sera la place donnée aux témoignages des développeurs vivant ces conditions de travail. En effet, si cette dimension peut apparaître comme basique au premier abord, elle découle cependant de nombreux aspects pouvant éclairer la pratique des journalistes. Cet angle d'attaque apparaît comme une porte d'entrée sur une plus vaste étude de la pratique du journalisme par les membres des rédactions généralistes et vidéoludiques. La mobilisation de témoignages est au moins en partie conditionnée par une série d'éléments qui seront explicités dans l'état de l'art et la méthodologie.

Etat de l'art

Le champ journalistique

Pour comparer les différences de traitement médiatique des conditions de travail dans l'industrie vidéoludique entre la presse jeu vidéo et la presse généraliste il convient d'abord de s'interroger sur la façon dont ces deux presses se positionnent dans le champ journalistique. Le champ journalistique est la structure dans laquelle existent des mécanismes exercés sur les journalistes, puis, à travers eux, sur les différents champs de production culturelle, juridique, littéraire, etc. Ce champ s'est construit au XIXe siècle selon l'opposition entre les journaux « à sensation » et les journaux « de commentaires ». Le champ journalistique voit aussi en son sein deux principes de légitimation : le premier est celle de la légitimation par les pairs, donnée à ceux qui reconnaissent les « valeurs » du champ journalistique, et le second est la reconnaissance par le plus grand nombre, le « verdict de marché ». (Bourdieu, 1994).

Dominique Marchetti (2002) approfondit cette analyse du champ en expliquant qu'il se caractérise par l'opposition entre deux pôles : l'un "généraliste" et l'autre "spécialisé". Cette distinction renvoie d'un côté aux caractéristiques des publics cibles des médias, et de l'autre aux médias et journalistes eux-mêmes. Mais avec cette distinction coexiste la dualité entre pôle "intellectuel" et "commercial" comme l'expliquait Bourdieu.

Au sein de ce champ, les capitaux ne sont pas distribués de façon égale. Ainsi, il existe des journaux perçus comme plus crédibles car dotés de plus de capital symbolique (Champagne, 2016, cité par Faber, 2018). Face à ces journaux se positionne un pôle journalistique « populaire ».

La presse et les journalistes vidéoludiques

Chomsky et Herman avaient déjà en leur temps mis en évidence la pression exercée sur les journalistes dépendants des revenus publicitaires (1988). Toutefois, cette pression est d'autant plus présente dans la presse vidéoludique que celle-ci est prise dans une « triade » public-annonceur-journaliste, selon Nieborg et Sihvonen (2009). En effet, les travaux académiques sur la presse vidéoludique mettent en évidence que les revenus publicitaires des publications et webzines consacrés au jeu vidéo pouvaient effectivement dépendre des

annonceurs publicitaires qui sont, la majorité du temps, les éditeurs de jeu vidéo eux-mêmes.

Néanmoins, Dozo et Krywicki (2018) relèvent que les bannières publicitaires ne rapportent plus autant de revenus au début dès années 2010. Dès lors, cela a motivé pour certains sites l'adoption de modèles d'abonnement dans la presse vidéoludique en ligne a permis à certaines publications de s'affranchir à degrés divers de cette dépendance. C'est notamment le cas de *Gamekult* en France, qui a lancé une formule *premium* en 2013, laquelle a ensuite été modifiée en 2015 et 2018 (*Offrez-vous un an d'abonnement Gamekult Premium + la Mega Drive Mini!*, 2019). Ce qui a démarré comme un accès exclusif à certains articles et à la désactivation des publicités est devenu, au fil du temps, un abonnement nécessaire pour accéder à la majorité des contenus du site, dont la rédaction souhaitait le transformer en « vrai magazine indé en ligne, composé de nombreux contenus réguliers, de longueur et profondeurs variables » (*Gamekult Premium évolue*, 2018).

Aux Etats-Unis, *IGN* propose actuellement un abonnement *IGN Prime* non-obligatoire pour l'accès aux articles qui permet de désactiver les publicités. Cette pratique avait déjà cours dans les années 2000 : le site américain *GameSpot* proposait en échange d'un abonnement des accès exclusifs à des événements en direct, la possibilité de télécharger des guides, ou encore de pouvoir consulter le site sans publicités (*GameSpot revamps subscription model*, 2006). Toutefois, ce système d'abonnement a pris fin en 2013 (Anderson, 2013).

L'actualité des jeux vidéo s'étant institutionnalisée autour du cycle « news-previews-tests » (Krywicki, à paraître) une bonne relation avec ces éditeurs/annonceurs étant, au moins un temps, primordiale afin d'obtenir les moyens de produire du contenu pour sa publication. L'idéologie professionnelle du journalisme vidéoludique, c'est-à-dire dans ce contexte « un système de croyances caractéristiques d'un groupe précis, comprenant le processus général de production de sens et idées (au sein de ce groupe) » (Deuze, 2005), diffèrerait du journalisme « traditionnel » compris comme une idéologie professionnelle. Dans ce cas, les journalistes vidéoludiques ambitionnent non pas de devenir des surveillants de l'*establishment*, mais plutôt comme médiateurs qui distribuent du capital ludique (Nieborg & Sihvonen, 2009).

Toutefois, Carlson (2009) relève que si des pratiques pouvant être considérées comme des conflits d'intérêts ont eu cours dans la presse vidéoludique, désignée comme étant une presse « enthousiaste » (*enthusiastic press*) par les journalistes *mainstream*, elle relève toutefois que certaines publications recherchaient une légitimation par rapport à leurs collègues généralistes. La chercheuse prend l'exemple de Dan Hsu, ancien rédacteur en chef du *Electronic Games Monthly*, qui a explicitement évoqué les conflits d'intérêts qui lient les journalistes de la presse vidéoludique aux éditeurs. Hsu (2008) a d'ailleurs relevé que les mesures de rétorsion prises par des éditeurs mécontents ne se cantonnaient plus aux campagnes publicitaires, mais aussi à la possibilité de couvrir leur actualité.

Carlson affirme cependant que l'adoption de pratiques plus « légitimes » du journalisme n'est pas tant motivée par un besoin d'intégrité, mais plutôt par le fait que les lecteurs apprécient davantage les articles d'opinion et « *hard-hitting* », sans perdre de vue qu'une partie des revenus publicitaires de ces publications ainsi que de leurs contenus demeurent dépendants des avantages tirés par une bonne relation avec les éditeurs. Ce constat rejoint la conclusion de Nieborg et Sihvonen, stipulant que le journalisme vidéoludique est largement payé par l'industrie et utilise l'information et le matériel directement fourni par l'industrie. Les journalistes doivent donc trouver un équilibre entre le respect de l'idéologie professionnelle et l'obtention de capitaux ludiques pour pouvoir les redistribuer.

Comme il a été suggéré précédemment, la presse vidéoludique a également vocation à distribuer le « capital ludique », notion utilisée notamment par Mia Consalvo (2007). Ce « *gaming capital* » part du principe que les joueurs appartiennent à un groupe de pratiques et de croyances particulières, et servirait donc à identifier des classes. Le capital ludique dépend de plusieurs facteurs, dont celui qui nous intéresse dans le présent travail, à savoir le choix des publications et de guides de jeu vidéo ainsi que la connaissance de l'industrie. Un des lieux d'échange de ces capitaux est la presse vidéoludique, qui obtient ses propres capitaux ludiques grâce à ses bonnes relations avec les éditeurs, ses principaux fournisseurs d'informations, produits et d'événements à couvrir.

La dépendance des journalistes de la presse vidéoludique aux annonceurs est donc double. Elle est matérielle, en ce que les annonceurs/éditeurs sont les premiers fournisseurs de nouvelles (les « news ») et de produits à tester (« review »), mais aussi symbolique. En tant que distributrice de capitaux ludiques, la presse se doit, afin d'obtenir ses capitaux, de

pouvoir obtenir ces nouvelles à publier et ces produits à tester. Il ne faut toutefois pas perdre de vue que, selon Krywicki et Dozo (2017), le capital ludique des journalistes de la presse jeu vidéo est hétérogène en ce qu'il comporte plusieurs dimensions et ne dépend pas uniquement des informations que la presse vidéoludique fournit à son lectorat. Les deux auteurs dégagent en outre trois subdivisions de ce type de capital. Le premier est le capital ludique psychomoteur, c'est-à-dire la faculté à « bien jouer » en suivant les règles du jeu. Le deuxième est le capital ludique encyclopédique, l'ensemble des connaissances d'un acteur sur l'industrie du jeu vidéo que ce soit au niveau des œuvres ou des créateurs. Enfin, le capital ludique spécifique, soit les connaissances sur un jeu en particulier.

Concrètement, cette influence a été dénoncée par plusieurs journalistes de presse vidéoludique en ligne dans un article du site Acrimed (Lemaire, 2014). Sony avait par exemple pris des mesures de rétorsion contre *Gamekult* en retirant l'intégralité de ses publicités suite à une mauvaise critique d'un de leurs jeux. De même Ivan Gaudé et Julien Chièze, respectivement anciens directeurs de la rédaction de *Canard PC* et *Gameblog* ont fait état de pression similaires. En 2012, l'éditeur Activision a supprimé ses publicités sur *Gameblog*, ce qui équivalait à un manque à gagner d'un quart des recettes du site, soulignant donc l'importance de la publicité pour la stabilité d'un site de presse vidéoludique.⁵

Le site américain *Kotaku* a également été exclu des campagnes publicitaires de Sony après avoir annoncé l'existence de jeux n'ayant pas encore été révélés au public. De la même manière ; entre 2013 et 2015, les éditeurs *Bethesda Game Studios* et « dans une moindre mesure » *Ubisoft* ont également interrompu leur relation avec *Kotaku* après que le site ait révélé en décembre 2013 l'existence du jeu de Bethesda *Fallout 4* et du jeu *Assassin's creed Victory* (rebaptisé *Syndicate*) édité par *Ubisoft* (Totilo, 2015)⁶.

L'article met en évidence l'importance du respect du cycle « news-previews-test » pour pouvoir jouir de bonnes relations avec un éditeur. Pourtant, Totilo soutient qu'en agissant de la sorte, ils affirmaient leur position de journalistes au service de leurs lecteurs, ce qui apporte une nuance au constat relatif à l'idéologie professionnelle des journalistes de la presse vidéoludique telle que perçue par Nieborg et Sihvonen (2009), déjà nuancée par

⁵ <https://www.acrimed.org/Jeux-video-une-presse-sous-influence>

⁶ <https://kotaku.com/a-price-of-games-journalism-1743526293> 13 septembre

Carlson (2009), Totilo attribue à l'équipe de *Kotaku* une idéologie professionnelle journalistique plus traditionnelle suite à la transgression de la culture du secret de l'industrie.

I'm sure some people will sympathize with Bethesda and Ubisoft. Some will cheer these companies and hope others follow suit. They will see this kind of reporting as upsetting, as ruining surprises and frustrating creative people. They will claim we are "hurting video games," and, as so many do, mistake the job of entertainment reporting for the mandate to hype entertainment products.

We serve our readers, not game companies, and will always do so to the best of our ability, no matter who in the gaming world is or isn't angry with us at the moment. In some ways, the blacklist has even been instructive—cut off from press access and pre-release review copies, we have doubled down on our post-release "embedding" approach to games coverage. We've experienced some of the year's biggest games from street level, at the same time and in the same way as our readers.

Toutefois, les cas de *Gamekult*, *Gameblog* et *Canard PC* rappelle que le respect du cycle « news-previews-test » n'est pas une condition suffisante pour maintenir des bonnes relations avec les éditeurs. Ces derniers peuvent « riposter » contre une critique qu'ils jugent trop sévère, et ce malgré le respect du cycle admis dans ce type de presse.

Cette dépendance des journalistes « jeux vidéo » par rapport aux annonceurs et aux acteurs de l'industrie comme caractéristique de leur idéologie professionnelle semble aujourd'hui être à nuancer. En effet, le passage au web va permettre l'avènement de rubriques « plus inventives et interrogeant la pratique journalistique sur le jeu vidéo elle-même » (Krywicky, 2017). Actuellement, des médias tels que *Gamekult.com* et *Jeuxvideo.com* distinguent leurs « rédacteurs » de leurs « journalistes », dont le travail relève davantage du journalisme traditionnel en ce qu'il apporte une certaine « valeur ajoutée » (Krywicky, à paraître).

Krywicky (à paraître) met en évidence trois signes de la professionnalisation des journalistes jeu vidéo. Le premier est la distinction dans certains médias (*Gamekult.com* et *Jeuxvideo.com* sont cités en tant qu'exemples) entre les « rédacteurs », écrivant des articles faibles en « valeur ajoutée », et les « journalistes » mobilisant des techniques d'enquêtes. Le deuxième signe est le glissement sémantique du terme de « passion » qui est aujourd'hui « associée à des soupçons de corruption », alors qu'elle était autrefois revendiquée comme un élément de distinction par rapport à la presse « traditionnelle ». La « passion » est désormais la posture revendiquée par les influenceurs. Le dernier de ces signes est « l'éclosion récente de nombreuses enquêtes approfondies autour du jeu vidéo, hébergées par les médias spécialisés, pluri-spécialisés ou généralistes ». C'est là, toujours selon

Krywicky, que « la spécialisation vidéoludique embrasse l'une des caractéristiques définitives de l'investigation journalistique ».

Ce genre de constat ressort aussi au cours d'interviews avec des journalistes de la presse jeu vidéo critiquant leur métier. Par exemple, Patrick Prax et Alejandro Soler (2016) ont conduit des entretiens avec des journalistes vidéoludiques « *alternative* » et « *established* ». Lors d'une entrevue en 2014 avec le journaliste finlandais Tommy Hakansson (partenaire éditorial du site suédois *Svampriket*, consacré aux *reviews*) émettait le regret suivant, tel que cité dans l'article de Prax et Soler :

« Just now when Irrational Just now when Irrational [video game producer] shut down [...] He [the executive producer] said in a press release that he was going to start up a smaller studio, and develop games in lesser extent. But that also meant that the developers and the publishers had fired everyone else. But no one talks about that, there is no one that investigates this further [...] (Joakim Dahlbäck 2014)

[...] Several journalists just identifies games as entertainment, and this was very obvious when Ken Levine left Irrational games, most news were all about "oh my god, what cool things will Ken Levine do now?" and less about the human factor. Why it happened and stuff like that. It's still to centred around entertainment. "

Selon Hakansson, dans la presse vidéoludique, les informations ayant indirectement trait aux produits eux-mêmes (les jeux, les consoles, etc.) seraient relégués au second plan. Ainsi, les raisons profondes d'une fermeture d'un studio venant de délivrer un jeu à succès ne seraient pas développées par les journalistes vidéoludiques. Ce constat concorde avec les données recueillies par Prax et Soler, qui établissent que ni les journalistes « alternatifs » ni les journalistes « établis » ne se considèrent comme des journalistes, et dès lors, aucun ne prend le rôle démocratique « traditionnel » du journaliste. Le facteur humain est mis de côté au profit de l'aspect « divertissement » du jeu vidéo.

L'événement

Eliséo Verón (1981) considère l'événement comme dénué d'existence propre : ils "n'existent que dans la mesure où ces médias les façonnent". Les médias finissent par imposer l'événement tel que construit par ceux-ci dans "l'intersubjectivité des acteurs sociaux". Les médias sont donc les lieux où le réel est produit.

En ce qui concerne la notion d'événement, Patrick Champagne (2000) le définit comme suit :

" [...] ce que l'on appelle aujourd'hui événement est une production collective dont les sujets apparents sont les journalistes. Il y a événement lorsque l'ensemble des médias qui « comptent » dans la production de l'information perçue comme crédible s'accordent à traiter une information comme telle. Cela signifie qu'un journaliste ou même un journal ne peuvent pas décider à eux seuls ce qui doit être

considérer comme un « événement » : chacun y contribue seulement à la mesure de la position qu'il occupe dans le champ journalistique. ”

En d'autres termes, « faire l'événement » était la réalisation d'une performance politique, physique, esthétique... devant les journalistes (Champagne, 1990). En outre, Dominique Marchetti (2002) rappelle que le champ médiatique n'est pas autonome, et que la "médiatisation d'un « événement » ou d'une thématique est le produit des changements internes au champ journalistique mais aussi de transformations qui affectent les différents espaces sociaux considérés [...]. Elles sont ensuite « retraduites » selon les logiques de l'espace médiatique”.

L'affaire, le conflit social et le feuilleton médiatique

Sur la notion d'affaire, Dominique Marchetti (2002) relève que la condition d'émergence d'une affaire dans l'espace médiatique est sa problématisation en un enjeu économique, scientifique ou judiciaire. Il ajoute que « Le traitement (ou non) du problème par l'Etat mais aussi [...] par le champ judiciaire, est une des conditions nécessaires à la mobilisation journalistique ». De plus, les mobilisations collectives individuelles ou collectives doivent être analysées pour expliquer l'émergence médiatique des "affaires". Cette analyse doit être effectuée au niveau des "propriétés sociales et [...] les différents types de capitaux qu'ils sont susceptibles de mobiliser : capital économique, capital de relations dans la presse, capital « médiatique », etc.”

Cependant, cette définition de l'affaire apparaît assez réductrice en ce qui concerne le sujet de ce travail. L'exemple de l'enquête du journal *Libération* sur les faits de harcèlement sexuel au siège de l'éditeur *Ubisoft* (Cario & Chapuis, 2020) est à ce titre assez parlant : il n'y a pas eu besoin de quelque mobilisation judiciaire ou étatique pour que le journal traite de cette affaire. L'enquête s'appuie sur une vingtaine de témoignages décrivant ce qui se présenterait comme l'impunité totale d'un manager pourtant responsable de faits de harcèlements majoritairement commis envers des employées, mais aussi des employés. Cette enquête est le point de départ de toute une série d'articles relayant au fur et à mesure des témoignages évoquant une ambiance toxique qui règnerait au sein de l'éditeur français. La suite de cette affaire a déjà été mentionnée précédemment avec la mise en cause de Michel Ancel, *manager* célèbre d'Ubisoft. En outre, nous pouvons remarquer que les articles liés à l'augmentation significative du temps de travail dans le studio polonais CD

Projekt Red lors du développement du jeu *Cyberpunk 2077*, se reposant eux aussi sur des témoignages. (Schreier, 2020), ne sont pas toujours désignés comme des affaires. Dès lors, cette notion apparaît insatisfaisante dans la mesure où certains cas de médiatisation des problématiques liées au *crunch* ne sont pas présentées comme des affaires.

A la lumière de ces réalités, il apparaît nécessaire de faire entrer en jeu la notion de conflit social, qui apparaît comme plus adaptée au sujet qui nous intéresse. Un conflit social « se définit en tant qu'affrontement entre deux ou plusieurs groupes interdépendants ayant des intérêts réellement ou symboliquement opposés » (Koutsouvoulou, 2016). Gérard Pirotton (2012) liste plusieurs façons de penser les conflits sociaux par leur traitement médiatique. Il établit tout d'abord que l'enjeu principal d'un conflit social est la conquête de l'opinion publique autour de laquelle s'articule toute une série d'acteurs tels que les salariés, les employeurs, les journalistes eux-mêmes, les professionnels de la communication, les internautes, les décideurs politiques, ainsi que les écoles de journalisme.

En ce qui concerne l'étude de la « couverture de presse » des conflits sociaux, Pirotton suggère que cette couverture serait la partie visible d'une lutte entre acteurs d'un conflit social « dans lequel chacun cherche à obtenir des points, notamment dans la gestion de son image auprès des médias ». Dès lors, la relation entre les acteurs change car elle se structure en partie en fonction du traitement médiatique. Par ailleurs, ces acteurs sont inégaux en ce qu'ils n'ont pas la même capacité à bénéficier d'une couverture médiatique dans les termes qu'ils souhaiteraient, mais ils le sont aussi par rapport aux ressources dont ils disposent : « les moyens institutionnels et les réseaux relationnels ne sont pas également répartis entre "dominants" et "dominés" ». Pirotton conclut que cette méthode conduit à étudier la dynamique de ces conflits par le rôle du traitement médiatique dans la gestion du conflit par les acteurs, et notamment par l'acteur revendicatif. Le cadrage, compris comme « l'interprétation des significations sociales et politiques du conflit », devient ici un élément fondamental.

Le conflit social est une situation narrative de prédilection pour le feuilleton médiatique. En effet, le conflit a ceci d'attirant qu'il suscite l'attente de la victoire d'un acteur sur un autre, ou d'un « règlement négocié », dont la conclusion est provisoirement repoussée et incertaine jusqu'au dénouement (Baroni et al., 2006). Ce travail portant sur la couverture médiatique des problèmes liés aux conditions de travail dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo, ce

concept apparaît également pertinent pour comprendre notre objet d'étude. D'autant que ces conflits sont porteurs d'enjeux salariaux et de qualité de vie sur le lieu de travail, qui sont majoritairement les objets des revendications des employés se sentant concernés par ces problématiques.

Un feuilleton médiatique peut se définir comme des « articles de presse qui suivent un événement réel (p. ex. un conflit, une affaire, etc.), provisoirement inachevé ou incomplète, et dont la narration se poursuit au-delà du numéro quotidien » (Baroni, 2016). En outre, le feuilleton médiatique « apparaît comme la forme idéale pour raconter jusqu'à son point d'épuisement un événement d'une certaine ampleur temporelle ». De plus, un feuilleton médiatique peut désigner une grande variété d'événements comme des faits divers, des épidémies ou des transactions sportives (Baroni et al., 2006). Un feuilleton peut donc porter sur ce que Marchetti (2002) désigne comme une affaire, c'est-à-dire un enjeu économique, politique ou judiciaire, mais peut aussi désigner d'autres types d'événements, dont les conflits sociaux.

[Les conditions de travail dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo](#)

Pour comprendre la nature et l'objet des conflits sociaux dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo, il convient de faire un rapide tour d'horizon des réalités de ce milieu au travers des études publiées sur le sujet.

Comme évoqué précédemment, ces dernières années ont vu la publication d'enquêtes relatives aux conditions de travail dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo, et plus précisément à l'égard du harcèlement sur le lieu de travail, à l'instar de l'enquête de *Libération* ou de l'affaire *Quantic Dream*.

L'autre dimension plus importante dans les problèmes relatifs à ce sujet concerne les heures de travail, les heures supplémentaires et leurs compensations. L'*International Game Developers Association* (IGDA) est une association internationale consacrée aux travailleurs de l'industrie du jeu vidéo. Son champ d'expertise concerne entre autres la discrimination dans l'industrie ou encore la qualité de vie des employés. C'est à ce titre qu'elle met à disposition sur son site internet toute une série de ressources, dont des études et des sondages concernant les conditions de travail dans l'industrie. Si la lettre d'Erin Hoffman a lancé en novembre 2004 la première affaire « d'ampleur » concernant le sujet des

conditions de travail dans cette industrie (Williams, 2013), Dyer-Witthford et de Peuter (2006) vont jusqu'à dire qu'Erin Hoffman a, en révélant dans sa lettre l'ampleur des heures supplémentaires auxquelles était soumis son conjoint, révélé un secret embarrassant pour les entreprises de l'industrie. Toutefois, un rapport de l'IGDA (2004) publié quelques mois avant la lettre d'Erin Hoffman fait déjà état d'intenses périodes de *crunch* dans l'industrie.

« *Crunch* » est un terme désignant une « période de crise apparemment inhabituelle dans l'agenda de production » (Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2006). Concrètement, le *crunch* se manifeste par des périodes de travail très intenses imposées par le *management* afin de pouvoir respecter les dates butoirs de projets en développement. Selon le rapport de l'IGDA relatif à la qualité de vie publié en avril 2004, cette pratique est omniprésente dans l'industrie et était, selon 51,7% des participants, vue comme une pratique normale dans l'industrie par les gestionnaires. En outre, les heures de travail durant ces périodes étaient d'entre 65 et 80 heures hebdomadaires pour 35,2% des participants, et excédaient les 80 heures pour 13% d'entre eux. En outre, le rapport souligne que dans 46,8% des cas, les heures supplémentaires ne sont pas payées ou compensées par des congés.

Dans le rapport de l'année 2019 (IGDA, 2019), 34% des employés interrogés ne recevaient pas de compensation pour les heures supplémentaires ou le *crunch*. 41% des employés interrogés affirmaient être soumis à des périodes de *crunch*, contre 51% en 2017. 42% d'entre eux considéraient que ces périodes étaient attendues sur leur lieu de travail, et 36% ont confirmé avoir été soumis plus de deux fois à ce type de pratique lors des deux dernières années. Durant ces périodes, 38% d'entre eux travaillent entre 50 et 59 heures par semaine, entre 60 et 69 heures pour 19%, et 13% travaillent plus de 70 heures. Ces chiffres montrent que la pratique reste fréquente dans l'industrie.

Les usages de l'événement

L'événement, une fois construit, peut être utilisé par les acteurs sociaux. Christophe Granger (2011) met en évidence que les années 1970 ont vu naître en France un « usage proprement militant de l'événement » qui rompt avec les pratiques alors admises. A celles-ci s'ajoutent en effet, par exemple, des conférences de presse, des distributions de tracts, etc. Dans son exemple, Granger explique que les grévistes de Rateau⁷ satisfont les exigences

⁷ Grève des métallurgistes de l'usine Rateau à la Courneuve entre janvier et avril 1974.

médiatiques de ce qu'est un événement en recourant à des démonstrations au fort capital médiatique, et toute la démarche se retrouve conditionnée par cette « stratégie de représentation ».

De même, dans une revue de la littérature concernant la question des sources dans les médias, Kaciaf et Nollet, en citant Bruce Williams et Michael Delli Carpini (2011) expliquent que l'effacement des frontières entre information et divertissement, et producteurs et consommateurs de contenus médiatiques, met en cause un système dans lequel élites journalistiques et politiques sont les seuls vecteurs d'accès à un espace public centralisé. Ce « régime médiatique » est mis à mal par toute une série de développements techniques et industriels, tels que la croissance d'internet, ce qui multiplie les sources d'informations, et ainsi la concurrence entre elles, et rendent possibles des usages militants des médias.

Molotch et Lester (1974) ont élaboré une typologie des « événements publics » pour lesquels les journalistes recherchent activement les informations. D'un côté les « événements de routines » sont « principalement promus par les groupes qui disposent d'un accès habituel aux médias en raison de leur "richesse" et de leurs "sources institutionnelles de pouvoirs" ». Les autres groupes doivent quant à eux créer des événements qui n'adviennent que parce qu'ils « représentent un problème pour les relativement puissants » (1974 : numéro de page).

Les sources

Kaciaf et Nollet (2013) affirment qu'il est aujourd'hui inenvisageable d'étudier l'activité journalistique et les processus de médiatisation sans tenir compte des stratégies d'accès aux médias utilisées par les organisations et leurs communicants⁸.

Dans leur tour d'horizon de la recherche, les deux auteurs affirment que les années 1950 et 1960 ont vu le développement d'une sociologie du journalisme préférant dépeindre les pratiques des journalistes et les « déterminants de leur production ». Une approche davantage constructiviste a émergé dans les années 1970 et 1980. Ces travaux changent la façon dont l'agenda médiatique est conçu : il devient appréhendé comme le « résultat d'une

⁸ Si la littérature précédemment citée s'appuie sur de la recherche majoritairement francophone, l'étude des sources a plus été l'apanage de la recherche anglo-américaine et canadienne.

compétition entre un ensemble d'acteurs et d'institutions, inégalement capables d' enrôler les journalistes et de peser sur leurs productions ».

Des chercheurs vont alors analyser les logiques de cet accès à la presse. Leon Sigal parlera de cet accès dans les deux sens en établissant les notions d'accès de la presse, c'est-à-dire l'accès qu'ont les journalistes à ces sources, et d'accès à la presse, l'accès qu'ont ces différents acteurs et institutions évoqués précédemment (1973)

Herbert Gans (1979) affirme que les sources se perçoivent comme ayant le pouvoir de fournir de l'information qui ferait la promotion de leurs intérêts, idées ou réputations personnelles. Cependant, la source n'a pas un rôle actif dans sa relation avec le journaliste, elle ne peut que se rendre disponible : c'est au journaliste qu'il reviendra de décider si telle ou telle source est appropriée.

Gans affirme en outre que cette relation entre la source et le journaliste est une lutte (*tug of war*) durant laquelle les sources essayent de contrôler les nouvelles, les journalistes essaient quant à eux de « contrôler » les sources pour obtenir les informations désirées. Pour pouvoir promouvoir leur message, Gans avance que les sources utilisent quatre facteurs afin de pouvoir être sollicitées par les journalistes : la motivation⁹ des sources, le pouvoir, la capacité de fournir des informations appropriées et la proximité sociale et géographique avec le journaliste. Il est toutefois à noter que si les couches socialement et géographiquement éloignées des journalistes auront du mal à les contacter, l'inverse est également vrai : le journaliste aura du mal à contacter des sources au sein d'environnements géographiques et sociaux qui lui sont éloignés.

Gans ne voit pas la transmission journalistique de l'information comme un procédé linéaire, mais plutôt comme une boucle complexe au sein de laquelle des sources contactent des journalistes, contact dont le succès sera déterminé par les quatre facteurs évoqués précédemment, qui choisiront si l'information convient au public, dont les sources font partie. Ce paradigme implique que la diffusion de l'information ne dépend pas seulement de sa pertinence, mais aussi de sa disponibilité qui est conditionnée par des facteurs politiques, économiques, géographiques et sociaux.

⁹ Gans parle de « *incentives* » : les sources peuvent être volontaires dans leur participation, mais peuvent aussi être récalcitrantes.

Dans les termes de Sigal, l'accès de la presse serait donc un critère déterminant de l'intérêt d'une « news ». En outre, la disponibilité de ces sources est, toujours selon Gans, un « reflet de la structure sociale » en ce que le pouvoir économique et politique a un accès plus aisé à la presse. Gans ajoute que « ceux qui manquent de pouvoir ne sont généralement pas recherchés par les journalistes à moins que leur activité ne produise du désordre social ou moral ». Cela correspond aux écrits de Piroton (2012), établissant que cette sélection des sources peut être éclairante sur les rapports de force en jeu au sein d'un conflit social donné, en ce que les acteurs du conflit disposent d'une inégale possibilité d'accès à la presse.

Nous évoquions précédemment la typologie des événements de Molotch et Lester (1974). Le prolongement de leur analyse de ce qu'est un événement leur fait conclure que, la couverture journalistique desdits événements étant davantage concentrée sur la « façon de traiter les dissidents » plutôt que sur les problématiques soulevées, les porte-paroles de ces groupes restent en dehors de la couverture médiatique.

Enfin, l'équipe de Birmingham menée par Stuart Hall (1978) va parler des « définisseurs primaires » pour désigner ces sources officielles bénéficiant d'un accès privilégié aux médias ce qui leur permet, en prenant exemple sur la théorie gramscienne de l'hégémonie culturelle, d'imposer leurs cadres de pensée. En opposition à ces « définisseurs primaires » se dressent des définisseurs « alternatifs ». Cependant, certains de ces acteurs alternatifs n'ont pas accès au processus de définition car tous les définisseurs, qu'ils soient alternatifs ou primaires, doivent intervenir selon les termes établis par les définisseurs primaires. Hall prend l'exemple d'un secrétaire général du T.U.C., qui sera mieux accueilli s'il est « raisonnable » et qu'il ne défend pas la grève non-autorisée. Sortir de ces règles du « débat raisonnable » verrait le définisseur alternatif exclu *–defined out-* du débat et sera considéré comme « extrémiste » ou « irrationnel ».

L'angle

L'angle est un sujet problématique dans la recherche académique en ce qu'il serait une « notion floue » (Laborde-Milaa, 2002). Ruellan (2006) considère, quant à lui, que les manuels de journalisme donnent une « idée du sens général du procédé angulaire », mais ne se traduisent pas dans la pratique concrète du journalisme. Il dresse donc une typologie de huit angles en se servant de l'analyse de la couverture médiatique du *tsunami* de

décembre 2004 dans cinq quotidiens français. Les huit types d'angle qu'il dégage sont les suivants : le déroulé des faits, le bilan, les acteurs, les causes, les précédents, les réactions, les conséquences et les à-côtés.

Il relève notamment que certains genres sont généralement mobilisés pour certains angles, et que le traitement angulaire est une réponse aux contraintes de temps et de moyens subies par les journalistes.

La place de l'objet « jeu vidéo » dans la presse généraliste

Le traitement médiatique du jeu vidéo dans la presse généraliste a longtemps été réalisé en fonction de la problématique de la violence et de l'addiction. Dimitri Williams (2003) affirme en effet que les journalistes utilisent le registre langagier de la pathologie (« *language of pathology* ») pour décrire les joueurs, en utilisant des termes tels que « *junkies* », « *madness* » ou « *pathological preoccupation* ».

Olivier Mauco (2008) constate également que la construction des problématiques de la violence et de l'addiction aux jeux vidéo dans la presse généraliste provient notamment de ce que Mauco perçoit comme le désintéret qu'auraient selon lui les journalistes non spécialisés et non joueurs pour cette problématique.

Mauco explique en outre que la violence émerge en tant que problématique dans les médias américains en 1993, année de sortie des jeux *Mortal Kombat* sur consoles de salon, et *Doom* sur PC. Dans une analyse de corpus constitué en partie d'articles issus de la presse américaine, le chercheur conclut qu'entre 1993 et 1999, la violence n'est pas le sujet principal des articles analysés, mais est toutefois évoquée, et que le jeu vidéo est abordé dans la rubrique « technologie ».

Toutefois, le massacre de Littleton du 20 avril 1999¹⁰ va changer la donne. Les articles traitant du jeu vidéo intègrent cet objet dans une problématique sociale, et passent de la rubrique « technologie » aux rubriques « politique » et « éducation ». Ce changement de rubrique, toujours selon Mauro, implique un changement de traitement de l'objet. Ainsi, dans les jours suivant le massacre, le *New York Times* traite la question de la responsabilité du média. Abordé dans les rubriques éducation, technologie, santé et opinion, la pratique

¹⁰ La tuerie du lycée Columbine, durant laquelle deux étudiants de l'établissement ont tué 13 personnes.

de *Doom 2* par Eric Harris¹¹ est également détaillée. Comme Williams l'affirmait, la problématique du jeu vidéo est « psychologisée ».

Cependant, Dimitri Williams (2003), en se basant sur son analyse d'un corpus constitué d'articles issus de trois grands magazines américains, *Time*, *Newsweek* et *US News & World Report*, remarque que la couverture du jeu vidéo en tant que medium « mature et *mainstream* » s'est développée à partir de la fin des années 1980 jusqu'aux années 2000. Progressivement, la presse a consacré des comptes-rendus plus « analytiques et « respectueux » des jeux vidéo en tant que création artistique. Cette reconnaissance n'a toutefois pas permis aux critiques de reconnaître que le jeu vidéo soit capable de « créer une expérience artistique de la même manière que le cinéma » (Kroll, cité par Williams).

¹¹ Un des deux auteurs de la fusillade.

Hypothèses de travail

Les recherches précédentes ont permis d'admettre que certaines recherches académiques sur le journalisme vidéoludique, en particulier celles relatives à l'idéologie professionnelle des journalistes vidéoludiques apparaissent aujourd'hui dépassées et réductrices.

Nous partirons également du principe que l'industrie du jeu vidéo américaine a connu un certain nombre de conflits sociaux relatifs aux conditions de travail, et que ces conflits ont été couverts aussi bien par des organes de presse vidéoludique et généraliste.

Les notions présentées permettront d'un côté de dresser une comparaison interne au champ journalistique, c'est-à-dire entre les façons qu'ont eu les sous-champs généraliste et spécialisé de couvrir ces problématiques. De l'autre côté, ces notions permettront de comparer ces différentes couvertures médiatiques sur un axe temporel et, ce faisant, de mettre en lumière les variations entre les pratiques journalistiques internes à ces deux sous-champs au cours de la période de temps concernée par le corpus, qui sera détaillée dans la méthodologie.

L'hypothèse principale sera la suivante : lors de la couverture médiatique des conflits sociaux relatifs aux conditions de travail dans l'industrie vidéoludique américaine, les sites de presse vidéoludique inscriraient leur couverture médiatique de ces sujets au sein du cycle « news-previews-test », reléguant donc ces problématiques au statut de corollaire du développement d'un jeu vidéo, et n'en serait qu'une problématique périphérique. La presse généraliste, quant à elle moins préoccupée par l'objet du jeu vidéo, en supposant que son lectorat ne s'y intéresse pas outre-mesure, privilégie le sujet pour ce qu'il a d'humain, et aborde alors ces problèmes comme des sujets à part entière, indépendants de toute considération attachée à un jeu précis.

Ces différentes orientations seraient alors observables par la durée de la couverture médiatique, le choix des angles, des sources, des genres, la façon dont ces derniers laissent entrevoir l'investissement du journaliste, et la façon dont ces couvertures médiatiques s'inscrivent dans le conflit social, notamment au travers des notions précédemment citées et de la notion de cadrage.

Cette hypothèse implique en outre un cloisonnement entre ces deux sous-champs, différenciés par des pratiques et prises de positions distinctes par rapport à la problématique.

Méthodologie

Il convient tout d'abord de préciser que le travail s'inscrit dans une démarche exploratoire du sujet, dès lors, il n'a pas vocation à être représentatif des pratiques générales dans le journalisme vidéoludique.

Il a été décidé que le corpus débiterait en 2004, cette année de commencement a été choisie pour deux raisons. Premièrement, 2004 a été l'année ayant vu la première médiatisation au niveau national d'une affaire liée aux conditions de travail dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo, à savoir la controverse dite de l'*EA_spouse* (Williams, 2013). Deuxièmement, l'année 2004 semble idéale pour aborder cette question car elle marque aussi le début de la septième génération de consoles¹². Cette génération a notamment été marquée par le passage à la haute définition pour les jeux sur consoles de salon (précisément la Xbox 360 et la Playstation 3), ce qui a augmenté les coûts de production des jeux, ainsi que la concentration d'équipes de développement afin d'augmenter les effectifs. Dans le cas d'Electronic Arts, Richard Hilleman, directeur créatif, évoquait en 2013 le passage de 125 équipes de développement travaillant sur les jeux dits "Triple A" au début de la génération à 25 en 2013 (mcvuk, 2013).

"That number today is well south of 30; probably in the 25 range. What's interesting is that, if you look at the composition of those teams, the numbers are exactly the same: those 125 teams became 25; the size of the teams increased by a factor of four. This has everything to do with the standard definition to HD change. If you look at the math, that change is about content – richly about content – and as we evolved, our costs went substantially up. And the number of people on teams with that kind of vision went up by necessity."

Le corpus ira jusqu'en 2020. Le temps long a été choisi pour ce travail car selon des observations préalables, dans l'ensemble des articles publiés concernant le jeu vidéo, assez peu concernent directement les conditions de travail. Cet important intervalle permettra donc d'avoir plus de matière à étudier et de livrer des conclusions les plus complètes possibles quant à l'évolution du traitement de ces conflits sociaux. Cela permettra également de déceler les éventuels signes qui permettront de déterminer comment l'*ethos* professionnel des journalistes vidéoludiques et l'attitude adoptée par les journalistes vis-à-vis de cet objet auraient changé au cours du temps.

¹² Génération composée, par ordre de sortie de la Nintendo DS, Playstation Portable, Xbox 360, Playstation 3 et la Wii.

Ces considérations soulignent que la sélection s'est opérée à partir d'une liste de conflits sociaux ayant eu lieu dans l'industrie, et de là a pu être entamée la recherche d'articles traitant desdits conflits sociaux. Ce critère a permis de collecter le corpus d'article le plus large possible afin d'avoir une idée aussi complète que possible des couvertures médiatiques.

Le choix de mobiliser des ressources en ligne est d'ordre pratique : constituer un corpus suffisamment complet à l'aide de ressources imprimées aurait été difficile étant donné le peu d'archives existantes sur cet objet, ou la difficulté à y accéder, à plus forte raison que notre étude se consacre à la presse américaine. Ce choix des médias américains a été motivé par le fait que les États-Unis disposent du plus large contingent de travailleurs de l'industrie du jeu vidéo. En 2017, le pays comptait environ 220 000 travailleurs pour 2 457 entreprises (Takahashi, 2017). De plus, les sites de presse ont ceci d'intéressant qu'ils sont les plus à même de réagir plus rapidement que les publications papier et d'être soumis à un rythme plus soutenu.

Outils d'analyse et de comparaison

Les concepts relevés dans l'état de l'art seront utilisés pour éclaircir les spécificités, différences ou similitudes entre ces types de presse. Ces concepts leur étant transversaux, à l'instar du sujet qui nous préoccupe, ils constitueront la base théorique et conceptuelle sur laquelle s'appuiera la comparaison et l'évolution de ces deux types de presse quant à leur façon d'aborder le sujet du *crunch* dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo.

Les termes d'analyse qui soutiendront les différentes comparaisons seront les suivants. Le premier sera la durée de la couverture médiatique, le deuxième les angles employés selon la typologie de Ruellan (2002), le troisième les sources utilisées, le quatrième évoquera le degré d'investissement des journalistes, et le cinquième tentera de déceler ce que la couverture médiatique révèle du conflit social en analysant notamment le cadrage comme enjeu du conflit tel qu'il se manifeste dans la presse. Ces termes ont en commun le fait qu'ils déterminent d'une certaine façon la place des témoignages dans les articles étudiés.

Ces notions permettront également de dégager les lecteurs modèles (Eco, 1979) construits par les journalistes de façon transversale. En effet, les angles, sources, place dans le conflit social, etc. permettent de dégager les stratégies mises en place par le journaliste pour

esquisser son lecteur modèle. Ce lecteur modèle apparaissant comme le reflet de l'auteur du texte, il permettra d'identifier les exigences et le rapport du journaliste à son travail. Le concept de lecteur modèle conçoit le texte comme obligatoirement incomplet. A l'instar de n'importe quel message, un texte n'a de signification que s'il est déchiffré grâce à un code correspondant. Le destinataire du texte, le lecteur, est l'acteur (réel ou non) qui déchiffre ce code. C'est à lui d'en déchiffrer les signifiants mais aussi le non-dit, qui est un élément distinctif du mode d'expression qu'est le texte. La lecture et le déchiffrement d'un texte nécessite un processus conscient dans le chef du lecteur. Le lecteur modèle apparaissant comme la construction sur laquelle le journaliste projette son travail et ses exigences, ce concept apparaît pertinent pour tenter d'identifier les exigences et l'attitude du journaliste par rapport à son propre travail.

L'auteur devra donc prévoir un lecteur modèle « capable de coopérer à l'actualisation textuelle de la façon dont lui, l'auteur, le pensait, et capable aussi d'agir interprétativement comme lui a agi générativement ».

Sélection des sites de presse

Avant de s'étendre sur les considérations liées à la sélection des articles et des sites de presse, précisons qu'à l'instar des articles papier, les ressources en ligne sont susceptibles d'avoir été perdues au cours des années, au fil des divers remaniements ou fermetures de sites, dès lors nous devons assumer le fait que ce corpus est possiblement incomplet. C'est pourquoi l'outil *Wayback Machine*¹³ a été ici particulièrement utile, dans la mesure où il a permis de retrouver des articles normalement inaccessibles, dont les adresses URL ont pu être récupérées car référencées sur d'autres pages qui leur étaient contemporaines.

Sites de presse vidéoludique

Etant donné que ce travail concernera les logiques internes au champ journalistique, il a été choisi de sélectionner quatre sites de presse ayant *a priori* des puissances différentes au sein dudit champ journalistique. C'est en cela que la sélection s'est basée sur des critères d'audience, afin de prendre un compte le poids de chacun de ces sites en fonction du lectorat.

¹³ Internet Archive. (2014). *Wayback Machine*. <https://archive.org/web/>

Ainsi, *IGN*, *GameSpot*, *Kotaku* et *Polygon* ont été choisis. Afin de déterminer la taille de leur lectorat, nous nous sommes servis du service *Alexa Rank*. Plus que simplement mesurer le nombre de visiteurs sur chaque site, le classement est déterminé selon la moyenne quotidienne estimée de visiteurs uniques et le nombre de pages vues au cours des trois derniers mois (Duò, 2020). Autrement dit, en plus de prendre en compte le trafic d'un site internet donné, il prend également en compte l'engagement des lecteurs.

Pour déterminer les sites choisis, *Alexa* permet de consulter le classement des sites populaires selon toute une série de catégories et de sous-catégories. Pour notre objet de travail, *Alexa* propose la catégorie *Games*, qui propose la sous-catégorie *Video Games*, qui elle-même propose la sous-catégorie *News and Reviews*, qui comporte 121 sites classés. Notons par ailleurs que le choix de cette catégorie est évident pour le sujet qui nous intéresse : les sites de presse vidéoludique sont ici caractérisés par ce qui fait une partie de l'essence de l'idéologie professionnelle des journalistes vidéoludiques, à savoir le cycle «News – Preview – test ».

Le choix d'*IGN* et *GameSpot* a été motivé par le fait que, outre leur ancienneté, ils occupent les deux premières places du classement *Alexa* dans leur catégorie. Dans le classement général, ils occupent respectivement la 644^{ème} et la 820^{ème} place¹⁴¹⁵. En ce qui concerne *Kotaku* et *Polygon*, il n'est pas possible d'accéder à leur classement précis au sein de leur catégorie, mais leur classement général relatif aux deux autres sites précédemment cités. Ils occupent respectivement la 4 037^{ème}¹⁶ et la 2 331^{ème}¹⁷ place.

Ces organes de presse ont également été sélectionnés en prenant en compte leur ancienneté. Le parcours global de ces sites de presse sera explicité plus loin, mais précisons déjà que *GameSpot* et *IGN* ont été fondés à la fin des années 90, *Kotaku* au début des années 2000, et *Polygon* au début des années 2010.

¹⁴ **ALEXA RANKING**, « *ign.com* Competitive Analysis, Marketing Mix and Traffic », [en ligne] <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/ign.com> consulté le 21 décembre 2020.

¹⁵ **ALEXA RANKING**, « *GameSpot.com* Competitive Analysis, Marketing Mix and Traffic », [en ligne] <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/GameSpot.com> , consulté le 21 décembre 2020.

¹⁶ **ALEXA RANKING**, « *kotaku.com* Competitive Analysis, Marketing Mix and Traffic », [en ligne] <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/kotaku.com> , consulté le 21 décembre 2020.

¹⁷ **ALEXA RANKING**, « *polygon.com* Competitive Analysis, Marketing Mix and Traffic », [en ligne] <https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/polygon.com> , consulté le 21 décembre 2020.

Sites de presse généraliste

Du côté généraliste, la sélection des organes de presse s'effectuera au cas par cas. En effet, le jeu vidéo n'étant pas leur objet de prédilection, il est peu probable que les mêmes sites de presse aient couvert les cas sélectionnés, c'est pourquoi il a été décidé d'élargir les critères de sélection aux organismes généralistes ayant couvert les conflits sociaux concernés, là où certains sites de presse vidéoludique ont été exclus du corpus. Etant donné qu'aucun site de presse généraliste ne couvre plus d'un conflit social, avoir recours à une sélection fixe aurait mécaniquement exclu des articles déjà rares.

Sélection des conflits sociaux étudiés

Le site internet *Gameqol.com*, qui a démarré comme un projet de recherche par l'université Western Ontario sur la qualité de vie dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo, propose une section archivant les couvertures médiatiques de sujets concernant la qualité de vie¹⁸. Cette section liste effectivement des cas précis, ou des entreprises ayant connu ce genre de problèmes. Si les listes des articles archivés n'est en aucun cas exhaustive, elles ont permis de constituer une solide base de recherche et de sectionner les différentes études de cas. Par souci de clarté, nous avons décidé de suivre majoritairement les distinctions opérées par les chercheurs qui tiennent le site. Ainsi, les sections intitulées *EA Spouse*¹⁹, et *Rockstar Spouse*²⁰²¹ ont été ici sélectionnées.

Le premier cas a été sélectionné dans la mesure où il est considéré comme la première controverse d'ampleur relative aux conditions de travail dans l'industrie (Williams, 2013 ; Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2006), apparaissant donc comme un point de départ légitime dans notre recherche.

Le second cas, consacré aux *Rockstar Spouses*, a quant à lui été choisi d'une part à cause de sa similitude avec le premier cas, ce qui permet d'avoir une base commune plus large afin de possiblement dresser des comparaisons plus précises, et d'autre part parce qu'il prend place six ans après le premier cas, ce qui permettra de constater si oui ou non des changements significatifs ont eu lieu entre ces deux premiers cas.

¹⁸ GAMEQOL, « News Archive », in *gameQOL*, [en ligne] <http://www.gameqol.org/news-archive> .

¹⁹ GAMEQOL, « EA spouse », in *gameQOL*, [en ligne] <http://www.gameqol.org/ea-spouse> .

²⁰ GAMEQOL, « Rockstar Spouse », in *GameQOL*, [en ligne] <http://www.gameqol.org/rockstar-spouse> .

²¹ Rockstar Games est un développeur et éditeur de jeux vidéo américain.

Pour autant, la section *Rockstar* ne concerne pas seulement la polémique des *Rockstar Spouses*. En effet, dans cette section est archivé un article daté d'août 2019 faisant part de certains changements relatifs au statut des testeurs qualité de Rockstar Games. Le site semble avoir omis d'évoquer le contexte de la publication de cet article, qui faisait suite à une polémique entamée en mars 2018 suite à l'interview d'un des fondateurs de l'entreprise. Ainsi, nous avons décidé de « scinder » cette section, dans la mesure où elle groupait deux controverses qui concernaient certes la même entreprise, mais, en dehors de rares références au cas précédent, demeurent distinctes. Le choix s'est porté sur ce troisième cas dans la mesure où il est relativement contemporain de l'écriture de ce travail, et permettrait de l'achever sur des pratiques ayant actuellement cours au sein des sites de presse vidéoludique et généralistes, et qu'il permettrait de nous éclairer, ne serait-ce que partiellement, sur le rapport de force actuel entre sites spécialisés et sites généralistes en ce qui concerne ce sujet précis.

Au total, 55 articles ont été rassemblés, à raison de 11 articles publiés sur des sites de presse généraliste, et 44 sur leurs équivalents vidéoludiques.

Présentation des quatre organes de presse sélectionnés

*GameSpot*²²

En janvier 1996, Pete Deemer, Vince Broady et Jon Epstein fondent *SpotMedia Communications*, qui met en ligne le site *GameSpot* le 1^{er} mai 1996. En 1999, le groupe ZDNet, alors le portail technologie du groupe de presse *Ziff Davis*, rachète *GameSpot*. Le groupe ZDNet est ensuite racheté par CNET en 2000 (Winter & Kuczynski, 2000).

En 2008, *CBS Interactive*, la filiale de CBS consacrée aux contenus web, rachète CNET et demeure aujourd'hui le propriétaire de *GameSpot* (Kawamoto, 2008).

IGN

L'histoire du site IGN a été contée dans un article à l'occasion des 10 ans du site (Schneider, 2008). La « marque » IGN est née le 12 janvier 1998 alors que le site internet *N64.com*, dédié à la console Nintendo 64, change de nom pour devenir *IGN64.com*. Le site trouve ses racines en 1993, quand le britannique Chris Anderson rachète l'éditeur *GP Publications*.

²² Le manque d'information relatif à l'histoire de *GameSpot* ne signifie pas que ce site présente moins d'intérêt. Les informations relatives à son histoire étant assez rares et lacunaires, nous n'avons pas pu broser un portrait plus complet de ce site.

Entre 1993 et 1995, Anderson a relocalisé l'activité de l'entreprise dans la région de la baie de San Francisco et l'a renommée *Imagine Media*.

D'abord éditeur de magazines papiers populaires au milieu des années 90, tels que *PC Gamer* et *Next Generation*, l'entreprise surveille l'essor du *World Wide Web*, et le groupe avait déjà des sites internet correspondant à leurs publications, mais leur étaient subordonnés.

Le 29 septembre 1996, *Imagine* a mis en ligne son premier site de presse jeu vidéo, *N64.com*, devenu *IGN64.com* (pour *Imagine Gamers Network*). Ce site a été suivi de *Saturnworld* et *PSX Power*, respectivement consacrés aux consoles de Sega et Sony, la *Saturn* et la *Playstation*, de *Next-Genration.com* et *Ultra Game Players Online*. Le 12 janvier 1998, suite à un arrangement avec la branche américaine de Nintendo, n'acceptant pas l'utilisation de l'abréviation utilisée par les joueurs, *N64*, pour parler de leur dernière console, la Nintendo 64, l'acronyme IGN est utilisé pour la première fois afin de rebaptiser le site *IGN64.com*.

Cet écosystème de cinq sites est devenu un ensemble de cinq « chaînes » rassemblées sur une page d'accueil qui les affiliait tous à la marque *IGN*.

En février 1999, *Imagine* a fait de sa division internet une filiale nommée *Affiliation Networks*, rapidement renommée en *Snowball.com*, qui a fini par totalement acquérir la marque *IGN* avant la fin de l'année. Les investisseurs se multipliaient et injectaient des sommes se comptant en millions de dollars, avant l'entrée en bourse de *Snowball* le 21 mars 2000.

Toutefois, le marché du web a entamé une pente descendante au printemps 2000, ce qui a mené au licenciement de 150 employés d'*IGN*, si bien qu'en avril 2001, *IGN* a lancé un système d'abonnement *premium* qui permettait aux abonnés d'avoir accès aux critiques et autres contenus avant les non-abonnés. En 2002, *Snowball* devient *IGN entertainment* (Wired, 2002).

En 2003, le site est racheté par le groupe *Great Hill Partners*, qui a acquis ou fusionné *IGN* avec d'autres sites entre 2003 et 2005. En 2005, le groupe *News Corporation* du magnat

Rupert Murdoch rachète IGN (Carless, 2005). Le dernier rachat date du 4 février 2013. Le site est alors racheté par le groupe de presse *Ziff Davis*, filiale de J2 Global (Laughlin, 2013).

Kotaku

Kotaku est un blog mis en ligne en 2004 et fait partie du réseau de *blogs Gawker Media* et vise un public majoritairement masculin, et plus précisément de « *young upscale males* » (Parker, 2004). Il a été lancé suite à la demande du public et des annonceurs publicitaires (Carr, 2004). Depuis sa fondation, *Kotaku* s'est exporté en Australie, au Japon, au Brésil ou au Royaume-Uni (Reynolds, 2004).

Lorsque *Univision Communications* rachète *Gawker* en août 2016, le groupe rassemble ses opérations sous la bannière du groupe *Gizmodo Media Group* (Calderone, 2016). *Gizmodo* a été renommé *G/O Media* suite à son acquisition par la société d'investissement *Great Hill Partners* en avril 2019 (Ha, 2019). Ce changement a mené au départ de plusieurs journalistes, tels que Jason Schreier en avril 2020 (Park, 2020).

Polygon

Polygon est de loin le plus tardif des quatre sites de presse jeu vidéo qui seront concernés par ce travail. Le site est en effet lancé le 24 octobre 2012 par le groupe *Vox Media* (également propriétaire des sites *Vox* et *The Verge*, respectivement consacrés aux technologies et à l'information générale) après dix mois de développement. L'équipe rédactionnelle est composée de vétérans de la presse jeu vidéo en ligne venant notamment de *Joystiq*, *Kotaku* ou *The Escapist*.

Mené par Christopher Grant et Justin McElroy, provenant tous les deux de *Joystiq*, la proposition éditoriale du site est « de se concentrer sur le côté humain du développement, et se concentrer sur les gens. Je veux que les gens ressentent le respect qu'on a pour eux », disait McElroy au site *Mashable* au lendemain du lancement de *Polygon*. Il rajoute son désir d'ouvrir le site aux joueurs dont le jeu vidéo n'est pas le seul intérêt, et de voir à quel point le jeu vidéo peut rencontrer d'autres intérêts. L'ambition était également de produire un journalisme « *mazazine-style* » pouvant présenter un intérêt historique pour le futur, que Christopher Grant considérait absent chez les concurrents de *Polygon* (Stark, 2012).

En 2015, suite au recrutement de Susana Polo, fondatrice du site *The Mary Sue*, *Polygon* marque le début d'un élargissement de son domaine d'expertise vers la culture, la politique et « science populaire » (Pearson, 2015).

Le corpus commençant en 2004, ce problème d'accessibilité à certaines ressources est intrinsèquement lié à cette période où l'internet était très différent de ce qu'il est aujourd'hui. Ainsi, comme évoqué précédemment, il est possible que certains articles publiés à cette époque aient été déplacés ou effacés au fur et à mesure des possibles restructurations, changements de domaine ou d'apparence des sites de presse concernés.

Première étude de cas : dénonciation de la pratique du *crunch* au sein d'*Electronic Arts* par Erin Hoffman

Eléments de contexte

La lettre d'Erin Hoffman, titrée *EA : The Human Story* (Hoffman, 2004) est considérée comme le point de départ de la première affaire d'ampleur mettant en lumière les conditions de travail problématiques dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo (Williams, 2013 ; Dyer-Witthford & de Peuter, 2006). Notons toutefois qu'en juillet 2004, *GameSpot* et *IGN* ont consacré un article à l'action intentée par Neil Aitken, employé du studio *Knowledge Adventure*, qui accusait Vivendi Universal d'avoir falsifié l'emploi du temps des employés afin d'éviter de payer des heures supplémentaires aux travailleurs (Adams, 2004 ; Feldman, 2004). Cette problématique abordait déjà en creux la problématique des heures supplémentaires dans l'industrie, mais elle n'a pas donné lieu à une controverse de la même ampleur que celle qui nous intéresse ici.

La lettre ouverte est publiée de façon anonyme sur un blog le 10 novembre 2004, et signée par une certaine « *EA_Spouse* ». Au début du millénaire, *Electronic Arts* compte, tout comme aujourd'hui, parmi les principaux éditeurs et développeurs de jeux vidéo. En 2004, le chiffre d'affaires de l'entreprise avoisine les 3 milliards de dollars, un bénéfice net d'environ 600 millions, et une trentaine de jeux ayant dépassé le million d'exemplaires distribués (Lemaire, 2013). Pour obtenir de tels résultats, la compagnie peut compter sur des licences populaires telles que *James Bond*, *Harry Potter*, *Les Sims*, *Medal of Honor*, *Need for Speed*, ainsi qu'un large panel de jeux de sports tels que *FIFA*, *NFL*, *NBA*, ou encore les jeux officiels du championnat de Formule 1. Ces jeux sortent, pour la plupart, sur ordinateur personnel et toutes les consoles dites « de salon » disponibles sur le marché²³.

Erin Hoffman, alors simplement connue comme l'*Ea_spouse* évoque dans sa plainte le mode de production en série adopté par *Electronic Arts* :

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?

²³ A l'époque, la *Playstation 2* de Sony, la *Xbox* de Microsoft et la *Gamecube* de Nintendo

Plus loin dans la lettre, elle mentionne également la toute-puissance de l'entreprise au sein de l'industrie. Ainsi, elle la compare à Sony et Microsoft, deux des trois principaux constructeurs de consoles de salon (le troisième étant Nintendo), ainsi que Vivendi, qui avait comme filiale *Vivendi Universal Games*.

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.

En outre, si cette lettre a permis de révéler à un plus large public les conditions de travail dans cette industrie, elle permet également de constater que Hoffman et son compagnon savaient déjà que le « *crunch* » était une pratique courante au sein de l'industrie, mais qu'ils n'avaient jamais rencontré ce problème dans de telles proportions :

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.

Le même jour, vraisemblablement motivé par cette lettre, Joe Straitiff (2004), un ancien employé du studio *Maxis*, appartenant à Electronic Arts, écrit une plainte²⁴ du même genre, sous son nom propre, qui corrobore les accusations d'Erin Hoffman.

Suivant ces publications, la presse va révéler l'existence de plusieurs actions collectives lancées par d'anciens employés mécontents contre Electronic Arts. Ces actions seront réglées à l'amiable en 2005 et 2006.

Le 25 avril 2006, à l'occasion du règlement de la dernière affaire, l'identité d'Erin Hoffman est révélée par le *San Jose Mercury News* à l'occasion d'une interview.

²⁴ STRAITIFF Joe, in *joestraitiff.livejournal.com*, [en ligne] <https://joestraitiff.livejournal.com/368.html>, 10 novembre 2004.

Origines et durée de la couverture médiatique

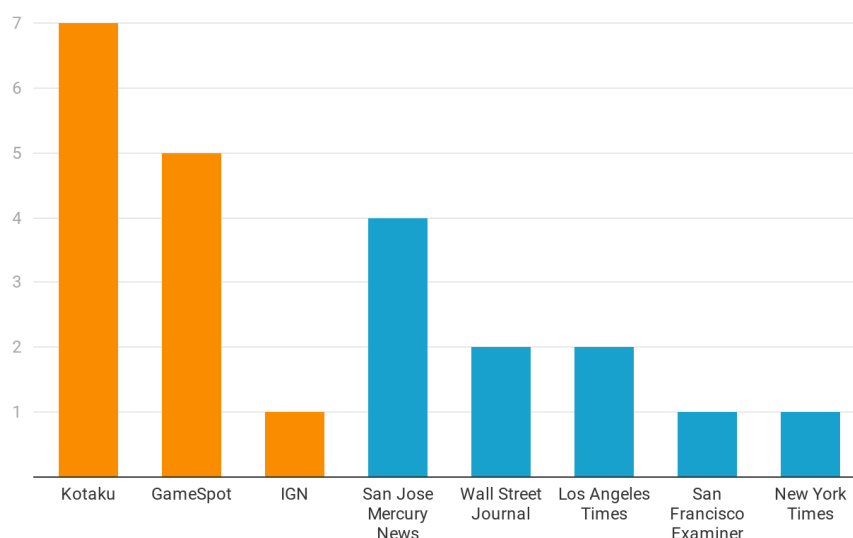


Figure 1 : nombre d'articles consacrés au conflit social par site de presse traitant de la lettre d'Erin Hoffman et des affaires opposant Electronic Arts et ses employés

	Sites de presse vidéoludique			Sites de presse généraliste				
	Kotaku	GameSpot	IGN	WSJ	LA Times	NY Times	SF Examiner	SJ Mercury News
10/11/2004	1							
11/11/2004		1						
12/11/2004	3						1	
17/11/2004					1			
19/11/2004				1				
21/11/2004						1		
03/12/2004	2	1						
04/12/2004								1
07/12/2004								1
08/12/2004	1							
22/02/2005		1						(1) ²⁵
11/03/2005			1					
05/10/2005		1						
06/10/2005				1	1			
25/04/2006								1
26/04/2006		1						

Tableau 1 : nombre d'articles publiés sur les différents sites de presse par date traitant de la lettre d'Erin Hoffman et des affaires opposant Electronic Arts et ses employés.

Comme ce graphique et ce tableau le montrent, la presse vidéoludique a en général consacré plus d'articles au conflit social opposant les développeurs d'Electronic Arts à leur

²⁵ Il faut relever que selon des articles de sites de presse autres que le *San Jose Mercury News*, ce dernier aurait publié un article traitant de l'affaire le 22 février 2005. Toutefois, cet article n'a pas été trouvé suite aux recherches entreprises pour ce travail. La parenthèse signifie ici que malgré son existence avérée, cet article ne fait pas partie du corpus.

employeur. Les sites de presse généraliste sélectionnés n'ont, à l'exception du *San Jose Mercury News*, jamais consacré plus de deux articles à l'affaire. Pour autant, comme le montre le tableau, nous remarquons que, dans les cas où seulement deux articles sont publiés, ils sont assez espacés dans le temps. Ainsi, les publications respectives des articles du *Wall Street Journal* et du *Los Angeles Times* sont espacées d'environ onze mois.

Il convient d'abord de remarquer que la couverture médiatique de l'affaire a, à l'exception d'*IGN*, commencé dans les jours qui ont suivi la publication de la lettre d'Erin Hoffman, et ce du côté des sites vidéoludiques. *Kotaku*²⁶ publie une première brève le jour-même, et *GameSpot*²⁷ publie son premier article sur le sujet le lendemain. La presse généraliste prend cependant plus de temps à réagir, et commence globalement la couverture médiatique à la fin du mois de novembre ou au début du mois de décembre. Il est d'ailleurs étrange de remarquer ce sous-investissement de la part d'*IGN*, dans la mesure où, comme mis en évidence précédemment, le site avait consacré un article sur l'action intentée contre Vivendi Universal en juillet 2004.

La recherche entreprise dans ce travail a permis d'établir que le point de départ du traitement médiatique du *crunch* chez *Electronic Arts* sont les lettres postées sur internet par Erin Hoffman et Joe Straitiff. En effet, même si certains journaux ne mentionnent que rapidement ces lettres et publient leurs premiers articles plusieurs jours après les publications de ces lettres, elles demeurent à chaque fois mentionnées.

Toutefois, ce ne sont pas ces lettres qui ont permis à ce conflit social d'obtenir une couverture médiatique plus ou moins étalée dans le temps selon les sites de presse. Il apparaît que cette controverse correspond partiellement à la définition de l'affaire telle que donnée par Dominique Marchetti (2002) : si les publications de Joe Straitiff et Erin Hoffman ont effectivement constitué le point de départ de la couverture médiatique de cette affaire, la grande majorité des articles ne portaient pas tant sur l'aspect humain des pratiques dénoncées, mais davantage sur le déroulement judiciaire de l'affaire. C'est cet aspect judiciaire, au travers des trois actions collectives intentées par les employés d'*Electronic*

²⁶ CRESCENTE Brian D., « Fear and loathing at Electronic Arts », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://web.archive.org/web/20051129100950/http://www.kotaku.com/gaming/industry-news/fear-and-loathing-at-electronic-arts-025405.php>, 10 novembre 2004.

²⁷ FELDMAN Curt, THORSEN Tor, « Employees readying class-action lawsuit against EA », in *GameSpot*, [en ligne] <https://www.GameSpot.com/articles/employees-readying-class-action-lawsuit-against-ea/1100-6112998/>, 11 novembre 2004.

Arts, qui a permis à cette affaire de conserver une présence médiatique un an et demi après la publication de la lettre. L'entrée de la problématique dans le champ judiciaire a précédé la publication de la lettre, et donc des premiers articles, de quelques mois. La judiciarisation de la problématique lui a permis d'avoir une couverture médiatique sur le long terme, et non pas d'émerger dans les médias. La cause de son émergence serait davantage imputable à la publication de la lettre.

En ayant eu la possibilité de s'exprimer anonymement sur ce qui peut être qualifié d'un des ancêtres des réseaux sociaux actuels sans avoir besoin d'un « accès à la presse », pour reprendre le terme de Sigal (1973), Erin Hoffman a eu accès à l'espace médiatique.

Cette émergence dans l'espace médiatique a été aussi bien le fait de la presse jeu vidéo que de la presse généraliste, en ce que ces deux espaces du champ journalistique ont abordé la question. A ce titre, *GameSpot* semble avoir déployé la couverture la plus complète : six articles publiés entre le 11 novembre 2004 et le 26 avril 2006 ont en effet été consacrés à cette affaire, là où on ne trouve plus de trace de la couverture médiatique de *Kotaku* après l'article du 8 décembre 2004.

Quant aux sites de presse généraliste, ils semblent n'avoir publié qu'un ou deux articles par site de presse sur l'affaire. En observant le tableau, on peut toutefois constater que la publication de ces articles correspond, à quelques jours près, soit à la publication de la lettre d'Erin Hoffman et donc de la révélation de l'action collective en cours²⁸²⁹, soit à la publication d'un communiqué d'Electronic Arts³⁰, ou alors à un des règlements à l'amiable desdites actions collectives. Sites de presse généraliste et vidéoludique³¹ semblent suivre le même cycle. Si la presse vidéoludique a pourtant tendance à suivre le cycle « *news-previews-test* », nous remarquons ici qu'elle semble sortir de ce cycle pour suivre l'agenda judiciaire. Que ce soit sur *Kotaku*, *GameSpot* ou *IGN*, le jeu vidéo en tant qu'objet ne sera que très peu mentionné. Toutefois, comme nous le verrons plus tard, si ces deux sous-

²⁸ WEIN Josh, « Long hours spur online rant », in *The Examiner*, [en ligne] https://web.archive.org/web/20041209002751/http://www.examiner.com/article/index.cfm/i/111204n_ea, 12 novembre 2004.

²⁹ STROSS Randall, « *When a Video Game Stops Being Fun* », in *The New York Times*, [en ligne] <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/21/business/yourmoney/when-a-video-game-stops-being-fun.html>, 21 novembre 2004.

³⁰ Ce communiqué a vraisemblablement été publié le 18 novembre 2004, et est mentionné dans les premiers articles du *Wall Street Journal* et du *San Jose Mercury News*.

³¹ Principalement *GameSpot*.

champs obéissent au même cycle, et donc que des nettes similitudes au niveau des sources, des angles, et des genres journalistiques, sont à observer, nous pourrions toutefois identifier des tendances différentes.

Les angles

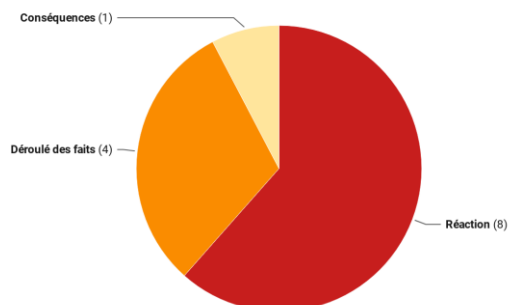


Figure 2 : Proportion de chaque angle journalistique dans la couverture de l'affaire par les sites de presse vidéoludique

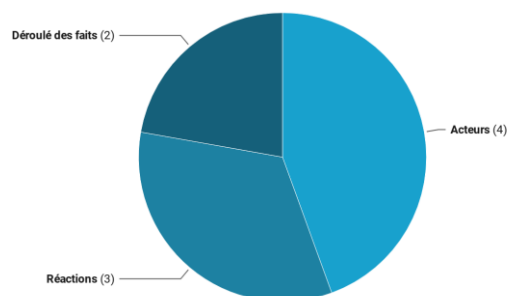


Figure 3 : Proportion de chaque angle journalistique dans la couverture de l'affaire par les sites de presse généraliste

	Réaction (8)	Déroulé des faits (4)	Conséquences (1)
GameSpot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EA addressing working conditions Electronic Arts served with second overtime lawsuit EA settles labor dispute lawsuit EA settles OT dispute, disgruntled spouse outed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employees readying class-action lawsuit against EA 	
Kotaku	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EA promises changes in leaked internal memo Exclusive : EA confirms memo is real EA keeps the promises coming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear and loathing at Electronic Arts Former EA employee speaks out under real name EA faces class action suit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EA suit could change the face of the gaming industry
IGN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> GDC 2005 : Building Games in a 40 hour week 		

Tableau 2 : Détail des angles des différents articles de sites de presse vidéoludique sélectionnés traitant de la lettre d'Erin Hoffman et des affaires opposant Electronic Arts et ses employés

	Acteurs (4)	Réactions (3)	Déroulé (2)
Los Angeles Times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working Too Hard in an Industry of Fun and Games 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EA to Pay \$15,6 million to settle Overtime Case 	
New York Times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When a Video Game Stops Being Fun 		
San Francisco Examiner			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Long hours spur online rant
San Jose Mercury News	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Video-Game Workers Sue for Overtime Pay Exclusive : Nicole Wong Reveals Identity of EA Spouse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> EA to reconsider OT-eligible Jobs 	
Wall Street Journal		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Electronic Arts Settles Lawsuit, Will Pay Overtime for Some Jobs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workers at EA Claim They Are Owed Overtime

Tableau 3 : Détail des angles des différents articles de sites de presse généraliste sélectionnés traitant de la lettre d'Erin Hoffman et des affaires opposant Electronic Arts et ses employés

Ces deux graphiques ont été pensés selon la typologie des angles telle qu'établie par Denis Ruellan (2002). Malgré son efficacité et le fait qu'elle offre une possibilité de systématisation, cette typologie apparaît à plusieurs endroits comme réductrice étant donné que Ruellan a étudié le déroulement quotidien de la couverture médiatique d'une catastrophe de grande ampleur dans des journaux papier. Or, l'objet de l'étude est ici différent de deux façons. Premièrement, le corpus que nous étudions est issu de sites de presse, et deuxièmement, l'affaire qui est l'objet de ce corpus s'est déroulée au gré d'épisodes distincts espacés de plusieurs mois.

Les angles utilisés par les journalistes des sites de presse ayant réagi directement à la publication de la lettre d'Erin Hoffman peuvent être rangés dans la catégorie du « déroulement des faits ». Cela s'applique aussi bien à *GameSpot* et *Kotaku* du côté vidéoludique, mais aussi au *Wall Street Journal* et au *San Francisco Examiner* du côté généraliste. Du côté du *Los Angeles Times*, du *New York Times*, et du *San Jose Mercury News*, qui ont respectivement publié leurs premiers articles le 17, le 21 novembre, et le 4 décembre 2004, on remarque que ce recul coïncide avec une vision de l'affaire très proche des acteurs concernés par l'affaire, là où les organes de presse ayant réagi directement évoquent le déroulement avant tout par son aspect judiciaire, alors qu'il n'apparaît dans ces trois journaux que comme une composante subordonnée au ressenti des acteurs concernés et comprise dans un sujet plus vaste. La seule exception notable demeure le *Wall Street Journal* qui consacre le 19 novembre un article consacré seulement aux actions collectives, avec toutefois la mention de la lettre de Joe Straitiff.

Le *San Jose Mercury News* consacrera un second article anglé sur les acteurs le 25 avril 2006, lorsque la journaliste Nicole Wong révélera l'identité d'Erin Hoffman en lui consacrant un portrait. En définitive, trois des cinq sites de presse généraliste sélectionnés ont anglé un article sur le sujet en évoquant les acteurs.

Il importe toutefois de nuancer ici la typologie de Denis Ruellan. En effet, que penser des premiers articles du *Los Angeles Times*, du *San Jose Mercury News* et du *New York Times* sur le conflit social en cours ? Ces trois articles donnent certes une importance fondamentale aux témoignages des travailleurs anonymes, de Jaime Kirschenbaum, d'Erin Hoffman et de son conjoint, et ce trait permet aisément de leur attacher l'angle consacré aux acteurs. Mais leur témoignage est aussi une façon d'explicitier le raisonnement qui a poussé certains

ingénieurs à attaquer leur employeur en justice. Nous voyons ici qu'il y a un angle « dominant », qui structure l'article, et lui est subordonné le déroulement des faits. Dans ces cas-ci, il apparaît que l'angle choisi est nuancé par un souci relatif au lecteur modèle de ces sites de presse. Le rappel de la chronologie des événements suppose en effet que les journalistes envisageaient un lecteur modèle n'étant pas préalablement au courant de ce qui était en cours.

Les raisons de la couverture médiatique la plus complète dans le chef de *GameSpot*, et dans une moindre mesure *Kotaku*³² sont explicables en prenant un compte deux facteurs principaux. D'un côté, leur objet est le jeu vidéo, dès lors il semble logique qu'ils se saisissent du sujet. De l'autre, il s'agit de prendre en compte leur capacité, en tant que sites internet, de réagir davantage au « *breaking news* », ce qui peut expliquer le nombre d'articles et la rapidité de leur réaction. Une analyse des angles permet de mettre en lumière les conséquences d'une telle fréquence sur la façon dont les journalistes angent leurs articles. En effet, dès le début de l'affaire les angles des deux sites s'articulent globalement autour de la chronologie des faits de façon très « surplombante » comme le dirait Ruellan (2002). La publication de la lettre est mentionnée et remise dans le contexte de l'action collective lancée en juillet 2004. Ce déroulement des faits est dans les deux cas agrémentés d'un éclairage judiciaire. Nuançons tout de même en mentionnant que *Kotaku* est le seul site de presse à avoir tenté de faire de la prospective en s'interrogeant sur les conséquences possibles de l'affaire sur l'industrie, et en anglant un article sur ces dernières.

Par opposition, on peut en déduire que les journalistes du *New York Times*, du *Los Angeles Times* et du *San Jose Mercury News* n'étaient pas soumis à une telle contrainte : ils ont donc pu prendre le temps de traiter l'affaire en anglant davantage leurs articles au niveau des premiers concernés, c'est-à-dire Erin Hoffman et un autre développeur anonyme pour le *Los Angeles Times*, et le conjoint d'Hoffman pour le *New York Times*, et Jaime Kirschenbaum lui-même ainsi qu'un employé anonyme pour le *San Jose Mercury News*.

Notons toutefois que ces rythmes, et donc ces angles différents, ne sont pas cantonnés à l'un ou l'autre type de presse, étant donné que le *San Francisco Examiner* a lui aussi publié un article descriptif le 12 novembre 2004. Nous pouvons y constater les mêmes choix

³² Le site s'étant en effet montré très prolifique entre le 10 novembre et le 3 décembre 2004, avec la publication de six articles.

relatifs à l'angle que dans le chef de *GameSpot* et *Kotaku*. De la même façon, même si le premier article du *Wall Street Journal* a été publié une semaine après la publication des lettres, il semble l'avoir été en réaction à un communiqué de presse d'Electronic Arts reconnaissant officiellement l'existence de l'action collective (Frauenheim, 2004)³³.

Toutefois, force est de constater que passés les premiers moments de l'affaire, les angles ont tendance à s'homogénéiser entre toutes les publications. En effet, si le déroulement des événements, en tant qu'angle principal ou secondaire, est systématiquement mobilisé en début de couverture médiatique, il est dans tous les cas suivis d'articles mettant en avant les différentes réactions des acteurs du conflit social. Notons d'ailleurs que l'acteur « réacteur » majoritaire est *Electronic Arts*, dans la mesure où c'est l'entreprise qui apparaît avoir ponctué les développements de cette affaire, soit en réagissant aux accusations initiales via un mémo (cf *infra*), soit en indemnisant ses employés. Une exception est à relever dans les troisièmes articles respectifs de *GameSpot*³⁴ et du *San Jose Mercury News*³⁵, qui sont les seuls sites de presse à publier un article évoquant le lancement d'une seconde action collective en février 2005. Cette homogénéisation peut être elle aussi le signe d'un impératif de réactivité qui, une fois l'affaire lancée, s'impose dans tous les sites de presse. La feuilletonnisation de l'affaire après ses débuts impliquerait le besoin de se montrer le plus réactif possible pour en livrer les « épisodes » au fur et à mesure des développements. Comme mentionné précédemment, la seule entorse à cette routinisation sera l'article final du *San Jose Mercury News*, qui révélera l'identité d'Erin Hoffman le jour du règlement de la dernière action collective.

Les sources et citations

La question des sources utilisées par ces différents médias peut également être un point de comparaison. Or, une relative homogénéité est observable entre les deux sous-champs du journalisme traités ici. Quatre types de sources sont à dégager dans ce premier cas : les

³³ On peut en effet lire dans l'article : « *In a statement the company said it offers benefits and a work environment that are competitive with others in the industry.* »

³⁴ FELDMAN Curt, « *Electronic Arts served with second overtime lawsuit* », <https://www.GameSpot.com/articles/electronic-arts-served-with-second-overtime-lawsuit/1100-6118948/>, 22 février 2005.

³⁵ En l'occurrence, il s'agit du seul article qui n'a pas pu être retrouvé pour les besoins de ce travail. Toutefois, l'article de *GameSpot* précédemment cité signale bien que le *San Jose Mercury News* révèle le lancement de cette seconde action.

sources dites judiciaires, la communication d'entreprise, les sources associatives et les développeurs eux-mêmes.

	Sources judiciaires	Communication d'entreprise	Sources associatives	Travailleurs ³⁶
Presse jeu vidéo				
<i>Kotaku</i>	2	2		
<i>GameSpot</i>	1	2	1	
<i>IGN</i>			1 ³⁷	
Presse généraliste				
<i>SF Examiner</i>	1			
<i>LA Times</i>	1	2	2	2
<i>New York Times</i>				1
<i>San Jose Mercury News</i>	1	3	2	2
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	2		1	

Tableau 4 : nombre de mobilisations des types de sources par organe de presse, excluant les citations de la lettre d'Erin Hoffman ou du billet de Joe Straitiff

Comme le montre ce tableau, les sources judiciaires et les sources associatives, principalement issues de l'IGDA sont les plus répandues à travers l'ensemble des sites de presse, alors que la source la plus mobilisée est la communication d'entreprise, au travers des communiqués ou des commentaires de porte-parole d'*Electronic Arts*. Cette fréquence et cette prépondérance peuvent s'expliquer cette fois-ci par l'accès qu'a la presse, pour reprendre une fois encore la notion de Sigal, à ces types de sources. En effet, une des raisons d'être de la communication d'entreprise est de servir de façade médiatique à l'entreprise, et les sources associatives se montrent disponibles pour étayer et réagir aux faits dénoncés.

Le tableau montre que l'utilisation des sources est relativement homogène d'une presse à l'autre, si ce n'est que la presse généraliste a une nette tendance à donner la parole aux développeurs et à développer leur point de vue. Cela pourrait s'expliquer de deux façons. Premièrement, l'idéologie professionnelle des journalistes « généralistes », surtout ceux évoluant au sein de rédactions prestigieuses aux Etats-Unis telles que celle du *New York*

³⁶ Autres que les lettres de Joe Straitiff et Erin Hoffman.

³⁷ Est considérée la conférence de la GDC dont *IGN* a publié un compte rendu comme de la communication associative en raison du fait que l'IGDA est un des organisateurs principaux de cette convention.

Times, leur donne une plus forte tendance à l'investigation fouillée, à la recherche de témoignages concrets. Une autre explication partirait cette fois-ci des témoins eux-mêmes. Les grands journaux généralistes bénéficiant de plus de capital symbolique au sein du champ journalistique que de jeunes sites et blogs de presse jeu vidéo pourrait inciter les témoins à prendre la parole pour ces journaux. Au niveau des témoignages, les journalistes de la presse jeu vidéo semblent s'être contentés des témoignages d'Hoffman et de Straitiff.

Par ailleurs, il convient de remarquer par rapport à la typologie des angles établie précédemment que la façon dont les différents sites privilégient un angle plutôt qu'un autre dépend des sources qu'ils décident d'utiliser. Par exemple, le déroulé des faits tel que rédigé par le *New York Times* ou le *Los Angeles Times* met en avant les témoignages inédits, alors que le déroulé tel qu'envisagé par *GameSpot* et *Kotaku* se repose sur des sources judiciaires, la différence est de taille. Les premiers remettent en perspective le conflit social dans un point de vue beaucoup plus humain que les seconds, qui font la synthèse de l'affaire par des sources majoritairement judiciaires.

L'utilisation de sources judiciaires par *GameSpot* et *Kotaku* envisage que les auteurs des articles dans lesquels ces sources sont mentionnées dessinent un lecteur modèle plus large que du seul amateur de jeu vidéo. En effet, les notions judiciaires d'action collective ou de règlement à l'amiable n'étaient sans doute pas communes dans les articles de sites de presse vidéoludique, à plus forte raison que ce conflit social a mené à la première controverse d'ampleur aux Etats-Unis.

Le fait qu'aucun article antérieur au 10 novembre 2004 traitant d'une problématique similaire n'ait pu être trouvé permet d'émettre une observation quant à la relation qu'entretiennent les journalistes des sites de presse vidéoludique avec les sources. Dans le cas de la presse vidéoludique, cette absence d'une source directement concernée par les conditions de travail dans l'industrie perdure : nous avons vu que le témoignage direct demeure inexistant dans la presse vidéoludique autrement que par les mentions des lettres d'Hoffman et Straitiff. Nous observons dans le cas de *GameSpot* et *Kotaku* une certaine préférence pour les sources judiciaires, et, dans le cas de *Kotaku*, par rapport à la communication d'Electronic Arts. Comme Gans (1979) le souligne, une source n'a pas de rôle actif : elle ne peut que se rendre disponible aux journalistes, qui décident de la pertinence d'une source plutôt qu'une autre. Cette sollicitation dépend de sa proximité

sociale et géographique avec le journaliste, mais aussi de sa puissance, de sa motivation, et de sa capacité à fournir des informations appropriées. Dès lors, on peut relever un certain écart entre les sites de presse vidéoludique sélectionnés et les travailleurs de l'industrie. Ces sites se contentent de citer la lettre d'Erin Hoffman ou de la paraphraser pour illustrer leurs articles, il n'y a jamais de témoignage inédit.

On peut expliquer cette absence de témoignage en invoquant une nouvelle fois les impératifs de réactivité des sites de presse vidéoludique. On peut déduire que cette absence de témoignage inédit peut s'expliquer simplement par le manque de temps des journalistes pour trouver un développeur concerné par de telles pratiques³⁸. Toutefois, cette explication ne peut être satisfaisante pour l'entièreté de la couverture médiatique de *GameSpot* et *Kotaku*, qui ne recueilleront pas de témoignages supplémentaires. Dès lors, deux explications seraient possibles. La première, et la plus simple, serait qu'aucune source du genre n'ait été motivée à apparaître dans ces médias. La seconde impliquerait que les journalistes n'aient pas considéré un nouveau témoignage comme approprié. Cette seconde explication serait à privilégier. En effet, on peut lire dans les premières lignes du premier article de *GameSpot* l'intention suivante : « *The veracity of the claims in the online rant is difficult to confirm. However, GameSpot News decided to investigate the matter—and found that there might be some truth behind the blogger's anger* ». L'article continue sur un angle judiciaire : la corroboration des accusations d'Erin Hoffman et de Joe Straitiff n'a pas été permise dans les sites de presse vidéoludique par des témoignages supplémentaires, mais par la révélation de l'existence des actions collectives et leurs développements étayés par les éclaircissements d'avocats.

Quand des acteurs de l'industrie vidéoludique sont cités dans les articles de *GameSpot* et dans l'article d'*IGN*, il s'agit de l'IGDA ou, dans le second cas, d'un acteur de l'industrie qui s'exprime dans le cadre d'une conférence³⁹ dont l'un des organisateurs se trouve justement être l'IGDA. Mais ces voix ne sont pas mobilisées pour apporter des témoignages concrets sur la condition des travailleurs de l'industrie : l'IGDA, par l'intermédiaire de son président

³⁸ Ce qui aura donc des conséquences sur l'angle choisi par les journalistes pour leurs premiers articles (cf. *supra*).

³⁹ Conférence organisée dans le cadre de la *GDC (Games Developers Conference)* de 2005, convention réunissant et consacrée aux différents acteurs de l'industrie.

de l'époque, Jason Della Rocca, n'est sollicitée par *GameSpot*⁴⁰ que pour répondre à un mémo interne circulant chez Electronic Arts fuité dans la presse, et de n'évoquer ce sujet que par des généralités trouvables par ailleurs dans les rapports et études de l'IGDA cités précédemment dans ce travail. Une fois de plus, il n'y a aucun témoignage véritablement inédit, mais l'intervention de l'IGDA semble, sur les sites de presse vidéoludique, faire office de palliatif aux témoignages. Alors que les citations de l'IGDA et du président de la *Game Developers Conference* permettent dans trois des quatre occasions observées dans la presse généraliste de donner du contexte aux témoignages.

Nous venons de l'évoquer, ce mémo interne promettant des changements de culture dans le chef d'Electronic Arts est cité aussi bien par *GameSpot* que *Kotaku*, que ce dernier reproduit par ailleurs dans sa totalité⁴¹ et les deux sites de presse l'authentifient au cours de la même journée par confirmation par une porte-parole d'*Electronic Arts*⁴². Notons que l'authentification et la citation du mémo par *GameSpot* sont comprises dans le même article. Cette « fuite » du mémo et cette réponse de la porte-parole ont été toutes les deux classées comme relevant de la communication d'entreprise : *GameSpot* soulève la possibilité que cette fuite était intentionnelle pour tenter d'atténuer la mauvaise publicité que recevait alors *Electronic Arts*. Par ailleurs, nous distinguons la fuite et la confirmation de l'authenticité car elles constituent deux moments distincts de la communication d'*Electronic Arts* : la fuite précède la confirmation de son authenticité par l'entreprise. Nous évoquions précédemment les différents critères de sollicitation de Gans (1979). A la lumière de ces citations de l'entreprise, nous pouvons souligner deux critères de sollicitations évoqués par Gans qui sont apparus comme déterminants dans le cas présent. Le premier, et le plus évident, serait la motivation. En effet, située au beau milieu d'une controverse sans précédent dans son secteur, il fait peu de doutes qu'*Electronic Arts* tentait au moins de tempérer ladite controverse. Toutefois, cette motivation semble assez modérée. En effet, l'entreprise ne communique jamais directement sur la controverse, soit elle atteste de

⁴⁰ FELDMAN Curt, THORSEN Tor, « EA addressing working conditons », in *GameSpot*, [en ligne] <https://www.GameSpot.com/articles/ea-addressing-working-conditions/1100-6114405/>, 3 décembre 2004.

⁴¹ CRECENTE, Brian D., « EA promises changes in leaked internal memo », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://web.archive.org/web/20050305121359/http://www.kotaku.com/gaming/business//ea-promises-changes-in-leaked-internal-memo-026800.php>, 3 décembre 2004.

⁴² CRECENTE, Brian D., « Exclusive : EA confirms memo is real », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://web.archive.org/web/20050404011035/http://www.kotaku.com/gaming/business//exclusive-ea-confirms-memo-is-real-026895.php>, 3 décembre 2004.

l'authenticité du mémo, soit elle refuse de commenter l'affaire. Concernant la fuite, on pourrait dire qu'il s'agit d'une communication indirecte : plutôt que de communiquer explicitement sur le sujet, ce mémo est transmis aux journalistes pour montrer que des changements sont prévus. Etant donné l'étendue de la polémique, il semble alors naturel que ce « *leak* » se soit retrouvé dans les médias vidéoludiques (qui, rappelons-le, s'adressent principalement aux joueurs, cœur de cible de l'entreprise).

Un autre critère apparaît comme éclairant sur la présence médiatique d'*Electronic Arts*. Comme nous l'avons vu dans la presse généraliste, le critère de motivation permet d'émettre des hypothèses quant aux raisons qui ont permis aux journalistes de celle-ci de recueillir des témoignages de développeurs anonymes, voire d'Erin Hoffman elle-même. Ces témoins ont sans doute réussi à se montrer motivés pour les journalistes de cette presse⁴³. Dans le cas du mémo « *leaké* », le critère de puissance/pouvoir (« *power* »), selon les termes de Gans apparaît comme le plus pertinent. En effet, par le « *leak* » du mémo interne, *Electronic Arts* a réussi à mettre à l'agenda médiatique une réaction qui apparaît comme vertueuse envers ses employés, sans pour autant que la parole de l'entreprise soit directement relayée dans les médias. Cette communication a permis à l'entreprise, certes le temps d'un article, de reprendre la main sur l'agenda médiatique de la presse vidéoludique, comme une réponse directe aux lettres d'Erin Hoffman et Joe Straitiff. Gans expliquait que la puissance de certaines sources ne leur permettait non pas de se forcer un chemin dans les listes d'articles, mais elle l'utilisait plutôt pour créer elle-même des *news* appropriées⁴⁴. Par la seule fuite (volontaire ou non), *Electronic Arts*, acteur puissant symboliquement et économiquement parlant de l'industrie du jeu vidéo s'il en est, a créé à lui seul un sujet d'article approprié dans le contexte, et a donc activement pris part au façonnement de l'agenda médiatique.

Nous pouvons toutefois observer que cette « puissance » n'a pas été observée avec la même intensité dans la presse généraliste. En effet, le *San Jose Mercury News* consacre bel

⁴³ Il convient néanmoins de rappeler que cette disponibilité envers la presse généraliste pourrait être également liée aux capitaux symboliques au sein du champ journalistique de certains « grands » journaux généralistes, dont l'exemple le plus parlant est le *New York Times*. Dès lors, des blogs ou sites de presse vidéoludique ne bénéficiant pas de ces mêmes capitaux seraient poussés à ne pas se rendre disponibles envers les journalistes de ces sites de presse.

⁴⁴ Gans note également que le pouvoir d'une source se manifeste au travers de la possibilité de refuser l'accès aux journalistes.

et bien un article au mémo, le *Wall Street Journal* cite brièvement un communiqué de l'entreprise, le *Los Angeles Times* rapporte également les paroles d'une porte-parole. Toutefois, en dehors de ces citations, la presse généraliste ne consacre jamais un article à ce mémo « fuité ». Dans ce cas, sur les sites de presse analysés, on pourrait parler de la puissance relative d'une source. *Electronic Arts* étant effectivement un acteur puissant et important de l'industrie du jeu vidéo, les sites de presses dont cette industrie constitue l'objet apparaissent comme plus sensibles aux actes de l'entreprise, à tel point que la fuite de ce mémo a permis à la compagnie de « reprendre la main » sur l'agenda médiatique, et de répondre concrètement aux accusations de Straitiff et Hoffman, sans pour autant le faire par des canaux « officiels ». Toutefois, cette puissance relative n'implique pas forcément que les journalistes acceptent ce que l'entreprise communique sans questionner sa prise de parole : comme dit précédemment, *GameSpot* évoque même des doutes quant à la fuite supposée du message.

Some insiders speculated that the e-mail may have been leaked to demonstrate to the public that EA was addressing the subject of overworked staff and overtime hours. However, EA denied having leaked the e-mail intentionally.

Enfin, en ce qui concerne les sources judiciaires, étant donné que la couverture médiatique de l'affaire est conditionnée par sa judiciarisation, les sources de cet ordre semblent être apparues aux journalistes comme les plus appropriées pour éclaircir le déroulement de l'affaire lors des premiers temps de la couverture médiatique.

Investissement des journalistes et genres employés

The Veracity of the claims in the online rant is difficult to confirm. However, GameSpot News decided to investigate the matter—and found that there might be some truth behind the blogger's anger.

Cette citation est le troisième paragraphe du premier article de *GameSpot* consacré à l'affaire. Rédigé par Curt Feldman et Tor Thorsen, il affirme d'entrée de jeu leur volonté d'aller au-delà de la publication de la lettre : contrairement à *Kotaku* qui, dans un premier temps, s'est contenté de rapporter la publication de la lettre dans une brève, *GameSpot* entame cette affaire en ayant recours à l'investigation pour tenter d'étayer les accusations publiées sur internet. C'est au cours de cette démarche que les journalistes auront accès aux éclairages de Robert C. Schubert, l'avocat qui a initié l'action collective pour le compte des employés d'*Electronic Arts*. Les journalistes auront également accès à un courriel que

l'entreprise aurait envoyé à ses employés durant l'été 2004 pour les prévenir de l'action collective en cours.

Du côté de *Kotaku*, l'auteur de tous les articles retrouvés sur le sujet est Brian D. Crecente. Après avoir rapporté la brève, il s'investit de manière similaire aux journalistes de *GameSpot* : il contacte des avocats, rapporte le mémo « fuité » et son authentification. La distinction la plus marquante avec les journalistes de *GameSpot* est le ton qu'il prend pour se positionner par rapport à l'affaire.

« [...] EA's motto, if you recall, is "Challenge Everything." Just not Ea's labor standards, wages, or long hours, I guess. »⁴⁵

« My favorite quote : you can't spell exploitation without EA. Nice. »⁴⁶

Dans le cas de ces deux traits d'ironie, il semble que Crecente prend explicitement position contre les pratiques d'*Electronic Arts*, en taclant « l'entreprise ». Ces écarts de ton sont les seuls présents dans le corpus. De plus, Crecente pose explicitement la question du devenir de l'industrie en Californie dans l'éventualité d'une victoire des employés mécontents :

« I wonder if a victory for the employees could lead to a gaming industry exodus form California ? »⁴⁷

Cette personnalisation peut être expliquée par le contrat de lecture⁴⁸ de *Kotaku* : à la différence de *GameSpot*, qui est un site internet, *Kotaku* se présentait comme un *blog*⁴⁹. Cette différence de nature entre *Kotaku* et *GameSpot*, qui avait déjà plus de huit ans d'expérience et s'était déjà fait une place, met en évidence les contrats de lecture différents qui lient les lecteurs à ces publications. Si les deux sites ont le même objet, *GameSpot* se

⁴⁵ CRECENTE Brian D., « Fear and loathing at Electronic Arts », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://web.archive.org/web/20051129100950/http://www.kotaku.com/gaming/industry-news/fear-and-loathing-at-electronic-arts-025405.php>, 10 novembre 2004.

⁴⁶ CRECENTE Brian D., « Former EA employee speaks out under real name », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://web.archive.org/web/20050308220733/http://www.kotaku.com/gaming/industry-news/former-ea-employee-speaks-out-under-real-name-025556.php>, 12 novembre 2004

⁴⁷ CRECENTE Brian D., « EA suit could change the face of the gaming industry », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://web.archive.org/web/20050308222235/http://www.kotaku.com/gaming/legal/ea-suit-could-change-the-face-of-the-gaming-industry-025586.php>, 12 novembre 2004

⁴⁸ Le contrat de lecture est « un dispositif d'énonciation, qui diffère selon les organes de presse, où est mise en forme la relation de lecture que propose le producteur du discours [...] Le contenu compte, mais la façon de dire prime pour ce qui est d'établir une relation particulière, si possible, durable, un lien affectif ou privilégié avec le lecteur. » (Gonzales, 1996)

⁴⁹ Dispositif en vogue dans les années 2000, l'arrivée de réseaux sociaux tels que *Twitter* et *Facebook* ont entamé leur déclin (Neihouser, 2017). Selon Emily Turettini (2016), les blogs constituaient au milieu des années 2000 un nouveau média à part entière, la matérialisation de l'idéal démocratique d'internet, mais leur déclin a aussi été précipité par la complexification grandissante de la maintenance d'un blog⁴⁹. Un blog supposait alors à l'époque une relation perçue comme plus personnelle par rapport à son lectorat.

pare d'un *ethos* bien plus professionnalisant et institutionnel que *Kotaku*, qui semble vouloir tisser un lien de camaraderie avec son lectorat. Cet *ethos* de blogueur amateur semble être le catalyseur de cette « éditorialisation » embryonnaire d'un site de presse vidéoludique⁵⁰.

La couverture de médiatique de *Kotaku* étant assez brève et les articles qui la composent souvent courts, il faut relever qu'environ la moitié d'entre eux ne rapportent que la publication des deux lettres ou encore une information donnée par le *San Jose Mercury News*. L'investissement actif de Crecente n'est donc pas constant. La même observation peut être émise du côté de *GameSpot*. Si quatre des cinq articles sont écrits ou co-écrits par Curt Feldman⁵¹, c'est à partir du troisième article qu'on remarque un investissement moins marqué que précédemment. En effet, dans le troisième article, Feldman reprend une information publiée auparavant dans le *San Jose Mercury News*, dans le quatrième, il relaie un communiqué d'EA à ses investisseurs, et une lettre publiée dans le magazine *Wired*. Dans le dernier article, Tim Surette cite à nouveau le *San Jose Mercury News*, qui venait alors de révéler l'identité d'Erin Hoffman.

Nous l'avons vu, la couverture médiatique de *GameSpot* dépendait en grande partie de l'agenda judiciaire. En observant le degré d'investissement des journalistes que laissent paraître les articles, nous pouvons observer qu'à mesure de l'avancement de l'affaire, les journalistes utilisent de plus en plus des informations diffusées par des communiqués ou un autre organe de presse, alors que les débuts de la couverture médiatiques ont été marqués par le recours à l'investigation, par la sollicitation de sources judiciaires et d'informateurs anonymes.

Cette remarque peut également être émise pour une bonne partie de la presse généraliste. En effet, seuls trois articles, respectivement publiés dans le *Los Angeles Times*, le *New York Times* et le *San Jose Mercury News* montrent un investissement du journaliste au travers de la collecte de témoignages anonymes ou d'éclairages par des acteurs des milieux judiciaire ou associatif.

Cette disparité de l'investissement des journalistes peut être expliquée par la fréquence et le nombre d'articles publiés par chaque site de presse. *Kotaku* et *GameSpot* ont consacré

⁵⁰ Dans les années qui suivront, l'éditorial se fera une place comme genre journalistique au sein des sites de presse vidéoludique. La forme actuelle de *Kotaku* en est d'ailleurs un bon exemple.

⁵¹ Le dernier article de la couverture médiatique, en date du 26 avril 2006, est écrit par Tim Surette.

plus d'articles à l'affaire que n'importe quel site de presse généraliste. On peut donc supposer qu'une des caractéristiques du lecteur modèle esquissé par le journaliste était un lecteur au fait des développements précédents des affaires. Dès lors, le besoin de réactualiser les informations via la recherche de nouveaux éclairages leur aurait paru inutile. De plus, dans le cas où des articles sont effectivement séparés de plusieurs mois, nous ne constatons pas de nouveaux éclairages. Le lecteur modèle de cette presse étant considéré selon toute vraisemblance comme un amateur ayant une certaine connaissance de l'industrie, le besoin de rajouter des informations ne se faisait pas ressentir. Etant donné que la couverture médiatique de l'affaire par les journalistes généralistes comportait moins d'articles par publication, le lecteur modèle imaginé par lesdits journalistes n'était pas au courant des développements de l'affaire. D'où le besoin de rechercher activement des témoignages, des remises en perspective, ou des éclairages sur les différents développements de l'affaire.

Toutefois, le type de presse concerné ne suffit pas à expliquer seul ce besoin de réactualisation. En effet, comme remarqué précédemment, le *San Jose Mercury News* a consacré au moins quatre articles à l'affaire, et même si de ces quatre articles, nous n'avons pu en retrouver que trois, on retrouve parmi eux deux articles éloignés d'environ trois jours. En comparant ces deux articles rapprochés, nous pouvons faire la même observation : dans le second article, l'auteur, Dean Takahashi, relaie un mémo interne à *Electronic Arts* et n'a activement pas recherché de nouveaux éclairages, le lecteur modèle déployé ici étant un lecteur de la publication ayant lu l'article quelques jours plus tôt.

On peut dès lors dire que si la presse vidéoludique a suivi une routine globalement plus soutenue dans la couverture médiatique de l'affaire, c'est parce qu'elle concerne son objet de prédilection. Dès lors, le rythme de publication des articles aurait pu leur faire penser que la recherche active incessante de nouvelles sources aurait été inutile compte tenu de leur lecteur modèle. Mais dans le cas où un journal généraliste, le *San Jose Mercury News* et son journaliste Dean Takahashi en l'occurrence, fait le choix de publier régulièrement des articles sur l'avancée de l'affaire, le besoin de réactualiser ne se fait pas non plus ressentir. Le type de presse ne peut donc que partiellement expliquer le degré d'investissement des journalistes, dans la mesure où des exceptions peuvent exister au sein de la presse généraliste.

Enfin, nous pouvons relever que dans les sites de presse vidéoludique et dans le *San Jose Mercury News*, ce sont globalement les mêmes journalistes qui sont en charge de la couverture médiatique de l'affaire. Curt Feldman pour *GameSpot*, Brian Crecente pour *Kotaku*, et Dean Takahashi pour le *San Jose Mercury News*.

Ce degré d'investissement se perçoit tout à fait dans les genres employés lors de la couverture médiatique : les premiers articles de *GameSpot* et *Kotaku* s'apparentent clairement à de l'enquête en ce que les journalistes de ces sites assument une posture d'investigation, et se citent tout deux des informateurs les ayant aiguillés vers des sources. Cette observation est également valable pour la presse généraliste. Notons toutefois que le *New York Times* et surtout le *Los Angeles Times* vont plus loin sur cet aspect. Les journalistes de ces derniers adoptent plus que quiconque une esthétique très narrative et très littéraire⁵². Alex Pham, journaliste au *Los Angeles Times*, explicite des détails qui pourraient très bien faire passer son article pour du reportage compte tenu des détails a priori mineurs sur la vie personnelle d'Erin Hoffman et son conjoint qui parsèment son article. La démarche d'enquête est ici parée d'une esthétique très littéraire⁵³ et narrative.

De la même manière, la baisse de cet investissement est observable tout au long de l'avancement de l'affaire, dans la mesure où le genre largement dominant devient la synthèse, à l'exception d'*IGN* et du *San Jose Mercury News*, qui publient respectivement un compte rendu, et une enquête suivie d'un portrait.

Au-delà des considérations liées aux lecteurs-modèles respectifs de chaque type de presse, il ne faut pas exclure que le rythme auquel sont soumis les journalistes des sites de presse vidéoludique semble les rendre moins enclins à pratiquer régulièrement l'enquête. Et quand ils montrent une démarche d'investigation, le nombre de sources différentes est inférieur aux sources utilisées par les journalistes du *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, et *San Jose Mercury News* ayant enquêté sur le sujet.

Ce que la couverture médiatique révèle du conflit social

La couverture médiatique d'un conflit social donne des indices quant au positionnement et au changement de ceux-ci des différents acteurs du conflit, notamment dans la gestion de

⁵² Que l'on pourrait sans problème apparenter au courant du *New Journalism*.

⁵³ La référence à Dickens dès le début de l'article du *New York Times* « *When video games stop being fun* » est à ce titre très révélatrice.

leur image respective. L'enjeu principal de cette gestion de l'image est le cadrage au travers duquel les organes de presse traiteront du conflit. Dès lors, il convient de revenir à une conception chronologique de la couverture médiatique.

Ce conflit social, ainsi que ceux que nous verrons plus tard dans ce travail ont ceci de particulier qu'ils ne se matérialisent pas physiquement. Il n'est en effet pas question de grèves ou de manifestations telles qu'elles pourraient être organisées par des ouvriers protestant contre la fermeture d'une usine par exemple. Dans ce conflit social, nous identifions deux « champs de bataille ». Le premier est le champ judiciaire, via lequel les employés tentent d'obtenir des compensations de leur employeur, mais aussi le web. Ce dernier a permis aux individus qui se sentaient sinon exploités, à tout le moins floués par leur employeur⁵⁴, de faire connaître leurs revendications.

La mise en ligne des lettres apparaît donc comme une façon de « marquer des points », pour reprendre le terme de Piroton (2012), auprès des médias, et il apparaît que cela a fait recette : tous les médias, qu'ils soient vidéoludiques ou généralistes, ont mentionné au moins une de ces lettres, qui ont permis aux médias de révéler l'existence du conflit social. Ces lettres n'ont pas seulement permis aux acteurs de faire connaître leurs revendications, mais également d'enclencher un engrenage qui a permis la révélation du conflit social. Piroton écrivait que les « dominants » et les « dominés » ne disposaient pas de façon égalitaire la capacité à « construire les formes d'action requises pour bénéficier d'une bonne couverture médiatique, dans les termes que souhaitent ces acteurs. Ils peuvent également être inégaux dans les ressources dont ils disposent [...] ». Il apparaît ici que cette inégalité a été fortement diluée grâce au moyen de communication que constitue le Web.

Williams et Delli Carpini (2011) écrivaient que l'arrivée d'internet signifierait la mise à mal d'un régime médiatique centralisé dont l'accès serait négocié par les élites politiques et journalistiques. Le billet de blog d'Erin Hoffman et la lettre de Joe Straitiff semblent accréditer ce constat : en postant sa lettre sur un blog, cette jeune femme d'alors 23 ans a bénéficié d'un retentissement médiatique alors inespéré, et dont la plainte est restée dans les mémoires. Notons que Piroton faisait la distinction entre les « salariés, leurs

⁵⁴ Ou en l'occurrence, celui de leur conjoint.

représentants et leurs chargés de communication », et les « internautes ». Ces deux catégories se sont ici en partie confondues.

Cela a déjà été mentionné, mais la réponse d'*Electronic Arts* aux accusations semble avoir été la fuite d'un mail interne à l'entreprise, affirmant que certaines positions et politiques de compensations seraient réévaluées. Il apparaît que l'entreprise n'a que peu riposté aux revendications postées par des canaux alors inédits dans ce contexte.

A la lecture des différents articles, deux cadrages dominants semblent se dégager. Le premier est un cadrage judiciaire, c'est-à-dire que les enjeux principaux du conflit social apparaissent comme les compensations envers les employés. C'est le cas dans la majorité des articles des sites de presse vidéoludique, dont les dates de publication et les angles choisis correspondent à la mise en évidence de cet enjeu : ces articles semblent en effet répondre à la question : « Quels moyens mettent en œuvre l'employeur et les employés pour résoudre ce conflit ? ». Pour le premier il s'agit des compensations et des changements relatifs au régime de paie des heures supplémentaires, pour les seconds il s'agit de la publication de revendications et du lancement d'actions collectives, tel est le cadrage qui conditionne la couverture médiatique du conflit social par un grand nombre de sites de presse.

Le second type de cadrage à mettre en évidence est minoritaire parmi le corpus et peut s'apparenter à un traitement bien plus émotionnel du conflit. Les moyens sont relégués au second plan, ce qui importe ici, c'est la façon dont les employés et leur entourage vivent, ou ont vécu, ces conditions de travail dans leur chair. Ce qui se joue ici n'est pas seulement les compensations pécuniaires et l'assouplissement des agendas de production, mais le bien-être des individus concernés et par une part d'entre eux, leur vie familiale. Notons toutefois que la gravité de cet enjeu est abordée à degré divers. A ce titre, deux extraits apparaissent comme assez révélateurs de cette diversité. L'article du *New York Times*⁵⁵ commence de cette façon :

CHARLES DICKENS himself would shudder, I should think, were he to see the way young adults are put to work in one semimodern corner of our economy. Gas lamps are long gone, and the air is free of soot. But you can't look at a place like Electronic Arts, the world's largest developer of entertainment

⁵⁵ STROSS Randall, « *When a Video Game Stops Being Fun* », in *The New York Times*, [en ligne] <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/21/business/yourmoney/when-a-video-game-stops-being-fun.html> , 21 novembre 2004.

software, and not think back to the early industrial age when a youthful work force was kept fully occupied during all waking hours to enrich a few elders.

La référence explicite à Charles Dickens dresse un parallèle entre les travailleurs de l'industrie du jeu vidéo au début du XXI^e siècle et les ouvriers anglais de l'époque victorienne dont la condition indignait l'écrivain anglais. Cette comparaison est lourde de sens et donne la couleur de l'article. Toutefois, Dean Takahashi écrit dans le premier article de *San Jose Mercury News*⁵⁶, article dont le cadrage apparaît comme similaire à celui de l'article précédemment cité, le paragraphe suivant :

To be sure, the work environment at EA is hardly Dickensian. The company offers such amenities as an upscale cafeteria, gymnasium, soccer field, game rooms and a theater where it shows movies and hosts concerts. In 2003, the company made the Fortune magazine's list of "100 Best Companies to Work For," which is based in part on employee surveys.

Si ces références à Dickens apportent un éclairage sur le lecteur modèle construit par ces journalistes, elles témoignent toutes deux d'une appréciation différente de l'ampleur de de l'objet du conflit social, à savoir les conditions de travail. De la même manière, il serait réducteur d'affirmer une nette dichotomie entre ces différents cadrages, dans la mesure où les articles de cette catégorie remettent en perspective le conflit dans le contexte de l'industrie du jeu vidéo, et inversement. Notons en outre que ce cadrage n'est présent que dans la presse généraliste.

Nous l'avons vu, le traitement médiatique du conflit social a ici un rôle majeur : l'absence de matérialisation physique du conflit dans l'espace public a poussé les lanceurs d'alerte à se reposer sur le retentissement qu'allaient avoir leurs plaintes chez les internautes et dans les médias. Il apparaît toutefois que sites de presse vidéoludique et généraliste ont eu des rôles différents, dans la mesure où les acteurs « revendicatifs », comme dirait Piroton, du conflit. Les organes de presse ont été les publications dans lesquelles les acteurs ont pu « avancer leurs pions », que ce soit par leur volonté ou par celle des journalistes de cette presse. *GameSpot*, *Kotaku* et *IGN* semblent s'être davantage inscrits dans une logique communicationnelle : au-delà des éclairages judiciaires sur l'affaire, ces organes ont relayé les différents actes (majoritairement judiciaires) des acteurs du conflit, sans pour autant privilégier le discours de l'un sur l'autre, et prend une position médiane par rapport à ces acteurs.

⁵⁶ TAKAHASHI Dean, « Video-Game Workers Sue for Overtime Pay », in *Technewsworld*, [en ligne] <https://www.technewsworld.com/story/38451.html>, 4 décembre 2004.

Conclusion

A la suite de cette étude de cas, nous pouvons établir un premier mode de couverture médiatique d'un conflit social dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo américaine. Nous pouvons appeler ce mode « parallèle », en ce que sites de presse généralistes et spécialisés ont tous les deux couverts au moins une partie de l'affaire de manière indépendante les uns des autres. Ces couvertures parallèles comportent des divergences et des points communs. Toutefois, comme nous venons de le démontrer, les sites de presse généralistes semblent se démarquer par un impératif de réactivité moins fort que dans le chef des sites de presse vidéoludique. Ces derniers, en plus d'être des *pure players* ont le jeu vidéo et l'industrie qui le conçoit comme objet principal. Du côté des sites de presse généralistes, cette plus grande latitude permet de trouver dans une partie de cette presse une plus grande attention envers les témoignages et le récit humain. Cela ne veut pour autant pas dire que les sites de presse vidéoludique n'ont pas enquêté : comme nous l'avons vu, *Kotaku* et *GameSpot*, malgré la soumission à cet impératif, ont eu recours à l'investigation journalistique et ont révélé l'existence de l'action collective avant la majorité des organes de presse généralistes concernés par le corpus. Fondamentalement, la démarche des journalistes n'est pas très différente, seul le sujet de l'enquête change entre les sous-champs. En outre, *GameSpot*, si l'on s'en tient aux faits composant l'affaire, semble avoir livré la couverture médiatique la plus complète de l'affaire au niveau de ses avancements. Relevons également la participation d'IGN qui, malgré un *ethos* journalistique apparaissant bien moins présent que chez ses concurrents, consacre un article à la réaction d'un membre de l'industrie aux pratiques dénoncées.

On pourrait dire que ces couvertures parallèles sont globalement complémentaires : les sites de presse généralistes permettent d'obtenir des éclairages humains, ainsi que des comparaisons avec d'autres secteurs que celui du jeu vidéo ou des remises en perspective historique. Les sites de presse vidéoludique, *GameSpot* en tête, feuilletonnent l'affaire, et rapportent ses développements dans ce qu'ils ont de plus pragmatique.

Deuxième étude de cas : les *Rockstar Spouses*

Éléments de contexte et considérations méthodologiques

Le 7 janvier 2010, un billet de blog anonyme hébergé sur le site gamasutra.com et signé par une certaine « *Rockstar Spouse* » (2010) est mis en ligne. Les auteures du billet se présentent comme les épouses d'employés du studio *Rockstar San Diego*, la branche californienne de l'éditeur *Rockstar Games*, alors mondialement connu pour être l'éditeur de la saga polémique *Grand Theft Auto*⁵⁷.

Les *Rockstar Spouses* décrivent la façon dont la santé mentale et le stress des employés augmentaient à mesure que les dates butoirs décidées par les *managers* du studio les mettaient sous pression. La lettre évoque notamment des cas de dépressions et une occurrence de tendances suicidaires. En outre, le mois de mars 2009 est désigné comme étant le début de la dégradation de la situation, situation durant laquelle les journées de travail pouvaient atteindre 12 heures.

La dénonciation des conditions de travail s'accompagne également de la diminution des compensations malgré l'intense charge de travail : il serait impossible pour les employés durant cette période de prendre congé, et on leur aurait retiré des heures supplémentaires. La lettre se conclut sur la menace d'une action judiciaire si rien ne change.

La lettre omet plusieurs éléments. Il convient de rappeler qu'à l'époque, les développeurs et artistes de *Rockstar San Diego* travaillent sur *Red Dead Redemption*, sorti le 21 mai 2010 en Europe. Le budget de développement a été estimé à 100 millions de dollars (jeuxvideo-live, 2015). En août 2015, le jeu comptait 14 millions de vente (Makuch, 2015).

Un peu plus de cinq ans après la première polémique, difficile de ne pas relever les similitudes entre ce billet et les lettres de Straitiff et Hoffman. L'efficacité de la méthode employée par ces derniers pour valoriser leur cause semble avoir marqué au point de la voir répétée des années plus tard. En outre, la menace d'une action en justice apparaît dans ce contexte comme un moyen supplémentaire d'attirer de nouveau l'attention des médias, qui avaient largement couvert l'aspect judiciaire du précédent conflit.

⁵⁷ Le principe de chacun des jeux de la saga est d'incarner un criminel effectuant des tâches pénalement répréhensibles dans des villes ouvertes au joueur, et dans laquelle ce dernier peut tirer sur des passants ou voler des voitures comme bon lui semble.

Origines et durée de la couverture médiatique

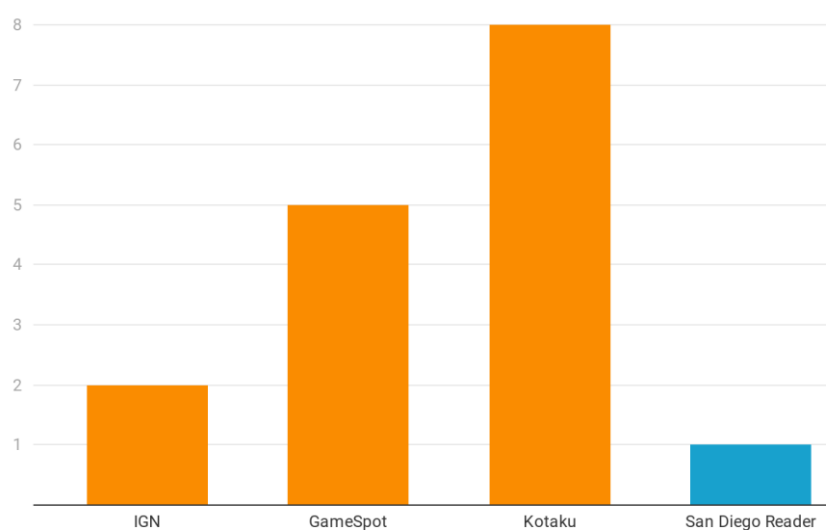


Figure 4 : Nombre d'articles évoquant les « Rockstar Spouses » et les conditions de travail au sein de Rockstar San Diego par chaque site de presse.

	Sites de presse vidéoludique			Site de presse généraliste
	IGN	GameSpot	Kotaku	San Diego Reader
08/01/2010	1		1	
12/01/2010		1	2	
14/01/2010		1		
15/01/2010			2	
19/01/2010		1		
21/01/2010			1	
22/01/2010		1		
10/02/2010				1
25/05/2010			1	
02/05/2011	1			

Tableau 5 : nombre d'articles traitant du sujet des « Rockstar Spouses » publiés sur les différents sites de presse par date.

La première chose à remarquer est que les sites de presse qui concernent notre corpus se sont montrés globalement aussi prolifiques que lors de l'affaire précédente. Ce qui marque véritablement ici est l'absence d'articles issus de la presse généraliste. En effet, seul un journal local, le *San Diego Reader*, a consacré un article aux plaintes des *Rockstar Wives*. Aucun autre article n'a été retrouvé dans le cadre de cette recherche.

Remarquons également qu'à l'exception de l'article d'IGN du 2 mai 2011 (sur lequel nous reviendrons plus tard), la couverture médiatique a duré un peu moins de deux mois. Il faut

tout d'abord relever que le caractère inédit des plaintes d'Erin Hoffman et de Joe Straitiff n'est ici plus présent. Quelques articles mentionnent d'ailleurs ce précédent comme point de comparaison avec la plainte mise en ligne en janvier 2010.

La durée moindre de cette couverture médiatique peut s'expliquer par le fait qu'il n'y avait ici pas de feuilleton judiciaire à couvrir sur le long terme. Les conflits sociaux dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo américaine ont ceci de particulier qu'ils ne se matérialisent pas dans des manifestations publiques telles que des mouvements de grève. Nous l'avons vu dans le cas des actions collectives lancées contre Electronic Arts en 2004 : ce conflit a bénéficié d'un suivi sur les sites de presse (majoritairement vidéoludique) sur la durée grâce aux développements judiciaires des actions collectives.

Notons que le 15 janvier 2010, *Joystiq*⁵⁸ rapporte qu'une action collective lancée en août 2006 par des employées de Rockstar San Diego (alors appelé Angel Studios) contre Rockstar Games avait été « calmement » réglée à l'amiable en avril 2009 (Gilbert, 2010). Nous avons établi que la publication des lettres était l'élément qui a permis au conflit d'émerger dans les médias, et que son aspect judiciaire est ce qui lui a assuré une certaine pérennité. Le cas des *Rockstar Spouses* apparaît comme un reflet du cas précédent, en ce que le volet judiciaire a trouvé sa conclusion plusieurs mois avant la dénonciation. Cet événement n'a donc pas pu se matérialiser en affaire médiatique. Aucune action en justice n'a suivi la publication de la lettre, et ce malgré l'évocation de cette possibilité. Cette absence judiciaire a en outre rendu impossible toute feuilletonisation du conflit social sur le long terme.

L'absence de syndicats de l'industrie du jeu vidéo aux Etats-Unis explique cette absence de mouvement. Si des groupes tels que le *Game Workers Unite* recherchent explicitement à organiser la syndicalisation de l'industrie, ces efforts semblent avoir pour l'heure porté assez peu de fruits. Cependant, on peut relever qu'une grève de 21 jours a été observée par des scénaristes du jeu mobile *Lovestruck* (Kersley, 2020), dont les revendications sont tout à fait similaires à celles d'Erin Hoffman ou des *Rockstar Wives*. Concernant la France, l'existence du Syndicat national du jeu vidéo est également à relever. Notons qu'une grève touchant l'industrie du jeu vidéo a eu lieu aux Etats-Unis entre le 21 octobre 2016 et le 23 septembre 2017, mais cette grève concernait les comédiens de doublages, protégés par la

⁵⁸ L'article en question est aujourd'hui trouvable sur le site *engadget.com*, successeur de *Joystiq*.

*Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists*⁵⁹ (McNary, 2017), et ne concernait donc pas les équipes de développement.

Toutefois, nous pouvons encore remarquer la réactivité des sites de presse vidéoludique par rapport à la publication relativement tardive de l'article du *San Diego Reader*. Au niveau des sites de presse vidéoludique, remarquons une fois encore que *Kotaku* a publié le plus d'articles, suivi de *GameSpot* et *IGN*. Ce classement est le même qu'en 2004, à la différence près que les articles de *Kotaku* sont plus longs, moins fréquents, et témoignent d'une certaine professionnalisation du site par rapport à ses débuts en 2004, dans la mesure où son *ethos* et son contrat de lecture semblent s'être alignés sur ceux de ses concurrents.

Les angles

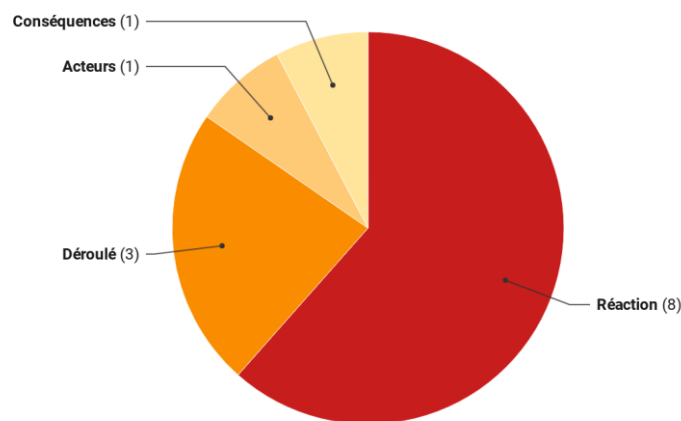


Figure 5 : Proportion de chaque angle journalistique dans la couverture du conflit social par les sites de presse vidéoludique traitant du sujet des « Rockstar Spouses »

⁵⁹ Communément abrégée SAG-AFTRA.

	Réactions (8)	Déroulé (3)	Conséquences (1)	Acteurs (1)
GameSpot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Rockstar turmoil afflicting Max Payne 3's August launch ? •Rockstar complaints get IGDA response •Red Dead Redemption on track, Rockstar 'saddened' by working-condition claims •Rockstar turmoil afflicting Max Payne 3's August launch ? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Midnight Club canceled at beleaguered Rockstar San Diego ? 		
IGN		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Rockstar Wives Strike Back 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Editorial : The Real Housewives of Game Development
Kotaku	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •A Week In Comments •Former Staffer Compares Rockstar NY To The Eye Of Sauron •Rockstar Has Some Fun With "Eye Of Sauron" Comparison, Still Won't Comment •Rockstar Responds To "Rockstar Spouse" Controversy, "Saddened" By Accusations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Alleged Unfair Work Conditions At Rockstar San Diego 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Do We Need Fair Trade Games ? 	

Tableau 6 : Détail des angles des différents articles de sites de presse vidéoludique sélectionnés traitant du sujet des « Rockstar Spouses »

Le graphique montre que les angles mobilisés par les sites de presse vidéoludique sont de manière générale les mêmes que ceux utilisés pendant l'affaire concernant *Electronic Arts*⁶⁰. De plus, ils semblent suivre la même routine : l'angle du déroulé des faits est mobilisé dans les premiers articles suivant la publication de la lettre, puis sont relayées les diverses réactions des acteurs du conflit social. La même observation peut également être dressée pour l'article du *San Diego Reader* : le journaliste de ce dernier a publié son article environ un mois après la mise en ligne de la lettre, et comme pour une partie des articles de la presse généraliste de 2004, on remarque que le déroulement est abordé selon l'angle consacré aux acteurs, c'est-à-dire des développeurs et de l'IGDA.

Il existe toutefois plusieurs distinctions au niveau du traitement angulaire dans les sites de presse vidéoludique. La première consiste à mettre en évidence que l'angle consacré aux acteurs est mobilisé, ce qui n'était pas le cas en 2004. Cet angle (ainsi que celui consacré aux conséquences) apparaît dans un éditorial d'IGN publié le 2 mai 2011⁶¹. La rédactrice se présente comme l'épouse d'un développeur, et mobilise son expérience personnelle pour adopter une posture pour le moins critique envers les *Rockstar Spouses* et Erin Hoffman.

⁶⁰ Etant donné qu'un seul article de la presse généraliste traitant du sujet a été trouvé, il n'a pas été nécessaire de réaliser un graphique semblable pour celle-ci.

⁶¹ **TANNER** Nicole, « Editorial : The Real Housewives of Game Development », in *IGN*, [en ligne] <https://www.ign.com/articles/2011/05/02/editorial-the-real-housewives-of-game-development>, 2 mai 2011.

Pour la première fois au sein du corpus d'articles observés, le conflit social est ramené à une dimension personnelle et individuelle dans le chef de ceux qui pourraient le vivre personnellement.

La seconde distinction concerne la plus grande variété des acteurs « réacteurs » : nous avons précédemment relevé dans la couverture médiatique de la polémique liée à l'*EA Spouse* qu'Electronic Arts pouvait être vu comme l'acteur « réacteur » majoritaire. Or, il apparaît dans ce cas que ces acteurs sont plus variés dans la presse vidéoludique : ainsi on y retrouve un ancien employé⁶², l'IGDA⁶³, et les internautes eux-mêmes⁶⁴. Sur ce dernier point, un article de *Kotaku* a en effet mis en évidence plusieurs commentaires postés en réaction aux articles traitant de la polémique, le « nouveau régime médiatique »⁶⁵ se manifeste dans la routine éditoriale du site⁶⁶. Les éclairages ou réflexions d'internautes sont relayées dans un article, et se manifestent dans le traitement angulaire. Les « réacteurs » ne sont plus obligatoirement « institutionnels » ou directement concernés par la controverse.

Relevons enfin la présence une fois encore d'un article qui s'interroge sur les conséquences possibles de la problématique, à savoir l'éditorial de *Kotaku* s'interrogeant sur le besoin ou non d'un label « *fair trade* » pour les jeux vidéo réalisés sous des conditions de travail jugées comme acceptables⁶⁷. Les conséquences ne sont en outre pas éclairées par des éclairages judiciaires, comme cela avait été le cas dans la première analyse, mais sont pensées selon ce qui serait souhaitable par l'auteur de l'éditorial. Ainsi, les conséquences sont ici abordées sous le prisme d'un jugement apporté par un rédacteur, ce qui traduit une prise de position plus prononcée sur le problème. Les éditoriaux apparaissent dans ce cas-ci comme le moyen auxquels ont recours les journalistes et publications pour aborder ce conflit social sous des angles plus « inhabituels » que ceux de la réaction ou du déroulé des faits, et donc de

⁶² **FAHEY** Mike, « Former Staffer Compares Rockstar NY To The Eye Of Sauron », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/former-staffer-compares-rockstar-ny-to-the-eye-of-sauro-5446339> , 12 janvier 2010.

⁶³ **GAMESPOT**, « Rockstar complaints get IGDA response », in *GameSpot*, [en ligne] <https://www.GameSpot.com/articles/rockstar-complaints-get-igda-response/1100-6246418/> , 19 janvier 2010.

⁶⁴ **ASHCRAFT** Brian, « A Week In Comments », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/a-week-in-comments-5445945> , 12 janvier 2010.

⁶⁵ Selon les termes de Williams et Delli Carpini (2011)

⁶⁶ A plus forte raison que l'article est issu d'une rubrique hebdomadaire mettant en évidence certains commentaires.

⁶⁷ **ORSINI** Lauren, « Do We Need Fair Trade Games ? », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/do-we-need-fair-trade-games-5546208> , 27 mai 2010.

s'affranchir des contraintes posées par le temps imparti qui constitue une dimension conditionnant en partie le traitement angulaire (Ruellan, 2002).

Les sources et citations

	Communication d'entreprise	Sources associatives	Travailleurs ⁶⁸
Sites de presse vidéoludique			
<i>Kotaku</i>	2		(2)
<i>GameSpot</i>	1	1	(3)
<i>IGN</i>			
Presse généraliste			
<i>San Diego Reader</i>	2	2	4

Tableau 7 : nombre de mobilisations des types de sources par organe de presse excluant la lettre des Rockstar Spouses. Les sources utilisées par d'autres médias non-concernés par le corpus mais reprises par un des sites de presse sont placées entre parenthèses.

D'entrée de jeu, nous pouvons remarquer que la variété des types de sources dans la presse généraliste relevée précédemment est toujours présente. La différence a encore une fois lieu au sein des sites de presse vidéoludique : nous pouvons remarquer dans le tableau que les témoignages ou éclairages de travailleurs (actuels ou anciens) sur la situation ont été initialement publiés dans deux autres sites de presse⁶⁹. En outre, les sites de presse vidéoludique concernés par notre corpus se sont mis à citer les premiers concernés par les problématiques soulevées en reprenant les témoignages publiés par les autres sites de presse. Toutefois, nous pouvons encore remarquer le « contentement » de ces sites de presse : à l'instar de la couverture médiatique de l'*EA Spouse*, les journalistes ne vont pas rechercher d'autres témoignages que ceux publiés en ligne ou cités sur d'autres sites. Encore une fois, l'impératif du *Breaking News* semble primer, et ne pousse pas les journalistes à rechercher de plus amples témoignages.

En outre, la comparaison entre les articles « vidéoludiques » et l'article « généraliste » permet encore une fois de montrer la puissance relative des sources selon le sous-champ journalistique : là où des articles entiers sont consacrés aux réactions de Rockstar Games ou de l'IGDA, ces sources apparaissent bien marginales dans l'article de Moss Gropen publié dans le *San Diego Reader*. En dépit de cette relativité, nous pouvons tout de même

⁶⁸ Autres que les lettres de Joe Straitiff et Erin Hoffman.

⁶⁹ *Joystiq* et *MTV News*

constater que cette puissance s'étiole, notamment au sein de *Kotaku* et *GameSpot*, dans la mesure où ces deux sites se font les relais de témoignages cités dans d'autres sites de presse.

Dès lors, nous pouvons dresser les mêmes remarques que précédemment : d'un côté il apparaît que les réflexes des journalistes de sites de presse vidéoludique n'aient pas suffisamment changé que pour adopter des pratiques différentes en matière de recherches de sources, mais il est aussi tout à fait possible que la presse vidéoludique jouissant d'un capital symbolique moindre que les journaux généralistes, les témoins soient moins enclins à se tourner vers elle.

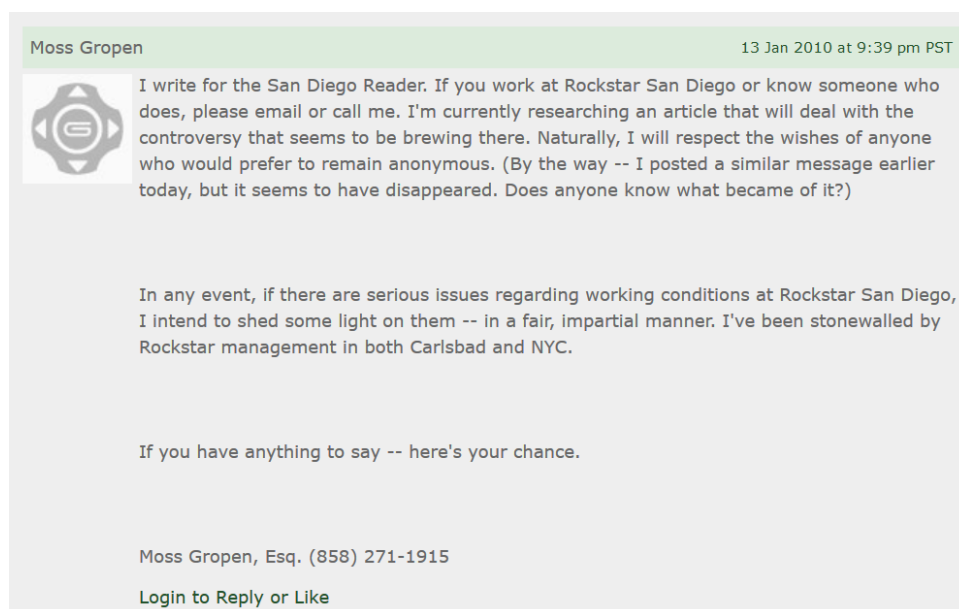


Figure 6 : commentaire de Moss Gropen sous la lettre des *Rockstar Spouses*, appelant les internautes à témoigner.

Toutefois, cette capture d'écran d'un commentaire publié en dessous de la lettre des *Rockstar Spouses* indique qu'il a suffi de ce commentaire pour que Moss Gropen, le journaliste du *San Diego Reader*, récolte au moins quatre témoignages distincts. Aucune autre sollicitation du genre n'est trouvable dans cette section consacrée aux commentaires. Dès lors, la recherche de ces sources étant liée à une démarche d'enquête nécessitant une démarche d'enquête, on pourrait déduire que les journalistes des sites de presse vidéoludique, soumis à un rythme de publication assez soutenu, ne prennent pas le temps de rechercher de plus amples témoignages.

La question des sources permet également d'émettre une première considération par rapport à l'agenda médiatique : la recherche de sources semble jusque-là s'opérer après la médiatisation d'un événement-initiateur. Il semble que la question des conditions de travail dans l'industrie apparaisse encore comme relativement marginale pour les journalistes vidéoludiques que pour ne pas les pousser à activement rechercher les témoignages sans avoir besoin d'une dénonciation publique du problème. Dès lors, cette passivité empêche toute contextualisation ou remise en perspective dans le chef de ces sites de presse quand une polémique entre dans l'espace médiatique. Et lorsqu'une polémique relative au sujet surgit, les journalistes de sites de presse vidéoludique, pris dans leur impératif de « *Breaking News* », ne sont pas en mesure de rechercher de plus amples témoignages, autres que ceux cités par ailleurs, ou que les communiqués et réactions de l'IGDA.

Investissement des journalistes et genres employés

En plus de nous renseigner sur le type de sources recherché par un journaliste généraliste, la capture d'écran précédemment citée témoigne également d'un investissement actif du journaliste par rapport à son sujet, investissement qui se matérialise concrètement dans sa mobilisation du genre de l'enquête. En effet, l'article du *San Diego Reader* est le seul qui témoigne d'un travail d'enquête et de recherche active de témoignages dans notre corpus. De manière globale, et à l'instar de notre première étude de cas, nous voyons que les journalistes n'ont pas mis la problématique des conditions de travail à l'agenda d'eux-mêmes : ils ont rebondi sur un événement externe pour évoquer la problématique. Mais de façon plus spécifique, là où les journalistes de *Kotaku* et *GameSpot* se sont, en 2004, inscrits dans une démarche d'enquête journalistique en allant solliciter des sources judiciaires recommandées par des informateurs, ou en relayant une fuite préalablement authentifiée par leurs soins. Dans le cas des *Rockstar Spouses*, nous ne retrouvons rien de tout ça au sein des sites de presse vidéoludique choisis. Nous l'avons déjà évoqué, ce sont les sites *MTV News* et *Joystiq* qui ont réalisé un travail d'enquête : le premier a corroboré les accusations mises en lignes (Frushtick, 2010), et le second a enquêté sur le statut de la franchise de jeux de courses *Midnight Club*, développée par une équipe de Rockstar San Diego (Gilbert, 2010). Là où les journalistes de *GameSpot* et *Kotaku* ont, en 2004, chacun enquêté de leur côté (en témoignent leurs différences au niveau des sources et, dans une certaine mesure, au niveau des angles), les journalistes de ces sites ont cette fois-ci relayé les trouvailles de leurs

collègues de *MTV* ou *Joystiq*. Dans le cas de *GameSpot*, nous pouvons observer cette pratique de reprise de *Joystiq* dans un article consacré à *Midnight Club*⁷⁰ et un autre consacré au développement du jeu *Max Payne 3*, lui aussi développé par Rockstar⁷¹. Les journalistes de *Kotaku* reprennent également *Joystiq*, mais aussi *MTV*⁷². Dans ce cas-ci, une partie de la couverture médiatique de ces deux sites apparaît comme en partie dépendante d'un travail réalisé au sein d'autres rédactions, ce qui n'était pas le cas lors de l'affaire précédente, ce qui peut constituer un indice d'un investissement moindre de la part des journalistes desdites rédactions.

Toutefois, nous remarquons au sein de la rédaction de *Kotaku* la récurrence de la plume de Stephen Totilo, qui signe trois des cinq articles consacrés au conflit. En outre, un article de *GameSpot* est signé Tor Thorsen, qui avait déjà officié à l'époque de la controverse de l'*EA Spouse*. Si ces journalistes sont également les auteurs de *news* traditionnelles⁷³, on pourrait mettre en évidence la récurrence de certains d'entre eux pour les sujets relatifs aux conditions de travail, et émettre l'hypothèse que cela préfigure une sous-spécialisation de certains journalistes au sein d'un site spécialisé.

Un autre aspect inédit de la couverture médiatique de ce conflit social est la présence de deux éditoriaux, respectivement publiés sur *Kotaku*⁷⁴ et *IGN*⁷⁵. Si l'investissement des journalistes de ces sites ne se fait dans ce cas-ci pas immédiatement ressentir, ces questionnements relatifs à l'attitude du consommateur par rapport à ces problèmes ou prises de positions explicites sont inédites au sein du corpus analysé. Nous évoquons déjà, en parlant de la façon dont *Kotaku* a couvert la polémique lancée par Erin Hoffman, d'une

⁷⁰ **GAMESPOT**, « *Midnight Club canceled at beleaguered Rockstar San Diego ?* », in *GameSpot*, [en ligne] <https://www.GameSpot.com/articles/midnight-club-canceled-at-beleaguered-rockstar-san-diego/1100-6245225/>, 12 janvier 2010.

⁷¹ **GAMESPOT**, « *Rockstar turmoil afflicting Max Payne 3's August launch ?* », in *GameSpot*, [en ligne] <https://www.GameSpot.com/articles/rockstar-turmoil-afflicting-max-payne-3s-august-launch/1100-6246424/>, 14 janvier 2010.

⁷² **FAHEY** Mike, « *Former Staffer Compares Rockstar NY To The Eye Of Sauron* », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/former-staffer-compares-rockstar-ny-to-the-eye-of-sauro-5446339>, 12 janvier 2010.

⁷³ C'est-à-dire comprises dans le cycle « institutionnel » de la presse vidéoludique.

⁷⁴ **ORSINI** Lauren, « *Do We Need Fair Trade Games ?* », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/do-we-need-fair-trade-games-5546208>, 27 mai 2010.

⁷⁵ Relevons cependant que l'éditorial en question a été originellement publié sur un autre site internet, à savoir *above49.ca*. Toutefois, sa republication sur *Kotaku* nous éclaire sur les choix éditoriaux des journalistes du site, et *in fine*, de leur position par rapport au conflit social.

⁷⁶ **TANNER** Nicole, « *Editorial : The Real Housewives of Game Development* », in *IGN*, [en ligne] <https://www.ign.com/articles/2011/05/02/editorial-the-real-housewives-of-game-development>, 2 mai 2011.

« éditorialisation embryonnaire » en relevant les commentaires, traits d'ironies, ou piques lancés par Brian D. Crecente dans ses articles consacrés à l'affaire. Les prises de position de journalistes ne sont plus ici encadrées par un article « factuel », mais font partie intégrante de l'agenda médiatique. Les prises de position développées dans ces éditoriaux apparaissent antinomiques. D'un côté, *Kotaku* se désole de l'exploitation de la passion des travailleurs, et *IGN* relativise la gravité des situations vécues plaintes. Les journalistes de ces deux sites de presse, par la voix de ces journalistes, en plus de témoigner d'un investissement personnel concernant le sujet, prennent clairement position dans le conflit social et explicitent leur statut d'acteur dudit conflit. L'investissement des journalistes ne se manifestent pas dans un travail d'enquête, mais plutôt dans des prises de positions explicites au travers d'éditoriaux.

Cadrage et conflit social

Comme nous l'avons dit, par des éditoriaux certains journalistes d'*IGN* et *Kotaku* prennent position sur le conflit social. Toutefois, ces deux publications adoptent un point de vue différent. Lauren Orsini, dont l'opinion a été relayée sur *Kotaku* fait part de ses interrogations en tant que consommatrice, alors que Nicole Tanner endosse dans *IGN* son costume d'épouse de développeur pour développer son opinion sur les problématiques soulevées à *Rockstar San Diego* et, par extension, dans le chef d'*Electronic Arts* en 2004. Si l'on se fie à la composition d'un conflit social selon Pirotton, les journalistes en sont des acteurs. Dans le cadre de la problématique qui nous occupe, ces éditoriaux sont les premières prises de positions et de questionnement explicites non pas sur le conflit supposé entre *Rockstar* et certains de ses employés, mais sur la question générale des conditions de travail dans l'industrie. Par exemple, Nicole Tanner met en cause le bien-fondé des plaintes publiées sur Internet concernant les conditions de travail de gens qu'elle considère comme passionnés par leur métier et par ailleurs au salaire relativement élevé.

Vient ensuite la question du cadrage, comme révélateur du conflit social. Ici aussi une distinction nette avec le cas précédent est observable dans les sites de presse vidéoludique : là où l'agenda judiciaire déterminait la couverture médiatique de *GameSpot* dans le cas précédent, nous remarquons ici que *GameSpot* cadre ce conflit social selon son influence sur les jeux en développement. Les révélations de problèmes de *management* sont dans trois articles sur quatre toujours rattachés et subordonnés au développement d'un jeu, les titres de ces articles sont d'ailleurs très révélateurs :

- « *Midnight Club* » canceled at beleaguered Rockstar San Diego
- Rockstar turmoil afflicting « *Max Payne 3* »'s August launch
- « *Red Dead Redemption* » on track, Rockstar « saddened » by working-conditions claims.

Les titres sont parfaitement révélateurs du cadrage, en ce que le conflit social ne prend une signification que parce qu'il renseigne et soulève de potentielles craintes sur le développement de jeux très attendus à l'époque. Soulignons toutefois que les accusations sont également très rapidement mentionnées dans d'autres articles, mais la brièveté de ces mentions a exclu ces articles du corpus, compte tenu de la marginalité du sujet au sein de l'article.

La tendance est différente sur *Kotaku* : à l'instar de *GameSpot* en 2004, les articles sont consacrés aux développements et révélations supplémentaires concernant les conditions de travail, et le cycle est davantage dicté par les réactions, publiques ou non, de Rockstar, et ne sont que minoritairement rattachés aux développements de *Red Dead Redemption* ou à l'état de la licence *Midnight Club*. On peut faire la même remarque pour *IGN* et le seul article « factuel » que le site a consacré à la publication de la lettre, la publicité de ces problèmes est prise comme un événement en soi, sans se soucier des influences possibles sur les jeux en développement. Il apparaît ici que le cycle est déterminant dans la façon dont ces sites de presse vidéoludique traitent les problématiques liées aux conditions de travail. *GameSpot* s'inscrit en effet dans le traditionnel cycle « *news-preview-test* », et l'importance donnée à ce problème se retrouve fortement diminuée au profit des considérations plus pragmatiques sur l'état de développement du jeu. *Kotaku* et *IGN* semblent, quant à eux, s'être inscrits dans un cycle dépendant davantage de la communication des acteurs, en ce que chaque article sans exception traite tour à tour de la publication de la lettre, du témoignage d'un ancien travailleur dans *Joystiq*, et dans les réponses de *Rockstar*. Le type de cycle apparaît donc ici déterminant. Remarquons toutefois que malgré ce cycle différent, la « fin » du conflit social intervient au même moment, c'est-à-dire quand *Rockstar* se déclare « attristé » par les accusations⁷⁷⁷⁸, ce qui accrédite l'hypothèse selon laquelle

⁷⁷ **THORSEN Tor**, « Red Dead Redemption on track, Rockstar 'saddened' by working condition claims », in *GameSpot*, [en ligne] <https://www.GameSpot.com/articles/red-dead-redemption-on-track-rockstar-saddened-by-working-condition-claims/1100-6246814/>, 22 janvier 2010.

⁷⁸ **TOTILO Stephen**, « Rockstar Responds To "Rockstar Spouse" Controversy, "Saddened" By Accusations », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/rockstar-responds-to-rockstar-spouse-controversy-sa-452580499>, 21 janvier 2010.

l'absence de mobilisation de l'acteur revendicatif a ouvert la voie à une couverture médiatique largement conditionnée par les communications de Rockstar.

Ces choix de cycles témoignent également d'une différence de posture, *Kotaku* semblant vouloir rendre compte le plus possible de la problématique, jusqu'à consacrer un article à la réaction teintée de dérision de l'entreprise⁷⁹. A ce titre, ce choix est éclairant sur le lecteur modèle déployé par les journalistes de *Kotaku*, c'est-à-dire un amateur de jeu vidéo toutefois attentif aux conditions de travail auxquelles sont soumis certains développeurs. Ce lecteur modèle apparaît comme une variation de celui esquissé par *GameSpot*, qui laisse supposer, comme notre analyse du cadrage a pu le montrer, que celui-ci subordonne les problèmes relatifs aux conditions de travail à l'objet jeu vidéo, à plus forte raison que les jeux concernés ici sont des jeux très attendus.

Là où le cycle était relativement similaire dans les articles publiés entre 2004 et 2006 sur l'affaire des conditions de travail au sein d'*Electronic Arts*, cette couverture médiatique comporte donc plus de distinctions sur ce point. On peut expliquer cette distinction par plusieurs aspects. Le fait que la plainte n'ait pas été suivie de poursuites judiciaires et l'anonymat des auteurs de la lettre n'a pas permis à l'acteur revendicatif d'occuper l'espace médiatique suffisamment longtemps que pour le conquérir ; les différences de cadrage entre *Kotaku* et *GameSpot* semblent tenir davantage du choix éditorial que de la « mobilisation de l'acteur revendicatif », étant donné que les revendications ne sont pas allées plus loin que la lettre, là où la dénonciation s'était convertie en affaire judiciaire six ans plus tôt. De plus, le fait que ces problèmes se situaient dans l'ombre de jeux très populaires ou très attendus, en l'occurrence *Red Dead Redemption*, a d'une certaine façon occulté ces revendications dans la couverture de *GameSpot*. Il apparaît alors que, d'une certaine façon, *Rockstar Games*, par sa communication et le *marketing* mobilisé dans la promotion des jeux a pu s'imposer dans les sites de presse vidéoludique.

Le fait que les conditions de travail aient été évoquées par les témoins dans le *San Diego Reader* permet de mettre en évidence qu'un organe de presse n'accordant pas, ou peu, d'importance au *marketing* et à la communication de *Rockstar Games* libère plus de place

⁷⁹ TOTILO Stephen, « Rockstar Has Some Fun With "Eye Of Sauron" Comparison, Still Won't Comment », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/rockstar-has-some-fun-with-eye-of-sauron-comparison-5449453>, 15 janvier 2010.

pour que les acteurs du conflit puissent s'exprimer. Il ne faut toutefois pas perdre de vue que ces revendications semblent avoir été rencontrées avec une indifférence marquée par l'écrasante majorité des sites de presse généraliste, ce qui peut être mis sur le compte de l'absence d'affaire médiatique au sens de Marchetti (2002). Une fois encore, nous pourrions évoquer la puissance relative d'une source entre les deux pôles du champ journalistique, en ce que la communication de l'entreprise trouve davantage d'écho sur les sites de presse vidéoludique que sur les sites généralistes. Une nouvelle fois, la presse généraliste étaye les dénonciations initiales.

Conclusion

De manière générale, ce cas-ci présente de nombreuses similitudes avec l'étude précédente, notamment au niveau des différences globales entre sites vidéoludiques et sites généralistes, qui se matérialisent par de nettes différences au niveau du cadrage⁸⁰, de la démarche, et des sources utilisées. Nous l'avons déjà dit, mais ces logiques semblent majoritairement déterminées par le temps laissé aux journalistes de chaque pôle pour faire son travail. L'impératif de réactivité des sites de presse vidéoludique nous semble peu favorable à une démarche d'investigation sur le plus long cours, contrairement à l'organe de presse généraliste ayant enquêté sur le sujet.

En dépit de cette différence, il nous faut encore souligner que cette fois-ci, les sites de presse généraliste nationaux ne semblent avoir que très peu évoqué cette controverse. Dès lors, l'impératif de temps semble se substituer à d'autres contraintes. Plusieurs pistes seraient ici à explorer, mais la principale semble venir du fait que la problématique n'a pas pu se matérialiser en affaire politique et judiciaire, comme ça avait été le cas en 2004. L'explication de la réactivité du *San Diego Reader* tiendrait alors davantage de sa proximité avec le cœur du conflit, à savoir la division californienne de *Rockstar Games*.

Les disparités entrevues entre les sites de presse vidéoludique, principalement concernant le cadrage, tendent à faire émerger des distinctions plus nettes qu'entre ces mêmes sites de presse six ans plus tôt. Rebecca Carlson (2009) entrevoyait ce changement de positionnements au travers de la franchise des journalistes de la presse jeu vidéo comme

⁸⁰ Notons toutefois que là où les cadrages s'articulaient autour des significations judiciaires et humaines de la problématique en 2004, dans le cas présent l'aspect judiciaire a laissé la place à un aspect davantage lié aux jeux vidéos en tant qu'objets.

plus attrayante pour le lectorat. Ici, *Kotaku* apparaît comme le site le plus « critique ». Pour autant, cet aspect doit tout de même être relativisé, dans la mesure où la controverse fait l'événement de la même façon que les lettres mises en ligne en 2004, c'est-à-dire que les journalistes restent dans un cycle déterminé, et ne mettent pas eux-mêmes la problématique des conditions de travail à l'agenda. En outre, dans le cas de *GameSpot*, le choix des cadrages est apparu comme déterminé par la communication et l'engouement suscité par les jeux concernés par ce développement aux pratiques considérées comme problématiques, et ce même avant la publication de la lettre. Cet élément apparaît intéressant dans la mesure où les jeux dont le développement a été désigné comme problématique en 2004 étaient des jeux « à franchise », soit portant sur des sports ou des sagas cinématographiques populaires, dont la sortie était attendue chaque année⁸¹. En l'occurrence, il est difficile d'imaginer que ces jeux « attendus » annuellement suscitaient autant d'engouement que *Red Dead Redemption* à l'époque, à plus forte raison qu'il était publié par l'éditeur de la très populaire saga *Grand Theft Auto*.

Ce cas a en tout cas permis de mettre en relief non seulement les différences de choix éditoriaux au sein des sites de presse vidéoludique, mais aussi de montrer que ces choix peuvent se matérialiser par une différence quant au cycle, tantôt inscrit dans les « *news-previews-test* », tantôt dans un cycle dépendant de la communication des acteurs, à défaut de pouvoir suivre un cycle judiciaire. En outre, le choix de ce cycle semble dépendre du cadrage utilisé par les journalistes pour évoquer le conflit social, ainsi que de prises de positions plus ou moins explicites.

⁸¹ Erin Hoffman écrivait : « *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.* » Le *San Diego Mercury News*, dans son article du 4 décembre 2004 explique par ailleurs que Jamie Kirschenbaum travaillait justement sur une adaptation vidéoludique de la saga *James Bond* lorsqu'on lui a demandé de travailler 60 heures par semaine.

Troisième étude de cas : Rockstar Games et la « culture du *crunch* »

Éléments de contexte

Ce cas a de nouveau comme point central l'entreprise Rockstar Games, et les conditions de travail concernant ici majoritairement la suite d'un des jeux évoqués précédemment, à savoir *Red Dead Redemption 2*, sorti le 26 octobre 2018.

Les conditions de travail ont commencé à être évoquées sur des sites de presse après la publication le 14 octobre 2018 dans le *New York Magazine* d'un article (Goldberg, 2018)⁸² consacré au jeu et faisant intervenir Dan Houser, un des fondateurs de l'entreprise. On peut lire dans l'article le paragraphe suivant :

The polishing, rewrites, and reedits Rockstar does are immense. "We were working 100-hour weeks" several times in 2018, Dan says. The finished game includes 300,000 animations, 500,000 lines of dialogue, and many more lines of code. Even for each RDR2 trailer and TV commercial, "we probably made 70 versions, but the editors may make several hundred. Sam and I will both make both make lots of suggestions, as will other members of the team.

L'interview a été reprise dans plusieurs sites de presse vidéoludique et a été le début de plusieurs séries d'articles publiés durant les semaines précédant la sortie du titre de Rockstar Games.

Origines et durée de la couverture médiatique

	Sites de presse vidéoludique				Site de presse généraliste
	<i>Kotaku</i>	<i>GameSpot</i>	<i>IGN</i>	<i>Polygon</i>	<i>Vice</i>
15/10/18	1		1	2	
17/10/18				1	
18/10/18	1		1		
23/10/18	1			1	
25/10/18		2			
26/10/18		2			1
27/10/18				1	
07/11/18		1			
06/08/19	1				
15/04/20	1				
20/04/20			1		

Tableau 8 : nombre d'articles traitant de la problématique du « *crunch* » lors du développement de « *Red Dead Redemption 2* » publiés sur les différents sites de presse par date.

⁸² GOLDBERG Harold, « How the West Was Digitized, The making of Rockstar Games' *Red Dead Redemption 2* », in *vulture.com*, [en ligne] <https://www.vulture.com/2018/10/the-making-of-rockstar-games-red-dead-redemption-2.html>, 14 octobre 2018.

Le premier élément qui distingue ce cas des autres est le fait qu'il ne trouve pas sa source dans les revendications de développeurs, mais dans une interview donnée par un des dirigeants de l'entreprise concernée dans un magazine non-vidéoludique. Nous remarquons en effet que dans la plupart des sites, les premiers articles datent du lendemain de la publication de l'interview. Il ne s'agit donc pas d'une dénonciation des conditions de travail : Dan Houser évoquait les horaires pour souligner l'attention aux détails que consacrait le studio au jeu alors en développement. C'est *Kotaku*, au travers d'un de ses journalistes, Jason Schreier, qui a demandé à Dan Houser de clarifier ses propos⁸³. L'entreprise a alors émis un communiqué clarifiant les propos de son co-fondateur.

Dans les jours qui suivent cette clarification, des articles de *Kotaku*⁸⁴, *IGN*⁸⁵, *GameSpot*⁸⁶ et *Polygon*⁸⁷ relaient les témoignages que les développeurs de *Rockstar* publient sur les réseaux sociaux après que leur employeur le leur a autorisé. Dès lors, ce sont ces prises de paroles qui vont rythmer la publication des articles pour la majorité des sites de presse vidéoludique.

Toutefois, nous remarquons que *Kotaku* a publié un article en août 2019⁸⁸, et un autre en avril 2020⁸⁹. Pour la première fois dans notre corpus d'analyse, nous constatons que des journalistes de la presse vidéoludique remettent à l'agenda ce genre de problématiques

⁸³ **SCHREIER** Jason, « 'We Were Working 100-Hour Weeks', *Red Dead Redemption 2* Head Writer Says, Then Clarifies », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/we-were-working-100-hour-weeks-red-dead-redemption-2-h-1829758281>, 15 octobre 2018.

⁸⁴ **SCHREIER** Jason, « *Red Dead Redemption 2* Developers Speak Out After Rockstar Lifts Social Media Ban », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/red-dead-redemption-2-developers-speak-out-after-rockst-1829835034>, 18 octobre 2018.

⁸⁵ **GURWIN** Gabe, « Update : Here's What Rockstar Employees Have To Say About Working On *Red Dead 2* », in *IGN*, [en ligne] <https://www.ign.com/articles/2018/10/18/rockstar-grants-permission-for-developers-to-talk-about-working-conditions>, 18 octobre 2018.

⁸⁶ **WATTS** Steve, « *Red Dead Redemption 2* Devs Talk Crunch And Working Conditions », in *GameSpot*, [en ligne] <https://www.GameSpot.com/articles/red-dead-redemption-2-devs-talk-crunch-and-working/1100-6462631/>, 26 octobre 2018.

⁸⁷ **GOOD** Owen S., « *Red Dead Redemption 2* developers open up about work conditions at Rockstar Games », in *Polygon*, [en ligne] <https://www.polygon.com/2018/10/18/17994068/red-dead-redemption-2-crunch-rockstar-games>, 18 octobre 2018.

⁸⁸ **TOTILO** Stephen, « Months After Labor Controversy, Rockstar Converts Game-Testes to Full-Time », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2019/08/months-after-labor-controversy-rockstar-converts-game-testers-to-full-time/>, 6 août 2019.

⁸⁹ **SCHREIER** Jason, « 18 Months After *Red Dead Redemption 2*, Rockstar Has Made Big Cultural Changes », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/18-months-after-red-dead-redemption-2-rockstar-has-mad-1842880524>, 15 avril 2020.

sans qu'elles ne soient un corollaire du développement d'un jeu attendu ou d'une affaire judiciaire, ce qui était pourtant le cas au début de la couverture médiatique. En outre, le fait que ces articles soient publiés par Stephen Totilo et Jason Schreier, deux journalistes de *Kotaku*, peut laisser entendre que ce site de presse vidéoludique et ses journalistes accordent une plus grande importance à ces considérations.

En ce qui concerne les sites généralistes américains, les mentions des conditions de travail apparaissent extrêmement rares. Des sites de presse culturelle ont publié des articles sur la controverse, tels que *Variety* (Lanier, 2018), ou *Esquire* (2018), c'est également le cas de sites plus spécialisés sur l'économie, tel que *businessinsider.com* (Gilbert, 2019). Le seul article totalement consacré à la controverse publiés sur un site de presse généraliste est trouvable sur le site *Vice*⁹⁰. Ce constat est étonnant dans la mesure où les sites de presse généralistes non-américains ont publié des articles sur l'affaire. C'est notamment le cas du *Guardian* (McDonald, 2018), *20 minutes* (V.J., 2018), *Le Monde* (Audureau, 2018), ou *Libération* (2018). Parmi les « grands » journaux américains, seul le *Washington Post* semble mentionner la controverse lors de la conclusion de la critique de *Red Dead Redemption 2* publiée sur le site du journal (Byrd, 2018).

Nous pouvons cependant remarquer qu'une fois encore, la mise à l'agenda de la problématique des conditions de travail a été effectuée suite à la publication d'un article sur un site externe, ce qui reproduit d'une certaine façon le mécanisme entrevu dans les cas précédents, à savoir qu'un facteur externe au journal soit nécessaire pour mettre initialement ces problématiques à l'agenda, même si cet agenda est par la suite géré différemment selon les journalistes et les sites de presse.

Cependant, dans le cas du seul article « généraliste » publié sur le site internet *Vice*, l'article s'appuie en partie sur des écrits publiés sur *Kotaku* et *IGN*. Pour la première fois dans notre étude, le site de presse généraliste qui s'appuie sur des articles d'un site de presse vidéoludique comme une source, ce qui renverse le rapport qui a pu être observé jusque-là entre ces deux types de presse, notamment entre *GameSpot* et le *San Jose Mercury News* lors de l'affaire de l'*EA Spouse*. On pourrait en déduire que l'adhésion explicite des journalistes de *Kotaku*, et plus spécifiquement Jason Schreier à une certaine forme

⁹⁰ JEANBART Le, « Should You Boycott 'Red Dead Redemption 2' », in *Vice*, [en ligne] <https://www.vice.com/en/article/598x4a/should-you-boycott-red-dead-redemption-2>, 26 octobre 2018.

d'idéologie professionnelle journalistique, en évoquant explicitement le secret des sources, le travail d'investigation, et le fait de passer outre la culture du secret de l'industrie, a permis à son travail de traverser les frontières du sous-champ de la presse vidéoludique. Toutefois, il ne faut pas non plus perdre de vue que le jeu concerné par cette problématique était très attendu et surveillé, au-delà des seuls sites de presse vidéoludique, comme peuvent en attester le fait que des grands journaux en aient parlé.

Les angles

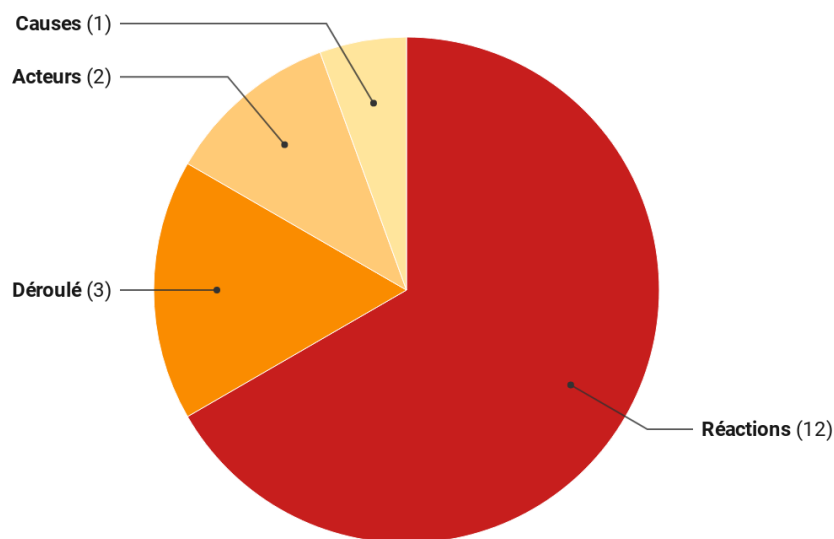


Figure 7 : graphique montrant la proportion de chaque angle au sein des articles publiés sur les sites de presse vidéoludique de la problématique du « crunch » lors du développement de « Red Dead Redemption 2 ».

	Réactions (12)	Déroulé (3)	Acteurs (2)	Causes (1)
GameSpot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Rockstar Clarifies Statement About 100-Hour Work Weeks for Red Dead Redemption 2 •Red Dead Redemption 2 Dev Tells Employees Overtime Isn't Mandatory After Controversy •Red Dead Redemption 2 Devs Talk Crunch And Working Conditions •Red Dead Redemption 2 Exec Responds To Crunch Controversy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Red Dead Redemption 2 Boss Shares Some Shocking Stats about The Game [update] 		
IGN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Rockstar Clarifies Statement About 100-Hour Work Weeks for Red Dead Redemption 2 •Update : Here's What Rockstar Employees Have To Say About Working On Red Dead •New GTA in Development, Rockstar Reportedly Making Changes to fix Crunch Culture 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •'We Were Working 100-Hour Weeks', Red Dead Redemption 2 Head Writer Says, Then Clarifies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Inside Rockstar Games' Culture Of Crunch •18 Months After Red Dead Redemption 2, Rockstar Has Made Big Cultural Changes 	
Kotaku	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Red Dead Redemption 2 Developers Speak Out After Rockstar Lifts Social Media Ban •« Months After Labor Controversy, Rockstar Converts Game-Testes to Full-Time 			
Polygon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Rockstar responds to blowback over Red Dead Redemption 2 team's '100-hour' workweeks •Red Dead Redemption 2 developers open up about work conditions at Rockstar Games •Giant Red Dead Redemption 2 'Thank you' note is Rockstar's latest step toward goodwill 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Red Dead Redemption 2's labor controversy, explained 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •What will be left of the people who make our games ?

Tableau 9 : Détail des angles des différents articles de sites de presse vidéoludique sélectionnés traitant de la problématique du « crunch » lors du développement de « Red Dead Redemption 2 ».

Il convient d'apporter une distinction importante entre plusieurs articles. Comme nous l'avons vu, chaque site de presse vidéoludique a consacré un article aux *tweets* postés par des développeurs de Rockstar Games pour éclaircir leur expérience au sein de l'entreprise. Pour autant, une question se pose ici. Pouvons-nous considérer que l'angle de ces articles tient de l'angle « acteurs », tel qu'établi par Ruellan (2012) ? La question peut se poser dans la mesure où ces témoignages ne sont premièrement pas recueillis par les journalistes eux-mêmes, et dépendent également d'une réaction de l'entreprise les ayant autorisés à mettre en ligne ces messages. Les articles concernés ici paraphrasent ou citent explicitement les différents *tweets* publiés, dès lors, l'on pourrait classer ces articles comme adoptant un angle plus proche de la réaction, étant donné que ces témoignages ont été postés sans qu'un journaliste ait eu une quelconque influence sur les témoins. Autant que des témoignages, il est ici question de réactions aux articles évoquant la controverse suscitée par les propos de Dan Houser.

Cette distinction permet en outre de considérer l'article de Jason Schreier *Inside Rockstar Games' Culture of Crunch* comme relevant d'un traitement angulaire consacré aux acteurs, dans la mesure où l'article témoigne de la démarche de Jason Schreier d'aller au-delà des réactions des développeurs sur les réseaux sociaux. Le journaliste met en effet l'accent sur des récits plus étoffés de témoins anonymes, qu'ils soient positifs ou négatifs par rapport à l'entreprise. Le traitement angulaire du conflit social apparaît donc, une fois encore, dépendre du rythme éditorial des sites de presse vidéoludique. Nous remarquons globalement que les sites de presse sélectionnés adoptent peu ou prou le même rythme, et que les implications sur le traitement angulaire sont les mêmes. Toutefois, il apparaît que *Kotaku* laisse davantage de temps à ses journalistes, Schreier en tête, pour leur permettre de mobiliser des angles nécessitant un plus grand travail d'enquête, d'autant plus nécessaire pour obtenir des témoignages compte tenu de la culture du secret de l'industrie. Notons cependant que cette influence du temps imparti sur le traitement angulaire n'est pas systématique : si l'article de Stephen Totilo du 6 août 2019 témoigne d'un travail d'enquête, il ne met pas en exergue le vécu des acteurs du conflit, et se sert de l'enquête pour révéler une réaction de Rockstar Games sur le sujet.

Ceci posé, nous pouvons remarquer une fois encore que l'angle majoritaire est une fois encore celui de la réaction, suivi par le déroulé des faits, à égalité avec l'angle des acteurs. Nous pouvons en outre observer que la majorité des articles adoptant les angles de la réaction et du déroulé sont publiés de façon très rapprochée entre eux, ce qui renforce une fois encore l'hypothèse selon laquelle la façon de couvrir les problématiques liées aux conditions de travail dépend du temps imparti pour les journalistes de ces rédactions. Les articles prenant l'angle des acteurs, à savoir les articles de Jason Schreier sont en effet publiés plusieurs jours après l'événement⁹¹ déclencheur de la controverse, mais sont aussi espacés de plusieurs mois les uns des autres.

Il faut cependant noter que pour la première fois dans notre corpus, nous trouvons un article consacré aux causes du problème. Il s'agit de l'éditorial publié sur *Polygon* titré *What will be left of the people who make our games ?*⁹² L'article établit que si la pression du *crunch* est en partie imputable aux *managers*, le rôle des consommateurs n'est pas à exclure. Ces deux parties demanderaient, selon l'auteure de l'article, un « travail émotionnel » aux développeurs qui, s'ils aiment le jeu vidéo, devraient être ravis de travailler dans l'industrie, quelles que soient les conditions auxquels ils sont soumis. Le travail et la passion seraient donc liés et la seconde conditionnerait l'assiduité au premier, même au-delà de limites raisonnables. Si la première étude de cas du présent travail a souligné l'apport de sources judiciaires pour une affaire précise, cet éditorial est la première fois qu'un site de presse vidéoludique s'interroge sur les causes du *crunch* dans sa globalité en convoquant des disciplines qui n'intéressent *a priori* pas ce genre de publication. En outre, le choix de cet angle peut constituer un signe d'une véritable interrogation et remise en question de la pratique du *crunch* et des mécanismes d'aliénation qui le rendent possible, ainsi que de la volonté de la part de joueurs et journalistes de la voir drastiquement réduite, ce qui constitue en outre une prise de position claire dans le conflit en cours.

⁹¹ Et comme nous le verrons plus tard, sont le fruit d'un travail d'enquête sur le long court *a priori* indépendant de la médiatisation initiale de la problématique après les propos de Dan Houser.

⁹² CROSS Katherine, « What will be left of the people who make our games ? », in *Polygon*, [en ligne] <https://www.polygon.com/2018/10/17/17986562/game-development-crunch-red-dead-redemption-2-rockstar>, 17 octobre 2018.

Les sources et citations

La nécessité d'un tableau ne s'est ici pas imposée dans la mesure où nous pouvons établir que deux types de sources ont été majoritairement mobilisés, à savoir les témoignages et la communication d'entreprise, et l'occurrence des premiers étant largement majoritaires par rapport à la seconde (Jason Schreier ayant en effet interrogé 89 témoins dans son enquête⁹³), il n'est pas apparu utile de faire le comptage rigoureux des différents types de sources.

Cette présence plus vaste des témoignages peut s'expliquer de deux façons. La première considère la disponibilité des sources⁹⁴ : il ne faut pas perdre de vue que chaque site de presse vidéoludique a consacré un article aux témoignages de développeurs sur les réseaux sociaux : cette démarche va au-delà d'une démonstration de disponibilité envers les journalistes, mais la publication de tels messages les rend disponibles à tous, journalistes ou non. Pour autant, les témoignages anonymes sont également bien plus présents grâce aux articles de *Kotaku* : Jason Schreier indique avoir interrogé 34 employés actuels, 43 anciens employés, et 12 interviews ont été organisées par *Rockstar*. Cela peut signifier que, au-delà de la pratique de l'enquête, les récits personnels apparaissent désormais comme véritablement dignes d'intérêt pour certains journalistes, dans la mesure où ils éclairent certains aspects que des témoignages « autorisés » par l'entreprise ou des lettres de dénonciation anonymes ne peuvent le faire. D'un autre côté, cela peut aussi vouloir dire que du côté des témoins, la problématique des conditions de travail apparaît comme importante, d'où leur disponibilité à en parler dans les médias. Toutefois, étant donné que ce genre de récits étaient déjà cités en 2004, la thèse selon laquelle les journalistes de la presse vidéoludique aient élargi leur champ de sélection des sources, suite à un gain d'intérêt pour la problématique des conditions de travail, semble ici à privilégier. Aussi, nous pouvons émettre l'hypothèse que la plus grande accessibilité des journalistes mais aussi des témoignages par l'intermédiaire des réseaux sociaux permet aussi bien aux témoins et aux journalistes de communiquer entre eux.

En ce qui concerne le gain d'intérêt supposé pour les témoignages par les journalistes vidéoludiques, l'absence d'interventions directes de sources associatives peut être

⁹³ SCHREIER Jason, « Inside Rockstar Games' Culture Of Crunch », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/inside-rockstar-games-culture-of-crunch-1829936466>, 23 octobre 2018.

⁹⁴ Selon les termes de Gans (1979).

éclairante. *Polygon* mentionne certes une table ronde traitant de la syndicalisation des travailleurs du jeu vidéo lors de la GDC de 2018⁹⁵, ainsi que l'importance grandissante de l'association *Game Workers Unite*, souhaitant favoriser la syndicalisation desdits travailleurs⁹⁶. Toutefois, jamais les propos de ces associations ne sont relayés dans notre corpus. En outre, à l'époque où des associations et développeurs américains se déclarent en faveur de la syndicalisation de la profession (syndicalisation déjà opérée notamment en France), l'on peut penser que l'IGDA, fondée en 1994, pourrait apparaître désuète auprès des journalistes en comparaison avec ces divers mouvements. Lors de l'affaire de l'*EA Spouse*, nous émettions l'hypothèse que les propos de l'IGDA dans la presse vidéoludique compensaient l'absence de témoignages dans celle-ci, là où son intervention dans la presse généraliste relevait de la contextualisation. De plus, contrairement au cas des *Rockstar Spouse*, elle ne semble pas avoir publié de communiqué, en dehors d'un tweet publié le 15 octobre 2018, en réaction à l'interview de Dan Houser⁹⁷. Enfin, le *crunch* étant une pratique très documentée à la fin des années 2010, le besoin de recontextualiser cette pratique pourrait être de moins en moins nécessaire, à plus forte raison dans la presse vidéoludique. En somme, la perte d'intérêt pour les sources associatives aurait suscité un plus grand intérêt pour les témoignages.

Notons également que nous remarquons pour la première fois, et cela s'applique aussi bien pour les témoignages postés sur les réseaux sociaux que pour les interviews fournies par l'entreprise. Le département des relations publiques et des ressources humaines de Rockstar semble instrumentaliser certains témoignages. Et même si l'entreprise encourage les employés à ne pas édulcorer les récits de leurs expériences, certains admettent dans l'enquête de Schreier en avoir omis certaines parties, et d'autres se montrent sceptiques quant à la possibilité de critiquer publiquement et en leurs noms propres leur employeur.

Nous soulignons lors de l'affaire de l'*EA Spouse* que les témoins anonymes étaient plus enclins à témoigner pour des « grands journaux » compte tenu de leur capital symbolique.

⁹⁵ GOOD Owen S., « Red Dead Redemption 2's labor controversy, explained », in *Polygon*, [en ligne] <https://www.polygon.com/2018/10/27/18029154/red-dead-redemption-2-working-conditions-rockstar-games-overtime-labor>, 27 octobre 2018.

⁹⁶ GOOD Owen S., « Red Dead Redemption 2's labor controversy, explained », in *Polygon*, [en ligne] <https://www.polygon.com/2018/10/27/18029154/red-dead-redemption-2-working-conditions-rockstar-games-overtime-labor>, 27 octobre 2018.

⁹⁷ IGDA, in *Twitter*, [en ligne] <https://twitter.com/IGDA/status/1051884861026459648>, 15 octobre 2018.

Ce changement pourrait également attester de l'acquisition de capitaux symboliques par *Kotaku* et ses journalistes, Jason Schreier en tête, suite à leur longévité mais aussi au fait que ce site évoque relativement fréquemment ces problématiques, au point d'y consacrer plusieurs onglets thématiques, certains articles étant classés sous les *tags* « *labor* »⁹⁸, ou encore « *crunch* »⁹⁹.

Quant à la communication d'entreprise, elle se manifeste par les propos et communiqués de dirigeants de l'entreprise tentant de tempérer la polémique. Nous l'évoquions plus haut, il est possible de déceler dans l'analyse des sources un type hybride de sources : certains témoignages postés sur les réseaux sociaux l'ont été avec la permission de l'entreprise, entreprise qui, en outre, organise des interviews avec des employés. On peut considérer ce type de source comme à mi-chemin entre la communication d'entreprise et dans le témoignage, dans la mesure où, du propre aveu de certaines sources, certains aspects des conditions de travail ont été omis dans ces témoignages¹⁰⁰¹⁰¹. Il apparaît donc que l'entreprise implique ses employés dans leur stratégie de communication, comme une réponse au gain d'intérêt qu'ont eu les témoignages pour certains journalistes de la presse vidéoludique.

Investissement des journalistes et genres employés

Si la majorité des articles relaient des propos publiés sur les réseaux sociaux, des communiqués, ou des éléments publiés dans un article de sites concurrents, il nous faut ici remarquer le travail de Jason Schreier. Si l'on en croit ce que le journaliste de *Kotaku* a posté sur son compte Twitter le 16 octobre 2018, ce dernier n'a pas attendu les déclarations de Dan Houser pour enquêter sur la culture du *crunch* chez Rockstar Games.

⁹⁸ KOTAKU, « Labor », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/tag/labor> .

⁹⁹ KOTAKU, « Crunch », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/tag/crunch> .

¹⁰⁰ SCHREIER Jason, « Inside Rockstar Games' Culture Of Crunch », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/inside-rockstar-games-culture-of-crunch-1829936466> , 23 octobre 2018.

¹⁰¹ « *when I spoke to some of those who tweeted, some who responded said they had been honest but may have left out some parts of their stories—and that they were hoping that this month's events might lead to change for those Rockstar staff in departments that had it rougher.* »



Figure 8 : « tweet » de Jason Schreier indiquant qu'il travaillait depuis un certain temps sur les conditions de travail des employés de Rockstar.

Dans l'éventualité où ce *tweet* reflète la démarche réelle de Schreier, il permet de constater son investissement personnel : il n'aurait en effet pas attendu que la problématique soit médiatisée pour la mettre de lui-même à l'agenda médiatique, et sans dépendre d'un cycle quelconque, ce qui témoigne d'une proactivité inédite de la part d'un journaliste vidéoludique dans le cadre du corpus analysé. Le travail de Schreier a abouti à un long article, détaillant les conditions de travail auxquelles les employés ont été soumis pendant les huit années de développement, et leurs implications. Si des témoignages ont été transmis directement par l'entreprise, Schreier établit que certains témoignages sont anonymes, et que leur citation doit être limitée pour que ces témoins ne puissent pas être identifiés. Ces références explicites à la protection des sources ne sont pas sans rappeler certains articles publiés sur des sites de presse généraliste couvrant l'affaire de l'*EA Spouse* en 2004, ce qui permet de déduire que le lecteur modèle déployé ici ne se cantonne pas au seul lecteur de sites de presse vidéoludique, mais dans une conception qui apparaît bien plus large.

Nous avons évoqué lors du cas des *Rockstar Spouses* que *Kotaku* se démarquait déjà par une conscience de ces problématiques plus marquée que ces concurrents, au travers d'un cycle et de choix de cadrage différents, ce qui laissait entrevoir un lecteur modèle

particulier, en ce qu'il était à mi-chemin entre l'amateur de jeu vidéo et une personne consciente de ces problématiques. Ici, le lecteur modèle peut être identifié comme un amateur de jeux vidéos pleinement conscient, et d'une certaine façon préoccupé par ces problématiques. Le travail de Schreier et Tolito affirme davantage cette posture « consciente » et partielle, mais rajoute en plus un degré « d'exigence » plus élevé : l'article d'enquête est en effet bien plus long qu'un article traditionnel et multiplie les points de vue, les explications des différents statuts des travailleurs dans l'entreprise. *Kotaku* se positionne ici clairement comme une publication prenant ces problématiques à bras le corps, ce qui lui permet par ailleurs de se distinguer par rapport à ses nombreux concurrents.

Ce constat est par ailleurs renforcé par le suivi de la controverse. En juin 2019, Stephen Totilo publie un article expliquant les améliorations mises en œuvre pour les travailleurs de Rockstar Lincoln, la branche britannique de l'entreprise, en charge du contrôle qualité¹⁰². A notre connaissance, cette évolution n'a été reprise dans aucun des sites de presse concernés par le corpus. La troisième et dernière étape de l'enquête de Jason Schreier est publiée le 15 avril 2020. Comme son article précédent, celui-ci est assez long et reprend de multiples témoignages de développeurs issus de différentes branches de l'entreprise. En outre, il mentionne un courriel reçu par Rockstar à l'automne 2019 consistant en une liste d'éléments que le studio tente d'améliorer. Nous avons vu dans le cas de l'*EA Spouse* que les promesses d'amélioration constituaient des sujets à part entière pour *GameSpot*¹⁰³ et *Kotaku*¹⁰⁴. Quinze ans plus tard, on remarque que ces intentions ne suffisent pas pour certains journalistes, qui préfèrent enquêter pendant un certain temps pour attester de la véracité de ces ambitions.

Ce cas permet de souligner l'investissement personnel sur le long court de la part des journalistes de *Kotaku*, qui pratiquent l'enquête comme cela n'a pas pu être perçu dans notre corpus d'articles issus de sites de presse vidéoludique jusqu'alors. Ce constat semble

¹⁰² TOTILO Stephen, « Months After Labor Controversy, Rockstar Converts Game-Testes to Full-Time », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://www.kotaku.com.au/2019/08/months-after-labor-controversy-rockstar-converts-game-testers-to-full-time/>, 6 août 2019.

¹⁰³ FELDMAN Curt, « EA addressing working conditions », in *GameSpot*, [en ligne] <https://www.GameSpot.com/articles/ea-addressing-working-conditions/1100-6114405/>, 3 décembre 2004

¹⁰⁴ CRECENTE, Brian D., « EA keeps the promises coming », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://web.archive.org/web/20050523083008/http://www.kotaku.com/gaming/business//ea-keeps-the-promises-coming-027156.php>, 8 décembre 2004

toutefois cantonné au site *Kotaku*, dans la mesure où les articles de sites concurrents témoignent d'attitudes plus passives et davantage inscrites dans un rythme de publication plus soutenu. Cela se ressent sur les genres, qui relèvent majoritairement de la synthèse des témoignages publiés sur les réseaux sociaux, de l'article qui a déclenché la polémique, ou du communiqué de Rockstar suivant ledit article. Relevons ici que la question du temps imparti permet aux aspects liés au traitement angulaire, aux sources, à l'investissement des journalistes, et au genre de s'entrecroiser et d'aboutir à une même conclusion.

Relevons également que *Polygon* a publié un éditorial sur la controverse¹⁰⁵, qui, s'il ne démontre pas un investissement des journalistes au niveau de l'enquête, montre clairement que ces derniers, d'une certaine manière, se servent de leur voix pour s'exprimer sur la problématique et clairement position, à l'instar de ce qui pouvait être lu dans *Kotaku* et *IGN* lors du cas précédent. A ce titre, il est tout à fait probable que le travail de *Kotaku* ayant été le canal principal par lequel les revendications (ou à tout le moins, les opinions) des développeurs se sont exprimées, les journalistes n'ont pas ressenti le besoin d'explicitier leurs prises de positions, clarifiées par leurs choix éditoriaux et le passé des journalistes ayant signé les articles¹⁰⁶. Le seul article d'un site de presse généraliste, issu du site *Vice*¹⁰⁷, prend lui aussi position par rapport à la problématique, tout en la résumant, en discutant du bien-fondé d'un éventuel *boycott* de *Red Dead Redemption 2* par les joueurs.

Cadrage et conflit social

Soulignons d'abord que contrairement aux deux cas précédents, le conflit social n'a pas pris racine dans une revendication claire, mais bien dans une évocation *a priori* innocente des heures de travail nécessaires par Dan Houser. Dès lors, il apparaît difficile de faire intervenir immédiatement une dimension de conflictualité. Cette dimension est apparue d'une autre façon : en s'interrogeant sur les propos de Dan Houser et, dans un second temps, en enquêtant sur la culture interne à Rockstar Games, ce sont les journalistes qui ont permis

¹⁰⁵ **CROSS** Katherine, « What will be left of the people who make our games ? », in *Polygon*, [en ligne] <https://www.polygon.com/2018/10/17/17986562/game-development-crunch-red-dead-redemption-2-rockstar>, 17 octobre 2018.

¹⁰⁶ Jason Schreier étant effectivement connu pour être un des journalistes de références en ce qui concerne la problématique des conditions de travail, au point d'y consacrer un livre : *Blood, Sweat, and Pixels : The Triumphant, Turbulent Stories Behind How Video Games Are Made*, publié en 2017.

¹⁰⁷ **JEANBART** Le, « Should You Boycott 'Red Dead Redemption 2', in *Vice*, [en ligne] <https://www.vice.com/en/article/598x4a/should-you-boycott-red-dead-redemption-2>, 26 octobre 2018.

l'émergence de revendications et la nécessité de changements de certains aspects. Cela rappelle que les journalistes et les organes de presse sont des acteurs à part entière des conflits sociaux, dans la mesure où la relation aux médias occupe est une dimension importante dans leur stratégie.

Dès lors, il apparaît que si les médias, plus spécifiquement *Kotaku* et *Polygon*, ne peuvent pas faire figure d'acteur revendicatif, ils constituent l'acteur qui détermine la prise de parole dudit acteur revendicatif. Là où ils occupaient une position plus médiane dans les cas précédents, position nuancée toutefois par les choix de cadrage, nous avons ici l'exemple d'un véritable engagement des journalistes et des médias, qui ne détermine leur pratique du journalisme, via le recours à l'enquête, le suivi du conflit et de son évolution sur plusieurs mois.

De manière générale, les articles issus de la première phase de la controverse, c'est-à-dire octobre 2018, sont cadrés de la même façon : ils soulignent tous la mention des 100 heures de travail par Houser, et mettent en avant les témoignages des développeurs sur les réseaux sociaux. On peut toutefois remarquer que *GameSpot* et *Polygon* évoquent après la sortie du jeu la problématique au travers d'un supposé *Easter egg* placé dans *Red Dead Redemption 2*.

La véritable distinction a lieu en avril 2020, quand Jason Schreier publie la dernière partie de son enquête. L'article comporte cet extrait :

One plan that management has laid out for the next game, a new entry in the Grand Theft Auto series, is to start out with a moderately sized release (which, by Rockstar's standards, would still be a large game) that is then expanded with regular updates over time, which may help mitigate stress and crunch.

Jason Schreier confirme, au travers de cet extrait, le début du développement du prochain opus de la saga *Grand Theft Auto*, saga phare de Rockstar dont chaque épisode est très attendu par les joueurs¹⁰⁸. Le 16 avril 2020, Jason Schreier se fend du *tweet* suivant :

¹⁰⁸ En guise d'illustration, il faut noter qu'entre sa sortie en septembre 2013 et mai 2020, *Grand Theft Auto V* se serait écoulé à plus de 130 millions d'exemplaires, ce qui en fait un des jeux les plus vendus de l'histoire (Simmons, 2020).



Figure 9 : « Tweet » de Jason Schreier publié le jour suivant la publication de son dernier article sur les changements de culture au sein de Rockstar Games.¹⁰⁹

Schreier déplore ici que son article puisse être repris non pas pour ce qu'il révèle sur les conditions de travail, mais bien pour ce qu'il révèle rapidement sur le prochain *Grand Theft Auto*. En plus de nous renseigner sur des conceptions différentes du journaliste vidéoludique, cet agacement témoigne d'un parti pris au sein du conflit social, Schreier admettant implicitement que les conditions de travail et la pratique du crunch sont des sujets qui devraient être médiatisés et révélés au public.

Cette différence de cadrage est perceptible dans notre corpus, au travers d'un article d'IGN titré « *New GTA in Development, Rockstar Reportedly Making Changes to Fix Crunch Culture* ». Notons que les conditions de travail sont évoquées dans le titre, mais sont mises au même niveau d'importance que la révélation de l'existence du prochain *GTA*. Ce genre de cadrage rappelle ce qui a pu être observé à l'époque des *Rockstar Spouses*, en ce que ces problématiques sont inscrites dans le cycle « *news-previews-test* » des sites de presse vidéoludique. Toutefois, il faut relever que dans le corps de l'article, les conditions de travail sont évoquées, mais sont toujours reliées au développement de ce jeu à venir. Cette configuration apparaît comme l'inverse de ce qui a pu être observé au début des années 2010 : là où le problème des conditions de travail était posé selon l'impact qu'elles

¹⁰⁹ SCHREIER Jason, in *twitter*, [en ligne] <https://twitter.com/jasonscreier/status/1250594286242009088>, 16 avril 2020.

pouvaient avoir sur le développement, l'article d'*IGN* pose la question de l'influence que pourrait avoir le développement d'un tel jeu sur les conditions de travail. L'inscription dans le cycle demeure, mais la configuration des deux sujets, à savoir le développement du jeu et les conditions de travail varie au sein de l'article comparé à ce que nous pouvions observer dans le deuxième cas. Remarquons également que là où *Kotaku* remet le sujet à l'agenda, tous les sites de presse ne semblent pas le suivre, ce qui accrédite la thèse de l'importance d'un cycle à suivre, et de l'impératif du *Breaking News*.

Il apparaît également que le choix de cadrage positionne plus clairement *Kotaku* dans la conquête de l'opinion publique comme enjeu de la couverture médiatique. Comme évoqué précédemment, la possibilité donnée aux développeurs de s'exprimer anonymement sur un site de presse vidéoludique permet de faire entendre ces voix autrement restreintes par des clauses de confidentialité les liant à leur employeur. En plus de l'accent mis sur la réalité de leurs conditions de travail, ces citations ne sont pas accompagnées d'évocations de l'influence que le conflit peut avoir sur les jeux en développement. Le parti pris est ici bien plus explicite que lors des précédentes couvertures médiatiques de *Kotaku* passées en revue dans ce travail. Cela confirme d'autant plus le statut de *Kotaku* et Jason Schreier comme canaux des revendications du conflit social.

En outre, Pirotton (2012), posait la question du rôle de l'acteur que constituent les journalistes dans les conflits sociaux de la façon suivante : « Quelles stratégies les médias et leurs professionnels mettent-ils en place pour s'adapter aux évolutions décrites ci-dessus et se prémunir contre les usages que les différents acteurs peuvent chercher à en faire ? »

Nous assistons, une fois encore dans l'enquête de Jason Schreier, à une réflexion sur ce sujet.

Although Rockstar explicitly told employees not to “sugarcoat” any of their stories, outside observers were skeptical that anyone would publicly trash their current employer. Indeed, when I spoke to some of those who tweeted, some who responded said they had been honest but may have left out some parts of their stories—and that they were hoping that this month’s events might lead to change for those Rockstar staff in departments that had it rougher.¹¹⁰

A la lecture de cet extrait, il apparaît que le journaliste prend totalement en compte l'instrumentalisation qui peut être faite de ces témoignages « autorisés » par l'entreprise,

¹¹⁰ SCHREIER Jason, « Inside Rockstar Games' Culture Of Crunch », in *Kotaku*, [en ligne] <https://kotaku.com/inside-rockstar-games-culture-of-crunch-1829936466> , 23 octobre 2018.

d'où la nécessité d'enquêter plus profondément sur le sujet, et aller rechercher au-delà des messages publiés sur les réseaux sociaux. Ce second élément entérine Jason Schreier et *Kotaku* comme acteurs du conflit social à part entière et assumés : au-delà de la simple citation de témoignages, la possibilité que ces témoignages soient utilisés par *Rockstar Games* est admise, et apparaît motiver en partie le travail d'enquête, afin de ne pas jouer le rôle que l'entreprise attend de la presse dans sa stratégie de communication. Cette prise de position entraîne indirectement avec elle les autres sites de presse vidéoludique relayant l'enquête, qui, à défaut d'explicitement cette même réflexion, deviennent eux aussi des relais des témoignages de développeurs.

Relevons enfin que *Vice* et *Polygon* ont, eux aussi, pris explicitement position dans le conflit social. Il est cependant intéressant de relever que leurs articles respectifs, posent la problématique en fonction du rôle des consommateurs : le premier s'interroge sur la pertinence d'un *boycott*¹¹¹, et le second s'interroge sur le destin des gens qui fabriquent « nos » jeux¹¹². Ces orientations sont le signe d'une ambition de conscientisation apparaissant comme grandissante dans les sites de presse vidéoludique envers ce genre de problématiques. Les éditoriaux mentionnés dans le second cas, respectivement publiés sur *IGN* et *Kotaku* s'interrogeaient sur la problématique en amont de la fabrication des jeux, là où *Vice* et *Polygon* font explicitement référence à la place du consommateur. Notons toutefois une différence de degré dans cette prise de position : *Vice* mentionne clairement les possibilités qu'ont (ou n'ont pas) les consommateurs face à ce genre de problématiques. *Polygon* est ici plus subtil en évoquant les personnes qui fabriquent « nos » jeux, reliant ce faisant les journalistes et le lectorat aux personnes individuelles qui travaillent sous les conditions dénoncées. En outre, rappelons que ce dernier article fait référence à des notions de sociologie ou au rôle que pourraient jouer les syndicats, ce qui peut laisser supposer que l'auteur de l'article construit un lecteur modèle ne connaissant pas véritablement les enjeux de la situation des conditions de travail dans l'industrie. Il faut également souligner que cet éditorial tente d'expliquer par les notions qu'il convoque

¹¹¹ JEANBART Le, « Should You Boycott 'Red Dead Redemption 2', in *Vice*, [en ligne] <https://www.vice.com/en/article/598x4a/should-you-boycott-red-dead-redemption-2>, 26 octobre 2018.

¹¹² CROSS Katherine, « What will be left of the people who make our games ? », in *Polygon*, [en ligne] <https://www.polygon.com/2018/10/17/17986562/game-development-crunch-red-dead-redemption-2-rockstar>, 17 octobre 2018.

l'aliénation des développeurs et le fait que le « travail émotionnel » les pousse à subir ces conditions de travail sans possibilité de pouvoir faire part de leur désaccord, ce qui serait un argument supplémentaire en faveur de la syndicalisation de la profession.

Conclusion

Cette troisième étude de cas a permis de mettre en lumière certains changements relatifs au traitement du sujet des conditions de travail dans la presse généraliste et dans la presse vidéoludique. Pour la première, si nous remarquons un certain gain d'intérêt pour le jeu vidéo en tant qu'objet comparé aux cas précédents, cet intérêt semble paradoxalement avoir grandi au détriment de la place accordée aux aspects périphériques de l'objet, dont les conditions de travailles sous lesquelles le développement s'est déroulé font partie.

Pour la seconde, si nous remarquons globalement une continuité par rapport aux cas précédents, que ce soit en matière d'agenda, d'angles, de sources, et de genres, il convient de noter que *Kotaku* décide d'affirmer un positionnement distinct ses concurrents, et à certains sites non-généralistes, dans la mesure où ses journalistes ne font pas que suivre le rythme des différentes réactions. Le rôle critique du journaliste apparaît ici comme totalement assumé en ce qu'ils remettent le sujet à l'agenda plusieurs mois après les premiers articles sans dépendre d'un cycle quelconque. Quant aux autres sites de presse vidéoludique, nous remarquons que si leur couverture médiatique de la problématique se déroule selon la même logique, le sujet demeure couvert et clairement évoqué dans les articles publiés. Nous pouvons remarquer ici la première affirmation radicale d'un *ethos* de journaliste d'investigation préoccupé par le sujet des conditions de travail. Et une fois de plus, ce changement de positionnement apparaît comme permis par une sortie de l'impératif de *breaking news* qui détermine la majorité des articles publiés sur les sites de presse vidéoludique en ligne, sortie qui apparaît comme elle-même permise par l'affirmation de cet *ethos* journalistique par les journalistes de *Kotaku*. Il convient cependant de rappeler que ce travail d'investigation fait figure de minorité dans les sites en question, et ce même dans le chef de *Kotaku*.

Enfin, cette prise de position est également observable au travers de l'éditorial de Katherine Cross sur *Polygon* qui apporte un éclairage jusque-là inédit sur le phénomène du *crunch* au travers de notions concrètes. Le rôle critique du journaliste se manifeste ici par une explicitation de l'aliénation à laquelle seraient sujets les développeurs sur le lieu de travail,

et qui les pousserait à accepter des conditions de travail difficiles. 14 ans après qu'Erin Hoffman ait posté sa lettre de façon anonyme, cette éditorial semble systématiser ce qu'elle dénonçait dans cet extrait :

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. [...] 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.

Conclusion générale

Relations entre sous-champ spécialisé et sous-champ généraliste.

Lors des deux premiers cas passés en revue, il apparaît que pôles spécialisé et généralistes sont très cloisonnés. En effet, les pratiques et les modalités liées à la couverture médiatique sont totalement différentes selon le type de presse dans lequel on se trouve. En outre, ces deux sous-champs opèrent dans une indépendance relative. A part une référence dans un article de *GameSpot* à un article du *San Jose Mercury News*, aucune citation d'un autre pôle n'est présente, que ce soit sur un site de presse généraliste ou un site de presse vidéoludique.

Ce constat est encore plus remarquable dans le deuxième cas, dans la mesure où la presse généraliste paraît ne pas avoir couvert le conflit social, à l'exception d'un seul article. Et l'auteur de cet article, par ses choix, adopte un traitement totalement différent de tout ce qui peut être trouvable dans le corpus. Et même pour les occurrences situées en dehors dudit corpus, les journalistes des deux sites presses spécialisés (*Joystiq* et *MTV news*) pratiquent l'enquête pour remplir d'autres objectifs, à savoir le passif judiciaire de l'affaire et la rapide corroboration des accusations, là où l'article généraliste s'attarde sur des récits individuels sans faire référence à ce que la presse vidéoludique a pu produire sur le sujet. Cela change légèrement dans le dernier cas, dans la mesure où *Vice* reprend en grande partie les informations produites par *Kotaku*.

Ce déclin de la proportion d'articles de la presse généraliste peut s'expliquer par deux facteurs déjà énoncés par Dominique Marchetti (2002). Premièrement, il s'agit tout simplement du degré de spécialisation des différents sites de presse : les sites de presse vidéoludique ont naturellement davantage tendance à rendre compte de l'actualité de l'industrie vidéoludique que son pendant généraliste, qui la traite de son côté en fonction d'axes plus généraux. Cela peut expliquer en outre le plus grand nombre d'articles issus de sites de presse vidéoludique, mais également l'absence de la presse généraliste pour le deuxième et troisième cas. Il ne faut pas perdre de vue que notre premier cas est apparu comme une actualité relativement inédite dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo. Ce caractère inédit nous semble être l'une des raisons principales pour laquelle la presse généraliste lui a

accordé plus d'articles que pour tout autre cas. Ce trait peut également s'expliquer par le caractère économique-judiciaire de l'affaire, et donc la possibilité de la « feuilletoniser ».

La deuxième explication prendrait en compte le rapport de force entre les différents pôles. Dominique Marchetti (*ibid*) écrivait que certains médias spécialisés avaient plus de poids dans la diffusion de l'information que la presse spécialisée, en prenant l'exemple de certains quotidiens sportifs à la diffusion égale ou supérieure aux titres de presse généraliste. Ce « poids fonctionnel » peut être déterminé par la production de l'information, des critères d'audiences quantitatifs, ou qualitatifs. Il apparaît donc qu'en 2004, les sites de presse généraliste ont plus de poids que leur équivalent vidéoludique : au niveau de la production de l'information, cela tient majoritairement au fait qu'ils sont ceux qui ont le plus d'exclusivité. D'un point de vue quantitatif, à défaut de disposer de statistiques précises sur la fréquentation des sites de presse vidéoludique, une comparaison entre la circulation d'un grand quotidien comme le *New York Times* et le nombre d'internautes visitant *GameSpot* en 2000 peut être éclairant : dans la mesure où en 2000, le premier est diffusé à hauteur de 1 122 400 exemplaires quotidiens (Watson, 2020), alors que le second reçoit 300 000 visiteurs par jour à la même époque (Olafson, 2000). On peut en conclure que ce rapport de force en faveur de la presse généraliste l'a poussée à produire un nombre significatif d'articles sur le sujet.

Dès lors, la diminution du nombre d'articles sur le sujet semble correspondre à la diminution du lectorat de la presse généraliste, au profit des sites d'information supposément gratuits au long des années 2000 et 2010. Et cela se vérifie à la lecture des articles de la presse vidéoludique, qui ont davantage tendance à reprendre les informations publiées par des autres sites de presse vidéoludique, et en particulier *Kotaku* dans le troisième cas.

La problématique du traitement médiatique du *crunch*, au-delà de nous renseigner sur la prise d'importance des sites de presse vidéoludique dans la production de l'information concernant ce sujet par rapport aux sites de presse généraliste, semble également mettre en évidence, d'une certaine façon, la crise à laquelle sont confrontés les journaux « traditionnels » parallèlement à l'augmentation de l'audience et à l'acquisition de capital journalistique par certains sites de presse vidéoludique.

Rapports entre sites de presse vidéoludique

Dès le début de notre corpus, la presse vidéoludique en ligne apparaît comme un milieu très concurrentiel, dans la mesure où l'offre entre les sites de presse sélectionnés semble majoritairement uniforme. Bourdieu (1994) établissait effectivement que la concurrence favorisait « l'uniformité de l'offre ». Cette uniformité peut être, à des degrés différents, constatée dans l'ensemble des cas observés. Toutefois, il conviendrait d'apporter plusieurs nuances, tant l'uniformité de l'offre ne se concrétise pas seulement par la reprise d'informations, mais aussi par le choix de sources et angles similaires.

Ce trait est caractéristique du premier cas, tant les sources et angles de *GameSpot* et *Kotaku* sont semblables, mais les journalistes de ces deux sites de presse utilisent tous les deux des sources différentes, bien que du même type. Or, l'uniformisation apparaît plus forte en 2010 et entre 2018 et 2020, dans la mesure où les journalistes de la presse vidéoludique citent les mêmes communiqués et les mêmes messages postés sur les réseaux sociaux. Cette uniformisation apparaît donc comme le signe du caractère très concurrentiel des sites de presse vidéoludique.

Nous remarquons cependant entre 2018 et 2020 l'émergence d'un média qui, au travers de ses reprises chez ses concurrents, mais aussi par des articles de presse généraliste et l'exclusivité des informations qu'il révèle, prend clairement position sur la problématique, à savoir *Kotaku*. De tous les articles et médias passés en revue, c'est ce site qui est apparu comme une référence pour le sujet qui nous occupe ici. Ce média fait exception, dans la mesure où les comportements des journalistes des autres sites sont, encore une fois, très semblables.

De plus, nous pouvons relever que l'acquisition de capitaux journalistiques peut coïncider ici avec la démonstration de davantage de capitaux ludiques encyclopédiques, au sens de Krywicki et Dozo (2017), que la concurrence. En effet, les enquêtes telles que réalisées par les journalistes de *Kotaku*, en plus d'embrasser certains aspects d'un *ethos* journalistique traditionnel, témoignent de la possibilité pour certains journalistes de ce site, Jason Schreier en tête, de mobiliser un réseau d'informateurs et de sources privilégiées dans l'industrie. L'analyse de ce corpus bat donc en brèche la distinction nette entre journalisme « *mainstream* » et journalisme vidéoludique telle qu'établie par des chercheurs à la fin des années 2000, dès lors que la mise en valeur du capital journalistique permet aussi la

distribution de capitaux ludiques encyclopédiques, et ne sont dès lors pas incompatibles. Relevons cependant qu'au travers des reprises, certains journalistes et sites de presse choisissent de faire valoir un type de capitaux au profit d'un autre, au travers des choix de cadrage notamment, c'est ce que nous pouvons observer avec *IGN* en 2020 par exemple, ou encore *GameSpot* en 2010, qui ont choisi de cadrer et reprendre les sujets car ils impliqueraient la mise en valeur exclusive de capitaux ludiques encyclopédiques.

Confrontation aux hypothèses de travail

Les hypothèses de travail, en suggérant que la part donnée aux témoignages dans la presse se trouvait davantage du côté généraliste que vidéoludique, impliquaient que ces deux pôles du champ journalistique avaient des pratiques radicalement distinctes. En définitive, nous observons qu'au fil des années, la part accordée aux témoignages et aux récits « humains », observée au départ dans la presse généraliste s'est progressivement retrouvée sur les sites de presse vidéoludique, ce qui est éclairant sur le changement des pratiques au sein de cette presse. Toutefois, il convient tout d'abord de nuancer en n'amalgamant pas la mobilisation de ces récits à la pratique de l'enquête : dès 2004, nous remarquons que deux sites de presse vidéoludique avaient recours à l'enquête pour expliciter des aspects de la problématique qui ne concernent pas directement le jeu vidéo en tant qu'objet, à savoir l'aspect judiciaire. Nous remarquons à la même période une absence de témoignages inédits dans les sites de presse vidéoludique, alors que ce genre de témoignages était beaucoup plus présents dans le pôle généraliste.

Globalement, les sites de presse vidéoludique ont couvert la problématique du *crunch* selon un schéma similaire. Tout d'abord, la mise à l'agenda de la problématique s'est toujours opérée de la même façon : un événement, au sens de Champagne (1990), à savoir une performance offerte aux journalistes¹¹³, a été relayé par ces derniers. Dans un second temps, nous observons que les sites de presse vidéoludique répondent à des logiques de cycle, à savoir selon le respect d'un cycle soit judiciaire, soit dépendant de la communication de divers acteurs. A ce titre, *Kotaku* fait, encore une fois dans le dernier cas, figure d'exception dans la mesure où les journalistes de ce site reviennent sur le sujet sans qu'un développement ne se manifeste par ailleurs, et imposent le « retour » de la problématique à l'agenda, problématique qui se retrouve dès lors reprise sur un autre site de presse. Notons

¹¹³ Deux billets anonymes dans les deux premiers cas, et dans le troisième, un extrait d'interview.

en outre que ce cycle « communicationnel » peut s'emboîter dans le cycle « news-previews-test » de la presse vidéoludique en fonction du cadrage qui est fait du sujet, le traitement des conditions de travail dans le second cas dans *GameSpot* en sont un exemple parlant.

Il apparaît également que la façon dont ces problématiques sont couvertes dépend du temps imparti aux journalistes. Une analyse des dates de publication d'articles d'enquête récoltant des témoignages atteste qu'ils sont, dans tous les cas, publiés plusieurs jours ou semaines après la médiatisation de la problématique. Cela ne veut pour autant pas dire que ce délai empêche toute enquête : comme nous l'avons déjà souligné, *GameSpot* et *Kotaku* ont réalisé un travail d'enquête, certes moins fouillé que dans d'autres cas, mais assez rapide.

La logique du *breaking news* inhérente à la plupart des sites de presse vidéoludique consultés semble être la caractéristique principale qui explique la rareté d'enquêtes plus fouillées sur le sujet et d'articles se consacrant aux témoignages des acteurs des conflits sociaux sur les sites de presse spécialisés. Si les journalistes vidéoludiques montrent dans la plupart des cas un intérêt pour ce genre de sujet, quel que soit la façon dont ils le cadrent, ils l'évoquent majoritairement selon les termes de communications disponibles par ailleurs, que ce soient des communiqués de presse ou des messages postés sur les réseaux sociaux. De plus, il ne faut pas non plus perdre de vue que l'industrie du jeu vidéo est soumise à une culture du secret, cette culture combinée aux impératifs de réactivité liés à la logique commerciale des sites de presse vidéoludique gratuits ne favorise pas l'approfondissement de ces sujets. Une nouvelle fois, le travail de *Kotaku* fait ici figure d'exception.

Nous l'avons déjà souligné, cet intérêt pour ce genre de sujet pourrait être motivé par le besoin de distribuer des capitaux ludiques encyclopédiques. Une variation a lieu quand, en plus de capitaux ludiques encyclopédiques, certains journalistes et organes de presse décident de faire valoir des capitaux journalistiques.

Il apparaît que cette proportion grandissante de ces capitaux s'est effectuée à mesure que la presse vidéoludique prenait plus de poids dans le champ journalistique, et que les sites de presse généralistes délaissaient le sujet, dans les cas qui nous intéressent. Il ne faut pas non plus oublier que cette conciliation des capitaux demeure minoritaire dans la presse vidéoludique, et ce même au sein de *Kotaku*, mais encore une fois, cela tient davantage aux

logiques commerciales de la presse gratuite *pure player* en ligne que d'une idéologie professionnelle journalistique différente.

Rajoutons que dans le cadre de notre corpus, l'augmentation des capitaux journalistiques correspond à un engagement plus marqué dans le conflit social. Nous pouvons observer ce trait sur *Kotaku* dans les trois périodes : en 2004, l'auteur des articles n'hésitait pas à donner subrepticement son avis tout en enquêtant sur la véracité des accusations et l'existence d'une action collective. En 2010, la posture plus critique et le détachement du cycle « news-previews-test » de la presse vidéoludique semble être une façon de se démarquer des pratiques en cours sur les sites concurrents. Et enfin, l'exemple le plus frappant demeure le travail de Jason Schreier, qui en plus de prendre position dans le conflit social, se fait le relai des revendications de l'acteur s'opposant à l'entreprise.

Cette quantité de grandissante de ce capital journalistique se répercute sur le choix des sources, des angles, et de l'investissement des journalistes. En effet, les plus « puissantes » auprès de la presse vidéoludique sont les entreprises et les associations, qui sont systématiquement citées à un moment ou l'autre de chaque cas passé en revue. Et en l'absence de témoignages, ces sources dictent le cycle que suivront la majorité des sites de presse. Les deux premiers cas nous éclairent sur la puissance relative des sources entre les différents pôles du champ journalistique : dans la presse généraliste, entreprises et associations sont moins citées que dans la presse vidéoludique. Toutefois, cette puissance semble aller de pair avec la quantité de capital journalistique de chaque site de presse : *Kotaku*, en 2018 et 2020, se positionne comme un organe de presse bien moins perméable aux stratégies de communication de l'entreprise concernée, et va explicitement remettre en cause certains de ces aspects, là où les autres organes de presse vidéoludique semblent ne pas exprimer la même remise en question, et s'inscrivent davantage dans une logique de reprise et citation. Cette remise en question de ces sources auparavant puissantes tend à favoriser la place de témoignages. En définitive, la place de ces témoignages, plutôt que de dépendre d'une prétendue différence d'idéologie professionnelle, dépend majoritairement de logiques suivant les rapports de force du champ journalistique, mais aussi des réalités commerciales auxquelles sont soumis les sites de presse, dont le rythme de publication semble peu favorable à l'enquête plus fouillée.

Limites du travail

Ceci posé, l'on pourrait désormais s'interroger non pas sur les pratiques telles qu'elles existent actuellement, mais telles qu'elles pourraient être : en effet, si les sites de presse vidéoludique ne suivaient pas une cadence aussi soutenue, est-ce que les journalistes pratiqueraient leur métier de façon différente ?

Du côté quantitatif, la non-exhaustivité de l'analyse a été assumée dès le début de ce travail. Il ne faut pas non plus perdre de vue que les analyses s'inscrivaient dans des cas bien précis préétablis par un organisme de recherche qui proposait déjà des corpus incomplets. Or, des articles traitant de la problématique ont été publiés en dehors de ces cas, que ce soit sur des sites de presse généralistes ou vidéoludiques. Le choix de recourir à des cas précis a été motivé par l'objectif de pouvoir opérer des comparaisons les plus précises possibles entre les organes de presse sélectionnés, traitant du même sujet au même moment, afin de déceler au mieux les différences et similitudes entre chaque couverture médiatique, ce qui n'aurait pas pu être possible autrement. Dès lors, le sujet pourrait être enrichi par une analyse plus exhaustive en tenant compte de ces articles publiés de façon plus irrégulière.

En outre, dans le même souci de comparaison, nous nous sommes attachés aux cas concernant la pratique du *crunch*. Cependant, ce phénomène n'est qu'une problématique parmi d'autres dans l'industrie du jeu vidéo. Nous aurions également pu évoquer les fermetures de studios de développement, les licenciements, le harcèlement des développeurs par les joueurs via les réseaux sociaux, le harcèlement sur le lieu de travail, la syndicalisation des travailleurs de l'industrie, ou encore les discriminations racistes et sexistes au sein des entreprises. Le spectre d'analyse pourrait être élargi et fonder des nouvelles orientations pour ce sujet qui demeure assez vaste. Il est également plus que probable que d'autres « affaires » liées au *crunch* continueront d'être médiatisées dans les mois ou années à venir, et peut-être que des pratiques journalistiques différentes se feront jour lors de la couverture médiatique de ces controverses à venir.

Enfin, notre état de l'art l'avait entrevu, et nos analyses de cas l'ont confirmé, la presse américaine ne semble pas avoir recours aux mêmes pratiques observées en France, où journalistes vidéoludiques et généralistes ont coopéré dans le cadre d'enquêtes¹¹⁴. Dès lors,

¹¹⁴ Les enquêtes concernant *Ubisoft* ou l'affaire *Quantic Dream* en sont des exemples.

des études prises dans d'autres contextes nationaux que ceux des Etats-Unis ou entre des champs journalistiques tels qu'ils s'articulent dans des pays différents pourraient constituer des pistes de réflexion supplémentaires.

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Annexes

Articles du corpus concernant la première étude de cas

GameSpot

1. Employees readying class-action lawsuit against EA (11/11/2004)

A lawyer representing the plaintiffs addresses a proposed class-action lawsuit seeking unpaid overtime from the world's biggest third-party publisher.

By Curt Feldman and Tor Thorsen on June 14, 2005 at 2:11PM PDT

Yesterday, a [blog entry](#) from the spouse of a worker at Electronic Arts lashed out against the game giant. "The current mandatory hours are 9am to 10pm--seven days a week--with the occasional Saturday evening off for good behavior (at 6:30pm)," read the post, which went on to claim that EA employees receive no overtime, "comp" time, or additional vacation for their efforts.

The veracity of the claims in the online rant is difficult to confirm. However, GameSpot News decided to investigate the matter--and found that there might be some truth behind the blogger's anger.

Following a tip from an informed source, GameSpot contacted attorney Robert C. Schubert, a partner at the San Francisco law firm Schubert & Reed. He said that he has initiated legal proceedings to start a class-action lawsuit on behalf of a group of EA employees. "We are seeking unpaid overtime for a good number of [EA] employees who weren't [properly] paid," Schubert told GameSpot this afternoon. "EA contends they were exempt," Schubert said. "We contend otherwise."

To recover the money they feel is owed to them, said employees are trying to file a class-action lawsuit against EA seeking overtime pay. On July 29, the complaint *Jamie Kirschenbaum vs. Electronic Arts, Inc.* was filed in San Mateo Superior Court. Kirschenbaum is one of the members of *The Sims 2* design team, although his current employment status at EA could not be clarified as of press time.

However, to initiate a class-action suit, a group must first be first certified as a "class" by the court. Schubert also said that until a class is certified by the court, he couldn't say how many individuals would seek to participate in the legal action. "We haven't been certified as a class yet," he said, admitting that certification "is a big battle."

And it looks like the lines for that battle are already being drawn. GameSpot was sent a copy of an e-mail purportedly sent to Electronic Arts employees over the summer, alerting them to the lawsuit. The e-mail went so far as to inform them that if they chose to participate in the lawsuit by joining the class, if it were to be certified, there would be no repercussions.

The e-mail, while not yet confirmed as authentic, frames the dispute between the proposed class and Electronic Arts as follows:

"On July 29, 2004, a class-action lawsuit was filed against Electronic Arts Inc. ("EA"). This communication responds to earlier e-mail communications from EA management regarding

the litigation. The lawsuit alleges that EA improperly classified some of its employees, including 'animators,' 'modelers,' 'texture artists,' 'lighters,' 'background effects artists,' and 'environmental artists' as exempt from overtime, and therefore failed to pay those employees overtime compensation. Plaintiff's action seeks statutory penalties, damages, restitution, and injunctive relief.

"EA denies plaintiff's claim. It is EA's position that it treats its employees fairly and lawfully, and that it has properly classified its employees within the meaning of the law. The plaintiff is seeking to bring this lawsuit on behalf of himself and to represent a proposed class of current and former EA employees as a class action. The court has not yet certified this case as a class action.

"If the case is certified, members of the class will be notified as directed by the court, and may be given the opportunity to be excluded from the class ('opting out'), or to hire their own lawyers to represent them.

"EA will not retaliate against employees for exercising legal rights, including by participating in the proposed class action."

According to Schubert, the most recent action taken by the court was the denial of a motion by EA that would have stopped the certification process in its tracks.

E-mails to Electronic Arts requesting comment had not been returned at press time.

2. EA addressing working conditions (03/12/2004)

Leaked internal e-mail reveals the publisher's plans to lessen crunch times, give more employees overtime.

By Curt Feldman and Tor Thorsen on December 3, 2004 at 4 :20 PM PST

Last month, Electronic Arts was hit by a wave of negative press that appeared shortly after [GameSpot News reported](#) the company was the target of a class-action suit seeking unpaid overtime. This was on the heels of a widely circulated [blog entry](#) from an angry "EA Spouse" that outlined the demanding hours and workload the publisher imposed on production and art staff.

The resulting fallout was severe. Stories in the [Los Angeles Times](#), [New York Times](#), and [Washington Post](#) broadcast the alleged harsh working conditions at EA to the general public, including the investment and financial communities.

This week, an internal e-mail, allegedly sent to all staff from EA senior vice president of human resources Rusty Rueff, began to surface at a number of game-enthusiast sites. Today, its authenticity was confirmed to GameSpot by the company's corporate communications division.

In the memo, Rueff admits EA has been asking a lot of its employees. "As much as I don't like what's been said about our company and our industry," he said, "I recognize that at the heart of the matter is a core truth: the work is getting harder, the tasks are more complex

and the hours needed to accomplish them have become a burden. We haven't yet cracked the code on how to fully minimize the crunches in the development and production process. Net, there are things we just need to fix."

Rueff's e-mail went on to say how addressing long hours has become a priority at the company: "We've started a Development Process Improvement Project to get smarter and improve efficiency. Just as we have revamped the Pre-Production process, we are now creating a Product Development Map that will provide earlier decision-making (on SKUS and game features), improve our consistency of creative direction, and lessen the number of late in the process changes, firedrills, and crunches. We will be rolling these changes out over the next year."

Reuff also said the company is "looking at reclassifying some jobs to overtime eligible in the new Fiscal Year." Electronic Arts' new fiscal year does not begin until April 1, 2005.

Some insiders speculated that the e-mail may have been leaked to demonstrate to the public that EA was addressing the subject of overworked staff and overtime hours. However, EA denied having leaked the e-mail intentionally.

Responding to the leaked memo, Jason Della Rocca, program director for the International Game Developers Association, a nonprofit group devoted to education and bettering the working conditions of game developers and creators, told GameSpot, "It is encouraging to see [Electronic Arts] respond, if only 'meant' for internal eyes."

Elaborating on what tangible good may come of EA's efforts, Della Rocca said: "While some will focus on the notes of overtime pay and exemption rules, etc., the truly significant bits are the plans to improve the production process and emphasize early prototyping and iteration (when the cost of change is almost nil). As the IGDA has noted, quality of life issues are symptomatic of more fundamental problems within the industry, and only through addressing the root issues head on will we ever hope to change. The entire industry has a great deal to learn from this whole process."

Whether or not the e-mail was intentionally leaked, few will argue the company needed to take action. "Given the media attention and concern within the community," Della Rocca said, "status quo was simply not an option."

3. Electronic Arts served with second "overtime" lawsuit (22/02/2005)

In a pending complaint, EA employee seeks back pay for overtime worked.

By [Curt Feldman](#) on February 22, 2005 at 1:17PM PST

The *San Jose Mercury News* is reporting that a second employee is seeking damages against game publisher Electronic Arts for unpaid wages based on overtime worked.

The paper is reporting that Leander Hasty, a Culver City-based engineer on the payroll of EALA since June 2003, filed the complaint earlier this week in Superior Court in San Mateo,

California. The paper says Hasty is seeking "undisclosed back pay, damages and penalties for himself and fellow workers."

Reportedly, Hasty's lawyers are basing their complaint on the theory that EA engineers should be eligible for overtime because they "do not perform work that is original or creative and have no management responsibilities and are seldom allowed to use their own judgment."

The suit is at least the second legal complaint pending against the world's largest game publisher. In [a similar case](#), other EA employees are attempting to file a class-action lawsuit against EA seeking unpaid wages. In that case, filed last July 29, complainant Jamie Kirschenbaum (in Kirschenbaum vs. Electronic Arts) alleges that EA improperly classified some of its employees, including "animators," "modelers," "texture artists," "lighters," "background effects artists," and "environmental artists," as exempt from overtime and therefore failed to pay those employees overtime compensation.

The Kirschenbaum complaint seeks statutory penalties, damages, restitution, and injunctive relief. It, too, was filed in San Mateo Superior Court.

4. EA settles labor-dispute lawsuit (05/10/2005)

Publisher will shell out \$15.6 million to clear the docket of Kirshenbaum v. EA, as judge expected to OK settlement shortly.

By [Curt Feldman](#) on October 5, 2005 at 2:48PM PDT

A San Mateo Superior Court judge is expected to soon approve a negotiated settlement between former Electronic Arts employee Jamie Kirshenbaum (and others) and Electronic Arts. The case, [Jamie Kirshenbaum vs. Electronic Arts, Inc.](#), was previously filed in court on July 29, 2004.

In a statement released after trading had concluded in New York today, EA alerted investors to the settlement.

In the complaint, Kirshenbaum alleged that EA had "improperly classified some of its employees, including 'animators,' 'modelers,' 'texture artists,' 'lighters,' 'background effects artists,' and 'environmental artists' as exempt from overtime, and therefore failed to pay those employees overtime compensation."

Kirshenbaum's initial complaint sought to establish a "class" that could press its claims for back pay against Electronic Arts. The settlement today renders the complaint moot in the eyes of the law, but by any standard, Kirshenbaum has come out on top.

The terms of the settlement will see Electronic Arts pay out \$15.6 million, to be distributed to all class members and plaintiffs' attorneys. A portion of that \$15.6 million will go directly to the named plaintiffs (Kirshenbaum, Mark West, Eric Kearns, and Gianni Aliotti) as well as into a fund to cover all administrative costs. The case will be dismissed as a result.

EA says any portion of the settlement fund that is not claimed by the class will go to the Jackie Robinson Foundation, nonprofit organization that awards college scholarships to minority students.

Today's settlement brings a notorious chapter in EA's labor relations to a legal close--a chapter first brought to light by the blog of the "[EA Spouse](#)", which outlined working conditions within EA. Though they preceded the publicity surrounding the Kirshenbaum complaint, the EA Spouse's posts were covered [by many outlets](#), including the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and others that dug deep to uncover alleged inequities.

That said, there remains an undercurrent of discontent among some current and former members of the extended EA family. In this month's *Wired* magazine, a letter to the editor written in response to a [recent article](#) about EA's efforts in Hollywood commented on the publisher's treatment of its employees. "The story didn't mention EA's decision to move hundreds of employees to Florida and Canada after being forced to reclassify which positions are eligible for overtime in California," read the letter. "If EA intends to break out of the sports market, it may be forced to cater to artists and designers on the same terms that its managers and marketers already enjoy." The writer claimed to be a former staffer at EA's Los Angeles studio.

5. EA settles OT dispute, disgruntled spouse outed (26/06/2006)

Publisher will pay \$14.9 million to programmers for overdue overtime; identity of blogging "EA spouse" that brought matter to attention revealed.

By [Tim Surette](#) on April 26, 2006 at 11:59AM PDT

In late 2004, Electronic Arts was tainted by the public revelation of a [class-action lawsuit](#) that asked for unpaid overtime to "a good number" of EA employees. The suit contended that several EA employees were not paid properly for long work hours--EA claimed they were exempt.

Jaime Kirschenbaum vs. Electronic Arts was filed earlier that year on behalf of many of the company's graphic artists. Kirschenbaum was, at the time, a member of The Sims 2 team. The suit was [settled](#) last year for \$15.6 million.

The matter really came to the forefront of the media when a [blog post](#) by someone who claimed to be the spouse of an EA employee ripped into EA for unfairly treating its workers. The blogger compared working at EA to being incarcerated, making note of time "off for good behavior" and describing a typical workweek as stretching from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m, Monday through Saturday.

Though the blog post had no legal firepower behind it, its description of an EA widow hit the heartstrings of fellow "EA spouses" and employees. The words were simply a personal account of what one person was going through, but they [rallied a movement](#) among employees against EA, which the blogger described as a "money factory."

A few months later, a [second lawsuit against EA](#) came to light representing EA's engineers and programmers, also seeking unpaid overtime wages. The lawsuit was brought on by Leander Hasty, an engineer from EALA who claimed that he and fellow workers "do not perform work that is original or creative and have no management responsibilities and are seldom allowed to use their own judgment." In short, Hasty claimed he and others were simply part of an assembly line.

Today, EA is settling Hasty's suit to the tune of \$14.9 million, which will be divided among "former and current [EA] computer programmers." In addition, EA is reclassifying nearly 200 positions as eligible for overtime pay--however, they will no longer be given stock options.

The proximity in timing of the suit's filing and the blog post are more than simple coincidence. In the wake of the settlement of the EA engineers' class-action lawsuit, the *San Jose Mercury News* today [revealed the identity](#) of the "EA spouse" that helped EA employees bring their matter to the courts. *Mercury* reporter Nicole Wong posted an interview with Erin Hoffman, who, until today, had remained anonymous. Hoffman is the formerly disgruntled and current spouse of Hasty, the first plaintiff in the EA engineers' class-action lawsuit.

Hasty resigned shortly after his contract with EA expired, and he and Hoffman moved to Troy, New York, where they both work at independent developer 1st Playable Productions. Hoffman has since started the Web site [GameWatch.org](#), a forum where game-industry workers can openly discuss their employers' operations.

Though Hoffman and Hasty had their differences with EA's policies, one company edict wasn't ignored--EA's old motto of "Challenge Everything."

Kotaku

1. Fear and loathing at Electronic Arts (10/11/2004)

10 november 2004

An anonymous significant other of an anonymous Electronic Arts' programmer is railing against what they call the "unethical and illegal treatment" of employees by the multi-billion dollar game company.

Most of the SO's anger seems directed at what they say is EA's practice of milking their production teams and not paying overtime or giving comp.

« 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. »

EA's motto, if you recall, is "Challenge Everyting." Just not EA's labor standards, wages, or long hours, I guess.

2. EA faces class action suit (12/11/2004)

12 november 2004

More details are emerging about Electronic Arts' alleged mistreatment of its employees, following yesterday's post about a blog entry from the spouse of an EA employee.

In the blog, the spouse complained about EA not paying overtime for hours worked and not giving employees comp time.

Electronic Arts is the world's leading independent developer and publisher of interactive entertainment software, according to their site. Some of their top game franchises include Madden, James Bond: 007 and The Sims.

Thursday evening, a source close to EA tipped me off to a class action lawsuit that was started on July 29 against the game publisher. The suit, which alleges overtime abuse by EA, has not yet been certified as a class action.

The suit alleges that EA "improperly classified some of its employees, including animators, modelers, texture artists, lighters, background effects artists and environmental artists as exempt from overtime, and therefore failed to pay those employees overtime compensation," according to a letter sent from EA to its employees and then leaked to Kotaku and several other websites.

In the memo, EA denies the claim saying that it treats its employees fairly and lawfully and that it has properly classified its employees within the meaning of the law.

The EA memo ends with this:

"EA will not retaliate against employees for exercising legal rights, including by participating in the proposed class action."

We'll keep you informed as this develops.

Update: Just wanted to give a shout out to all you /.s in the house — welcome to the finest game blog since...well, since ever. Feel free to look around and make sure you come back by.

3. EA suit could change the face of the gaming industry (12/11/2004)

12 november 2004

A victory in the class action lawsuit started against EA by their serfs could spur sweeping changes in the industry.

I had a quick chat with one of the attorney's representing the employee who filed the initial complaint. Todd Heyman said they have already cleared the first hurdle, with the judge decline to throw the case out. The law firm and EA are now in the discovery process, he said.

It will likely be a few months before any discernable movement happens, but if the judge rules in favor of the employee it will likely mean all of the gaming companies in California will have a new set of rules to play by.

“Depending on the nature of a positive judgment, other employers with similar job descriptions would most likely be required to start paying their employees by the hour and paying overtime,” Heyman said.

When asked if employees from any other gaming companies had contacted him about filing their own suits, Heyman followed a short pause with a pat: “No comment.”

We’ll make sure to keep you up to date with any new information on this case. I wonder if a victory for the employees could lead to a gaming industry exodus from California?

4. Former EA employee speaks out under real name (12/11/2004)

12 november 2004

Today sees more angry Electronic Arts employees and more angry posts, but this time at least one with a name attached. In the wake of the EA Spouse diatribe and news of an upcoming class action against the world’s largest game developer and publisher, Joe Straitiff has decided to go off on his former employer. Straitiff, a former Software Engineer III, worked on The Urbz until he was fired. He details the chain of events that lead to his firing. It’s an interesting and seemingly honest view of work at the Mothership. My favorite quote: You can’t spell exploitation without EA. Nice.

5. EA promises changes in leaked internal memo (03/12/2004)

03 december 2004

We got our hands on a hot little internal memo written by EA Senior VP Rusty Rueff that amounts to a mea culpa to the company’s sweatshop employees. In it, Rueff promises that changes are coming, including reclassifying more employees so they can receive overtime.

For those of you who have some how missed out on the EA scandal this is it in a nutshell:

An anonymous letter written by EA Spouse complained of the treatment of employees by EA and their Byzantine overtime practices.

An employee filed a suit against EA, asking for it to be classified as a class action.

An on the record employee complains of EA’s treatment of employees.

Which brings us to the Memo, which I now present to you in full:

“The last few weeks of reading blogs and the media about EA culture and work practices have not been easy. I know personally how hard it is when so much of the news seems negative. We have purposefully not responded to web logs and the media because the best way to communicate is directly with you, our team members.

As much as I don’t like what’s been said about our company and our industry, I recognize that at the heart of the matter is a core truth: the work is getting harder, the tasks are more

complex and the hours needed to accomplish them have become a burden. We haven't yet cracked the code on how to fully minimize the crunches in the development and production process. Net, there are things we just need to fix. And the solutions don't apply to just our studios — the people who market, sell, distribute and support the great games that our Studios create, all share a demanding workload.

Three weeks ago we issued our bi-annual Talk Back Survey and more than 80 percent of you participated — much higher than the norm for a company our size. That tells me you care and are committed to making EA better. In the next 30 days we'll have the survey results and we will share them openly with you by the middle of January.

Your feedback in the Talk Back Survey will help us make changes in the coming year, but we're not waiting — some changes are already in the works in the Studios. Here are just a few:

The Studios will be moving to a consistent application of the Renderware Platform. We bought Criterion because we believe there is no better technology platform (25% of all games in our industry are being built on RW). Having a standardized technology approach will save us from having to re-invent the wheel over and over. It will save time and effort we used to spend navigating technology issues.

Every member of the Studio will have gone through Pre-Production Training by the end of December (Tiburon will be going through their training in January when they move into their new facility). We understand the toll taken on our teams when we change directions late in the process. We are putting more teeth in our preproduction discipline to ensure that we more fully define and agree (at all levels) on what the features of the game will be before we scale up teams.

We've started a Development Process Improvement Project to get smarter and improve efficiency. Just as we have revamped the Pre-Production process, we are now creating a Product Development Map that will provide earlier decision-making (on SKUS and game features), improve our consistency of creative direction, and lessen the number of late in the process changes, firedrills, and crunches. We will be rolling these changes out over the next year.

We are looking at reclassifying some jobs to overtime eligible in the new Fiscal Year. We have resisted this in the past, not because we don't want to pay overtime, but because we believe that the wage and hour laws have not kept pace with the kind of work done at technology companies, the kind of employees those companies attract and the kind of compensation packages their employees prefer. We consider our artists to be "creative" people and our engineers to be "skilled" professionals who relish flexibility but others use the outdated wage and hour laws to argue in favor of a workforce that is paid hourly like more traditional industries and conforming to set schedules. But we can't wait for the legislative process to catch up so we're forced to look at making some changes to exempt and non-exempt classifications beginning in April.

So, there are things in the works short-term, longer-term, along with those ideas that will come from you over the next few months.

Here is what I know about our progress as a Company.

First, we have the best people in this industry and arguably in the entire entertainment industry. Globally, we are now over 5000 strong and we continue to win in the market place. Year after year, our games finish at the top of the charts with the best ratings. We like to compete and we like to win.

Second, we're doing something that no one has ever done before: No entertainment software company has ever scaled to this size. We take it for granted sometimes, but it's important to recognize this fact. Every day is a learning day with new competitors, new consumers, new people working on bigger teams – and all of this amid rapidly changing technology. We experiment, we learn from our mistakes, we adapt and we grow.

Most important: we recognize that this doesn't get fixed with one email or in one month. It's an on-going process of communication and change. And while I realize that the issue today is how we work – I think we should all remember that there are also a lot of great benefits to working at EA that are not offered at other companies. With some smart thinking and specific actions we will fix these issues and become stronger as a company.

Thanks for taking time to read this.

Rusty''

6. Exclusive : EA confirms memo is real (03/12/2004)

I was able to reach EA today and they have confirmed that the memo from EA Senior VP Rusty Rueff to EA employees worldwide is in fact authentic. Unfortunately, they were unwilling to comment. Here's the entire email from Trudy Muller spokeswoman with Electronic Arts Corporate Communications:

"Hi Brian,

It is a real communication, yes.

I don't have any additional comments on it.

Thanks Brian.

Trudy''

It's amazing to me that a company of this size is willing to bite the bullet and admit they screwed up and to do so in a way that they had to realize would leak out. This could go a long way toward fixing the increasingly unbearable work conditions at many of the industries largest companies.

EA promises changes in leaked internal memo

7. EA keeps the promises coming (08/12/2004)

Electronic Arts continues to promise change, despite rumblings from EA employees that the game publisher's much-publicized promise to make good on the OT issue is all talk.

On Monday an EA spokesman did a lot more talking, saying that there is no quick fix to the overtime issue, and that before any changes are made, EA will have to "talk to employees, review hundreds of jobs, determine the best solutions for each business unit and communicate the impact of those decisions to our team and shareholders." That would make change come about in, oh, never. In the meantime, EA has kicked-off a project to make production more efficient. I'm sure that's the first time anyone thought of that idea. I mean, usually companies like to waste as much time and money as possible creating their products.

EA to reconsider OT-eligible jobs [Mercury News]

IGN

1. **GDC 2005 : Building Games in a 40 Hour Week (11/03/2005)**

Overworked developers and disgruntled spouses: here's some hope.

By David Adams

Updated: 14 Jul 2016 12:22 am

Posted: 11 Mar 2005 1:47 am

The game industry has come under scrutiny in recent months given reports of harsh working conditions, with many companies having developers work upwards of 70 hours a week, straight through weekends, or even planning severe "crunch periods" into development schedules, expecting that developers will simply grin and bear the relentless hours.

This casts the situation dramatically, but the characterization may not be off the mark. The now well-known "EA Spouse" blog entry decried working conditions at Electronic Arts (which, for its part, has announced it will offer overtime to some employees), though intense production schedules are hardly unique to one company. Like the film world, the games industry can be as harsh as it is glamorous.

Industry working conditions are now enough of a concern that this year's Game Developers Conference featured a session devoted to the topic. Hank Howie drew from his experience as president of Blue Fang Games (Zoo Tycoon) to discuss "Better Games (and Quality of Life) in 40 Hours per Week."

Howie stood before a packed room and stated the situation bluntly. "It is clear we have a problem," he said. The problem arises from the nature of the games industry itself. Developers usually come to the industry wide-eyed and enthused -- if they can have a "dream job" making games, they'll put up with rough working conditions. These conditions lead to burn out, with more than half of all developers leaving the industry after ten years. The attrition means that those in the game, as it were, often have relatively little experience, leading to poor management and scheduling.

It's not a pretty picture. Making it worse, the game industry's relative youth makes it arrogant, according to Howie. Rather than learning from leading management experts and from other industries, the gaming world tends to "go it alone," thinking that if certain methods have worked before, they'll keep working -- even if it means sudden crunches, exhausted employees, and irate spouses. As the scope and cost of production rises, along with potential revenues -- i.e., games are getting to be very big business -- the problems only increase.

It is possible to make a good game using lousy management, Howie pointed out, however, it's just as possible to do so with smart scheduling. The latter results in longer-term, sometimes intangible benefits, such as higher productivity per hour, better morale, higher creativity, and employees sticking with the industry for the long haul -- which means, eventually, more people with the experience to be leaders. This will be even more critical as game development becomes more and more elaborate.

What can be done? The core of Howie's advice is the 40 hour work week, with the careful planning and employee breathing room this implies. Developers have to spend enough time in initial planning stages, Howie said, carefully defining game features, mapping out the development process in detail, and then relentlessly updating schedules as production proceeds.

Planning for crunches in advance, and using them sparingly and fairly, supports developer morale. Howie also emphasized the importance of great managers. Too often, a "star programmer" or "star designer" is promoted to manager by default, not because he or she is necessarily good management material. Managers must be humble, empathetic, organized, and excellent communicators, among other things -- and not everyone has all the necessary qualities. Ultimately, it's important that managers work with their actual employees, not just projects, ensuring that a game's schedule, and the work environment itself, support real productivity.

Simply put, holding game production schedules to a 40 hour work week -- with reasonable flexibility built in -- will result in better games. Of course, from a human standpoint, it will result in far less grief, and the industry will be stronger for it. Developers simply need to learn that these methods work.

What Hank Howie offered was a sensible outline of game development done right -- or at least, without also developing haggard and overworked employees. While his message is nothing new in the larger world of business, for an industry now moving out of adolescence, it's a grown-up lesson the gaming world would do well to learn.

New York Times

1. **When a Video Game Stops Being Fun (21/11/2004)**

By Randall Stross

Nov. 21, 2004

CHARLES DICKENS himself would shudder, I should think, were he to see the way young adults are put to work in one semimodern corner of our economy. Gas lamps are long gone, and the air is free of soot. But you can't look at a place like Electronic Arts, the world's largest developer of entertainment software, and not think back to the early industrial age when a youthful work force was kept fully occupied during all waking hours to enrich a few elders.

Games for video consoles and PC's have become a \$7 billion-a-year business. Based in Redwood City, Calif., Electronic Arts is the home of the game franchises for N.F.L. football, James Bond and "Lord of the Rings," among many others. For avid players with professional ambitions to develop games, E.A. must appear to be the best place in the world. Writing cool games and getting paid to boot: what more could one ask?

Yet there is unhappiness among those who are living that dream. Based on what can be glimpsed through cracks in E.A.'s front facade, its high-tech work force is toiling like galley slaves chained to their benches.

The first crack opened last summer, when Jamie Kirschenbaum, a salaried E.A. employee, filed a class-action lawsuit against the company, accusing it of failure to pay overtime compensation. He remains at the company, so I spoke with him by phone last week to get an update. He told me that since joining E.A. in June 2003 in the image production department, he has been working -- at the company's insistence -- around 65 hours a week, spread over six or seven days. Putting in long hours is what the industry calls "crunching." Once upon a time, the crunch came in the week or two before shipping a new release. Mr. Kirschenbaum's experience, however, has been a continuous string of crunches.

Crunches also once were followed by commensurate periods of time off. Mr. Kirschenbaum reports, however, that E.A. has scaled back informal comp time, never formally codified, to a token two weeks per project. He said his own promised comp time had disappeared altogether. At this point, he said he would be glad to enjoy a Labor Day without laboring, or eat a Fourth of July spread at some place other than his cubicle, pleasures he has not enjoyed for two years. The company said it had no comment on the lawsuit, but it is likely to argue that Mr. Kirschenbaum's image production position is exempt from the laws governing overtime compensation.

A few days ago, another crack opened -- one large enough to fit a picture window. An anonymous writer who signed herself as "E.A. Spouse" posted on the Web a detailed account of hellish employer-mandated hours reaching beyond 80 hours a week for months. No less remarkable were the thousands of comments that swiftly followed in online discussion forums for gamers and other techies, providing volumes of similar stories at E.A. and at other game developers.

I learned the identity of the E.A. employee described in the anonymous account and spoke at length with him in person late one night, adding a third shift to the day's double that he'd already worked. He seemed credible in all respects, in his command of technical detail, in his unshakable enthusiasm for the games he works on -- and in his pallor.

For around \$60,000 a year in an area with a high cost of living, he had been set to work on a six-day-a-week schedule. On weekdays, his team worked from 9 to 10 (that is, 9 a.m. to 10 p.m.), and on Saturdays, a half-day (that means 9 to 6). Then Sundays were added -- noon to 8 or 10 p.m. The weekly total was 82 to 84 hours.

By tradition, Silicon Valley employers have always offered their bleary-eyed employees lottery tickets in the form of stock options. E.A.'s option grants, however, offer little chance of a Google-like bonanza. An employee who started today with an options package like that of the E.A. worker just described (and who stayed with the company the four years required to fully vest) would get \$120,000, for example, if the share price quadrupled -- and proportionally less for more modest increases. The odds of a skyrocketing stock grew much longer this month, when the company said competition had forced it to cut prices on core sports titles.

Still, the company is a generous warden: free laundry service, free meals, free ice cream and snacks. The first month, the E.A. employee recalled, he and his colleagues were delighted by the amenities. But he said they soon came to feel that seeing the sun occasionally would have had more of a tonic effect.

This employee, who has not had a single day off in two months, is experienced in the game software business. But he said he had never before had to endure a death-march pace that begins many months before the beta testing phase that precedes the release of a project.

Jeff Brown, a company spokesman, declined to comment on E.A. Spouse's allegations. Mr. Brown did say that the company was interested in its employees' opinions, as illustrated by its employee survey, conducted every two years. This suggests that it needs to conduct a survey to learn whether a regular routine of 80-hour weeks is popular among the salaried rank and file.

Asked about reports of employees working long, uncompensated hours, Mr. Brown responded that "the hard work" entailed in writing games "isn't unique to E.A." He is correct; smaller studios demand it, too. The International Game Developers Association conducted an industrywide "quality of life" survey this year documenting that "crunch time is omnipresent." The study urged readers to tell "the young kids just starting out" in the industry to reject the hours that lock them into "an untenable situation once they start wanting serious relationships and families."

Electronic Arts' early history has none of the taint of present labor practices, and many who are acquainted with the old E.A. and the new E.A. have publicly lamented in Web forums the disappearance of the generosity practiced by Trip Hawkins, who founded the company in 1982. Mr. Hawkins, who has not been associated with E.A. for many years, said that he was not surprised by E.A. Spouse's story. He called today's E.A. a corporate "Picture of Dorian Gray," its attractive surface hiding a not-so-attractive reality.

INDEED, E.A. is noticeably young in appearance. After Randy Pausch, a computer science professor at Carnegie Mellon University, spent a sabbatical last spring as a researcher at the company, he wrote, "I am 43 and I felt absolutely ancient during my time there." He said the

place felt to him like "Logan's Run," the 1976 science fiction movie in which no one is allowed to live past 30 -- and he felt even older when he realized that the 20-somethings were too young to know the reference.

The company has 3,300 employees in its studios developing game titles, and it hires 1,000 new people a year. (Company officials said voluntary turnover is about 10 percent annually.) In the past, it has hired only about 10 percent of new studio personnel directly from college; it has set a goal of increasing that to 75 percent, which would skew the median age still younger.

Professor Pausch listed cost savings from lower salaries as one reason E.A. wishes to shift hiring to a younger group. The company also recognizes that fresh graduates are the most suggestible; Professor Pausch said he heard managers say that "young kids don't know what's impossible." That, however, they will learn when they get their schedules.

San Jose Mercury News

1. **Video-Game Workers Sue for Overtime Pay (04/12/2004)**

By Dean Takahashi

San Jose Mercury News

Dec 4, 2004 5:00 AM PT

Working in the video-game industry is a dream job for those raised on "Super Mario" and "The Sims." Thousands of programmers and artists have flocked to companies such as Electronic Arts for the chance to create popular games like "James Bond" or "Madden NFL 2005."

Living the Silicon Valley stereotype, they subsist on pizza and soft drinks, working six-day weeks for months on end to make deadlines so there will be plenty of games under Christmas trees.

But Jamie Kirschenbaum, a 26-year-old lead animator at EA's Redwood City studio, is not a happy elf. In July, he filed a class-action lawsuit against the world's largest video-game company, alleging EA drives workers to exhaustion without paying overtime.

Around the same time, game programmer Neil Aitken filed a similar suit against Vivendi Universal Games in Los Angeles. Aitken claims he and his co-workers regularly worked 12-hour-plus days without being paid overtime and then were asked to falsify time sheets.

Crunch Time

The lawsuits have opened a window into a long-smoldering controversy in the US\$10 billion U.S. video-game industry over the widespread practice of "crunch time," or working long hours to finish a project as its deadline nears.

The debate also is part of a larger battle in the technology industry: Who qualifies as a creative professional and who should receive the protections of labor laws designed for work habits of a different era?

"I thought it was awesome to get a job here because I started playing EA games when I was young," said Kirschenbaum. "But it's a job. I never felt I should devote my life to it."

Electronic Arts, which has US\$3 billion in revenues and 5,100 employees, declined to comment on Kirschenbaum's allegations or discuss its overtime policies.

But in response to the suit, the company issued a statement that it offers workers competitive wages and benefits.

Vivendi declined comment on Aitken's case.

Broken Promises

Within a month of being hired at EA, Kirschenbaum said, he started working 60 hours a week on a "James Bond" title. As the deadline to complete the game approached, he would work from 8:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. on weekdays and 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. on Saturdays and Sundays.

He says the project's producer apologized for the long hours in a meeting, promising it wouldn't happen again. Veteran staffers laughed at the remark.

After the "James Bond" game was finished, Kirschenbaum was assigned to work on another project that was in crunch mode for several months. Then he moved on to "The Sims 2" followed by "The Lord of the Rings: the Third Age."

He recalled one night when he sat in his cubicle until 11:30 p.m., with a producer looking over his shoulder for three hours straight asking him to tweak his images so they looked right.

Although Kirschenbaum said managers promised to give him days off after each project, the comp time never materialized.

Defending Practices

EA issued a statement in response to Kirschenbaum's lawsuit, which was filed in San Mateo Superior Court. "We offer competitive salaries, bonuses, stock options, health care and a wide variety of other benefits and work environments that are second to none in our industry," the company said. "EA remains committed to our customers and our employees and will continue to do all we can to ensure EA is a great place to work."

Where once game developers toiled alone in garages to finish games, they are now part of a global multibillion-dollar industry where games often cost \$5 million to \$10 million to develop and take two or three years to complete. As the costs go up, the temptations to cut corners -- and overtime pay -- are plentiful, said Jason Della Rocca, director of programming for the International Game Developers Association.

"It's a critical issue in our industry," said Jamil Moledina, director of the Game Developers Conference, which will hold several "quality of life" panels at its March 2005 event. "Creative people have basic needs in order to function. At a management level, they have to be able to schedule properly to avoid crunch time and plan for delays that are inevitable in projects of this kind."

To be sure, the work environment at EA is hardly Dickensian. The company offers such amenities as an upscale cafeteria, gymnasium, soccer field, game rooms and a theater where it shows movies and hosts concerts. In 2003, the company made the Fortune magazine's list of "100 Best Companies to Work For," which is based in part on employee surveys.

Fair Package?

Nor do video-game workers earn sweatshop wages. For instance, an animator with eight years experience like Kirschenbaum typically makes \$65,000 to \$74,000, according to Game Developer magazine. And entry-level animators make \$40,000 to \$45,000. Bonuses can equal up to 15 percent of annual pay.

But Kirschenbaum's complaints about crunch time are common in the industry, according to a recent survey of video-game workers.

Kirschenbaum's portrayal of EA's work culture was corroborated by several current and former co-workers, who requested their names not be used so as not to jeopardize their job prospects.

"We don't get paid enough for how much life we give up. EA spouses call themselves EA widows," said one employee. Another disgruntled worker called the company "a divorce factory."

Earlier this month, one "EA widow" posted an impassioned condemnation of the company's working conditions that left her partner exhausted. "The extended hours were deliberate and planned; the management knew what they were doing as they did it," she wrote on the LiveJournal blog site (www.livejournal.com), generating thousands of generally sympathetic responses.

Deadline Pressure

Companies like EA have drop-dead deadlines for finishing games because they often have to ship products for the holiday selling season or the beginning of a sports season. Crunch time has become a way of doing business even on large multimillion-dollar projects with 200-person teams. Even with good planning and big budgets, games inevitably go off schedule because of unexpected programming bugs or design changes prompted by player feedback.

In contrast to other Silicon Valley workers who traditionally receive stock options and other rewards for working around the clock, game developers are expected to put up with the unpaid overtime for their love of video games.

"The growing pains some of these companies are going through have already been experienced by Disney and others in the film industry," which now pay for overtime, says Daniel Pyne, an employment attorney at Hopkins & Carley in San Jose.

EA studio manager Neil Young sent an e-mail to employees shortly after Kirschenbaum sued. "This is a very sensitive issue that the entire digital entertainment industry is grappling with," Young wrote. "Fundamentally, it is about redefining who makes creative decisions in

the development process. There's no clear-cut, final answer as each new generation of technology forces us to re-examine jobs and responsibilities."

In 2000, the California Legislature changed the state's labor law to exempt some professionals in the software industry from overtime regulations.

Exceptions to Rule

Companies do not have to pay overtime to software programmers if they make more than \$41 an hour and engage in advanced work that is creative or intellectual in nature.

Kirschenbaum's attorneys argue that his position as an "image production employee" does not require original, creative work and thus he and colleagues in similar positions should be eligible for overtime

California's overtime exemption does not apply to image effects workers in the film and theater industries. Kirschenbaum's suit argues that EA is part of the entertainment industry and should be subject to overtime regulations.

High salaries and the prospect of free video games lure many young people to EA. But Kirschenbaum and other employees said they would gladly trade the perks for the option of not working unpaid overtime.

"I'm looking at jobs that pay less because my concern is having a good work environment. I don't care that the campus is beautiful," said one EA employee who requested anonymity.

Kirschenbaum said he has heard many stories about co-workers having hard times with families, divorces and other problems.

"I decided that something had to be done," he said.

2. EA to reconsider OT-eligible jobs (07/12/2004)

SUIT BY GAME DEVELOPERS BROUGHT BAD PUBLICITY

By Dean Takahashi

Mercury News

Under fire from employees who say they're forced to work long hours without being paid overtime, Electronic Arts is considering making some jobs eligible for overtime, according to an internal company memo.

The change comes after a wave of negative publicity about the Redwood City video-game company's practice of requiring game developers to work unpaid overtime to complete projects during "crunch time."

"We have resisted this in the past, not because we don't want to pay overtime, but because we believe the wage and hour laws have not kept pace with the kind of work done at technology companies," wrote Rusty Rueff, EA's senior vice president of human resources, in a Nov. 30 e-mail to employees. The memo described how the company, which has \$3 billion in revenue and 5,100 employees, plans to improve working conditions.

EA argues that artists, animators and other employees are creative workers who are exempt from state and federal regulations requiring overtime pay.

That position has been challenged by EA animator Jamie Kirschenbaum. In July, Kirschenbaum filed a lawsuit against the company, arguing EA is required to pay overtime to employees like himself because their work is not creative or original and is controlled by supervisors.

Two more employees, Mark West and Eric Kearns, joined Kirschenbaum's class-action suit last week.

More speak up

A number of EA employees have stepped forward to say they were forced to work unpaid overtime for months at a time during the final rush to finish production of a video game.

Rueff wrote that EA would make changes to its compensation policy, possibly in the new fiscal year, which starts in April. "We can't wait for the legislative process to catch up so we're forced to look at making changes."

In a statement issued Monday, EA spokesman Jeff Brown said, "Before making any changes, we need to talk to employees, review hundreds of jobs, determine the best solutions for each business unit and communicate the impact of those decisions to our team and shareholders."

He said the video-game industry continues to grapple with the overtime issue and that there is no quick fix. He said employees are responding favorably to the memo.

EA has begun a project to make its production process more efficient to reduce the number of last-minute changes that wreak havoc with employee schedules.

'Core truth'

"I recognize that at the heart of the matter is a core truth: The work is getting harder, the tasks are more complex and the hours needed to accomplish them have become a burden," Rueff wrote. "We haven't yet cracked the code on how to fully minimize the crunches in the development and production process. Net, there are things we just need to fix."

He said EA issued its biannual Talk Back Survey to employees and more than 80 percent participated, much higher than the norm. He said results would be available in mid-January, but he said EA wasn't waiting to make changes.

EA officials did not disclose how many people will be reclassified as eligible for overtime among its workforce.

"We experiment, we learn from our mistakes, we adapt and we grow," Rueff wrote.

3. Exclusive : Nicole Wong Reveals identity of EA Spouse (25/04/2006)

POSTED BY DEAN TAKAHASHI ON APRIL 25TH, 2006 AT 10:34 PM | CATEGORIZED AS DEAN TAKAHASHI, NOOCH ON GAMING

EA Spouse shook up the video game industry in November, 2004, when she posted an anonymous letter that detailed the harsh working conditions that led to overtime lawsuits against Electronic Arts and other big video game companies. Her actions have changed the industry. The impact remains to be seen, but what can we say about someone who stepped forward and took her husband's employer to task? At the time she wrote the anonymous post, some speculated that EA Spouse wasn't a real person. In this exclusive interview, Nicole Wong reveals the identity of EA Spouse for the first time and what led her to take on the game industry. Tell us your thoughts on this.

By Nicole Wong (photo: Erin Hoffman and her husband Leander Hasty, photo by Richard Koci Hernandez)

Erin Hoffman's heart was breaking. She hardly got to see her overworked fiance, a video game software engineer who was working 85 hours a week at the industry's premier company, Electronic Arts of Redwood City.

Yet they didn't clash over it — because she was so grateful for the few minutes she could spend with Leander Hasty. And he was too exhausted to argue anyway.

So Hoffman, then 23, poured out her frustration — under the pen name EA Spouse — in a November 2004 blog that resonated so strongly with other video game developers that it helped spark an employee uprising inside EA and six lawsuits for unpaid overtime against three of the industry's most prominent employers.

Hoffman wrote on the blog that EA's attitude toward its workers was: "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."

Now, more than a year later, game developers have won settlements in three class-action lawsuits alleging EA created exhausting work schedules without paying overtime and successfully pressed employers to ease unrelenting workloads. And EA Spouse, whose true identity has been cloaked until now, is becoming a voice against America's culture of overwork.

"We had received so many excuses, and they had done so much overtime and everyone was so tired," Hoffman said. She told her fiance, "I need to write something about this. It's not right."

Jesse Schell, chairman emeritus of the International Game Developers Association, said "the EA Spouse letter kind of created an atmosphere where a lawsuit like that would be taken more seriously."

Round-the-clock work schedules have long been common among game developers. Some say the overwork epidemic in the video-game industry is spreading to other professions as financial pressures intensify.

The \$10.5 billion U.S. games industry is "kind of like the canary in the coal mine," said David Fugate, an independent literary agent who is helping Hoffman find a publisher for her book about overwork in America.

EA, the world's largest video game publisher, on Tuesday announced it settled the third lawsuit brought against it for not paying employees for extra hours worked. The original plaintiff in that lawsuit, which covers programmers, was Hoffman's then-fiance, Hasty, now 26.

The couple met as college students at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, where they created a video game together for a class project. After graduating, they took jobs testing games at the same small Southern California game studio, Taldren.

But Taldren tanked. So it seemed fortunate, at first, that EA swooped in and hired a bunch of Taldren employees, including Hasty. EA even offered Hasty a \$5,000 signing bonus that stipulated he stay on the job for a year.

In June 2004, he started working in EA's Los Angeles studio on the game "Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-Earth."

On Hasty's second day of work, the team was sucked into a six day-a-week "crunch," an intense work period. By September, the team had to work 13-hour days, seven days a week.

The exhausted team members started making mistakes and getting sick. For Hasty, the stress triggered an allergic reaction that resulted in stomach problems and chronic headaches. He dropped 10 pounds and turned pale.

He and Hoffman moved into an apartment 10 minutes from EA's office. She started bringing spaghetti dinners to his office and dining with him there so they could spend 30 minutes together.

They desperately wanted to ditch EA. But they didn't have the \$5,000 to repay the signing bonus.

At that point, Hoffman funneled her frustrations into writing a 1,962-word essay that she hoped would catch the attention of EA executives and warn potential employees.

"No one works in the game industry unless they love what they do....They are and were more than willing to work hard for the success of the title," Hoffman wrote. "But that good will has only been met with abuse."

The essay appeared on the Live Journal blogging site anonymously because the couple feared retribution and blacklisting from potential employers. But within 24 hours, 15 game companies left comments or sent e-mails offering to hire Hasty.

And hundreds of other readers commiserated. Some said their children didn't get to see their father as they were growing up. Others asked EA Spouse for help.

"That was actually the really heartbreaking part," Hoffman said. "There was nothing I could do besides tell them, 'Get out.' "

Three months later, Hasty signed on as the first plaintiff in a class-action lawsuit programmers filed against EA for unpaid overtime. And a few days after his contract expired, he resigned from EA.

They married and moved to Troy, N.Y., where they work together again. He's a programmer and she's a designer at 1st Playable Productions, an independent game development studio.

And they finally have free time to read science fiction novels and indulge in their first love ... playing video games.

They are building a Web site, too. GameWatch.org is Hoffman's brainchild, a forum where game developers can swap stories about the companies they work for.

Hoffman continues to receive anguished e-mails in response to her essay from readers lamenting experiences with work overload. For some of them, she said, "the damage had already been done. They were already divorced."

Los Angeles Times

1. **Working Too Hard in an Industry of Fun and Games (17/11/2004)**

By ALEX PHAM

NOV. 17, 2004 12 AM

TIMES STAFF WRITER

Carnations and lilies were the final indignity.

The bouquet, which arrived at her door on a sunny Saturday in September, were from her fiance, a video game programmer who was working his eighth consecutive 72-hour week.

Far from being flattered, the woman poured out her anger and frustration in a 2,000-word essay that she posted on the Internet under the pseudonym "ea_spouse."

"The love of my life comes home late at night complaining of a headache that will not go away and a chronically upset stomach," she wrote. "My happy supportive smile is running out."

Within 48 hours, ea_spouse had received more than 1,000 sympathetic responses -- from colleagues of her fiance at Electronic Arts Inc. and from men and women across the fast-growing \$25-billion video game industry.

Links to her plaint rocketed through in-boxes at game studios nationwide and touched a nerve among the young, mostly male programmers whose engineering prowess brings ever more elaborate monsters and car chases to television screens and computer monitors.

“People regularly joke about forgetting their wives’ names, but it’s not funny,” said one senior developer, who asked that his name not be published. “When I read ea_spouse’s article, it just hit me.”

Since its founding as a garage industry in the mid-1970s, the video game business has been fueled by a dicey mix of testosterone and caffeine. Programmers routinely boast about napping under their desks or of forgoing sleep for days on end. Now, as those workers mature along with their industry, many are grappling with failed relationships, neglected families, weight gain and anxiety attacks. They complain that as budgets and expectations for games explode, so do the workloads for those making them.

Game companies don’t dispute that their employees put in long hours but contend that the workload is balanced with good pay, benefits and perks.

“Everyone who works in a game studio knows that the hard work that comes with [finishing] games isn’t unique to EA,” said Electronics Arts spokeswoman Tammy Schachter. “As the industry leader, EA generates a lot of attention on issues common to all game developers.”

Nonetheless, more than half of game developers expect to leave the industry within 10 years, according to an April survey by the International Game Developers Assn. Nearly 60% of those questioned said crunch periods were normal, and 47% said they weren’t compensated for overtime hours. Only 3% said their employers counted all the overtime hours they had worked.

“For game developers, never has the pressure to work hard and fast been stronger than it is today,” the report concluded.

That ea_spouse lashed out at Electronic Arts is, in part, a function of EA’s size. With 5,100 workers, the Redwood City, Calif.-based publisher is the world’s biggest. But it isn’t the only company that expects its developers to work 60 to 80 hours a week in the weeks and months leading up to the final release of games -- referred to as crunch time. Developers from other companies tell similar stories.

Their descriptions of life behind the computer contrast with the image promoted by big game companies and popularized during the tech boom of the 1990s. True, office campuses boast gleaming gyms, expansive swimming pools, gourmet cafeterias and volleyball courts, but, as one developer put it, “these things just sit there and mock us.”

“It’s ironic because we have these shiny new things that nobody has any time to use,” said the developer, who asked not to be named. “The best use of the swimming pool so far was by someone who jumped into it and started flipping off his managers on his last day of work.”

Although ea_spouse has become the online standard bearer for games workers, the battle actually began in July, when current and former workers sued EA over allegations that they were owed overtime pay. The company declined to comment on the lawsuit.

“Unfortunately this kind of thing is prevalent throughout the industry,” said Jason Della Rocca, executive director of the International Game Developers Assn. in San Francisco.

“There are a handful of studios that put an emphasis on work-life balance, but those are few and far between.”

What irritated ea_spouse most, she said, was that Electronic Arts appeared to exploit her fiancé’s love of video games. Like many now working in the industry, he grew up as part of the first generation to start playing video games at a young age.

“It’s so difficult, because we love the game industry,” ea_spouse said during an interview. “Games have been a part of our lives for so long.”

But, she said, “he hasn’t been home for dinner to stay for months. It’s a constant stress. I can’t see him suffer without suffering myself. I noticed a change in him. All his interests have gone away. He’s constantly on the verge of getting sick. He’s pale and unresponsive.”

For months, she kept a meticulous record of her fiancé’s hours and work habits.

In neat handwriting, she jotted entries like “August 28, 2004 -- Going home early, 8:30 p.m.”

She acknowledged that both she and her fiancé understood long hours came with the job. Neither, though, was prepared for what they said were weeks on end without a break. “They increased the mandatory hours to 9 a.m. to 10 p.m., six days a week,” ea_spouse said. “Then it went up to seven days. They were just so pompous about it.”

Part of the industry’s work ethic grows out of its early days when solo programmers regularly pulled all-nighters to bring their games to life.

“There’s a cowboy mentality and a bravado about working 60 to 80 hours a week, drinking Jolt Cola to stay awake and being a game development machine,” Della Rocca of the game developers association said. “Some companies exploit that and pressure people to work long hours. The implication is that if you’re not willing, there are 10 other people lined up outside ready to take your place.”

The pressure on game publishers to churn out hits has increased too. Most big game publishers are publicly traded firms that have to meet ambitious Wall Street expectations. As games become more sophisticated, they can cost millions of dollars to produce. Also, many games are based on expensive movie licenses that limit publishers’ time to develop titles.

Some contrast the non-union game industry with the heavily unionized movie business, which often employs former game workers to produce digital special effects and computer animation work. The Walt Disney Co., DreamWorks Animation SKG Inc., and Warner Bros. have labor contracts that require them to pay overtime for every hour worked beyond 40 hours a week.

“In computer graphics for feature animation and television, pretty much everybody gets overtime,” said Steve Hulett, business representative for the Animation Guild, a union for television and movie animators. “The difference is that we have labor contracts covering motion picture work but the game industry is relatively new. And labor law is so badly written that they fall into a gray area.”

Indeed. Most programmers at EA are classified as salaried employees exempt from overtime pay. The lawsuit filed in July disputes that categorization, saying that game developers should be paid on an hourly basis because they don't have managerial responsibilities.

Instead, many game companies lavish other goodies on their workers, mostly free food. For example, the flowers sent to ea_spouse were part of a company-paid effort to boost morale: Employees were given a card from a florist and told to pick from four bouquets to send to their wives or girlfriends.

"What got me mad was that the flowers were so random," said ea_spouse, who still plans to marry the EA employee. "Instead of giving their workers time off, they try to buy them off with frivolous things. I didn't want flowers. I wanted my fiance."

2. EA to Pay \$15,6 Million to Settle Overtime Case (06/10/2005)

By JULIE TAMAKI

OCT. 6, 2005 12 AM

TIMES STAFF WRITER

Video game publisher Electronic Arts Inc. said Wednesday that it would pay \$15.6 million to settle claims that it required graphic artists to work long hours and weekends without overtime pay, resolving the first of several cases highlighting working conditions in the fast-growing industry.

The world's largest independent game publisher also agreed to reclassify about 200 entry-level artists as eligible for overtime, said Jose Martin, head of human resources for EA Global Studios. In May, the company reclassified about 240 jobs spread over its corporate, studio and marketing divisions as eligible for overtime.

It isn't clear how much individual artists would collect, but the lawsuit -- filed in July 2004 in San Mateo County Superior Court -- estimated that "several hundred" workers could be eligible for overtime wages.

Lawyers representing the plaintiffs declined to comment on the settlement but said that EA's practices were not unique. They said they had filed similar suits against Redwood City, Calif.-based EA on behalf of one of its computer programmers and against Foster City, Calif.-based Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. for a former artist there.

"There does seem to be a common practice throughout the video game industry ... [of companies classifying] employees as exempt from the overtime laws," said Miranda Kolbe, a San Francisco attorney for the EA artists.

The lawsuit alleged the employees in EA's California studios regularly worked more than eight hours a day or 40 hours a week, clocking in on weekends and occasionally on holidays without compensation.

Industrywide, experienced game artists make an average of about \$65,000 a year.

Under the agreement, the artists' claims will be dismissed without EA acknowledging wrongdoing, an EA spokeswoman said.

The \$15.6 million covers the workers' claims, their attorneys' fees and administrative costs. The settlement is expected to be submitted to a judge in San Mateo County this week.

The settlement comes at a crucial time for the video game industry, which is bracing for a new wave of game consoles from Microsoft Corp., Sony Corp. and Nintendo Co. that, in turn, are expected to trigger a flood of new titles by publishers such as EA.

The company, best known for its John Madden line of football video games, also was caught up in a larger controversy last fall over working conditions in the video game industry. The dust-up was sparked by a woman using the pseudonym ea_spouse who posted a 2,000-word essay on the Internet lamenting the long hours her fiance worked as an EA video game programmer.

Martin said his company had spent the last year trying to smooth out production schedules, particularly around the crunch periods leading up to the final release of a game. EA, for example, is bolstering its project management ranks to ensure projects are better supervised.

Martin said the improvements were in the early stages of implementation and declined to declare an end to the hectic crunch periods. The changes, he added, were fueled in part by results from an employee survey launched in January among EA's 6,500 workers, which garnered an 83% participation rate.

"We want staff to help us solve these complex challenges so we can deliver great content for next-generation gaming systems," Martin said.

Wall Street Journal

1. **Workers at EA Claim They Are Owed Overtime (19/11/2004)**

By Nick Wingfield and Robert A. Guth Staff Reporters of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Nov. 19, 2004 11:59 pm ET

Working at Electronic Arts Inc. isn't nearly as much fun as playing its games, according to some discontented workers, who are stepping up their criticism of labor practices at the industry's biggest game publisher.

A former Electronic Arts employee, Jamie Kirschenbaum, filed suit in July in California Superior Court in San Mateo, Calif., against the company for failing to pay overtime to the workers who produce the snazzy effects and eye-popping graphics inside the company's games. The suit was only recently disclosed by the company in a regulatory filing. Unlike most Silicon Valley engineers, who are not eligible for overtime, these "image production workers," as they are identified in the suit, might be considered neither professionals nor managers under state law, and therefore eligible for the extra pay.

The complaints over labor practices reflect the growing pains of an industry that in a few short years has shifted from a gaggle of small entrepreneurial companies to a \$15 billion

global business dominated by a few large corporations. In essence, these disgruntled workers argue that, far from the hip, creative image Electronic Arts conveys, work inside the company more resembles a fast-moving, round-the-clock auto assembly line.

Last week Joe Straitiff, a 33-year-old former Electronic Arts software engineer, posted a message on the Internet describing the pressures of completing games at Electronic Arts, which he said included 70-hour weeks for months on end.

"Everyone was extremely tense, exhausted and tired of feeling like they always had to come in," Mr. Straitiff said in an interview. He said he was fired recently because of repeated conflicts, mostly over long hours, with his supervisor.

Electronic Arts declined to comment specifically on Mr. Straitiff's complaints and on the pending litigation against the company. In a statement the company said it offers benefits and a work environment that are competitive with others in the industry. "As the industry leader, EA generates a lot of attention on issues common to all game developers," the statement said. "Everyone who works in a game studio knows that the hard work that comes with finalizing games isn't unique to EA."

A recent outpouring of online complaints led one group of game programmers, the International Game Developers Association, in San Francisco, to issue an open letter this week encouraging game companies to more seriously tackle quality-of-life issues at their companies. "Despite the continued success of the games industry, the immaturity of current business and production practices is severely crippling the industry," the nonprofit association said in the letter.

Of course, deadlines are hardly unique to the game business. There is scant proof that game production is worse than the pressures of the broader technology industry. But game-worker complaints may reflect a unique aspect of the game business. Game creators once were given free reign over the direction of games and were treated as rock stars.

As the industry has grown, so has management control over creators. Game making is a risky business, with production costs reaching \$20 million for some games.

To limit risk, game makers are increasingly keeping a tighter leash on their creators, with strict production processes and tight deadlines to keep games on schedule.

Corrections & Amplifications:

Jamie Kirschenbaum, the plaintiff in a lawsuit against Electronic Arts Inc., is an employee of the videogame publisher. The article above incorrectly described him as a former employee.

2. Electronic Arts Settles Lawsuit, Will Pay Overtime for Some Jobs (06/10/2005)

By Nick Wingfield Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Oct. 6, 2005 12:01 am ET

Electronic Arts Inc. said it agreed to settle a class-action lawsuit brought by former employees who alleged the videogame publisher owes them overtime wages.

The company also agreed to reclassify some jobs to be eligible for overtime pay, in a shift away from compensation perks, such as stock options, that are a longtime tradition in the high-tech industry.

Under the terms of the settlement, which must still be approved by the California Superior Court of San Mateo County, the company agreed to pay \$15.6 million to cover plaintiffs' claims, attorney fees and administrative costs. The class of workers eligible for a portion of the settlement includes graphic artists employed at EA between July 2000 and July 2005, including current employees.

Plaintiffs in the lawsuit had alleged that they put in far more than 40 hours a week without overtime pay in computer-graphics jobs very similar to those in the movie industry, where workers have long received overtime compensation.

The settlement of the EA case could be a sign of litigation to come in the high-tech industry, where workers have traditionally put in long hours without overtime pay, in part because of the lure of stock options that could enrich them. Since the bursting of the dot-com bubble, though, stock options are no longer seen by many employees as the reliable source of compensation they once were. That, in turn, may lead to more wage and hour suits in places such as Silicon Valley.

"I think you're going to see more and more of these being filed down here," said Bradford Newman, a labor attorney representing corporations at Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker.

Indeed, EA is facing a separate lawsuit over allegedly unpaid overtime involving engineers who were involved in the production of videogames.

A spokeswoman for EA, of Redwood City, Calif., declined to comment on that suit, which is also being heard in state court in San Mateo.

The same attorneys representing plaintiffs in the two EA labor cases have filed a similar suit against Sony Corp.'s U.S. videogame division. A Sony spokesman didn't return a call for comment.

As part of the settlement, EA agreed that entry-level graphic artists are eligible for overtime. The change affects about 200 current positions in EA's U.S. studios in California, Florida and Illinois out of a world-wide staff of about 6,500. The company in May reclassified about 240 jobs in marketing, game-development studios and other areas to make them overtime-eligible, in response to an internal review of its compensation practices.

The employees to whom EA is now paying overtime wages will receive one-time restricted stock grants when they are reclassified, but they will no longer receive bonuses or stock-option grants tied to their job performance, according to the company.

San Francisco Examiner

1. **Long hours spur online rant (12/11/2004)**

Blogger chronicles horrors of working for Electronic Arts.

By Josh Wein | Staff Writer

Published on Friday, November 12, 2004

REDWOOD SHORES -- An anonymous writer who claims to be the spouse of an Electronic Arts employee has sparked an online venting session, drawing hundreds of disgruntled employees out of their shells to complain of slave-like work conditions.

The writer, who goes only by "ea_spouse," posted a 2,000-word missive on the misery the company has caused employees, including a nearly 80-hour work-week. As a result, employees at EA, one of the country's most successful video game companies, are beginning to talk of unionizing and bringing litigation against the corporation.

"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," the blogger wrote on the Web site Live Journal.

Since the initial post went up around 12 a.m. Nov. 10, more than 800 replies have appeared, and the essay has been redistributed on other tech sites such as Slashdot. In nearly all of the notes, the story is the same: An employee is lured into what is seemingly a dream job designing video games, only to find the hours rapidly increase until they're working 90-hour weeks with no overtime pay. Employees lose all social life and fear getting fired for not living up to such high standards.

For Steven Pearl, a Los Angeles-based attorney who specializes in information-technology labor issues, it's a story that's all too common in the tech industry, and he said employers should know better.

"[Big companies] know they are cheating people, and people are too frightened to step [forward] and do anything about it," Pearl said. "The problem is companies have no disincentive to follow this type of practice."

Before the economic bust, Pearl said, companies were compensating employees for long hours with promises of stock options that often never materialized. Now, he said, companies appear to be up to similar tactics, flaunting California labor laws that prohibit employees from working more than eight hours in a day without being compensated for overtime.

"The law is what it is. Employers are aware of it, and they abuse it. They know they can intimidate their employees," Pearl said.

Several attempts to contact EA's corporate headquarters were unsuccessful, and the company has not issued a formal statement on its employment practices.

1. **Midnight Club canceled at beleaguered Rockstar San Diego ? (12/01/2010)**

Apparently disgruntled game-developer spouse blasts severe quality of life infractions at studio; commenter claims racing franchise is no more.

By GameSpot Staff on January 12, 2010 at 9:07AM PST

Source: A blog posted to game-industry news site Gamasutra.

What we heard: In 2004, someone claiming to be the spouse of a developer at Electronic Arts issued a now-famous manifesto that brought to light quality-of-life concerns at the publisher. The blog post was issued alongside class-action lawsuits filed by employees at EA over unpaid overtime dues--suits that each resulted in multimillion dollar settlements.

Now, a similar online denunciation has been leveled at Rockstar Games and specifically its San Diego studio, which is prepping Red Dead Redemption for its April 27 release on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. Posted in the blog section of industry news site Gamasutra, the missive was issued by "Rockstar Spouse" on behalf of the "Determined Devoted Wives of Rockstar San Diego employees" in an effort to "assert their concerns and announce a necessary rejoinder, in the form of an immediate action to ameliorate conditions of employees."

According to the lengthy post, conditions began to deteriorate at the San Diego studio in March 2009, as management at the outfit began enforcing mandatory 12-hour workdays and extended the work week to Saturday. "The managers at Rockstar San Diego continue in their dishonesty, pushing their employees to the brink [by] promising temporariness, fully equipped with the knowledge of another deadline just around the corner," the post reads.

Rockstar Spouse goes on to note that the studio has also cut benefits at the studio, including promised time-off credit, milestone bonuses, and cost-of-living raises. "This is especially unjust to those who significantly contribute to projects," Rockstar Spouse wrote. "Further than unappreciative, employees are disrespected when lied to as a whole on how Rockstar games [do] not generate money and, as claims of justification for unappreciated employees are made, [point] to the deficit, meanwhile the last Grand Theft Auto game made over a billion dollars of revenue."

Rockstar Spouse ends the post by threatening legal action against Rockstar San Diego, but the allegations against the studio continue into the comments. Corroborating Rockstar Spouse's claims, a poster by the name of "BitterPartyOfMany" offers other condemnations against the studio that range from overtime exploitation to fiscal irresponsibility.

"Where is the detail about people getting performance warnings for not working 11hrs+ a day?" BitterPartyOfMany wrote. "The running joke is that donuts were taken away every other week (about \$200 in savings per month), yet Rockstar flies in people from all the other studios (Vancouver, Leeds, Toronto, New England, etc.) and puts them up in a luxurious rental home, gives them per-diem, and rents cars for them. How about the temporary

appointment of a new studio president who spent thousands at a time on drinking outings, only to give up the position after a few short months?"

BitterPartyOfMany also claims that Rockstar dismantled the San Diego studio's Midnight Club team. "Please, someone explain why the profitable and very functional Midnight Club team was ripped apart, their technology thrown away (after Midnight Club Los Angeles), and everyone who wasn't fired or quit was shoved onto a project that has been struggling for well over 4 years?" the posting states.

Another commenter posting under the handle "Code Monkey" claimed to be a current employee at Rockstar San Diego and also offered damning words against the studio-level and corporate management team.

"We're producing a fantastic game right now, but in times past, it seemed to have little in the way of direction or conception," Code Monkey wrote. "If it did indeed have these attributes, they were largely lost upon the majority of the development team, and many of us had little knowledge of what kind of product we were actually trying to put out there. I think we all do now, but it's in no thanks at all to any concerted effort whatsoever to actively motivate the team and evangelize the product to the developers themselves."

The words echo other statements made by BitterPartyOfMany, who claimed that Rockstar's New York division has done away with the San Diego studio's top managerial talent.

"They have fired and demoted all the best and most well respected managers," BitterPartyOfMany wrote. "They lost some of the best graphics and optimization people in the industry because of their attitude and management style. What they're left with are a few managers who nobody believes deserves their position, or who nobody likes/respects, and some very talented developers who are just waiting for the project to end so they can move on. You're just not going to get the best work out of people when they don't like/trust/respect their managers."

The official story: Rockstar had not responded to requests for comment as of press time.

Bogus or not bogus?: Not bogus that somebody is mighty steamed at Rockstar San Diego. The gaming industry has developed a reputation for its exploitative work schedules, especially in the lead-up to a game's ship date, and many commenters on Rockstar Spouse's entry concurred with the assessment at the studio. However, it remains to be seen how the working conditions will affect Red Dead Redemption or any future installments in the Midnight Club franchise.

2. **Rockstar turmoil afflicting Max Payne 3's August launch ? (14/01/2010)**

Purported former Vancouver studio employee said alleged San Diego studio conditions are mirrored at Canada outfit; shooter sequel slated for late-summer debut, but delay likely.

By GameSpot Staff on January 14, 2010 at 5:08PM PST

Source: Popular gaming blog [Joystiq](#).

What we heard: It appears as if [Red Dead Redemption isn't the only title creating a strenuous work environment at Rockstar Games](#). Joystiq reports today that it has received word that a similar situation is unfolding at Max Payne 3 development house Rockstar Vancouver.

"Virtually everything said in the original 'Rockstar wives' letter and by current and former Rockstar San Diego employees in the comments applies to my experience at Rockstar Vancouver," a purported former employee at the studio told Joystiq. The studio is also reportedly in "enforced crunch mode through to the end of the project," necessitating "14 - 16 hour work days, six or seven days a week."

The source also noted that Rockstar is targeting an August 2010 release for Max Payne 3, having [delayed the game to late 2010](#) in December. The game was [officially announced](#) in March 2009 after having been first mentioned in [March 2004](#).

"The game's story just went through another total re-write earlier this month (the third that I am aware of in the past two years) and that [means] the team would have to have all of the content done by April or May to make that August release date," he said.

The official story: Rockstar had not responded to requests for comment as of press time.

Bogus or not bogus?: Given that [the Independent Game Developers Association has offered to mediate in the quality-of-life concerns at Rockstar San Diego](#), it seems like there is some credence to the purported Vancouver employee's claims.

3. Rockstar complaints get IGDA response (19/01/2010)

Industry group says it has reached out to Take-Two and studio employees to mediate alleged overworking of staffers.

By GameSpot Staff on January 19, 2010 at 2:32PM PST

Red Dead Redemption is expected to ship for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 on April 27, and its launch will apparently come as a monumental relief to many of the employees at Rockstar San Diego. Last week, an anonymous person claiming to represent the "Determined Devoted Wives of Rockstar San Diego employees" [leveled gross quality-of-life violations at the studio](#), alleging excessive mandatory overtime and time-off denials, among other exploitative practices.

Today, the [Independent Game Developers Association](#) responded to the claims made by the Rockstar San Diego spouse. In its note, the representative body stated that it has issued an open invitation to mediate any concerns between Take-Two management, studio heads, and employees over overtime practices.

"In any studio, the IGDA finds the practice of undisclosed and constant overtime to be deceptive, exploitative, and ultimately harmful not only to developers but to their final product and the industry as a whole," the IGDA said. "While our research shows that many

studios have found ways to preserve quality of life for their employees, unhealthy practices are still far too common in our industry."

The IGDA went on to note that while "crunch" hours continue to be an issue within the industry, it is not the norm across game studios. Citing its 2009 Quality of Life Survey, the organization said that while more than half of developers desired more time off, the majority felt that their employers worked to avoid excessive overtime requirements.

"While crunch has always been a concern for the games industry, the IGDA concludes from its research that conditions in most workplaces are improving and, with diligence and an emphasis on increasing process efficiency, can continue to do so," the IGDA said.

Rockstar had not responded to requests for comment as of press time.

4. Red Dead Redemption on track, Rockstar 'saddened' by working-condition claims (22/01/2010)

Developer-publisher says its open-world Western will indeed mosey onto PS3, 360 April 27; responds to "Rockstar Spouse" accusations of discontent at its San Diego, Vancouver studios.

By Tor Thorsen on January 22, 2010 at 9:42AM PST

Though not as damaging as the [NBC/Conan O'Brien](#) PR implosion, the "Rockstar Spouse" controversy has proved a major headache for Rockstar Games' public relations department. On January 7, someone emulating the [class-action-lawsuit-inspiring "EA Spouse" letter](#) posted [a similar note decrying the working conditions at Rockstar San Diego](#). Soon, commenters claiming to have worked at the satellite studio piled on, saying its current project, Red Dead Redemption, had long been beset by problems and that its Midnight Club racing series had been scrapped.

According to Rockstar, Red Dead Redemption will ride into PS3-ville and 360-town on April 27, as scheduled.

The Rockstar Spouse accusations were quickly echoed by [posters claiming to be working on Max Payne 3](#) at Rockstar Vancouver. Nonetheless, Rockstar's New York headquarters remained silent, even after the [Independent Game Developers Association](#) issued an open invitation to mediate any concerns between management and employees over overtime practices.

Today, Rockstar broke its silence on its [official Web site](#). After strongly asserting that Red Dead Redemption is on track for its scheduled April 27 release on the PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360, it offered the following thoughts on the controversy that Rockstar Spouse stirred up:

"Unfortunately, this is a case of people taking the opinions of a few anonymous posters on message boards as fact. No business is ever perfect, but Rockstar Games is a tight-knit team made up of around 900 supremely talented and motivated professionals, many of whom have worked here for a very long time. We're saddened if any former members of any studio did not find their time here enjoyable or creatively fulfilling and wish them well with finding an environment more suitable to their temperaments and needs, but the vast majority of our company is focused solely on delivering cutting-edge interactive entertainment. "

"We've always cared passionately about the people working here and have always tried to maintain a supportive creative environment. There is simply no way Rockstar could continue to produce such large-scale, high-quality games without this. That being said, making great games is very challenging, which is why we have and will continue to try to keep hold of some of the best talent in the industry and support them in every way we can."

Kotaku

1. Alleged Unfair Work Conditions At Rockstar San Diego (08/01/2010)

Stephen Totilo

1/08/10 8:00PM • Filed to: RUMOR

An anonymous blogger filing under the heading "Rockstar Spouse" has penned a letter of complaint about working conditions at Red Dead Redemption development studio Rockstar San Diego.

The lengthy posting appeared yesterday on a user blog on the game development site Gamasutra and was signed by "Determined Devoted Wives of Rockstar San Diego employees." The post claims that since March 2009, San Diego employees have suffered "degradation" that "extends to their quality of life and their family members" in the form of mandatory 12-hour days six days a week, have had pay cut and vacation limited. The post alleges that this extended crunch-time stress has affected the health of some employees. The "wives" blame management and a Rockstar "thirst for power," urging changes in the working conditions at the San Diego studio: "If these working conditions stay unchanged in the upcoming weeks, preparation will be made to take legal action against Rockstar San Diego."

Rockstar Games did not respond to requests from Kotaku for comment about the letter or any actions the company might take because of it.

While the charges of an anonymous blogger — and the sentiments echoed below the post by anonymous commenters allegedly familiar with the workings of the studio — must be met with skepticism, the letter was clearly designed to evoke memories of 2004's "EA Spouse." Six years ago, Erin Hoffman, writing anonymously as "EA Spouse" complained of unfair working conditions at Electronic Arts. Her complaints about the long hours and stressful lives of EA developers gained industry-wide attention and was the topic of several

stories that appeared on Kotaku. But by 2006 EA appeared to change its ways and Hoffman was praising the happiness of people who worked for the company.

The charges levied in the "Rockstar Spouse" post are unproven. We'll continue following this story as the veracity of the complaints — or lack thereof — comes more clearly to light.

Wives of Rockstar San Diego Employees Have Collected Themselves [Gamasutra "Rockstar Spouse" user blog]

2. **A Week In Comments (12/01/2010)**

Brian Ashcraft

1/12/10 1:00AM • Filed to: HYPER MULTI-TAP

I don't think it's an overstatement to say that when video games were parodied on "The Simpsons" (and they were, countless times), it introduced segments of the population to video games who had previously not been interested or thought about them. After all, at the height of its popularity almost every TV-owning soul in the world was watching the show. Gamers and non-gamers alike were watching.

So when Bart was kicking Homer's ass in "Slug Fest", it legitimized "Punch Out" for people who weren't already playing Nintendo (poor bastards) and when Bart stole the Mortal Kombat-like "Bonestorm" while caricatures of Donkey Kong, Mario and Sonic cheered him on, it was a reference non-game players suddenly wanted to "get." And anyone who ever found themselves playing one of the many completely lame golf games that existed before EA gave us PGA-licensed golf sims can appreciate "Lee Carvallo's Putting Challenge." What about the episode where Lisa got addicted to Bart's Crash Bandicoot-like platformer about Dingos eating golden babies? I'm not even mentioning the literally dozens of arcade game parodies Bart and others can be found playing in various episodes (okay, just one - Martin plays "My Dinner with Andre: the Arcade Game").

"The Simpsons" were notorious for lending their license to shitty products - something else that the show itself has made fun of ad nauseam, and that extended to video games, but it would be an oversight to say that the show

was not fully engaged with games and game culture throughout the show's lifespan.

I think other comments on this topic prove that what the Simpsons contributed to video games was a healthy dose of satire within the show itself - people might not remember "Virtual Bart", but try finding a Simpsons/video game fan who doesn't still laugh at the words "BUY ME BONESTORM OR GO TO HELL!"

Which is kind of what scares me about Kotaku sometimes - the Simpsons hasn't contributed anything to "the broader medium?" Sometimes I think all you guys do is play video games because you are shockingly disengaged with how games relate to other media sometimes.

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Michael Pasquariello

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Alleged Unfair Work Conditions At Rockstar San Diego
Comment by: WittyUserName

Nominated by: jayntampa

Alleged Unfair Work Conditions At Rockstar San Diego

An anonymous blogger filing under the heading "Rockstar Spouse" has penned a letter of complaint...

[Read more](#)

"Look, when you marry a firefighter, you don't write blogs complaining about how they fight fires all the time and might get burned, right?"

You might if you were sent into a burning building without proper equipment or backup.

ADVERTISEMENT

Alleged Unfair Work Conditions At Rockstar San Diego

Comment

by: [WittyUserName](#)

Nominated by: [WittyUserName](#)

This is the reason why I left the industry and do not seek to get back in. I never made it past dev testing, but there is an overwhelming unwillingness to speak up on the issue with regards to everyone employed in these circumstances. These companies can and will take advantage of their workers and the potential workers who will fill the place of those, like me, who opt out of a career of extreme servitude. Until they actually do try to stand up, whether that's through the extremely unpopular prospect of unionizing or unilateral demands by some watchdog agency, this trend of overwork and negligence of personal quality of life needs will continue. To leverage a career over the head of people that are suffering because of that tactic is sick and twisted, and it is done because it is tacitly accepted. Until that acceptance changes then the industry will retain these cutthroat ways, and if it does, maybe the jobs will go elsewhere, and that will cause further problems down the line. Such is the path of growing industries, as it always has been, but hopefully won't always be.

[...] ¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Les autres commentaires recensés dans l'article ne sont d'aucun intérêt pour le présent travail.

3. **Former Staffer Compares Rockstar NY To The Eye Of Sauron (10/01/2012)**

Mike Fahey

1/12/10 2:30PM • Filed to: RUMOR

Following a blog post last week describing unfair work conditions at Rockstar San Diego, a former Rockstar New York staffer spoke to MTV Multiplayer of the fear the East coast office instills in the developer's West Coast employees.

Last Thursday's blog post, signed by "Determined Devoted Wives of Rockstar San Diego employees," described mandatory long work days, extended crunch times with little or no relief, and generally stressful conditions. Multiplayer's source confirms these allegations, saying, "I can support what those accounts are saying, where you're working long hours with last minute demands and no direction."

The source then elaborates further, however, explaining that the New York corporate offices lord over satellite studios like Rockstar San Diego much like the Eye of Sauron lords over Middle Earth in The Lord of the Rings. Studios work without guidance for years, until one day the New York office focuses on their project, ordering sweeping changes to projects that hadn't been scrutinized for months.

"That's opposed to any other studio where there are regular meetings and milestones and stuff so you don't get too far down a path before people come in to make sweeping changes."

One can almost imagine a giant eye atop Rockstar's New York offices, suddenly shifting Westward and opening wide. It's a rather apt comparison, right down to the fear such attentions bring, especially considering comments made by sources at Rockstar San Diego to Joystiq yesterday.

"Anyone from the New York office is feared, because people in the San Diego office know that they are unstable and needy ... in other words, if a comment comes from a person from New York, it's a mandate that needs to be immediately addressed regardless of previous priorities."

That's not to say the New York staffers had it easy either, as Multiplayer's source describes instances where employees were called into work on a weekend without any actual work to finish, calling it "kinda like face time, just so [the top of Rockstar] sees you there."

What MTV Multiplayer's source describes sounds like several bad jobs I've had, all rolled up into one. Of course none of mine involved creating a Grand Theft Auto game, which would have made some of the suffering worth it.

"You're making sacrifices, but for the end result. There's very few times that you're able to be a part of something like that."

4. **Rockstar Has Some Fun With "Eyre Of Sauron" Comparison, Still Won't Comment (15/01/2010)**

Stephen Totilo

1/15/10 5:40PM • Filed to: ROCKSTAR GAMES

Capping off a week during which Rockstar Game's New York team was unfavorably described as an Eye of Sauron overlooking its development studios, the company just posted some new editions to its wallpaper series.

Recent Videos from Kotaku

Bakugan For Switch Has The Most Boring Battles

Mike Fahey

The company entitled the three-image series: "The Eye Is Watching."

Earlier in the week, an anonymous ex-Rockstar employee described to MTV the dynamic between Rockstar's New York headquarters and satellite studios such as Rock Star San Diego, the development studio behind the upcoming Red Dead Redemption. They likened the New York office to "The Eye of Sauron" the watchful presence of the evil overlord in The Lord of the Rings.

Rockstar has had no comment for Kotaku regarding last week's allegations of unfair working conditions at the company. Those complaints were levied a week ago by an anonymous blogger claiming to represent disgruntled wives of overworked Rockstar San Diego employees. They were published on a Gamasutra user blog called "Rockstar Spouse" and were followed by other anonymous complaints that the development studio behind Red Dead Redemption, Rockstar San Diego, was experiencing an unprecedented run of mandatory and unhealthy crunch-time development. Some Internet commenters have countered, saying the Rockstar Spouse complaints pertain to common industry practices that are the price of making video games.

Kotaku sought new comment this morning from Rockstar about the validity of what appeared to be a leaked memo distributed by Rockstar management regarding those allegations. The company has not provided comment on that either.

That week of official public silence makes today's artwork the first public reference — however indirect — by the company to the Rockstar Spouse situation. There's a San Diego hook to the image. The domes in the shot appear to resemble those of the San Onofre nuclear power plant located just outside of San Diego, home city to the developers of Red Dead Redemption.

The wallpapers appeared as part of Rockstar's recurring series of desktop backgrounds available for download on the company's official site.

5. Rumor : Rockstar Responds To Allegations Of Poor Work Conditions (21/01/2010)

Luke Plunkett

1/15/10 3:30AM • Filed to: ROCKSTAR

Rockstar Games has yet to respond publicly to allegations that staff working on Red Dead Redemption have suffered through poor work conditions, but this apparent internal email is the next best thing.

Posted on Gamasutra, the supposed email to RSD employees goes to great lengths to distance the company from the accusations levelled against it by the "Determined Devoted Wives of Rockstar San Diego Employees".

The email reads:

"Dear Rockstar San Diego

No doubt you are all aware of the comments made on Gamasutra regarding some internal dynamics at the studio and some people's dissatisfaction with the environment. We take issues related to working conditions extremely seriously and will look to address any genuine concerns immediately.

It's been a challenging few years, and a tough last few months as the game moves towards completion, but the final product of all that incredible effort is on the verge of finally being received by the public: the stellar game that is Red Dead Redemption, a game of which you all should be justifiably proud and which you should be excited to see come to market.

We do not agree with the allegations in the Gamasutra post (e.g. there has been no reduction in health benefits or ancillary benefits and perks (such as free dinners and massages etc), wage increases across the studio have kept track with cost of living increases, and anyone who feels they have been overlooked for a bonus for a game they worked on please contact HR to discuss as soon as possible). Nevertheless, we do know that the team is working very hard right now, and we care deeply about the physical health and mental well-being of every single person on our team. We are committed to working through any issues anyone at the studio may have, and to providing support wherever possible. Please, if you have concerns, discuss them with Sarah Shafer or with Rob Spampinato who heads up HR for the whole of Rockstar and who will be on-site in the studio for the next few days (Rob is sitting in the "new york" office). If you would prefer to speak to someone in confidence outside of Rockstar, please contact Chris Casazza, who oversees HR for Take Two.

Red Dead Redemption is rightly one of the most anticipated games of 2010, and we're incredibly proud of the entire team for the truly outstanding work that's gone into making this remarkable game as good as it is. Here's hoping we can give this game the reception it deserves this April."

He said, she said. It's why we have courts, people.

6. Rockstar Responds To Rockstar Spouse Controversy, "Saddened" By Accusations (21/10/2010)

Stephen Totilo

1/21/10 6:20PM • Filed to: ROCKSTAR GAMES

An image wasn't all they had to say. Two weeks since the posting on the Internet of anonymous complaints about working conditions at its San Diego satellite, the development studio most famous for Grand Theft Auto addressed those charges.

The company did so by addressing a reader question on Rockstar's official website.

"Unfortunately, this is a case of people taking the opinions of a few anonymous posters on message boards as fact," the response began. "No business is ever perfect, but Rockstar Games is a tight knit team made up of around 900 supremely talented and motivated professionals, many of whom have worked here for a very long time.

"We're saddened if any former members of any studio did not find their time here enjoyable or creatively fulfilling and wish them well with finding an environment more suitable to their temperaments and needs, but the vast majority of our company are focused solely on delivering cutting edge interactive entertainment. We've always cared passionately about the people working here, and have always tried to maintain a supportive creative environment. There is simply no way Rockstar could continue to produce such large scale, high quality games without this. That being said, making great games is very challenging, which is why we have and will continue to try to keep hold of some of the best talent in the industry and support them in every way we can."

The furor over working conditions at Rockstar San Diego began on Thursday, January 7, when an anonymous writer or writers, referring to themselves as "Determined Devoted Wives of Rockstar San Diego employees," published a screed against the studio in a user-blog on website Gamasutra. Echoing widely-publicized complaints made in 2004 about working conditions at publisher Electronic Arts, the user-blog was entitled "Rockstar Spouse."

The letter alleged that Rockstar San Diego employees were experiencing extended crunch-time working conditions since March 2009 for the April 2010 Red Dead Redemption. Allegations included mandatory six-day, 12-hour work weeks and a culture of "dishonesty" among Rockstar San Diego management that contributed to stressed workers. The letter, which was written awkwardly, suggested that the well-being of San Diego workers was a growing problem: "Without time to recuperate and no efforts made to alleviate the stress of such conditions would procure on an employee after a period time, serious health concerns. Yet, now the health concern becomes another financial concern as the stripping of medical benefits surfaces to realization."

The Rockstar Spouse letter promised consequence: "If these working conditions stay unchanged in the upcoming weeks, preparation will be made to take legal action against Rockstar San Diego."

Rockstar's headquarters is in New York. Managers and creators in that office oversee the work at all Rockstar studios around the world, including Rockstar North, where the main Grand Theft Auto games are built and Rockstar San Diego, the group responsible for

Rockstar Games Presents Table Tennis, the RAGE graphics engine that was used to run the GTA IV and the forthcoming western, Red Dead Redemption.

MTV quoted an anonymous former Rockstar New York employee as saying Rockstar New York's oversight of the satellite studios was similar to the watchful, menacing Lord of the Rings "Eye of Sauron."

Since the publication of that letter, writers claiming to be current or former Rockstar employees — most of them anonymous — chimed in below the Rockstar Spouse post and on other websites, agreeing with the letter's complaints or at least saying that they were believable. Kotaku was unable to independently verify any of these accounts, including those anonymous ones that arrived in our inbox vouching further support for the Rockstar Spouse claims. On Friday, website Joystiq reported that, in April 2009, Rockstar had settled a lawsuit brought against the San Diego office in 2006 regarding unpaid overtime.

Amid the response to Rockstar Spouse was an argument by some Internet posters that the tough working conditions alleged at Rockstar San Diego were commonplace in the gaming industry and possibly even the price of working at a topflight development studio.

Rockstar itself remained mum, providing Kotaku no comment on the matter, despite repeated requests over the last two weeks. On Friday, however, the company did update its series of regularly released computer wallpapers with a series seemingly based on the "Eye of Sauron" comment. The studio behind the often-satirical GTA games appeared to be having some fun with the controversy.

The company's comments on its official site today may not have addressed the specifics of the alleged mandatory six-day work weeks, 12-hour work days and health risks at Rockstar San Diego, but it is clear that the makers of some of the biggest games in the world prefers it to be known that it wants its employees happy, no matter how hard making games is.

7. Do We Need Fair Trade Games ? (25/05/2010)

Lauren Orsini

5/25/10 10:00AM • Filed to: REPUBLISHED

Red Dead Redemption came out last week and while I know I'm going to buy it, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't somewhat hesitant to do so.

It seems the controversy is now mostly forgotten, but in January, the spouses of a number of Rockstar San Diego developers penned an open letter decrying the working conditions in the studio. Reminiscent of the then unnamed Erin Hoffman's EA Spouse letter, it details conditions that grossly overreach the usual game development crunch time. And of course, the response from Rockstar HQ and Take 2 was typical mealy-mouthed PR bullshit. While I'm sure plenty of other games I have enjoyed were made under similar conditions to Red Dead Redemption and simply didn't receive public outcry, a pall is still cast over RDR that it won't ever be able to fully shake, at least for me.

Hearing the alleged conditions in Rockstar San Diego were also unfortunately familiar; by several accounts, Bully was created at Rockstar Vancouver under very similar conditions. And even though I quite enjoyed Bully, I couldn't help but feel a little ... uncomfortable about it. It was that same twinge of discomfort you get seeing "Made in Bangladesh" on the tag of your shirt. I don't mean to pick on Rockstar, I'm sure this is a problem at many studios, but you know, they did pay out almost \$3 million after a lawsuit was filed by employees about a year ago.

While I'm being facetious about the idea of "fair trade" certification for games, even if such a thing could exist, I'm not sure something like it would actually be desirable. The purpose of fair trade is to avoid purchasing goods produced in unfair conditions. But if I had slaved away on a game, seeing it sell poorly because consumers disagreed with the conditions it was made in would only be adding insult to injury.

And of course, I don't think it's very risky to say most of the potential audience really doesn't care. Most are simply unaware of such circumstances at all and of the small percentage that are, many seem to have the perverse and naive attitude that being a game developer is some invaluable gift. Once this legendary position has been obtained, all expectations of fair and decent working conditions evaporate.

A couple choice comments from the Shacknews post about this: "Come to NY and see who cries for you." "Oh please. These guys have the best jobs in the world and they love doing it. Have a problem with it? DON'T MARRY THEM." "This sucks, but god damn those screens look good."

Unfortunately, this attitude exists even in some new entrants to the industry. Willing to do virtually anything to "break in," their enthusiasm results in a seemingly unending supply for the digital salt mines. Eventually circumstances like the above burn them out and they leave for good, resulting in less than one third of developers making it to ten years in the industry.

And I have no idea what to do about it. It seems buying Red Dead Redemption is better than not doing so in protestation, but good sales likely aren't going to inspire change at Rockstar San Diego. More likely, a good swath of people will leave, replacements will be brought in and things will get as bad again the next time a project is well behind schedule. I do not think the solution is a union, as I'm very skeptical of a union ever being a good idea for knowledge workers. The great, bloated beasts SAG and the WGA have become certainly give me little hope.

The only thing I can do, personally, is refuse to ever work at a studio that operates under such conditions and strongly council others to do the same. If great, experienced developers will only operate at studios with respectful, fair working conditions, and they make this known, that might incentivize certain changes. The passion people have to making games is also a great weakness, because it can be exploited. Game developers will tolerate conditions I can't imagine someone making accounting software ever would. We cannot allow our passion to be taken advantage of.

I really hope Red Dead Redemption is a big success, both in terms of quality and sales. It's better condolence than the alternative. It sure sounds like its creators were asked to give far too much and there's a part of me that will feel a little guilty enjoying the game because of it. I long for the day when developers' passion will be respected rather than exploited, but honestly, I don't know how soon that day will come. Not soon enough, I think.

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IGN

1. **Rockstar Wives Strike Back (08/01/2010)**

Spouses of the San Diego based developer cry foul.

By David Clayman

Updated: 15 Jun 2012 10:50 pm

Posted: 8 Jan 2010 11:30 pm

Today the wives of Rockstar San Diego employees posted an open letter on Gamasutra decrying the business practices and conditions suffered by their husbands. The letter is addressed to "whomever it may concern," and alleges worsening work conditions starting in March 2009.

The letter alleges that certain members of the Rockstar San Diego management have ratcheted up pressure in the office by forcing twelve hour work days including Saturdays with false promises of compensation time off in the future. It also claims a cut in benefits which include vacation time between Christmas and New Year, loss of medical benefits, and loss of overtime pay. It continues to describe a new studio manager who "...vulgarly speaks the F word in most sentences and those who refuse to look at the workers' faces as they pass in the hall."

According to the letter it is meant as a "starting point" to provide a "...clearer direction for change." However, it also threatens legal action against Rockstar San Diego if working conditions are not improved in the coming weeks. The letter describes these conditions as directly affecting employee's health and family life with diagnosed cases of depression and one instance of suicidal tendencies.

You might remember a similar letter penned by an EA Spouse in 2004, detailing unfair work practices at EA. The husband of the author of that letter was Leander Hasty, who was the main plaintiff in a class action suit on behalf of software engineers at EA. This eventually awarded the plaintiffs 14.9 million for unpaid overtime.

2. **Editorial : The Real Housewives of Game Development (02/05/2012)**

It's time for industry spouses to stop complaining and start supporting.

By Nicole Tanner

Updated: 8 May 2012 6:57 am

Posted: 2 May 2011 7:20 pm

In 2004, Erin Hoffman was the significant other of an employee at Electronic Arts who was being forced to work long hours, up to seven days a week. Frustrated with what this situation was doing to her life and the life of her significant other, she took to the web, anonymously posting a blog titled "EA: The Human Story," under the name "EA Spouse." This well-written diatribe called out in specific detail what the working conditions were like at EA at the time, specifically referring to "crunch time," which is a period of long hours that usually occurs close to the end of a project in order to get it shipped on time. This situation eventually led to a class action lawsuit, and EA re-classifying the employment status of a number of workers so that they would be entitled to overtime pay.

Since this case was settled out of court, it's hard to say for sure whether EA was legally doing anything wrong, but this whole event has led to a growing tide of angry wives (unfortunately game development is still largely dominated by men) jumping on the bandwagon and berating companies for what is actually pretty standard process for making a game. As the wife of a game developer myself, I'm starting to become skeptical that these women are really more concerned about creating a fairytale life for themselves than they are about supporting their husbands' dreams.

In 2010, a number of wives of Rockstar employees wrote an open letter to the company, complaining about the treatment of the

ir husbands, who were working on Red Dead Redemption. I've read that note a number of times, and it sounds like the sort of shrill whining you'd hear on one of the "Real Housewives" television shows. There's very little in that letter that hasn't gone on in just about any other developer studio or at other corporations outside the video game industry, for that matter.

Yes, stress has a negative impact on health, but I can't think of a job that doesn't involve stress. Bad managers can be found anywhere. Team members looking down on those who refuse to work overtime, or call in sick a lot during a deadline – seems pretty understandable if you look at it from the perspective of the person who now has more work to do to keep caught up.

As employees get promoted, they may move from one tax exempt status to another. This happens everywhere. The more money you make, the less you're likely to be eligible for overtime pay. And it's not like game developers don't make a good chunk of money. According to Game Developer Magazine's annual salary survey, the average game developer salary in 2010 was \$80,817. The current tax code says anyone who earns a salary of at least \$450 a week and does a job that requires specialized education and skills is exempt from receiving overtime pay, meaning most game developers fall into that category.

Another factor most of these wives seem to be missing is that long working hours are not exclusive to the gaming industry. Doctors, lawyers, financial analysts, investment bankers, and many, many others regularly work long hours, but you never hear people complaining about their working conditions; it's just considered part of the job. Perhaps these other

game developer wives view game development differently from these other professions because of the status of video games in our society as a whole. They might think something that's fun and even perceived as being "just for kids" shouldn't be taken so seriously. But that's a completely asinine thought. Besides being the biggest earner in the entertainment industry, games are also making strides into solid, beautiful artistic creations made by passionate artists.

Most game developers wouldn't put up with the long hours unless they really, really love what they're doing. My husband is one of those people. Making games has been his dream since he was a kid, and his passion is apparent whenever he tells someone about his current project.

During our 13 years together my husband has moved from entry level designer to senior programmer, and we've seen our share of crunch times. Some of them have been as short as a few weeks, others have lasted nearly an entire year. On one project there was a "controlled crunch" put into place, where the team worked late two set days a week, throughout the entire project, and that seemed to work very well in reducing the insanity of a full-on 24/7 crunch.

Does crunch time suck from my perspective? Sure. It certainly doesn't make me happy to see my husband get home at 4 a.m. and have to be back at work at 10 a.m. the next day. It doesn't make me happy that on the rare occasion during a crunch when he is home, all he wants to do is sleep. But that's OK because this isn't all about me. I knew what I was signing up for when our relationship started, and while it was very difficult in the early days, I've now learned how to take crunch times in stride, because I know they're not going anywhere.

Game development is a battle between resources and time. Very few games actually get substantial amounts of either, so crunch time is practically guaranteed. We, as spouses, can cause ourselves a lot of pain and anguish banging our heads against the wall trying to change capitalism, or we can accept it as part of our reality and make the most of our relationships in spite of it. I'm not saying it's easy or that more shouldn't be done to reduce the long hours as much as possible. But real life work balance cannot be defined in the number of hours spent here or there. It's the quality of those hours that counts.

San Diego Reader

1. **Rockstar San Diego gaming manufacturer accused of shorting pay**

"A workplace that might as well be in Pyongyang, North Korea."

Author

Moss Gropen

Publish Date

Feb. 10, 2010

'When the people in power are completely senseless with regards to human values and their ideal is a sweatshop, you are screwed.'" That's a man who identifies himself as Brian Meidell, talking about Rockstar San Diego, the local branch of the New York-based video-game behemoth. He's not alone. Meidell's blog comment — one of dozens — typifies the

disillusion and anger that grip some of the video-game developers who log tedious hours in Rockstar's Carlsbad office. But are the complaints justified?

San Diego isn't known for sweatshops and neither is the video-game industry, at least not in the traditional sense. But according to a few insiders — the folks whose efforts “enable” video-game addicts — there seems to be sweat aplenty these days at Rockstar San Diego. To be sure, this is no archetypal, industrial-age factory. And unlike the workers who toil on the slaughterhouse floor or in the tomato fields, the folks who make the video games face little exposure to biohazards or chemical toxins. But Rockstar San Diego employees — and their wives — claim that the atmosphere at the office is rather toxic.

It's the distaff in this largely male enclave who took the initiative recently to air their husbands' grievances. They're preaching to an in-industry choir, using the forum of a gaming-community website, Gamasutra.com. The “Wives of Rockstar San Diego,” as they prefer to be called, addressed a letter “to whomever it may concern,” posting it in the Rockstar Spouse's Blog. The missive — perhaps best (if uncharitably) described as the proverbial rambling manifesto — is redundant and cryptic. Nonetheless, it is a provocative broadside at a company that, some contend, treats its employees “like slaves.” Apparently, a number of the 180 or so game developers — who take pains to distinguish themselves from the standard-issue corporate types who rule the roost — have been spending way too much time at the office. They complain of 12- and even 14-hour days, weekend work, and incessant pressure — they call it “crunching” — to meet project-completion deadlines. And, boy, are their wives pissed.

Rockstar's developers, as well as their wives, say they were a content lot when Rockstar was still Angel Studios, the locally owned denizen of hard-core game builders led by CEO and namesake Diego Angel. But that was before the buyout, which resulted in the rebranding of Angel. According to a longtime former employee (who cautioned me against writing anything that might reveal his identity), when Angel and cofounder Michael Limber gave themselves a golden handshake in late 2002, “The entire culture changed.” The “ex-Rocker” (to use Gamasutra blog parlance) says that, in 2003, what had been a well-run company with a “family atmosphere” turned into a corporate mill — a poorly run one, at that — replete with insanely long hours.

It seems that payment for (at least some of) those overtime hours has, for several years now, been at the heart of the gripes. In March 2009, a group of Rockers, represented by a San Francisco law firm, reached a settlement in a class-action lawsuit in which the plaintiffs alleged that Rockstar San Diego management had unlawfully mischaracterized some employees as “exempt” — thus denying them overtime pay. Despite a settlement reported to be in the \$2 million to \$3 million range, developers say that violations persist. Rockstar game developers, and their unofficial quasi-union, the International Game Developers Association, term it a “quality-of-life issue.”

The association, founded in 1995, calls itself “the largest non-profit membership organization serving individuals that create video games.” According to the “mission” statement on the association's website, the group attempts to advocate “on issues that

affect the developer community.” On Wednesday, January 13, the association issued a press release stating that “the IGDA finds the practice of undisclosed and constant overtime to be deceptive, exploitative, and ultimately harmful not only to developers but to their final product and the industry as a whole.”

I spoke with International Game Developers Association director Joshua Caulfield, who told me that the majority of San Diego Rockstar game-crafters are members; however, many local Rockstar employees are less than enthused about the prospects of meaningful change via the association’s efforts. To start, it’s not actually a union; although it may “advocate” on behalf of game developers, members complain that the group has no teeth. Without the force of a collective-bargaining agreement or litigation, they grouse, disgruntled workers will be subject to the crunches that result in long hours.

To be fair, as several blog posters commented, long hours — especially as game-delivery dates approach — are standard practice in the industry; it’s not clear that Rockstar stands apart as an egregious offender. Even the posters on Gamasutra, while taking aim at the Carlsbad facility, acknowledge the fact that the video-game business is infamous for long (albeit flexible) hours — not to mention ultracasual dress and an informal ambience.

I asked a current Rockstar developer who cautiously — and anonymously — agreed to chat with me via email, “Just how bad are the hours at Rockstar San Diego?” He replied, “Game companies are generally very loose about their hours; Rockstar is actually the most strict I’ve seen. At most companies, you should be in by 11 a.m. or so; right now, we’re supposed to be in at 9:30 a.m. In real life, however, most people come in by 10 a.m., some at 10:30.” He also told me that, until 2009, the hours at Rockstar San Diego had been “surprisingly good...much better than any other company I’d worked at before that.” He noted, however, that, during the past year, as Rockstar has approached completion of the current project, things have deteriorated. “It slowly got worse — at first, we were asked to stay until 8:00 p.m.; Saturday work was supposed to be temporary but it’s now mandatory. Personally, I’m working 10 a.m.–11:00 p.m. these days, but I’m one of the people who stay the longest. Typically, the office starts clearing out at 9:00 p.m. Saturdays are about 10 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.”

In these economic times, it’s likely that few Americans would lose sleep over long hours by employees who (by many standards) are well compensated. Indeed, one former Rockstar employee — who left the company, as well as the industry, in 2004 — says that by the time he completed his decade-plus tenure at the studio he was making \$150,000 and that many of his coworkers took in \$80,000 to \$100,000 annually. Another current developer says that he receives a salary of \$120,000, plus bonuses, while still others receive company stock.

Given the compensation, one might ask, why the unhappiness? After all, according to many blog posters, creating video games is a dream job for many developers, an opportunity to get paid for computer geekiness. And, of course, there’s the slumping economy to consider; as many point out, it’s an employer’s market, especially for positions that pay an industrywide average of more than \$70,000 per year.

Despite the pay (which, for some developers, has actually increased) a chorus of voices says there's more to it than money. The developers complain that Rockstar management — by, they claim, forcing unreasonable hours and assuming an arch-corporate “don't give a shit” attitude about its employees — has drained the creative folks of creativity and enthusiasm. However, when it comes to sussing out the root cause (if one exists) for the management-labor disconnect, there's by no means unanimity among local Rockstar developers. If there's anything close to a consensus regarding the work environment at Rockstar, it's that things changed dramatically after the 2002 buyout.

Some of the employees assign primary blame to the head honchos, the corporate big shots, such as Strauss Zelnick, whose perspective is pure Wall Street. A number of developers quip that the folks in charge “have never played a video game in their lives” and are “left brainers.” But there's nothing to indicate that they've tried to alienate developers; after all, without designers, there are no video-game studios, and without studios, no product.

Rockstar Games is a wholly owned subsidiary of Take-Two Interactive Software, a publicly traded, billion-dollar company that, according to its December 2009 financial disclosures, was in the red in 2009. It would be easy enough to focus on the media tycoons at the top, the guys with the lucrative stock options and bonuses. But even the most irate of the developers over at Faraday Avenue in Carlsbad are hesitant to single out the Madison Avenue execs who run Take-Two, and by extension Rockstar — it's not that simple. If anything, complain the game builders with whom I spoke, it's the local managers who've made their lives a living hell; the moguls in New York may be “remote and neglectful,” but the Carlsbad straw bosses are “downright evil.”

In an attempt to get management's perspective, I placed calls to both the parent company and the San Diego office. First up was the chairman of Take-Two, Strauss Zelnick, whom several Rockstar San Diego employees have described as “reasonable.” I got a prompt return call from Alan Lewis, their top flack, but he didn't tell me much, just a version of the standard “no comment.” When I pressed Lewis about the sweatshop allegations, he replied, robotically, again and again, “It is our corporate policy — we don't comment on any rumors or speculation.” When I asked him if he was sure he didn't want to say something that might place his media behemoth in a better light, he said, “No, but thanks for reaching out to us.”

I called Rockstar San Diego, requesting to speak to the general manager (or whatever a video-game studio boss is called), but after multiple attempts — messages left — no one ever called back. According to an employee who calls himself “Captain Anonymous,” it's a workplace that might as well be in Pyongyang, North Korea; he told me, “Employees are being surveilled, and the last person to speak anonymously whose identity was presumed (not proven) was fired. They are not able to speak freely at the office, not even on their cell phones, and e-mails are being watched. It's in some ways worse than what is being reported so far. Please don't attempt to locate me personally.”

While it's tough to determine the scope of the problem at Rockstar San Diego, and tougher still to finger the culprits, it's clearly not all fun and games at the console these days.

Whoever's to blame, it's difficult to ignore the ironically blithe puffery put out by local management:

"We're hiring talented people who are as dedicated to fun as we are. Come work and play in the sun at our beautiful facility only 5 minutes from the surf."

Does the sun shine in Carlsbad after midnight?

Articles du corpus concernant la troisième étude de cas

GameSpot

1. **Red Dead Redemption 2 Boss Shares Some Shocking Stats About The Game [Update] (25/10/2018)**

Rockstar also talks about some of the content it cut from the much-anticipated PS4 and Xbox One western.

By Eddie Makuch on October 25, 2018 at 7:43AM PDT

Author Harold Goldberg sat down with Rockstar Games co-founder Dan Houser recently for a chat about Red Dead Redemption 2, and there are a number of notable takeaways. [Update: Houser and Rockstar have now clarified some of these comments, saying it was only a small handful of people working such long hours and that other employees are not expected to do the same.]

Starting off, Houser discussed the intense production of the ambitious western, saying in a piece for Vulture that some people on the development team worked 100-hour weeks several times in 2018 to finish the game. This is an alarming figure, though it is not entirely surprising. In 2010, the spouses of Rockstar San Diego employees wrote an impassioned blog post in which they criticised Rockstar's management for overworking employees on Red Dead Redemption 1. Rockstar responded to the post by saying it was "saddened if any former members of any studio did not find their time here enjoyable or creatively fulfilling and wish them well with finding an environment more suitable to their temperaments and needs."

Going back to the Vulture piece, Houser said, "We were working 100-hour weeks" for several periods of time in 2018. Oftentimes at the end of a project, developers will "crunch" to finish a game, and it appears that was also the case with Red Dead Redemption 2.

Red Dead Redemption 2 appears to be a massive undertaking. The Vulture report says the final game has 300,000 animations and 500,000 lines of dialogue. It is estimated by the author, presumably based on information from Houser or other Rockstar representatives, to be a 65-hour game, and it could have been longer. The report said Rockstar cut five hours from the game, one part of which was scaling back a love interest for main character Arthur Morgan. Apparently, the writers intended for Morgan to have two love interests, but Houser explained that "one of them didn't work," and as such, this story element was removed. Additionally, some missions got axed because "they were never going to work technically or be quite slick enough, or they felt superfluous."

One mission that got removed had Morgan on a train trying to take down bounty hunters. "It was fun at first, but then it wasn't," Houser explained. "This part of the process is always about compromise and horse trading. Everyone always loses bits of the game they love."

Regarding Red Dead Redemption 2 being a 65-hour game, this is only one estimation for its length. Everyone plays games differently, so your mileage may vary. And then of course, Red

Dead Redemption 2 has an online mode that seemingly offer plentiful opportunities to keep playing after the story credits roll.

As Houser said, game development is a fluid process, and things change all the time. What's rare is for developers to talk about this, and even more rare for one of the higher-ups at a secretive studio like Rockstar to be talking about it.

The Vulture story goes on to claim that Red Dead Redemption 2's final script for the main story alone was 2,000 pages. Rockstar reportedly paid 1,200 actors to do motion-capture work on Red Dead Redemption 2, 700 of whom also recorded dialogue. What's more, they were all represented by the acting union SAG-AFTRA, which asked its members to stop working last year amid a strike that was eventually resolved. It's not immediately clear if Rockstar had to pause production on Red Dead Redemption 2's voice and mo-cap work as a result of the strike. "We're the biggest employers of actors in terms of numbers of anyone in New York, by miles," Houser said.

Also in the interview, Houser said Rockstar might make Red Dead Redemption 3, but he isn't committing to it yet. Rockstar will only do it "if [Red Dead Redemption 2] does well enough and we think we have other interesting things to say."

Red Dead Redemption 2 launches on October 26 for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One. The multiplayer mode, Red Dead Online, is set to debut in November, and Houser said Rockstar intends for it to be "as robust as Grand Theft Auto Online."

You can read the full Vulture story [here](#).

2. Rockstar Clarifies Red Dead Redemption 2's 100-Hour Week Comments (25/10/2018)

"We obviously don't expect anyone else to work this way."

By Steve Watts on October 25, 2018 at 7:27AM PDT

As we approach the release of Red Dead Redemption 2, now is the time for the publisher to promote the game with impressive stats about just how much work went into the final product. But one number has been raising eyebrows, forcing Rockstar co-founder Dan Houser to issue a clarification.

In a lengthy interview, Houser suggested that the team worked 100-hour weeks several times throughout 2018. But now in a statement to Kotaku, he has elaborated that he was referring to the senior writing team, not the entire Rockstar development team.

Now Playing: Red Dead Redemption 2 File Size, Other Stats Revealed - GS News Update

"After working on the game for seven years, the senior writing team, which consists of four people, Mike Unsworth, Rupert Humphries, Lazlow and myself, had, as we always do, three weeks of intense work when we wrapped everything up," he said. "Three weeks, not years. We have all worked together for at least 12 years now, and feel we need this to get everything finished. After so many years of getting things organized and ready on this project, we needed this to check and finalize everything."

His clarification does square with the original piece in Vulture, which used the 100 hours quote immediately after explaining rewrites and edits. Houser's clarifying statement also goes on to explain Rockstar's general policy towards "crunch"--the widely used practice in AAA game development to put in long hours, especially near the end of a project that's preparing to ship.

"More importantly, we obviously don't expect anyone else to work this way," he said. "Across the whole company, we have some senior people who work very hard purely because they're passionate about a project, or their particular work, and we believe that passion shows in the games we release. But that additional effort is a choice, and we don't ask or expect anyone to work anything like this. Lots of other senior people work in an entirely different way and are just as productive--I'm just not one of them! No one, senior or junior, is ever forced to work hard."

This all has a tone of history repeating itself. When the first Red Dead Redemption was nearing completion, an anonymous letter alleged poor working conditions at Rockstar San Diego, including mandatory overtime. That prompted mediation from the IDGA. Houser's clarification suggests the studio does not expect its employees to work such long hours.

Red Dead Redemption 2 is coming October 26. Its online mode, Red Dead Online, will follow in November.

3. Red Dead Redemption 2 Dev Tells Employees Overtime Isn't Mandatory After Controversy (26/10/2018)

A different kind of expectation-setting.

By Steve Watts on October 26, 2018 at 7:23PM PDT

The long-awaited Red Dead Redemption 2 is finally out for PS4 and Xbox One, but Rockstar is working to counteract an unexpected controversy. Following comments about 100-hour work weeks, the studio has repeatedly made attempts to tell fans that it doesn't expect such long hours from everyone. Now it has reportedly sent that message to its own employees too.

Variety reports that Rockstar held a meeting on Friday to tell its employees that overtime is not mandatory, though it is occasionally requested and scheduled. Rockstar's Jennifer Kolbe said the meeting was held to clear up any misconceptions about what was expected of employees.

"Some people have said that they felt it was effectively mandatory because it was expected of them. In light of the discussion around this issue, we got the team together today to make sure it is clear to them that OT work is not mandatory," she said. "We are also pushing to make any OT worked more flexible in terms of schedule (i.e. 'work when makes sense for you')."

Rockstar Lincoln is said to have worked the longest hours approaching the launch of Red Dead Redemption 2, with some weeks topping 60-70 hours. The meeting came to light after Flik Green, an animation assistant at Rockstar North, spoke about it on social media. She

went on to say that when she worked at Lincoln as a QA tester she and her coworkers never assumed the overtime to be optional--but that the environment at North has been very different with more standard hours and only slight overtime.

The controversy kicked off when co-founder Dan Houser casually mentioned working 100-hour weeks several times in 2018. He later clarified that he was referring only to the senior writing team, including himself, but it had sparked a larger discussion about development crunch and the expectations put on developers.

Rockstar encouraged its employees to speak out about their own experiences, and several gave anecdotes about their time at the company. Many anecdotes noted that the studio does go through crunch, but that the environment had improved over the years and isn't as extreme as 100-hour weeks.

Red Dead Redemption 2 is coming on October 26. For more details check out our pre-order guide.

4. Red Dead Redemption 2 Devs Talk Crunch And Working Conditions (26/10/2018)



"We were told not to sugarcoat anything."

By Steve Watts on October 26, 2018 at 7:22PM PDT

Red Dead Redemption 2 for PS4 and Xbox One is Rockstar's next giant open world epic, but its impending release has been marred this week by a controversy about working conditions at the celebrated developer. In an interview, co-founder Dan Houser seemed to imply that the studio had undergone a hard "crunch" cycle with 100-hour work weeks. He quickly clarified that he was only referring to a handful of senior members of the writing team, including himself. But in a continued effort to clear the air, the studio is now encouraging employees to speak for themselves.

Tools programmer Vivianne Langdon spoke extensively in a Twitter thread about her own experiences. She said she's never worked more than 50 hours in a week, that such overtime was her choice when she was "in the zone" on solving a tricky problem, and that she was compensated for it with overtime pay. She stressed that she's not being compensated for making these disclosures, and also cautioned that her experiences may not be universal.

Another employee, interior artist Miriam Bellard, has been retweeting several employees who say they do not feel overworked, and expressing frustration with the controversy.



 **lucy**
@lucyofrivia 

Replying to @lucyofrivia


Seeing people's responses to the "100 hours" articles has been so disheartening and honestly quite upsetting to read. It's been horrible seeing friends and fellow devs sharing posts that don't reflect the current situation and telling others to boycott the game.



2:02 PM · Oct 18, 2018 

 145  32 people are Tweeting about this

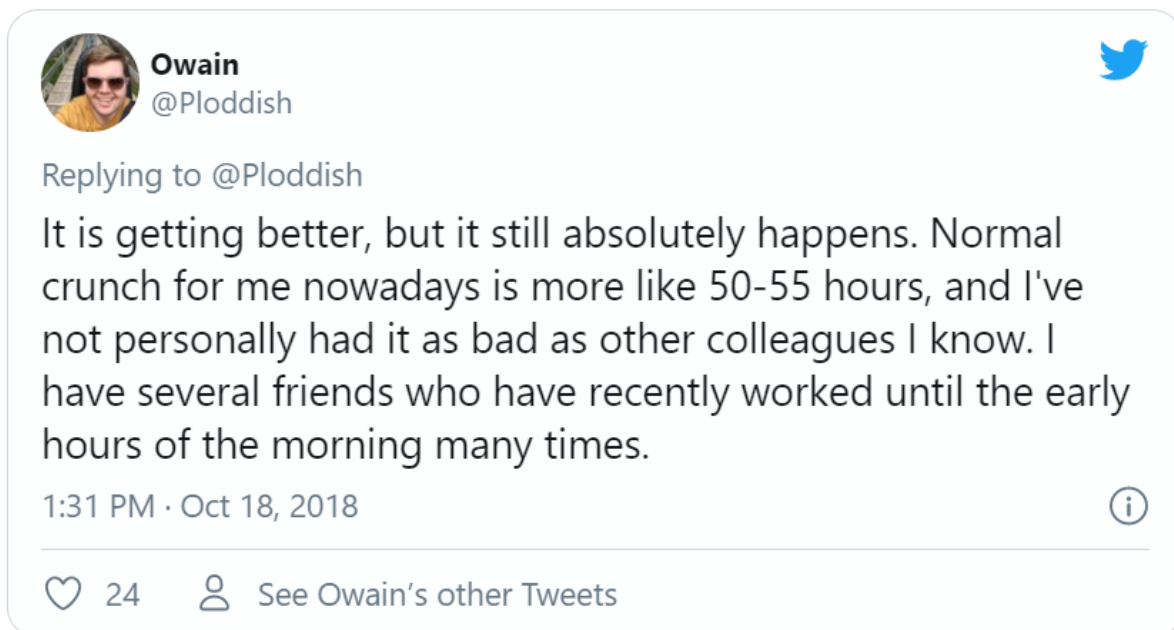
 **Rich Rosado**
@RichRosado 

Just wanted to point out that I was never asked to work anything near a 100 hour work week in the 18+ years I have been working at Rockstar. Overtime? At my own discretion, yes.

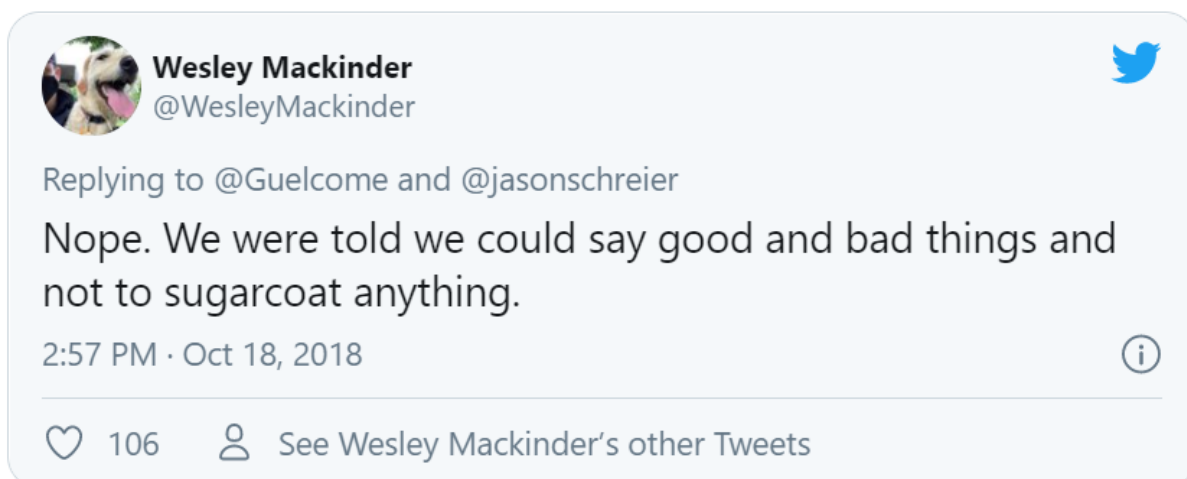
10:14 AM · Oct 18, 2018 

 91  30 people are Tweeting about this

Some employees have pointed out that Rockstar has had difficult crunch periods in the past, but that the studio has made real strides in recent years to reduce the impact of these long overtime hours.



And others have stated that they were encouraged to speak openly and honestly.



On the whole, the impression given by Rockstar employees speaking on social media is that it has gone into overtime, but within reason—not the 100-hour overtime some people interpreted Houser's initial comments as. On the other hand, employees with less positive things to say may feel apprehensive about coming forward on social media, regardless of Rockstar's encouragement to be honest.

This all comes alongside the official launch trailer, and very soon you'll be able to begin pre-loading the game through the PlayStation and Xbox digital stores. Red Dead Redemption 2 launches for PlayStation 4 and Xbox One on October 26. Its online mode, Red Dead Online, will follow in November.

5. **Red Dead Redemption2 Exec Responds To Crunch Controversy (07/11/2018)**

"I stand behind the [Rockstar] label and their approach."

By Eddie Makuch on November 7, 2018 at 4:21PM PST

One of the biggest talking points surrounding Red Dead Redemption 2 has been about the working culture within developer Rockstar Games. Co-founder Dan Houser said he and a small team worked a few 100-hour weeks to finish the game, and after this, Rockstar HR encouraged its developers to speak openly about their own experiences. Many shared stories of working overtime, but not to the point of 100-hour weeks.

While the topic of "crunch" and extended working hours is nothing new for Rockstar or the industry overall, it re-energised the discussion about the importance of a positive work-life balance. Now, Take-Two CEO Strauss Zelnick has responded to the controversy, telling GameDaily.biz that he is "incredibly proud" of Rockstar and the effort that went into making Red Dead Redemption 2. Take-Two is the parent company of Rockstar Games.

"Rockstar commented extensively on the issue. I don't think there's much to add to it. I would say that I'm incredibly proud of Rockstar Games," Zelnick said. "There are more than 2,000 members of the team who did a fantastic job bringing Red Dead Redemption 2 to audiences around the world."

Unlike 2010's Red Dead Redemption, the sequel was developed by all of Rockstar's studios together, which is where the 2,000 person figure comes from. Zelnick went on to say that Rockstar and management at Take-Two have "aligned interests" as it relates to money and culture.

"Look, we have a common culture and shared views and aligned interests, both personal and economic," he said. "Certainly, our creative interests are aligned. We all work within the same enterprise. I think there's a great deal of commonality of culture and I'm really proud of that, which is why I said I stand behind the [Rockstar] label and their approach."

Rockstar HR told Kotaku that developers at Rockstar's studios worked an average of 42.4 hours per week from January through March 2018, then 45.5 hours from April through June, and 45.8 hours per week from July through September. These numbers are the average from everyone at Rockstar working on all of the studio's projects, not just Red Dead Redemption 2, which may explain some of the stories people are telling about overly long working hours.

Another element at play here is that Rockstar developers who worked on Red Dead Redemption 2 stand to make potentially significant bonuses related to the game's performance. For the previous game, some people made five-figure bonuses, according to Kotaku. Red Dead Redemption 2 made \$725 million in its first three days, and has shipped 17 million copies already; the sequel needed just eight days to outsell its predecessor. This all suggests developers are in line for a nice bonus payday.

Disclosure: Take-Two CEO Strauss Zelnick is the interim chairman of CBS Corp., the parent company of GameSpot.

Kotaku

1. **'We Were Working 100-Hour Weeks', Red Dead Redemption 2 Head Writer Says, Then Clarifies (15/10/2018)**

Jason Schreier

10/15/18 1:25PM • Filed to: ROCKSTAR

It's long been an open secret in the video game industry that the prestigious developer Rockstar embraces overtime, and a new quote from company co-founder Dan Houser about Red Dead Redemption 2 caused controversy this morning by suggesting that it took 100-hour weeks to make. In a new elaboration to Kotaku, however, Houser said the quote had been misinterpreted, saying such a workload is not required at the studio.

In a feature published yesterday by New York Magazine about the making of Rockstar's ambitious cowboy game, which comes out October 26, Houser talked about working "100-hour weeks" en route to completion of Red Dead Redemption 2.

Here's the full quote:

"The polishing, rewrites, and reedits Rockstar does are immense. "We were working 100-hour weeks" several times in 2018, Dan says. The finished game includes 300,000 animations, 500,000 lines of dialogue, and many more lines of code. Even for each RDR2 trailer and TV commercial, "we probably made 70 versions, but the editors may make several hundred. Sam and I will both make both make lots of suggestions, as will other members of the team.""

When asked by Kotaku to elaborate, Rockstar sent over a statement, also attributed to Dan Houser:

"There seems to be some confusion arising from my interview with Harold Goldberg. The point I was trying to make in the article was related to how the narrative and dialogue in the game was crafted, which was mostly what we talked about, not about the different processes of the wider team. After working on the game for seven years, the senior writing team, which consists of four people, Mike Unsworth, Rupert Humphries, Lazlow and myself, had, as we always do, three weeks of intense work when we wrapped everything up. Three weeks, not years. We have all worked together for at least 12 years now, and feel we need this to get everything finished. After so many years of getting things organized and ready on this project, we needed this to check and finalize everything.

More importantly, we obviously don't expect anyone else to work this way. Across the whole company, we have some senior people who work very hard purely because they're passionate about a project, or their particular work, and we believe that passion shows in the games we release. But that additional effort is a choice, and we don't ask or expect anyone to work anything like this. Lots of other senior people work in an entirely different way and are just as productive – I'm just not one of them! No one, senior or junior, is ever forced to work hard. I believe we go to great lengths to run a business that cares about its people, and to make the company a great place for them to work."

Rockstar consists not just of Houser's office in New York City, which also houses the rest of the leadership team, but also of several studios in California, Boston, the UK, and elsewhere across the world.

To put things in perspective, an 100-hour week would average out to around 14 hours a day for seven days. The deleterious effects of these kind of hours have been well-documented.

Excessive overtime—or “crunch”—has long been a reality in the video game industry, one we’ve written about extensively. Although some companies have taken strides to reduce or eliminate crunch, many have not, with some top video game creators insisting that the only way to make the best games in the world is to put in extra hours. In fact, some of the world’s top game studios, like Rockstar, Naughty Dog (Uncharted), and CD Projekt Red (The Witcher), are well known for embracing crunch.

In early 2010, as Rockstar was preparing to release the first Red Dead Redemption, a group of spouses of employees at Rockstar’s San Diego studio, which was the lead team on that game and is on this next one, wrote an open letter decrying work conditions at the studio. The claims, which echoed across the video game industry, included 12-hour-average workdays, mandatory Saturdays, and the reduction of benefits.

2. Red Dead Redemption 2 Developers Speak Out After Rockstar Lifts Social Media Ban (18/10/2018)

Jason Schreier

10/18/18 8:40AM • Filed to: ROCKSTAR

Last night, Red Dead Redemption developer Rockstar Games lifted its social media policies, telling employees they were no longer banned from speaking about their work experiences on Twitter and Facebook. The move has led to a number of current staff sharing mostly positive stories from their time at the massive game company.

“First off, this was one of the most rewarding and least stressful projects I’ve worked on,” said Keith Thorburn, who works in the music department at Rockstar North in Edinburgh, Scotland. “I know what epic crunch feels like but this was managed in such a way that I felt happy and healthy. “

The social media lift comes in the wake of an industry conversation surrounding excessive overtime, or crunch, that followed Rockstar co-founder Dan Houser’s comment to New York Magazine saying “we were working 100-hour work weeks” in 2018. On Monday, Rockstar sent further comments to Kotaku, attributed to Houser, saying that he was referring to himself and his writing team, for a three-week period, and that “we don’t ask or expect anyone to work anything like this.”

The comments have triggered a firestorm of controversy over the past few days, as former Rockstar employees spoke up on Twitter about their own crunch experiences at the company—with ex-Rockstar PR man Job Stauffer writing that “during the GTA IV era, it was like working with a gun to your head 7 days a week”—and other observers criticized the company for its overtime practices. Stories about Rockstar have circulated in the video game industry for years, most notably in 2010 around the release of Red Dead Redemption, when a group of spouses of Rockstar San Diego employees put together a letter excoriating the company.

Typically, Rockstar tells all of its employees to refrain from discussing work-related matters on social media, but last night, the company's HR boss sent out an e-mail to staff at several of the company's studios saying they acknowledged that some felt frustrated by the narrative that had circulated and saying that employees would now be allowed to speak up about their experiences, with "no need to sugarcoat anything." The move has led current staff to share mostly positive things about their employer.

"In the time that I've been at the studio, work practices have definitely improved," said Phil Beveridge, a coder at Rockstar North. "Crunch on Red Dead Redemption 2 has definitely been a lot better than it was on GTA V, where I was pulling a month of 70+ hour weeks (while being told by my boss at the time to go home...)"

"I have never worked more than maybe 50 hours a week (and that's a rare occurrence), but I generally work about 2-6 hours of paid overtime per week," said Vivianne Langdon, a tools programmer at Rockstar San Diego.

"I have been at Rockstar for two years, and worked on RDR2," said Danny Bannister, a vehicle artist at Rockstar North. "I have never worked anywhere close to 100 hrs a week. There was some crunch sure but nothing ridiculous. We worked hard on the game but we weren't being abused. I think the most I did on RDR2 was 60 for one week."

(Just to conceptualize that, 60 hours would be five 12-hour days or six 10-hour days.)

"As a worker at Rockstar North, I should probably add my voice to the conversation going on around crunch," wrote tools designer Tom Fautley. "We do crunch. I've not seen anybody forced to work 100 hour weeks, but I've definitely seen friends get closer to that figure than is healthy. I am asked, encouraged and expected to work overtime (both nights and weekends) when coming up to a big deadline. The most I've ever worked in a single week during my nearly-five years here has been 79 hours, but that was not recently."

(Rockstar lead artist Miriam Bellard has rounded up a number of these stories on her Twitter feed, if you want to see them all.)

We've been looking into and reporting on workplace conditions at game studios for years now, and specifically Rockstar for a few months. For that story, we have been granting anonymity to both current and former employees in order to ensure they feel comfortable speaking candidly. We've heard a wide range of experiences and will publish the story when it's ready.

3. **Inside Rockstar Games' Culture of Crunch (23/10/2018)**

Jason Schreier

10/23/18 1:20PM • Filed to: ROCKSTAR GAMES

In the final year of development on Red Dead Redemption 2, the upcoming Western game, the top directors decided to add black bars to the top and bottom of every non-interactive cutscene in hopes of making those scenes feel more cinematic, like an old-school cowboy

film. Everyone agreed it was the right creative move, but there was a catch: It would add weeks of work to many people's schedules.

"You can't just slap black bars on the cinematics we've already shot," said one person who worked on the game. "You have to reframe the camera so that the cinematics flow in a particular way, and you're emphasizing what you weren't emphasizing initially with that shot."

With no hope of delaying the game any further—Red Dead Redemption 2 had already been bumped internally before it was announced, then publicly delayed twice—there was no way for the developers at Rockstar Games to add more time to their schedule. Instead, they would have to crunch, putting in extra nights and weekends in order to redo these scenes and deal with the rest of the massive workload that was ahead of them. Would the black bars prove to be worth it?

This has been a common occurrence in the last years of development on a Rockstar game. Dan and Sam Houser, the co-founders of Rockstar and creative leads on Red Dead Redemption 2, are renowned for rebooting, overhauling, and discarding large chunks of their games. Through eight years of development on Red Dead Redemption 2, the Housers and other directors have made a number of major changes to the story, the core gameplay mechanics, and the game's overall presentation. It's a process that some see as essential for making a game of this nature, but it's also one that leads to a great deal of overtime, and has contributed to a culture of crunch at Rockstar Games that is impossible to deny, according to interviews with dozens of current and former employees. This isn't crunch that came in a burst of a few weeks—it's crunch that, those employees say, has lasted for months or even years.

Two Sundays ago, a glowing article in New York Magazine about the making of Red Dead Redemption 2 ignited controversy thanks to a quote, left unexamined and unexplained, in which Dan Houser described working "100-hour weeks" to get the game out the door. The following Monday, Houser said in an e-mailed statement to Kotaku that he was only referring to the writing team and only for a period of three weeks. On Wednesday the company lifted its social media policies, allowing employees to share thoughts on their own experiences with crunch.

The article and its fallout have led to widespread industry discussion of crunch and plenty of questions about work conditions at Rockstar. Does the company behind Grand Theft Auto V, the most lucrative video game of all time, overwork its employees? How much unpaid overtime went into Red Dead Redemption 2? Is crunch required to make games with the scope and scale of Red Dead Redemption and its sequel, which comes out on Friday and is likely to be a massive commercial success? What is Rockstar's culture really like?

This account, a peek inside one of the most secretive companies in gaming, is based on interviews with 34 current and 43 former employees, over phone calls and e-mails and texts. Last Wednesday, Rockstar told current employees that they were allowed to speak to journalists (so long as they gave HR a heads up), but almost all of the people who spoke to me for this story requested anonymity. Some said they feared retaliation for being candid

about their negative experiences at Rockstar, and some said they were worried about coming across as dishonest for sharing positive stories.

In addition, Rockstar provided us interviews with 12 current employees over group video chats as well as its head of publishing, Jennifer Kolbe, who oversees all of Rockstar's studios.

The tale of Red Dead Redemption 2's development is complicated and sometimes contradictory. For some people at Rockstar, it was a satisfying project, an ambitious game that took reasonable hours and far less crunch than the company's previous games. Many current employees say they're happy to work at Rockstar and love being able to help make some of the best games in the world. Others described Red Dead 2 as a difficult experience, one that cost them friendships, family time, and mental health. Nobody interviewed said they had worked 100-hour weeks—that would equate to seven 14-hour days—but many said their average weekly hours came close to 55 or 60, which would make for six 10-hour days. Most current and former Rockstar employees said they had been asked or felt compelled to work nights and weekends. Some were on hourly contracts and got paid for overtime, but many were salaried and did not receive any compensation for their extra hours. Those who are still at the company hope that their 2018 bonuses—expected to be significant if Red Dead 2 does well—will help make up for that.

Many of the most harrowing stories shared by current and former employees— anecdotes of damaged relationships, mental breakdowns, and heavy drinking at work—were impossible to print without risking that the individuals involved might be identified. Given Rockstar's complex non-disclosure agreements and possible repercussions for violating them, we erred on the side of being as cautious as possible in this piece, which meant leaving out some of the roughest details we'd heard.

Rockstar consists of thousands of people in eight offices across five countries, so it's no surprise that its employees would have a wide variety of experiences. Last week, Rockstar shared several statistics with Kotaku and other outlets, including the average reported weekly hours across all of its offices from January to September of this year. From January through March 2018, according to those statistics, Rockstar employees worked an average of 42.4 hours. From April through June, they hit 45.5 hours. And from July through September, 45.8 hours. The averages include people from all disciplines and working on all of the company's projects, which helps explain the discrepancy between those numbers and the anecdotes we've heard. People whose work on Red Dead Redemption 2 was finished earlier, or who were working on different projects (like Grand Theft Auto Online) that weren't in heavy crunch mode this year, may have worked far fewer hours. Those who have worked on Red Dead Redemption 2 describe the cinematics team, the design team, and especially the quality assurance team as facing some of the worst crunch.

In an e-mail on Monday, Kolbe offered another explanation for the discrepancy, saying that the "averages for Red Dead only would not be meaningfully different" and that days off were actually included in those averages, although weeks off were not. "However, the explanation for the discrepancy between the cross-company data and the individual anecdotes is just that: you are hearing individual anecdotes which are usually self-selecting

both for the most extreme ends of the scale as well as for people who clearly have issues with our process,” she said.

“There are absolutely people who, at various times, worked really long hours,” Kolbe added. “There are also individuals who are exaggerating what their actual hours were, as we have confirmed their self-reported numbers at the time as substantially lower from what they recall having done in their online postings, and we have offered to share the evidence of that with you if given permission from those people.”

(We could not discuss any individuals’ stories with Rockstar, as we had agreed to protect their identities.)

Even among those who said they crunched hard on Red Dead Redemption 2, accounts varied. Some said they left or were planning to leave because they felt mistreated, while others described Rockstar as a great place to work, aside from the long hours. Several current staff said they were infuriated by Houser’s comments implying that overtime at the company was voluntary. “I didn’t volunteer for it,” said one current developer. “I just know that’s the cost of working where I’m at.” We’ve heard the highest number of tough crunch stories from two offices in particular: Rockstar Lincoln in the United Kingdom and Rockstar’s main headquarters in New York City. From other Rockstar studios, we’ve heard a variety of positive and negative stories. (One studio we did not hear much from was Rockstar India, although those at other offices said they’d heard that overtime was bad there as well.)

Personal experiences may differ, but anecdotes from current and former employees paint a consistent picture: Rockstar Games is a complicated and sometimes difficult company, one where working “hard” is equated to working for as many hours as possible. Many told Kotaku they felt pressured to stay at the office at night and even come in on weekends if they wanted to succeed. Despite Dan Houser’s quote that “No one, senior or junior, is ever forced to work hard,” people who have worked and currently work at Rockstar say that overtime is mandatory. In conversations, several used the phrase “culture of fear,” with some saying that they were worried about lawsuits or other retaliation for speaking up.

“We care deeply about the games... You can become obsessive about certain things.” - Rockstar head of publishing Jennifer Kolbe

“The overall tone at Rockstar is that what the company values most is not the bugs you fix but the hours you put in,” said one current employee, echoing a view shared by most of the people interviewed for this article.

Rockstar’s Kolbe disagreed with this characterization but acknowledged that many members of her team have worked evenings and weekends in the lead up to Red Dead Redemption 2’s launch.

“In an ideal world, I’d like to think that we could have all of our work done so that we didn’t actually have to spend late nights here, but at the same time I think we do push ourselves really hard,” she said. “I think that’s across the board. It’s not just the games team, I think it’s the people involved in all aspects of what we’re creating here in that we will push ourselves to get the best piece, whether it’s the best piece of creative, whether that’s a

television commercial, a trailer, whether that's back-of-box copy... We care deeply about the games. I think that can sometimes result in a little bit of— You can become obsessive about certain things.”

Many video game studios crunch, and it's rare to find a big game that didn't require excessive overtime to make. But accounts from dozens of current and former Rockstar employees describe a company that appears to embrace crunch more than most, one where people have traditionally struggled to find success without working long hours. Rockstar makes some of the most impressive games in the world. The question is: What's the cost?

Rockstar's crunch culture first became public nearly nine years ago. On January 7, 2010, an anonymous author published a letter claiming to be from a group of “wives of Rockstar San Diego employees.” The account, which was well-publicized, criticized Rockstar's California studio for forcing staff to work 12-hour days for six days a week in order to finish the first *Red Dead Redemption*, which would come out four months later, in May 2010. At the time, Rockstar waved it off as “a few anonymous posters on message boards,” but people who worked on the game say the letter accurately depicted what they went through.

“If you left early on a weekday or weekend, you'd get dirty looks,” said one former employee of Rockstar San Diego who told me they worked an average of 70 hours a week during *Red Dead Redemption*. “You'd feel the stare down, and sometimes you'd see it as you were leaving. There was this culture of, if you don't put in the hours, you're not worth working here.”

In the thick of this crunch, Rockstar San Diego began offering laundry service, according to two people who worked there, which as another former employee pointed out left some people feeling uncomfortable—they wouldn't even have enough spare time to do their own laundry?

“The temperament from these guys has always been: It should be a privilege to serve in this organization,” said a person who was there. “And if you don't agree with that, there's a long line of people waiting to take your place.”

That's a common sentiment from those who have had negative experiences at Rockstar, especially those who were there during the first *Red Dead*. “I would normally never speak about my time at Rockstar—it's not my style,” said another person who worked at Rockstar San Diego during that game's development, “but we absolutely were forced to work six-day weeks in the six to nine months leading to launch.”

Even Rockstar's management now admits that it was a problematic time for the company, despite originally dismissing the anonymous letter.

“We certainly looked at *Red Dead 1* and what came out of that, and knew we did not want to have a situation like that again,” said Rockstar's Jennifer Kolbe. “I think naturally as the team has grown in its working practices together, we have made improvements into how the teams are run.”

Rockstar's next project after Red Dead Redemption was L.A. Noire (2011), which went through a rough production under the Australian studio Team Bondi, and then came Max Payne 3 (2012), a third-person shooter about an alcoholic vigilante. People who worked on Max Payne 3 have described it as a "death march," a brutal period of time for the company that involved long nights and plenty of mandatory crunch.

"I'm gonna be honest, a lot of the details of my life during that time are pretty blank," said one person who worked on Max Payne 3 at Rockstar's New England office in Massachusetts. "It was a lot of getting into the office at 9 or 10 AM and leaving at 10 or 11 at night."

That person, who was salaried, did not get paid for their extra hours. Instead, they had to hope that the game would sell well enough to net everyone on staff a healthy bonus.

Bonuses are a big deal at Rockstar Games. The standard compensation package for a Rockstar employee includes an annual bonus, one that grows substantially during years when the company ships a game. It's tied to a number of factors, Rockstar says, including the sales of that game and individual employee performance. Some former Rockstar employees described receiving hefty bonuses after the first Red Dead Redemption, sometimes reaching the mid-five digits. But Max Payne 3 did not sell well, according to the former Rockstar employee, so bonuses in 2012 were significantly lower than expected.

Then came 2013's Grand Theft Auto V, which required crunch from many who worked across Rockstar's studios. One former employee at Rockstar's Toronto office shared documents showing how many hours one team had worked during a week in the months leading up to GTA V's release. Those who had worked fewer than 60 hours were marked with the word "Under" in red letters. One person who worked at one of Rockstar's offices in the United Kingdom said that the stress of constant overtime for nearly a decade had cost them their relationship and their mental health, although the person also insisted that it was one of the best places they'd ever worked. "They were—are—one of the best companies going," the person said. "But the thing is, for the people who work for them, it's not just a job, it's an absolute way of life."

"Maybe they didn't tell anyone 100 hours, but they definitely told us 80." - Former Rockstar employee

It's not uncommon to hear current and former employees describe Rockstar as a family—or, less charitably, as a "cult." Some have shared stories of the company going out of its way to help them out during hard times, like family deaths or serious illnesses. Some said they saw Rockstar as a sort of trial by fire: Work there for a few years, put in the extra hours, and your resume will be armed with a Grand Theft Auto or a Red Dead Redemption, giving you the prestige to get hired by any game development studio you'd like.

During the development of Grand Theft Auto V, Rockstar began formally shifting to a new policy. Instead of different studios or clusters of studios working on each project, as they had for Red Dead 1 and Max Payne 3, all of Rockstar's offices would combine forces. For some departments, that helped alleviate the workload.

Others said they still had it rough, however. Three people who worked at Rockstar San Diego between 2011 and 2016 recall a period where they were told that overtime wasn't optional. "It was mandatory 80 hours for basically the whole studio," said one person who was there. "If you don't have any work to do on Red Dead 2, just test GTA V for another eight hours." Said a second: "Maybe they didn't tell anyone 100 hours, but they definitely told us 80. Concept artists were sitting there being glorified QA."

A current Rockstar San Diego employee also confirmed that they had been asked to work 80-hour weeks for periods back then. That'd be an average of 11-hour work days—10am to 9pm—for all seven days of the week.

In order to keep track of hours, Rockstar asks many employees to log into the company's proprietary bug-tracking software, BugStar, every day when they get into work, then log out when they leave. (Some Rockstar offices use other software to track their hours.) Employees are also told to log their individual tasks, which Rockstar says is for project management purposes, so the company can know how long it takes to fix bugs or implement features. It's an environment that has made some staff feel as if they're constantly being watched, and several current employees have shared stories of being called into their manager's office and asked why they aren't working more than 40 or 45 hours a week.

"The idea that Rockstar cares about its employees and their health is laughable," said one former San Diego employee who left during production of Red Dead Redemption 2. "I was pushed further into depression and anxiety than I had ever been while I worked there. My body was exhausted, I did not feel as though I was able to have any friends outside of work, I felt like I was going insane for much of my time there and I started drinking heavily... Now, I have heard from some friends that are still working there that some improvements have been made, but Dan's statement about crunch being optional is ridiculous. It is optional if you want to lose your job or never move forward in your career."

When Red Dead Redemption came out in May 2010, it was a massive critical and commercial success. It was widely seen as one of the greatest games of all time, and it was no surprise that Rockstar greenlit a sequel.

Red Dead Redemption 2, announced in October 2016, has been in some form of development since the beginning of 2011. Those who have worked on the game over the past seven years have expressed nothing but positivity about it, and even those who feel bitterly about how Rockstar treated them acknowledge that working on the sequel to Red Dead was creatively satisfying. "The work I did there was the most fun, most interesting work I've ever done," said one former Rockstar employee who otherwise had nothing but negative things to say about his experiences with crunch, management, and the company as a whole. "I think I enjoyed the actual work more than I have doing really anything."

Current and former employees use high praise when talking about Red Dead Redemption 2, describing it as unlike anything anyone has played before. It's poised to be one of the most technically impressive games of all time. It was also developed under a great deal of crunch.

The word “crunch” is something of a misnomer. It implies a short period of time toward the end of a project—crunch time, the final opportunity for everyone to make the game as good as possible. But in the video game industry, crunch can happen any time, for a variety of reasons. Whether there’s a big publisher milestone coming up, some executives are coming to town, or the creative director wants to look at a new demo, there are many periods when game developers might have to work nights and weekends to finish big tasks.

For some people working on Red Dead Redemption 2, crunch started as early as 2016. For others at Rockstar, crunch periods started in the fall of 2017, a year before the game’s release date. Even when the company wasn’t in official crunch mode, dozens of current and former employees say they’ve felt compelled to stay late for a variety of reasons. “Rockstar pressures employees to put in overtime in several direct and indirect ways,” said one current Rockstar developer. “Coming in on weekends is perhaps the only way to show you are dedicated and care. So you can be very efficient and hard-working during the week, but if you don’t show up on the weekend, you’re accused of not doing your share and will be constantly harassed.”

In conversations and e-mails, six current and former employees all independently used the term “culture of fear” to describe their experiences at Rockstar, in large part because of that overtime pressure. “There is a lot of fear at Rockstar,” said a former employee, “fear of getting fired, fear of under-performing, fear of getting yelled at, fear of delivering a shitty game. For some people fear is a great motivator, for others it just incites rebellion.” Some current employees, when asked, said they’d experienced nothing like this, noting that it would all be dependent on their department and individual manager. But those who have worked in several of Rockstar’s offices have described feeling like they had to be in the office as much as possible out of fear of getting yelled at, having their bonuses docked, or losing their jobs.

Even over the past week, as Rockstar’s management sent multiple messages to employees telling them that they were welcome to talk about their experiences, some current staff said they were terrified of being open. Last weekend, Rockstar North co-studio head Rob Nelson sent an e-mail to everyone at the company acknowledging that management was looking to improve “the way we approach development at this scale” and promising that nobody would be targeted for sharing feedback. “He reiterated an offer he made last week that if any of us wants to talk to him, he’s happy to do so,” said a current employee, “but everyone I’ve spoken with is still afraid to open up.”

One common fear at Rockstar is that if you leave during a game’s production, your name won’t be in the credits, no matter how much work you put in. Several former Rockstar employees lamented this fact, and Rockstar confirmed it when I asked. “That has been a consistent policy because we have always felt that we want the team to get to the finish line,” said Jennifer Kolbe. “And so a very long time ago, we decided that if you didn’t actually finish the game, then you wouldn’t be in the credits.”

Kolbe later told me that for Red Dead Redemption 2, Rockstar was “planning to recognize many people who made a contribution, including many former employees,” which turned

out to be a list of their names on the company's website. That list includes those who worked on Red Dead Redemption 2 for years but left before the game shipped, leading Rockstar to exclude their names from the in-game credits. This appears to be the first time Rockstar has credited former employees in a fashion like this.

"Rockstar pressures employees to put in overtime in several direct and indirect ways." - Current Rockstar employee

For some, crunching on Red Dead Redemption 2 was a choice, one that several proud current employees told me they made because they wanted to help ensure that the game was as good as possible. Many have argued about the ethics of voluntary crunch—and the pressures it creates on one's co-workers—but quite a few Rockstar staff insisted that their overtime had not been mandatory. They were workaholics, they told me. They wanted to put in that extra push to make Red Dead 2 great.

For others, crunch emerged for other reasons. During development of Red Dead Redemption 2, several sources say, there were many points where the Houser brothers weren't pleased with how the game was shaping up. They made major changes to the map and the camp system, a core part of Red Dead Redemption 2 that involves protagonist Arthur Morgan's gang of fellow criminals moving around the world. "There was a point where the Houser bros. were extremely disappointed at how the game was turning out," said a former Rockstar employee. "They didn't like the gameplay, didn't find it fun or interesting, and this triggered an overhaul on a lot of different things."

Even something as simple as changing the name of a city could lead to tons of extra work. At one point, Red Dead Redemption 2's biggest city was called New Bordeaux, two sources confirmed, but when Rockstar found out that the open-world game Mafia III (developed by 2K, which is also owned by Rockstar parent company Take-Two Interactive) had used that name, they changed it to Saint Denis. That meant taking voice actors into the dialogue booth for a whole lot of re-recording, which meant a whole lot of extra work for anyone involved with cinematics—not to mention all the artwork and interface changes.

Ask any game developer what the most important part of making games is and they'll likely give you a single-word answer: iteration. What that means is experimenting and prototyping and changing your game until you learn what works best. Inevitably, that means throwing out work that's already done, and even more inevitably, that means that an entire team will have to put extra hours into a game. Many game developers see this as one of the reasons that crunch is unavoidable, especially for those at the end of the pipeline. The audio team, for example, can't work until other parts of the game are finalized.

"You cannot possibly accurately plan out a project as complicated as RDR2," said a current Rockstar employee. "There are always going to be unexpected problems or dependencies that arise that generate bottlenecks which are going to require somebody get some work done quickly, otherwise 20 other people are held up. If someone is looking for an absolute 9-5 no surprises type job, then there are plenty of those jobs available in different industries that someone who works in games is more than qualified to do."

Yet Rockstar's crunch feels different than that of other studios. For years, whispers have circulated in industry circles about crunch at the company behind *Red Dead Redemption 2*, and there are plenty of people with stories to tell.

Over the course of reporting for this article, I heard a wide range of varying and often contradictory opinions and anecdotes. Even within the same office, one team might be going through brutal crunch while another team works standard nine-hour days. One current employee at Rockstar NYC, for example, told me that they'd been working 60- to 70-hour weeks for the past two years. They said that they can't see themselves doing this kind of work for that much longer. But they also said they didn't see how else a game like *Red Dead Redemption 2* could be made.

"I think one of the big misunderstandings that I see a lot in comments and articles is that this isn't number crunching," said the employee. "We have an understanding that we're trying to make a work of art more than just churning out a product. If I was just churning out a product, [at] 5 p.m. I'm heading out. But we're making something you've never seen before."

The employee said they'd reached out because of Dan Houser's comments implying that crunch was limited and voluntary at Rockstar—comments that the employee said were infuriating to them and others in their office. "We got a few e-mails where they were like, 'Look, guys, we need to be hitting these deadlines, doing this—I don't see any butts in the seats on Saturdays,'" they said. They added that their crunch had "100 percent had long-term ramifications" on their friendships and relationships, yet they'd do it all again if they could. "This game would have never come out if we did not put in the hours that we did," the employee said.

A second Rockstar NYC developer also said they reached out because of Houser's comments. "While nobody I know worked 100 hour weeks, many of us worked 60-80 hour weeks for the past one or two years," they said. "To hear one of the heads of the company effectively go on record as saying none of that ever happened has been a huge blow to morale at a time when we should be celebrating."

A third Rockstar developer in the New York office said they'd had far more positive experiences. "We crunch far less than articles so far have presented and there is no 'secret shaming' of people who leave early," that person said.

A fourth current developer, also in New York City, said they were terrified even to reach out to me, and that they felt like they worked long hours under an "abject culture of fear." A fifth employee at Rockstar New York said their past few years had been great. "I would really hate for all of Rockstar's management to get vilified when some managers/leads really are doing a phenomenal job and genuinely care about their employees," that person said.

As with any massive, multi-national company, experiences at Rockstar can differ drastically. Yet there are a few common themes. The current Rockstar employee who said they'd crunched far less than articles have presented also brought up a point echoed by many others: At Rockstar, being in the office is valued above all else. "Rockstar does have a

pervasive issue with the ‘appearance of work,’” that person said in an e-mail. “They like seeing people at their desks (they don’t allow work from home unless for medical reason and even then they strongly urge PTO [paid time off]). They also like people staying for dinner and you do see a bit of shame if you haven’t stayed until dinner (7:30) in a few weeks.”

At Rockstar’s New York City office, dinner has been catered three to four nights a week since the heaviest crunch started, in fall of 2017, according to those who spoke to me. To some teams, this wasn’t presented as a voluntary option. One e-mail shared with Kotaku from the fall of 2017 makes it clear that crunch was required, starting with three nights a week.

On Twitter over the past week, Rockstar employees have shared a number of positive stories, with many, especially at Rockstar North in Edinburgh, Scotland, stating that crunch on Red Dead Redemption 2 was the easiest they’ve ever had it. Although Rockstar explicitly told employees not to “sugarcoat” any of their stories, outside observers were skeptical that anyone would publicly trash their current employer. Indeed, when I spoke to some of those who tweeted, some who responded said they had been honest but may have left out some parts of their stories—and that they were hoping that this month’s events might lead to change for those Rockstar staff in departments that had it rougher.

Former employees have also publicly shared negative experiences. Job Stauffer, who worked in PR for Rockstar, said on Twitter that he had worked weekends during his time at the company. “It’s been nearly a decade since I parted from Rockstar, but I can assure you that during the GTA IV era, it was like working with a gun to your head 7 days a week. ‘Be here Saturday & Sunday too, just in case Sam or Dan [Houser] come in, they want to see everyone working as hard as them.’”

“It was never about working, it was always about, you want that good bonus so you need Dan and Sam to see you sitting there.” - Current Rockstar employee

Privately, several current employees told me that this hasn’t changed. Those who didn’t work in the New York City office shared stories of everyone having to work extra hours whenever the Housers came to town, while those who do work in New York echoed Stauffer’s comments.

“There’d be Saturdays that I’d go there with nothing to do,” said one. “I’d sit in the office for six to eight hours just in case Sam or Dan was there, so they could see me. It was always dictated to me about my bonus. It was never about working, it was always about, you want that good bonus so you need Dan and Sam to see you sitting there.”

Said another: “The stories you’ve heard about people coming in to be visible for the Housers (more frequently Dan than Sam) are 100% true... I myself have been told at least once to walk a lap around the floor on an otherwise slow Saturday so that he could see there were people around.”

When asked about this, Rockstar head of publishing Jennifer Kolbe said she found it shocking. “I can’t speak to any particular manager that might say that type of stuff,” she said. “I don’t know the last game review with Dan or Sam that actually flowed over to a

weekend... I'd like to believe that we don't believe in the idea of mandatory face time, if that makes sense. I think it's more if you have work that needs to get done, we expect it to get done."

Kolbe said she used to come into the office nearly every weekend until around two years ago, when she had a child. She said she found it productive to be there when other people weren't around, so she could catch up on e-mails and other work without having to take any meetings. "I don't know if I was inadvertently sending a message to people that because I was here, they needed to be here," she said. "Now that I look back, I don't know. I would've hoped they would've stayed home so I could get my stuff done."

And what of other studios? Some who currently work for Rockstar North have shared positive experiences, both on Twitter and privately with Kotaku, outside of those in the scripting or design department, who say they've been hit pretty hard by crunch on Red Dead Redemption 2. One current Rockstar North staffer said their hours have ranged from 40 all the way up to 80 per week during crunch. "I love working there, during my time I've had multiple promotions, get to make great games and I feel the pay is ok/good," they said in an e-mail. "Outside of crunch hours the job is amazing." A second current Rockstar North staffer described a bleaker situation: "Not once have I approached 100 hour weeks, even in the worst of crunch. I have, however, been on a steady death march of mostly mandated 50-60 hour weeks for quite honestly years."

(To conceptualize this, a 50-hour week would be five 10-hour days, say 10am to 8pm. A 60-hour week would add a full Saturday or Sunday to one's work schedule.)

Two current employees at Rockstar New England, which is located in Andover, Massachusetts, both shared glowing stories. "I really can't imagine working at another game company at this point," said one. "I'm working on the best products with amazingly talented people using the best tools and pipeline in the industry under a company that puts the quality of the game above anything else. I'm also working very reasonable hours and I'm very well off financially. It's a comfortable and exciting career, and they take care of us." A third, also at Rockstar New England, said they loved working at the company but that they'd been told to work 55- to 60-hour weeks during crunch over the past year.

In San Diego, some said things have changed drastically from the days of the first Red Dead Redemption and that anonymous letter from employees' spouses, while others said they've felt pressured to work nights and weekends. Two current staffers each said they'd been asked to work more hours, although they weren't given specific guidelines or quotas. "It's a culture thing," said one. "You're going out to lunch and everyone's talking about work hours—how many hours you've done, how many you've logged in. The culture values being a workaholic."

Some Rockstar staff said they were paid annual salaries, so they didn't get any extra money for putting in hours on top of their standard schedules. Others said they were paid hourly, although several said they'd compared their wages to those co-workers making annual salaries and found that they'd have to work overtime just to make the same amount. (The people on annual salaries tended to be more senior, so it follows that they were paid more.)

And then there's Rockstar Lincoln. Of all of the current Rockstar employees who reached out to tell their stories, nearly a dozen worked at Lincoln. More than a dozen former employees from that office also chimed in with their own experiences, painting a bleak picture. Even some current staff who worked at other offices and told me they had positive experiences at Rockstar acknowledged that Lincoln had serious issues. If crunch culture is a problem across Rockstar, then at Rockstar Lincoln, it appears to be an epidemic.

At many game studios, there's one department on the very bottom of the totem pole, a place where it's tough to get a lot of respect: Quality Assurance, or QA, where people play different sections of the game in as many ways as possible, trying to find all of the bugs. Although QA testers are essential to the success of a game, they're also seen by many game studios as low-skilled and dispensable.

Rockstar has a few QA departments, but a large number of its testers work at one particular office: Rockstar Lincoln, located in the English city of the same name. Current and former employees of Rockstar Lincoln describe it as a tough place to work, one where the testers are paid low wages, asked to work extremely long hours, and subject to strict security practices.

"The QA department at Rockstar Lincoln has been working mandatory OT since August 2017," said one current employee. "In October 2017 we officially began our crunch and have been in this crunch since to this date." As Rockstar has confirmed, Lincoln's testers have been asked to work on evenings and weekends since then, starting with three nights a week and later moving up to five, and starting with one weekend day per month and later moving up to every weekend. Anyone who wanted a two-day weekend would have to work an extra weekend day on another week, which meant 12 straight days of work between days off.

Even before then, however, some staff said they were working overtime. Some explained that testers were hired on a temporary contract basis, and they'd felt compelled to work extra hours in order to get permanent jobs. "A large amount of staff are on rolling temporary contracts and live in the hope that they will be extended and able to pay rent as the end of their contract approaches," said one current tester. "I don't feel like anyone is comfortable speaking out in the hopes that they can be extended long enough to be made permanent. Staff are often reminded how lucky they are, simply to be working for Rockstar."

"The QA department at Rockstar Lincoln has been working mandatory OT since August 2017." - Current Rockstar employee

"I have never suffered from depression before working at Rockstar," said a former Lincoln tester. "Now some time after leaving it's a recurring issue for me... One tester who worked below me told me he had gone to the doctor for help dealing with depression, was asked where he worked and when he replied Rockstar, the doctor said. 'For god's sake, another one.'" Two different spouses of Rockstar Lincoln employees contacted me to share stories, saying they hadn't seen much of their partners lately.

Others said they had positive experiences as well, with one current Rockstar tester even calling it “the greatest place I have ever worked,” outside of the crunch. But, they said, “This type of work should never be placed on people to maintain over the course of an entire year and beyond.”

Only some of Lincoln’s testers were paid overtime. People working in the localization department received annual salaries, as did lead testers, creating an uncomfortable situation where some testers were getting paid more than their leads. Some told me they didn’t want promotions as a result.

On top of the overtime, those who work or have worked at Rockstar Lincoln describe restrictions they saw as unfair. Three testers said they weren’t allowed their cell phones at their desks during the work day, and had to put them in lockers before starting their shifts, which made it difficult to deal with doctor’s appointments or other essential activities aside from their breaks. Two said that after a tester spotted a drone that might have been filming through the windows, they were no longer allowed to open the blinds at night. Testers said they weren’t allowed to eat hot food at their desks—desks that were shared between day- and night-shift employees.

Rockstar’s Jennifer Kolbe confirmed these details, saying in an e-mail, “We believe that the vast majority of our team in Lincoln feels positively about work conditions there, and these specific difficulties mentioned are either not generally considered real hardships or are not based on any current reality.”

For some, that was certainly the case—except for the hours. “Ultimately, the job is a good job,” said one former tester. “And Rockstar is a good company to work for. When it’s not crunch, it’s not a bad place at all. The money’s alright, there’s a bonus at the end of the year. It’s just that crunch practically kills people.”

In conversations, some testers said they’d missed out on important events and time with their families due to this crunch. Others said their hours were monitored down to the minute, with managers reacting harshly to any missed time. One former Lincoln tester said they’d arrived late at work one day due to a heavy snowstorm that had led other businesses in the area to shut down. “There was no, ‘Thanks for making it in,’” the tester said. “It was, ‘Can you work back that?’”

“I feel like I’m going to need to get to know my partner again,” said a current tester.

On Friday, October 19, Rockstar Lincoln told its staff that overtime would no longer be mandatory. Although Kolbe characterized this as a clarification of a previous policy, and said it hadn’t been mandatory before, nearly a dozen current and former Rockstar Lincoln employees have reached out to Kotaku since then to say otherwise. All said that this overtime was a regular part of their schedule, and one even said they had received e-mails using the word “mandatory” to describe crunch.

In an e-mail on Monday, Kolbe offered more clarification: “We have spoken with the Lincoln team to make sure it’s clear that the scheduled extra time is requested, and yes we have only been requesting what we feel is really needed to get this game finished at the quality

level we need. From talking to our team last week, we have heard that there were references to ‘mandatory’ overtime from some managers. At the same time we don’t believe that was a blanket message for the Lincoln team, and that is borne out by the comments from some that while they knew it was not in fact mandatory, they felt an obligation to do it. Either way, it is clear to us that our communication has not been perfect and we take responsibility for the situations in which the team has been confused or has received confusing messages from us. We have pushed hard over the last years to build and optimize the structure of our QA team, including doubling the size of the permanent team since 2014 and introducing scheduled day and night shifts so that we can increasingly avoid asking the QA team to work overtime. We will continue to make progress on that.”

Last Friday, Kolbe shared numbers that appeared to show normal work hours at Rockstar Lincoln, despite the company’s request that daytime testers work nights and weekends. From October 9, 2017 to May 13, 2018, she said, the average work week at Lincoln was 38.4 hours. From May 14, 2018 to August 5, 2018, she said the average work week was 45.4 hours. But if these averages accounted for days off, as Kolbe had later clarified, then the data was skewed—and it certainly doesn’t mesh with the experiences of those who shared their stories.

“Some of us on dayshift feel a bit cheated by the averaged out hours,” said a current Lincoln employee in an e-mail last weekend. “It diminishes the work we’ve put in, if some higher-up tries to gloss over or down-play the actual hours we were forced to crunch. Rockstar doesn’t need to use such underhanded tactics to make themselves look slightly better, all they should do is resolve the issue at hand—which they have started to, credit where credit’s due.”

Some at Rockstar Lincoln are optimistic about the change to optional overtime, although two lead testers have lamented the fact that their extra hours remain unpaid. “While I’m still a bit skeptical as to whether this voluntary overtime can remain free of peer pressure/job security/‘passion’ anxieties, it’s comforting to see leads/supervisors commit to no more than two overtime shifts per week and two weekend shifts a month,” said the current employee. “Especially considering how much we were supposed to be crunching in November. Now I’m in control of how much I can work, it feels great. I’ll actually have meaningful free time in an evening!”

“Some of us on dayshift feel a bit cheated by the averaged out hours.” - Current Rockstar tester

From people across all of Rockstar’s studios, we’ve heard mixed feelings: Pride at having worked on a game like Red Dead Redemption 2. Weariness after putting in so many hours. And anger that Rockstar’s management has seemingly downplayed the crunch in public over the past week.

As Rockstar’s approach to work has made headlines over the past couple of weeks, the company has tried to get on top of things by taking some unusual steps. Normally a secretive institution that would prefer the press stay away and their developers not talk publicly about their jobs, Rockstar last week made the unprecedented move of allowing its

developers to speak publicly about work conditions. It also opened up its doors to Kotaku—in a particularly unconventional way.

It was cold last Thursday when I went down to Rockstar's office in SoHo, Manhattan at the company's invitation. Rockstar had learned that I was working on this story earlier in October, a week before Houser's comments set off public discussion of crunch culture, and said it would make its employees available for interviews. Over the course of a few conversations, some of Rockstar's top people, including head of publishing Jennifer Kolbe, told me that they took this issue very seriously and wanted to make sure I had a chance to speak to staff on the ground at all of their studios.

What followed was one of the strangest interview experiences I've ever had. Rockstar's head of PR and communications, Simon Ramsey, sat with me at a table in a fourth-floor conference room. Ramsey said we'd be video-chatting with staff from all across the world, and after some brief technical issues, we were faced with two boxes on a screen. In one box, on the left, two employees sat on a couch at Rockstar New England. In another box, on the right, three Rockstar North employees also sat on a couch. They all wore casual clothes, some adorned with Red Dead Redemption logos and slogans. We exchanged quick introductions, and then I was given free rein to interview them about their work-life balances and crunch experiences. All five of them. At once.

Over the next two hours, the company also brought in groups from Rockstar San Diego, Rockstar Lincoln, and Rockstar Toronto, a mix of junior and senior employees. Rockstar said I could quote them but asked that I not use any of their names.

It's difficult to gauge whether someone's being completely candid about their work experiences when they're on a video chat with a group of their co-workers, a journalist, and the company's head of PR. Still, the 12 employees who spoke to me on these calls offered perspectives that are worth sharing, much like those who publicly tweeted about their experiences.

"I know when I feel like I need to put in the extra time—you certainly have weeks when you feel like you're going to have a lot more hours than others," said one Rockstar New England employee. "The other side of it is that it's been very easy for me to balance my work life and my personal life."

"I've worked one day of the weekend in five years," said a lead at Rockstar North, noting that things had changed drastically for them since the development of Grand Theft Auto V. "I've got people who just want to go home at 5 p.m., and that's not an issue... I see in the company that we've changed, and that people feel more like they're being treated well, but there are still some cultures that remain from the old days."

"Out of all those projects, Red Dead Redemption 2 has been the easiest I've experienced personally," said one Rockstar San Diego employee. "Core hours, including lunch, would be nine hours. I'd say I probably get in an extra two hours on top of that most times. During crunch I probably put in another hour or two on top of that."

“Nobody’s ever told me, ‘You need to work X amount of hours,’” said a Rockstar Toronto employee. “We will on occasion be asked if we have availability on weekends.”

After one of these calls, Ramsey turned to me and asked what I thought so far. I told him that I believed these stories but was skeptical that anyone could be transparent under interview circumstances like this. He seemed surprised.

This tracks with my encounters with Rockstar higher-ups over the past week. While they’ve made efforts to discuss the allegations of overwork and have loosened restrictions on their employees speaking up, I’ve not gotten much sense that they see that workers will inevitably fear retaliation from bosses, no matter how much those bosses say they can speak freely. It’s human nature. In an e-mail sent to Rockstar employees this past weekend, Rockstar North studio co-head Rob Nelson said that a few people had mentioned wanting some place to submit their thoughts anonymously, and that the company was looking into setting that up. That will undoubtedly inspire more candid feedback.

What plenty of Rockstar employees say they believe, even those who spoke to me privately, is that things have changed for the better since the days of the first Red Dead Redemption. It’s a sentiment that Rockstar’s Kolbe also shared, when I asked her if she thought crunch was sustainable.

“I think we’ve realized that it’s not sustainable,” she said, “but I don’t necessarily think we realized it through burnout. I think we’ve realized it through having children, because I think that naturally means you’re going to work less hours. I think even for the people who don’t have children, who have gone through crunch periods on other games, they approach the game they then go onto next a little differently. Because no matter who you are, your health is a concern to you. I think everyone approaches each new project with the goal of: It’s got to be better than what I did last time.”

Kolbe added that many members of her team have worked together for 15 to 20 years. “We want to continue working together, but we also know that certainly as you get older, it gets harder,” she said. “We’re dealing now with the generation after mine. They have very different ideas about work-life balance than my generation has, and they are bringing that into the company, and I think that’s a positive thing. They probably think we’re all crazy, but I think it actually has changed our ideas of how you can work.”

Just how much has changed at Rockstar depends who you ask. During the Red Dead 1 days, at least, life at Rockstar appealed to a certain type of person—a workaholic, one who loved the thought of spending long hours with their co-workers, pushing as hard as possible to finish the gargantuan, ambitious projects that have made Rockstar one of the most beloved companies in games. Some employees compared it to a family. One described making games at Rockstar as feeling like fighting a war together. Others used the words Stockholm Syndrome.

“If you’re really passionate about the game and working there, and want to prioritize that over your life, it’s a really great place,” said a former Rockstar San Diego employee. “But if you want to prioritize your life, it’s not.”

One lead at another major game studio told me that in the last few weeks he'd interviewed two different candidates from Rockstar. He asked why they were looking to leave. "[They] said, 'If you work at Rockstar, it is expected you have no life outside of Rockstar,'" he told me.

"If you're really passionate about the game and working there, and want to prioritize that over your life, it's a really great place. But if you want to prioritize your life, it's not." - Former Rockstar employee

What's become clear over the past week is that many of those who work and have worked for Rockstar—even those who have had positive experiences—want things to change. They want a better atmosphere for themselves and their colleagues, one where overtime is an exception rather than the rule, and where working on a dream game doesn't mean burning themselves out.

Or, at the very least, they want a future where all employees are paid for their extra hours.

"I'm not writing because I want to harm the company or the game," said one current employee in a recent e-mail. "I'm proud of both and I stand by them. I think the incredible amount of time and effort put into the game will show and I can't wait for people to see it next week. I'm writing because I think this is a unique opportunity to raise our voices against the insanity of crunch, and that Rockstar really could change for the better as a result. If that happens, maybe other studios will follow suit."

Some fans have asked if they should avoid buying or playing Red Dead Redemption 2 to show support for those who had tough experiences making it, but many of Rockstar's current and former employees—even those who had the worst things to say about the company—say they're against the idea. For one, those who put long weeks into the game want people to see what they've done. Also, given that this year's bonuses will be based on royalties, any sort of large-scale boycott may hurt Rockstar employees more than it helps, some current employees have said. What fans can instead do, those people say, is speak out about crunch and workplace issues like this, helping put public pressure on the company.

On Friday, Rockstar will release Red Dead Redemption 2, and next month, it will launch Red Dead Online, which some current employees are now crunching to finish. Then, Rockstar will move on to new projects. The work of making video games at Rockstar will continue, and it is unclear how much the process of creating them will change.

Is it possible to make great art without unreasonable sacrifice? That's a question that's haunted the video game industry for decades, and it's one that remains difficult if not impossible to definitively answer. Can Rockstar continue to make great games without putting in the crunch hours that have been so pervasive in its long history of successful art? Is crunch just, as CD Projekt Red CEO Marcin Iwiński once told me in an interview about his studio's mega-hit *The Witcher 3*, a "necessary evil" in game development? These are questions that will be debated for years to come. For now, at least, many hope that by coming together to share their stories, they can push for some change at Rockstar Games.

4. Months After Labor Controversy, Rockstar Converts Game-Testers To Full-Time (06/08/2019)

Stephen Totilo

8/06/19 10:30AM • Filed to: ROCKSTAR GAMES

Workers at Rockstar Lincoln, the British studio that does the lion's share of testing for the Grand Theft Auto and Red Dead Redemption games, are being converted from contractors to full-time employees, three sources familiar with the studio have told Kotaku.

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Stephen Totilo

The move will remove the uncertainty of working on temporary contracts, a positive turn at a company with notoriously arduous working conditions. The changes were set to go into effect on August 1, according to two sources. It's unclear how many people this affects, nor whether it extends to temporary workers at other Rockstar studios. We hoped to get more details from Rockstar itself, but a company rep declined to comment.

This nevertheless appears to be an improvement at a studio where full-time and contract workers helping make Rockstar's biggest games felt the brunt of the company's crunch culture. Last October, a Kotaku report about the development across Rockstar's numerous studios highlighted Lincoln as one of the toughest places to work. A Lincoln employee had told us that the testing team had been working mandatory overtime for a year, and Rockstar confirmed that testers had been asked to work on evenings and weekends.

The contract workers had it rough, a source explained last October:

"A large amount of staff are on rolling temporary contracts and live in the hope that they will be extended and able to pay rent as the end of their contract approaches," said one current tester. "I don't feel like anyone is comfortable speaking out in the hopes that they can be extended long enough to be made permanent. Staff are often reminded how lucky they are, simply to be working for Rockstar."

Kotaku had also reported last year that testers at Lincoln weren't allowed to keep their cell phones at their desks, and instead must keep them in lockers. This policy, a source now tells us, has been rescinded.

One source told Kotaku last week that attrition at Lincoln has been high, speculating that the impact that negative press about Rockstar's labor practices last year may have combined with a high level of worker burnout to result in this policy change.

Rockstar is also experimenting with "flex-time," two of the sources said, allowing workers to shift when they do their assigned work hours.

Such granular changes to workplace policy are seldom made public nor covered in gaming news, but in recent years, journalism, activism (and at times a mix of both) have brought greater attention to the taxing labor involved in making the games so many people enjoy. Last Friday, it was even the topic of a Netflix news show.

Additional reporting by Jason Schreier

5. 18 Months After Red Dead Redemption 2, Rockstar Has Made Big Cultural Changes (15/04/2020)

Jason Schreier

4/15/20 11:48AM • Filed to:ROCKSTAR

Last fall, nearly a year after the release of Red Dead Redemption 2, top Rockstar executive Jennifer Kolbe sent out an email to staff with a list of bullet-pointed initiatives to improve Rockstar's culture.

Rockstar, the game developer behind Grand Theft Auto and many other highly selling, often controversial games, had been widely criticized a year prior for cultural issues and extensive overtime.

"In these last several months we have undertaken a lot of work across every area of the company, looking at our processes to determine what works and what doesn't, what we are great at and what we could improve," Kolbe wrote in the email, which was reviewed by Kotaku. "We hope that the majority of you have felt some of these positive changes already and those that haven't soon will."

Kolbe went on to outline some of their plans for 2020: flexible schedules for developers at Rockstar's studios, from California to the United Kingdom; management and leadership training; anonymous surveys to collect feedback from employees; regular updates on the company's future games and updates; and better communication all around. The tenor of the email was straightforward: after the controversies of 2018, Rockstar wanted to do better. They also wanted to cut back on crunch, the ubiquitous practice of working nights and weekends to finish video games.

"We have taken conscious steps to improve our approach to developing games in order to reduce the need for overtime," Kolbe wrote. "We realise we still have plenty to do in this area and will continue to take steps so we can more accurately predict and schedule games and DLC in a way that is more sustainable but still allows us the creative flexibility to iterate on the incredibly ambitious and complex games we make."

Kolbe's email was another in a long line of big changes—or promises to change—that Rockstar has made in the 18 months since the company faced a public reckoning of its extensive overtime and other cultural issues. In October of 2018, while promoting Red Dead Redemption 2, Rockstar co-founder Dan Houser told an interviewer that he and his writing team were working "100-hour weeks" to finish the game. The claim set off an internet firestorm and led to investigations into crunch culture at the developer of some of the

world's most popular video games, including the Grand Theft Auto series, where employees regularly worked months worth of 55-to-60-hour weeks to finish new games.

Crunch wasn't the only endemic issue at Rockstar, which employs roughly 2,000 people in studios across the globe. A subsequent investigation by Kotaku revealed a sexual harassment allegation against one of the company's top executives, Jeronimo Barrera. (Barrera has denied the allegation.) For years, led by Houser, his brother Sam, and an inner circle of other veterans including Barrera, many of Rockstar's offices embraced a frat-house-like culture that often included heavy drinking, parties, and excursions to strip clubs.

Now, however, the climate appears to be shifting at the longrunning game studio. Interviews with 15 people who either work at Rockstar or left within the last year paint the picture of a company that's changing in significant ways. As one Rockstar staffer described it to Kotaku, management seems to now be set on "running the company like a company." (Rockstar declined to provide an interview or comment for this story.)

"It does seem like a healthier culture overall," said a second Rockstar developer. "We'll see in a year or two if I'm pulling my hair out, but it does seem like we're moving in the right direction for being a company the size we are."

Even today, with production slowed down and staff working from home due to the coronavirus pandemic, the company's management seems to be saying the right things. "They keep emphasizing that it's normal to not be productive and our focus should be on our health and taking care of our families," said a third Rockstar employee.

Since the release of Red Dead Redemption 2, Rockstar has made several major management changes. Last spring, Dan Houser went on a sabbatical that later turned into his departure from the company. Throughout the year, Rockstar replaced studio heads at its San Diego, California and Lincoln, UK offices. The company also booted directors and managers who were said to contribute to cultural issues. Rockstar held meetings about conduct and sexual harassment, and made plans to bring in a coaching organization called Mindful Talent for management training.

It's been a slow process, Rockstar developers say, but it's led to improvements to some people's lives. "It's like there's an operation to get rid of bad eggs," said one Rockstar employee. "There are still bad eggs around, don't get me wrong, but it feels like their days are numbered."

Rockstar's leaders have told employees that they hope to mitigate crunch on the next big project by improving their technology pipelines and planning out more of the game's beats in advance. One belief shared by Rockstar employees is that Dan Houser's departure will lead to fewer last-minute rewrites and overhauls—the type that led to a great deal of overtime on Red Dead Redemption 2. Rockstar has also implemented "flexitime" scheduling for many employees, allowing them to work variable hours based on their preferences and needs.

One plan that management has laid out for the next game, a new entry in the Grand Theft Auto series, is to start out with a moderately sized release (which, by Rockstar's standards,

would still be a large game) that is then expanded with regular updates over time, which may help mitigate stress and crunch.

But there's a catch: Rockstar's next big project is still early in development. When production ramps up and the game gets closer to launching, will overtime come with it? Will Rockstar's employees then face the pressure of months of crunch in order to finish all of the ambitious work it takes to make a Rockstar game? "The changes have been good enough for me to stay and give them a chance but let's see what happens down the road when the pressures of delivering a final product become reality," said one developer.

"There are still bad eggs around, don't get me wrong, but it feels like their days are numbered."

Even with some disliked managers gone, there's concern at some Rockstar offices that the long-rooted culture of workaholism may rear up again when it comes time to get a new game out the door. "The issue with Red Dead Redemption 2 wasn't just scope," said a former employee. "The culture was very much centered on the idea that if you aren't doing overtime you aren't working hard."

Still, staff at various Rockstar offices say they feel like the company has taken big strides over the past year and a half in ways that will improve people's lives even if there is crunch on the next game.

One of the Rockstar studios whose employees felt the most pain during the development of Red Dead Redemption 2 was Rockstar Lincoln, based in the United Kingdom, which handles quality assurance testing. Testers at Lincoln painted a bleak picture, telling stories of an atmosphere in which crunch was mandatory, staff were expected to put phones in a locker while at work, and the blinds had to be closed to prevent fans from snooping.

Since 2018, Rockstar has increased salaries for Lincoln testers and converted all of the contractors to full-time staff. Lincoln now tells testers that overtime is optional, and that it will be paid at a 1.5x rate. Some of those previous policies have been revoked, to the point where one employee said the "company culture has become more fun." Testers are now allowed to use phones at their desks.

"I wish you were there [in 2018] to hear the global sigh of relief when people learned that overtime became optional," one Lincoln tester told me in an email last year. A second said that "Rockstar have been a lot better" since Kotaku's reporting on work conditions at the studio.

Staff at Rockstar North in Scotland, at Rockstar San Diego in California, and in Rockstar New York in Manhattan also shared optimistic outlooks on the company's cultural changes, praising the new quality-of-life improvements and communication from management, although some were careful to temper their comments with skepticism. Some complained of low salaries (expected to be augmented by overtime) or managers who still maintained much of the frat house culture that characterized the Rockstar of years ago.

Even those who spoke the most optimistically of Rockstar's cultural changes were quick to mention that it has been and will continue to be a slow, sweeping process, one that may take years to fully come to fruition. But some who were making exit plans two years ago now say they can see themselves staying at Rockstar for the long haul, as long as this trajectory continues.

Cautious optimism is the common theme.

IGN

1. **Rockstar Clarifies Statement About 100-Hour Work Weeks for Red Dead Redemption 2 (15/10/2018)**

To make the biggest game of the year, Rockstar devs put in some serious overtime.

By Nick Santangelo

Updated: 15 Oct 2018 10:30 pm

Posted: 15 Oct 2018 7:58 pm

A recent interview with Rockstar Games suggested Red Dead Redemption 2 saw weeks of massive overtime work; however, one of the company's executives has clarified his statements. Rockstar co-founder and Vice President of Creativity Dan Houser told Vulture that the team behind Red Dead 2 worked very long weeks this year.

"We were working 100-hour weeks," Houser said, initially in a comment that has since drawn ire on social media given the continued discussions about the nature of "crunch" developing in the gaming industry.

In a statement provided to IGN, Houser clarified his comments, saying the 100-hour work weeks sentiment was explicitly about his writing team, which included himself, Mike Unsworth, Rupert Humphries, and Lazlow Jones.

Houser explained that this specific group felt it had to work those long hours "to get everything finished" but that "we obviously don't expect anyone else to work this way.

"Across the whole company, we have some senior people who work very hard purely because they're passionate about a project, or their particular work, and we believe that passion shows in the games we release. But that additional effort is a choice, and we don't ask or expect anyone to work anything like this," he continued.

Houser's full statement reads:

There seems to be some confusion arising from my interview with Harold Goldberg. The point I was trying to make in the article was related to how the narrative and dialogue in the game was crafted, which was mostly what we talked about, not about the different processes of the wider team. After working on the game for seven years, the senior writing team, which consists of four people, Mike Unsworth, Rupert Humphries, Lazlow and myself, had, as we always do, three weeks of intense work when we wrapped everything up. Three weeks, not years. We have all worked together for at least 12 years now, and feel we need

this to get everything finished. After so many years of getting things organized and ready on this project, we needed this to check and finalize everything.

More importantly, we obviously don't expect anyone else to work this way. Across the whole company, we have some senior people who work very hard purely because they're passionate about a project, or their particular work, and we believe that passion shows in the games we release. But that additional effort is a choice, and we don't ask or expect anyone to work anything like this. Lots of other senior people work in an entirely different way and are just as productive – I'm just not one of them! No one, senior or junior, is ever forced to work hard. I believe we go to great lengths to run a business that cares about its people, and to make the company a great place for them to work.

2. Update : Here's What Rockstar Employees Have To Say About Working On Red Dead 2 (18/10/2018)

Current Red Dead Redemption 2 developers give their side.

By Gabe Gurwin

Updated: 18 Oct 2018 8:54 pm

Posted: 18 Oct 2018 6:10 pm

Update 10/18/18: Added gallery with additional tweets from Rockstar employees. Please note that these tweets only come from those currently at the studio.

Current Rockstar Developers Talk About Working Conditions

Following controversy surrounding Rockstar co-founder Dan Houser's comments on 100-hour work weeks during the development of Red Dead Redemption 2, the studio has seemingly given its employees the opportunity to speak openly about working conditions. Experiences from several current Rockstar employees lined up with Houser's second statement, in which he claimed that only he and a select portion of the writing team "crunched" to this degree during certain points in the game's development.

Rockstar North engine programmer Timea Tabori wrote a thread of comments about the studio and its culture, adding that "there is so much positive change happening behind closed doors."



Timea Tabori @TimeaTabori · Oct 18, 2018



I have worked at Rockstar for over 5 years. We have been given permission to talk openly about our experiences. This is likely to be far from perfect and it also doesn't claim to be universal but it is honest. A thread.



Timea Tabori
@TimeaTabori

In over 5 years, never have I been asked or pressured to work anywhere near 100 hours. I have occasionally worked maybe 50 hours a week at most and nobody demanded or even expected that.

12:45 PM · Oct 18, 2018



63



See Timea Tabori's other Tweets

Rockstar San Diego tools programmer Vivianne Langdon echoed those comments, adding that overtime at the studio was paid (a recurring question after Houser's original comments):



Vivi Langdon 🏳️‍🌈 @viiviat · Oct 18, 2018



Replying to @viiviat

R* has granted permission for us to speak frankly about this issue on social media. I want to stress that this is my uncurated personal opinion, I am not being compensated for this post in any way and am making it voluntarily. I'm only going to speak to my personal experience.



Vivi Langdon 🏳️‍🌈
@viiviat

I have never worked more than maybe 50 hours a week (and that's a rare occurrence), but I generally work about 2-6 hours of paid overtime per week.

5:45 AM · Oct 18, 2018



142



22 people are Tweeting about this

This move comes following a widely-shared tweet by ex-Rockstar and Telltale developer Job Stauffer, who said that he was pressured to work extremely long hours during his time at the company.



Job J. Stauffer is on an Immersive Fitness Journey  
@jobstauffer

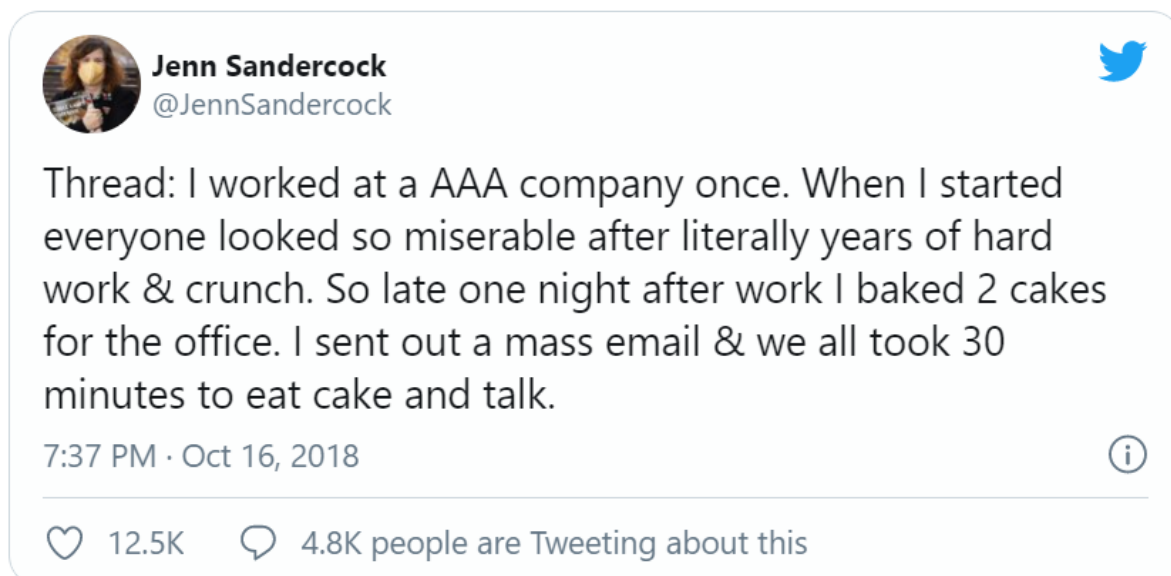
It's been nearly a decade since I parted from Rockstar, but I can assure you that during the GTA IV era, it was like working with a gun to your head 7 days a week. "Be here Saturday & Sunday too, just in case Sam or Dan come in, they want to see everyone working as hard as them."


Jason Schreier  @jasonschreier
Truth is, I've been working on an article about work conditions at Rockstar for quite some time now. Yesterday's story has ramped things up. If you work or have worked there and want to talk about your experiences, even anonymously, my DMs are open and I'm at jason@kotaku.com.

12:21 AM · Oct 17, 2018 


 1.2K  643  Copy link to Tweet



Former L.A. Noire developer Jenn Sandercock shared that she was told to stop holding 30-minute "Cake Days" each week by Rockstar (made clear in a separate tweet), who published and co-developed the game.



Jenn Sandercock 
@JennSandercock

Thread: I worked at a AAA company once. When I started everyone looked so miserable after literally years of hard work & crunch. So late one night after work I baked 2 cakes for the office. I sent out a mass email & we all took 30 minutes to eat cake and talk.

7:37 PM · Oct 16, 2018 

 12.5K  4.8K people are Tweeting about this

Allegations of poor working conditions at Rockstar are not new. Similar concerns were brought up during the end of development for the first Red Dead Redemption, specifically from the Rockstar San Diego studio.

The company has made no official statement on the current controversy since Houser's clarification, but its choice to allow current developers to share their feelings might be seen as an alternative.

3. New GTA in Development, Rockstar Reportedly Making Changes to Fix Crunch Culture (15/04/2020)

And how Red Dead 2 crunch talk may be improving how Rockstar works.

By Jonathon Dornbush

Updated: 15 Apr 2020 11:25 pm

Posted: 15 Apr 2020 8:39 pm

Rockstar Games is working on a new Grand Theft Auto, but the next entry in the series is reportedly a long ways from release, and may take on a different scope due to alleged changes at the Red Dead and GTA studio. An anonymous source close to Rockstar Games has confirmed to IGN that the Red Dead Redemption 2 company is next working on a new entry in the Grand Theft Auto series, as first reported by Kotaku.

Kotaku's report, which places a larger focus on workplace changes allegedly happening at Rockstar following the massive discussions on crunch in game development that centered around Red Dead Redemption 2, also notes, however, that the next GTA is "early in development." The report further goes on to explain that, due to the changing nature of conditions at Rockstar, the company is considering ways of altering production to avoid similar crunch issues. One such plan is to allegedly have the next GTA, whether it be called GTA 6 or some other title, be "a moderately sized release (which, by Rockstar's standards, would still be a large game) that is then expanded with regular updates over time, which may help mitigate stress and crunch."

Of course, given that the next Grand Theft Auto is early in development, it remains to be seen how the later parts of development could affect these plans to curb crunch, the process by which developers work frequent overtime in order to hit certain release dates and milestones.

According to the new report, Rockstar has attempted to root out the causes of widespread crunch reported at the studio, including changes in leadership throughout many of its offices, outside management training, and plans to improve technology pipelines and scheduling for production on the next game. And while there's still concern at the studio, according to the report, many anonymous devs speaking to Kotaku were cautiously optimistic about the future.

IGN has reached out to Rockstar for official comment on the alleged changes at the studio, as well as further comment on the next GTA, and will update this story should they respond.

Conversation around Rockstar and the effects of crunch ignited after Rockstar co-founder Dan Houser, who has since left the company, commented about working 100-hour weeks on Red Dead 2. Though Houser later clarified his statement was about his specific writing team, discussion around crunch at the studio surged. Rockstar employees were speaking openly about their experiences at the studio, while reported surfaced that, in response to all of the discussion, Rockstar explicitly told employees overtime was not mandated.

Crunch and its impact on developers has of course been a discussion before Red Dead 2's development, and one we've seen continue since, including a CD Projekt Red executive indicating crunch would be needed on Cyberpunk 2077. And recent reports suggested that The Last of Us Part 2's delay from February to May allegedly led to more sustained crunch, rather than alleviating it.

GTA 6 has not officially been announced, and though we've seen plenty of attempts to fool us into believing GTA 6 has been announced for previous years, Rockstar has remained quiet about what will follow Red Dead 2, as well as its continued work on Red Dead Online and GTA Online.

Polygon

1. Rockstar responds to blowback over Red Dead Redemption 2 team's '100-Hour' Workweeks (15/10/2018)

'We obviously don't expect anyone else to work this way'

By Allegra Frank @LegsFrank Oct 15, 2018, 3:43pm EDT

Rockstar Games renewed the ongoing conversation of game industry crunch after co-founder Dan Houser suggested in a New York Magazine interview that the development team worked multiple 100-hour weeks on Red Dead Redemption 2. In response to the backlash, Houser sought to clarify his comments, although those concerned about crunch at the studio may not be satisfied.

New York Magazine's story about the making of Rockstar's new Red Dead noted that writing and edits on the game's script were "immense," with Houser explaining, "We were working 100-hour weeks" earlier this year.

Houser told the magazine that the entire script of Red Dead Redemption 2, if stacked, "would be eight feet high," and that the game features 500,000 lines of dialogue. The game's NPCs have 80-page scripts, said writer Lazlow Jones.

Game developers, writers and others criticized what read as a flippant, even boastful admission of overwork at Rockstar.

"If you are crunching, the people above you are not doing their job correctly or are incapable of doing it correctly at all," tweeted Adam Orth, who developed the VR game Adrift. "They are the problem, not you. You can usually spot them a mile away, before you even set foot in the studio."

Dylan Wildman, who worked on Grand Theft Auto 5 before leaving Rockstar Games, wrote, “The only way to fix the problem is from the very top. We need to move away from traditional release calendars and hype.”

Reached for comment, Houser explained that he was only referring to some of the game’s writers when discussing 100-hour weeks. Here’s Houser’s statement:

“There seems to be some confusion arising from my interview with Harold Goldberg [in New York Magazine]. After working on the game for seven years, the senior writing team, which consists of four people, Mike Unsworth, Rupert Humphries, Lazlow and myself, had, as we always do, three weeks of intense work when we wrapped everything up. Three weeks, not years. We have all worked together for at least 12 years now, and feel we need this to get everything finished. After so many years of getting things organized and ready on this project, we needed this to check and finalize everything.

More importantly, we obviously don’t expect anyone else to work this way. Across the whole company, we have some senior people who work very hard purely because they’re passionate about a project, or their particular work, and we believe that passion shows in the games we release. But that additional effort is a choice, and we don’t ask or expect anyone to work anything like this. Lots of other senior people work in an entirely different way and are just as productive – I’m just not one of them! No one, senior or junior, is ever forced to work hard. I believe we go to great lengths to run a business that cares about its people, and to make the company a great place for them to work.”

Even with that amount of writing, and even if the team did so as “a choice,” working upward of 100 hours a week sure sounds a lot like crunch. And with numerous studios and staff members subjected to tight deadlines, extreme hours and disproportionate pay, that kind of behavior will never be taken lightly by industry members further down the chain of command.

Hearing people in game development talk proudly of the number of hours they averaged a week, as if it was a badge of honor and they were admirable survivors, is not totally uncommon. What it is, though, is dangerous — an implication that spending almost all your waking hours working is something worth bragging about.

As for Red Dead Redemption 2, the game finally ships Oct. 26. Meanwhile, Red Dead Online, its multiplayer mode, remains in the works for a November beta launch.

2. **What will be left of the people who make our games ? (17/10/2018)**

Our games are getting bigger, but the cost is way too high

By Katherine Cross Oct 17, 2018, 9:16am EDT

Illustration by James Bareham

Buried deep in Harold Goldberg’s wide-ranging feature for Vulture about the making of Red Dead Redemption 2 is a reminder of why one of Rockstar’s founders, Dan Houser,

rarely gives interviews: his stunning admission that “we were working 100-hour weeks” at multiple points in 2018.

In a report peppered with numerical superlatives (1,200 actors; 300,000 animations; 500,000 lines of dialogue; 2,000 pages of script; a budget in the millions), it’s that hundred-hour statistic that shocks the senses the hardest, and it raises a troubling question: If this is what’s required to make vast open-world games, then are those games worth it?

Sixty-hour workweeks are the mainstay of gaming’s crunch culture, which is destructive enough, but the idea of a hundred-hour week causes one’s eyes to water. Spread out over that week, that equates to seven 14-hour days, with no weekend break. There are only 168 hours in a week, after all.

It’s not at all hard to see why more and more game developers are calling to unionize the industry. It would hardly be without precedent. Those 1,200 actors that Rockstar employed? All are said to belong to the SAG-AFTRA trade union — a point highlighted in the Vulture piece. SAG-AFTRA contracts ensure fair working conditions for both voice actors and motion-capture actors, limiting the number of consecutive hours they can work and guaranteeing a fair wage for those hours. Rockstar’s bottom line somehow weathered that; why not allow the developers writing the code and designing the game to receive the same guarantees?

But we must also address the vise that’s pressing devs from both ends here: Our demands as players and the demands of studio heads alike are sated by the emotional labor of these professionals.

That, in the end, is what fills the void left by material want. In short, the knowledge that you’re, as Houser put it, “on a mission to entertain” is meant to be its own reward, offsetting the hours away from one’s family, the uncompensated overtime and, of course, the emotional performance of the perfectly compliant employee who loves every “customer” equally.

You’re making people happy, doing a dream job, bringing digital fantasies to life. And even when you’re not physically at the office for 60 or 100 hours a week, you’re there psychologically. Recent firings at ArenaNet and Riot Games make it abundantly clear that the studio owns your personality after hours on social media as well. Every developer is also expected to work as unpaid PR, providing a smiling, pliable face for the company in every interaction with the public.

How, exactly, did we get here?

WHEN ALL WORK BECOMES PR

“Emotional labor” is, as so many concepts bandied about by activists on social media, a term that can be overused to the point of meaninglessness. Its origins in the sociology of labor have been all but forgotten.

Arlie Russell Hochschild, a groundbreaking sociologist who studied gender and labor, coined the concept of emotional labor in her 1983 study *The Managed Heart*, a work that never

quite receives the credit it deserves for radically altering our understanding of what “work” entails. At the heart of the book is a study of flight attendants that reveals how they affect a certain personality to please customers, one entirely at odds with their true feelings.

It was the result of years of advertising that used the flight attendants themselves as a product — from the “Pan-Am smile” to National Airlines’ “Fly Me” ads, there was an unsubtle implication of compliance and servitude imbued in every part of the profession. Flight attendants were meant to be sexy maternal figures, who would smilingly wait on you hand and foot.

This shifted the very nature of “the product,” that essential unit in capitalism. In aviation, it was no longer the journey and the seat in which you took it, but also the personality of the flight attendants themselves. The consequences of this change remain with us to this day, even after decades of unionization and reforms.

Hochschild’s basic insight — that customer service jobs sell “service with a smile” — may seem obvious today, but it was quite radical in 1983. The other insight of her ethnographic work is less well-known but considerably more chilling: People become alienated from their own personalities the longer they perform this kind of work. In short, they lose some sense of their true selves as they lurch from one performance to another. The line between true self and the Pan-Am smile personality became blurry, at best.

Hochschild’s definition of emotional labor, then, was fairly strict and applied only to those cases where it was part of one’s job, exchanged under capitalist conditions. Per Wikipedia’s summary, such jobs:

require face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact with the public;

require the worker to produce an emotional state in another person;

allow the employer, through training and supervision, to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of employees.

Three decades later, the trend Hochschild identified in its embryonic stages has entered a refined middle age, dominating every part of our economy. Personalities are commodities, and in gaming, it’s no different. Indeed, gaming was arguably built on the idea that the people who make our games should be thrilled at the opportunity to do so. Developers are artists who have the rarest of chances: the opportunity to do what you love for a living.

And yet devs are often told that there are a hundred people eager to take their place if they step out of line; a hundred people who love gaming with all their hearts, who would gladly take the job and eagerly work those 100 hours a week. If you complain, you clearly don’t love it enough.

What is this if not emotional labor? The performance of not only love, but love defined in a narrow, abusive way, specifically for public consumption?

Beyond that, developers are increasingly expected to conform to a certain personality type, both in and out of the office.

Riot Games has come under sustained fire recently, after searing investigative reports by Kotaku's Cecilia d'Anastasio revealed a culture of sexism at the company. "Rioters," those who worked at the company, were expected to conform to the narrow archetype of a "core gamer." This was defined not only by competency in and passion for video games, but by a certain coarse personality that delights in abusive "humor."

PEOPLE BECOME ALIENATED FROM THEIR OWN PERSONALITIES THE LONGER THEY PERFORM THIS KIND OF WORK

If one is coarse beyond those bounds, however — in speaking out against sexism, for instance — then one has offended the almighty customer and must be removed. Your personality is hewn into the shape of the lowest common denominator, supplicant to a toxic culture at both the office and online. Developers are expected to work unlimited hours at the office, and serve the customer with a smile and a servile attitude during every possible interaction. In this way, Hochschild's typology is exceeded: You must perform for both the public and your fellow employees, in a way that alienates you from your true self.

The people who make your games, no matter how they're treated at the office or on social media, are expected to act with the poise of flight attendants. As Hochschild defines it, such labor "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others."

THE PLAYER IS KING, AND YOU ARE THERE TO SERVE

The bigger the product, the more that is asked of employees, and the deeper that common denominator sinks. Both ArenaNet and Riot, which create and curate vast online worlds, unambiguously allowed the worst of their communities to dictate staffing decisions. Rockstar's Houser attempted to use crunch as a sort of implicit come-on to the player: Look at how willing my people are to kill themselves for your pleasure!

"Across the whole company, we have some senior people who work very hard purely because they're passionate about a project, or their particular work, and we believe that passion shows in the games we release," Houser said in a statement, trying to clarify his comments. "But that additional effort is a choice, and we don't ask or expect anyone to work anything like this. Lots of other senior people work in an entirely different way and are just as productive — I'm just not one of them! No one, senior or junior, is ever forced to work hard."

In trying to walk back his comments, Houser can't help but justify the practice by recourse to that oldest of all-purpose justifications for toxicity in the gaming industry — passion. There's also an implicit threat: The people at the head of the company are willing to work hard for the customer; are you? Emotional labor is reinforced even when the industry tries to protect itself from claims of abusive practices. How can you be abused if you're "passionate," after all?

The demand for the emotional labor of employees, combined with a lack of union protection, leads to this culture of disposability. Whether it's one person picked off at a time

to win a moment's reprieve from braying forums of entitled fans, or entire studios being shut down, the churn of developers in this industry is a truly nauseating thing to behold.

And the emotional demands are always made clear. *Mass Effect: Andromeda's* goofy animations demanded a blood sacrifice, which the angriest of gamers found in a blameless woman and another developer whose only crime was being an outspoken man of color. They weren't making players happy enough; therefore, they had to be destroyed.

Or take Telltale's promise of an appropriately zombie-like *Walking Dead* title that, despite the studio closure and the desolation of hundreds of developers — all left without health benefits — would somehow be finished. The fans demand it, after all.

THE FORM OF FAILURE

In the resonant words of former International Game Developers Association chair Kate Edwards, "Crunch is a form of failure." But despite being widely quoted, the implications of her words are rarely seen through to their logical conclusion. It is, first and foremost, a moral claim. Even if your game is made and it sells well, if it required crunch (and, frankly, other abusive practices) to be developed, perhaps it shouldn't exist.

Crunch exists, however, because the industry is ultimately fueled by emotional labor — the demand that one always be the kind of person willing to endure all of this with a smile, whether it's having one's scrotum tapped at Riot in the name of "bonding" or smilingly submitting to players who treat you like their personal servants.

That mentality is what creates someone willing to work for 60 hours a week or more, to work nights, holidays and weekends — and even if they may not clock those hours at the office, it produces the kind of person who may, functionally, be representing or promoting a product for their company, even during their nominal downtime on social media.

"Emotional labor" is, to pull it back into its proper definitional moorings, a form of work under conditions of capitalism, where one trades a product of one's self in exchange for wages. In older, Marxist understandings of such relations, the product was physical: You were alienated from the widget you made in exchange for money.

Now, you're alienated from a part of yourself. Gaming is hardly at the front lines of this reality — the next time you're at McDonald's or Starbucks, it may be worth evaluating what, precisely, you expect of the staff — but it is powered by the ongoing demand for emotional labor from developers.

There's little reason to doubt that this sorry state of affairs will continue. We'll get our games, and they'll be ever larger, ever more numerous and ever more realistic. Those impressive stats will keep inflating, redefining what counts as impressive every year, to the point where yesterday's blockbuster sales are tomorrow's disappointing first week numbers. We'll get bigger, better and faster; we'll get the mythical open-world game to end all games.

But will there be anything left of the people who made it?

Update: We've clarified the language regarding the use of SAG-AFTRA actors in Red Dead Redemption 2 above. The "Fly Me" ads were released by National Airlines, not United. We regret the error in the original article.

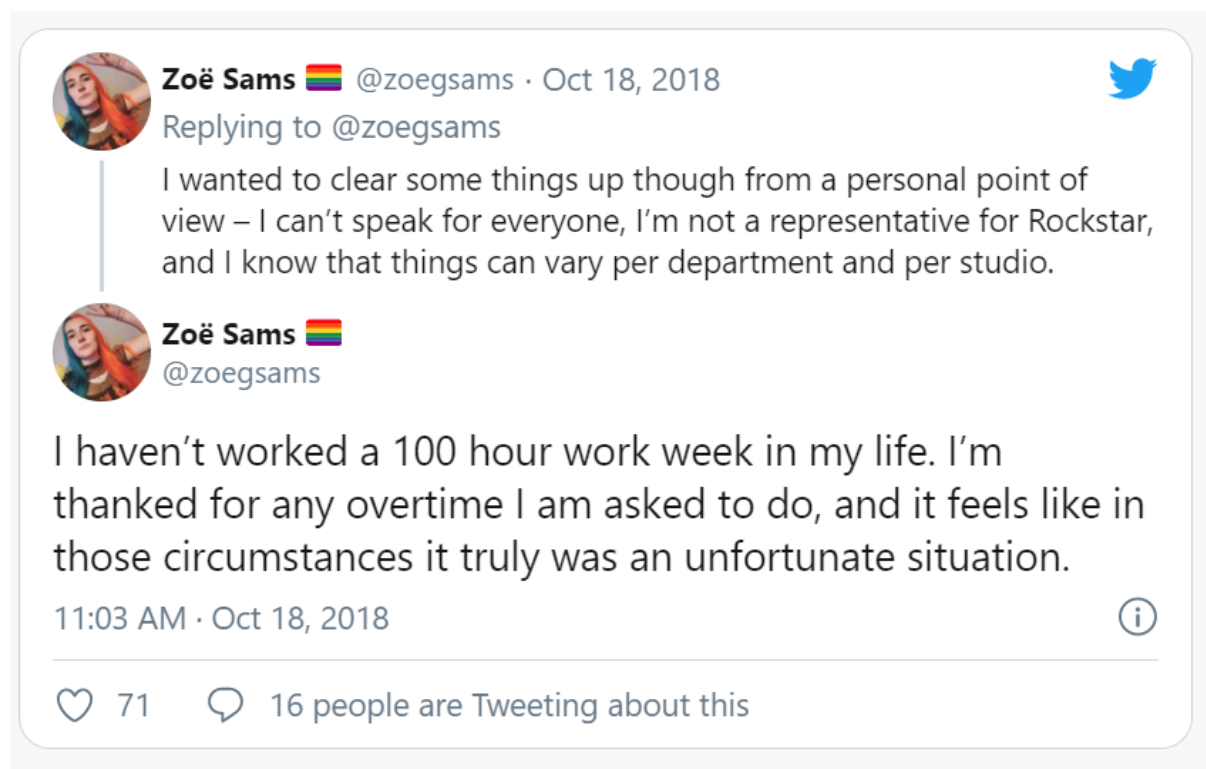
3. **Red Dead Redemption 2 developers open up about work conditions at Rockstar Games (18/10/2018)**

Several refute talk that 100-hour workweeks are the norm

By Owen S. Good Oct 18, 2018, 10:04am EDT

Rockstar Games, still battling blowback from the offhand comment that a company co-founder gave about long work hours in an interview published this week, last night gave current employees permission to speak about their work experiences over social media. Some, who have worked on the Red Dead Redemption and Grand Theft Auto franchises, have taken that opportunity and have pushed back at the depiction that they work under unfair conditions and expectations.

"I haven't worked a 100-hour week in my life," Zoe Sams, a tools programmer with Rockstar North, said on Twitter. "I'm thanked for any overtime I am asked to do, and it feels like in those circumstances it truly was an unfortunate situation."



The testimonials come eight days before Rockstar is due to ship Red Dead Redemption 2, a highly anticipated cowboy adventure expected to be the fall season's biggest hit. In an interview with New York magazine published earlier this week, meant to promote the game, Dan Houser said studio employees worked 100-hour weeks this year to finish the game.

Houser made the remarks apparently to compliment the dedication given to Red Dead Redemption 2. But in an industry whose major publishers have been embarrassed more than once by war stories about developers “crunching” double-shift workweeks, the tone came off as exploitive. Houser later tried to clarify his remarks by saying his comment to New York concerned himself and his writing team, and applied to a three-week period this year only.

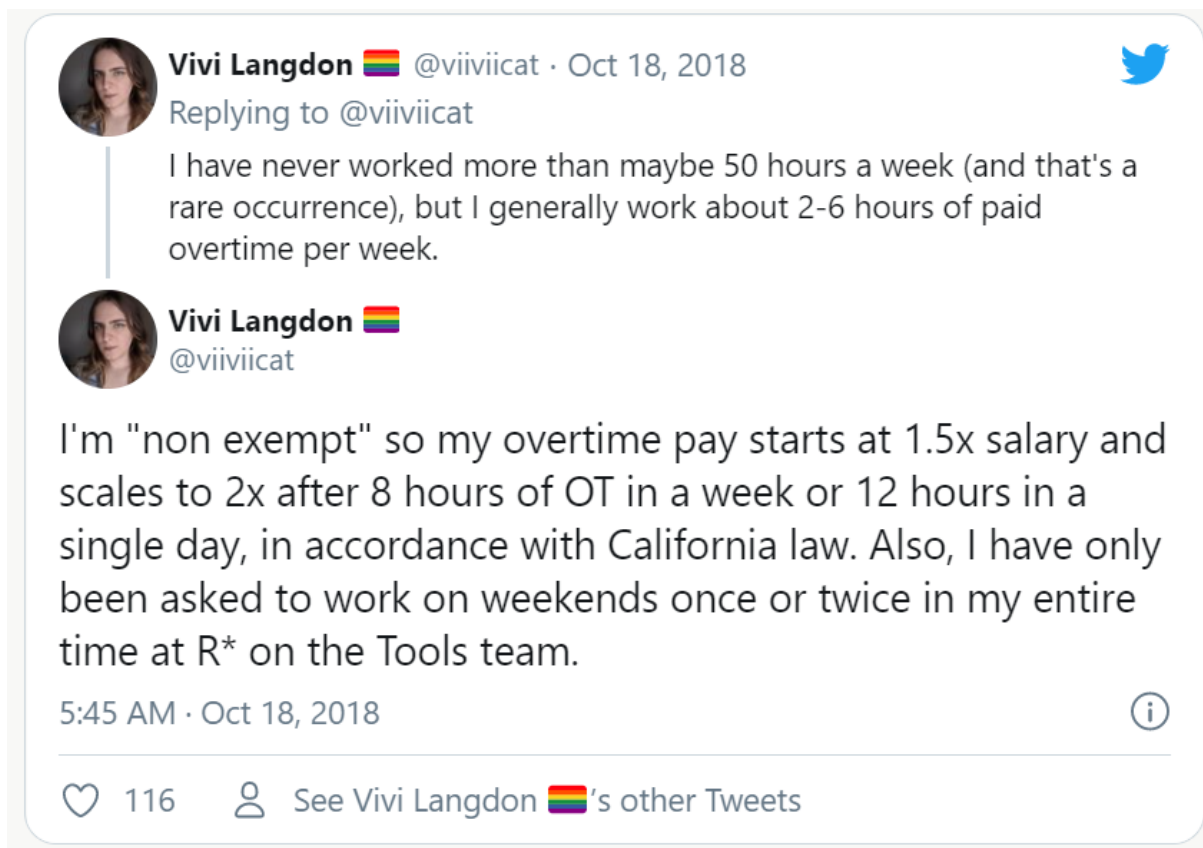
Wesley Mackinder, an environmental artist with Rockstar North, echoed Sams’ contention that he was never asked or expected to work a 100-hour week in his time at the studio. “I’ve been at Rockstar for six years and I have never worked, or been asked to work, anywhere remotely close to 100 hours in a week.”



Rockstar North, based in Edinburgh, Scotland, developed 2013’s Grand Theft Auto 5 and is one of seven Rockstar Games studios that all collaborated on Red Dead Redemption 2’s development.

“No one is pretending that working extra hours is fun/desirable,” Mackinder added. “Everyone tries their very hardest to avoid this. And in my experience it has gotten better over time.”

Vivianne Langdon, a tools programmer at Rockstar San Diego, was even more specific about her experience and working conditions. Langdon also said that developers had been granted permission by their bosses to speak about their work on social media. “I have never worked more than maybe 50 hours a week (and that’s a rare occurrence), but I generally work about 2-6 hours of paid overtime per week,” she said.



“Non-exempt” references a portion of United States labor law that governs what types of employees must be paid hourly and which ones, usually those with managerial roles, are “exempt” from that law and may be paid a straight salary.

Another worker, Phil Beveridge of Rockstar North, conceded that he worked “crunch” shifts for Grand Theft Auto 5 but the work schedule was less demanding for Red Dead Redemption 2.

 **Phil B.** @philcsf · Oct 18, 2018 

Replying to @philcsf

That isn't saying that overtime doesn't happen. On average, I'll do somewhere between 40 to 45-hour weeks, and that can go up to around 60 for a week or two when deadlines loom. But this is of my own accord, and part of me being a perfectionist with the work I do.




 **Phil B.**
@philcsf

In the time that I've been at the studio, work practices have definitely improved. Crunch on Red Dead Redemption 2 has definitely been a lot better than it was on GTA V, where I was pulling a month of 70+ hour weeks (while being told by my boss at the time to go home...)

1:18 PM · Oct 18, 2018 



 64  16 people are Tweeting about this

In any case, Beveridge said he was told by his supervisor to go home as he stayed late; Langdon also described her long hours as a personal choice.


 **Vivi Langdon**  @viiviicat · Oct 18, 2018 



Replying to @viiviicat

I'm "non exempt" so my overtime pay starts at 1.5x salary and scales to 2x after 8 hours of OT in a week or 12 hours in a single day, in accordance with California law. Also, I have only been asked to work on weekends once or twice in my entire time at R* on the Tools team.

 **Vivi Langdon** 
@viiviicat

The few instances when I work late overtime hours are generally because I'm in the "zone" and don't want to stop until I finish some tricky problem. It is not the result of anyone forcing me to stay late or giving me impossible deadlines, but rather my own drive as a programmer.

5:45 AM · Oct 18, 2018 

 145  16 people are Tweeting about this

“Crunch” has been treated as a fact of life by some developers and decried by others who call it a sign of bad product management or unfair labor expectations in a field where jobs are very desirable. The most notorious complaint about work practices came in 2004 from Erin Hoffman, aka “EA Spouse,” whose writing led to a class-action lawsuit that Electronic Arts ultimately settled.

In 2011, Danny Bilson of THQ said Kaos Studios had been working “seven-day weeks for a couple of months” to complete Homefront, remarks that were widely criticized as insensitive. Also that year, Australian freelance journalist Andrew McMillen wrote extensively about the development of Rockstar-published L.A. Noire, which painted a picture of an overworked and poorly led development staff pushed to meet unreasonable deadlines.

4. Giant Red Dead Redemption 2 ‘Thank you’ note is Rockstar’s latest step toward goodwill (23/10/2018)

The company’s attempts to rebuild its image continue

By Allegra Frank@LegsFrank Oct 23, 2018, 12:40pm EDT

Since the backlash stemming from an aside about its staff’s “100-hour workweeks” in a lengthy Vulture feature, Rockstar Games has been on something of an image-reconstruction tour. The studio has taken steps to appeal to dismayed critics and fans, with its latest being a massive “thank you” note to the thousands who worked on Red Dead Redemption 2.

“Red Dead Redemption 2 has been a massive project spanning many years and multiple teams, and we are extremely proud of the work of the entire company in bringing this game to the world,” Rockstar Games wrote in a public letter on the Red Dead Redemption 2 site.

“We would like to extend our sincere thanks to all those whose contributions both big and small, assisted in the journey along the way.”

What follows is what appears to be a complete list of credits for the game. That list runs more than 3,000 names long — which makes sense, considering the size of the new Red Dead game. While this seems like a minimal update in the lead-up to Red Dead Redemption 2’s launch on Oc. 26, it’s a piece of something larger: Rockstar’s overt, even performative efforts at seeking approval from an enraged industry.

In the week that followed Vulture’s interview with Dan Houser, studio co-founder and the one who flippantly mentioned the immense level of crunch in the first place, Rockstar has tried hard to dispel the image of crunch that it’s built for itself, by itself. It lifted a social media ban to allow employees to speak up about working conditions at the studio; many of these have been positive, a distinct different from other claims by ex-employees.

But other current staffers also expressed concern over the hours they work at Rockstar.

“We do crunch,” tweeted Rockstar’s Tom Fautley. “I’ve not seen anybody forced to work 100 hour weeks, but I’ve definitely seen friends get closer to that figure than is healthy.”

A QA tester at Rockstar Lincoln in the UK later wrote on Reddit that the company has also updated its strict overtime policy following the interview fallout.

“We had a big meeting today where it was announced that all overtime going forward will be entirely optional,” the verified Redditor wrote, “so if we want to work the extra hours and earn the extra money (As well as make yourself look better for progression) then we can do, but there is no longer a rule making us do it.”

The idea that overtime is “optional” echoes Houser’s clarification about the earlier, controversial figure. Overtime that isn’t required doesn’t mean it’s not highly encouraged, of course — and it’s not a given that this policy rewrite will change that part of the equation.

Stories about the working conditions at Rockstar are nothing new. In 2010, the “wives of Rockstar” came together to insist that the company lighten the load on its crunching employees. Perhaps this latest, strenuous development cycle will finally change things at the studio for the better ... or perhaps things will remain status quo.

5. **Red Dead Redemption 2’s labor controversy, explained (27/10/2018)**

The year’s biggest video game premiere highlights a thorny issue for the industry

By Owen S. Good Oct 27, 2018, 9:00am EDT°

Red Dead Redemption 2 is the biggest game in the world, dominating the current conversation of video games and popular culture. It also represents the industry’s decades-long struggles to mature from creative experiments in garages and small office complexes to international, 24-hours, 7-days a week consumer products made by thousands.

You may have read stories about “crunch” and poor working conditions during the creation of Red Dead Redemption 2. The issue, for both Rockstar Games and the industry at large, is complex. Here is a primer.

WHAT STARTED ALL THIS?

On Oct. 14, New York magazine published a lengthy feature about the development and highly anticipated launch of Red Dead Redemption 2. In it, Rockstar Games co-founder Dan Houser described the workload necessary to deliver such a richly detailed open world and video gaming experience. “We were working 100-hour weeks,” several times this year, Houser said. The story went on to tout the 300,000 animations, 500,000 lines of dialogue and voluminous codebase in the game.

Reaction within the gaming community was swift and intense. Working conditions in games development, particularly long hours and expectations of overtime, have been a mainstream topic in the subject going back to 2004. Though Houser later gave a statement saying he intended his remarks to reflect RDR2’s senior writing team’s workload within a limited timetable, the fuse on this controversy had been lit.

WHAT IS CRUNCH AND WHY IS IT CONTROVERSIAL?

“Crunch” is an industry term describing a period up to a game’s launch when the development team is putting in longer-than-normal hours to finish and polish the game. In 2004, a woman writing a blog as “EA Spouse” wrote in detail about work practices her fiancé faced at Electronic Arts, bringing the issue to mainstream attention. It ultimately led to a class-action lawsuit against the publisher, who settled with employees for millions of dollars.

Houser’s remarks, though he said they concerned a single three-week period for himself and three others, appeared insensitive to the issue of crunch. Adding to appearances is the fact developers of the first Red Dead Redemption also faced extremely demanding schedules, hours and workloads. This was brought to light in 2010 by a letter claiming to be from spouses of Rockstar San Diego employees, who made Red Dead Redemption.

Houser later, in a profile by GQ magazine’s U.K. edition that carried the same tone as New York Magazine’s, spoke patronizingly about development. “Sam [his brother and Rockstar co-founder] and I talk about this a lot, and it’s that games are still magical. It’s like they’re made by elves,” he said. “You turn on the screen and it’s just this world that exists on TV. I think you gain something by not knowing how they’re made.”

Crunch is a complicated subject. Some consider it an abusive or exploitative labor practice, or a sign of poor management. Others have pointed to the hours they’ve spent on a creative project as a sign of their dedication. Fans who enjoy the games want to buy them as a credit to their makers, but are troubled by the encouragement it sends to the industry status quo.

WHAT DID ROCKSTAR DEVELOPERS SAY ABOUT THEIR WORK?

As reaction on social media moved to condemn Houser’s remarks and industry practices on the whole, Rockstar Games moved to contain the damage. First came Houser’s follow-up remarks, in which Houser insisted “we obviously don’t expect anyone else to work this way.”

“I believe we go to great lengths to run a business that cares about its people, and to make the company a great place for them to work,” he added.

The company also, in a note sent to employees, gave developers permission to speak on social media about their experiences at Rockstar Games. Not all were glowing, but none were harsh or critical. A developer at Rockstar North said he pulled a month of 70-hour weeks working on Grand Theft Auto 5, but noted that his boss was telling him to go home in that time, and that “work practices have definitely improved.”

“It’s not the result of anyone forcing me to stay late or giving me impossible deadlines, but rather my own drive as a programmer,” said Vivianne Langdon, a programmer at Rockstar San Diego. But the comments had to be considered in light of the fact they were made after their employer all but suggested them.

Then came the Kotaku exposé.

On Tuesday, Kotaku’s Jason Schreier published a 9,500-word story about the “culture of crunch” at Rockstar Games, which comprises eight studios. Over reporting done well before

the New York magazine story published, Schreier interviewed dozens of Rockstar employees. They described a working environment where overtime was expected; where not being in the office late factored into performance reviews and questions from their superiors; where many employees felt “watched”; and where the working lifestyle severely damaged personal lives, including depression, broken marriages and heavy alcohol use.

Rockstar, made aware of Schreier’s work midway through his reporting, invited him to the company’s New York offices for video conference interviews with a dozen employees and the company’s head of PR. The company also provided internal statistics showing average work weeks, for all employees, between 42 and 46 hours from April through September. Jenn Kolbe, Rockstar’s head of publishing, acknowledged that “There are absolutely people who, at various times, worked really long hours,” but “there are also individuals who are exaggerating what their actual hours were.”

HOW CAN OVERTIME BE ‘MANDATORY’?

Rockstar’s quality assurance office in Lincoln, U.K., has been described as an especially demanding workplace, even relative to the rest of Rockstar. Schreier’s post spoke to several developers there. Eurogamer, in a story published on Red Dead Redemption 2’s launch date, focused more on what they’ve gone through.

Eurogamer’s Tom Phillips said every employee he spoke to who worked at Rockstar Lincoln said overtime there was considered mandatory. Some described workweeks of greater than 100 hours during development of Grand Theft Auto 4. Others talked about sleeping under their desks. “You were expected to live your life 24/7 around what Rockstar wanted you to do,” an unidentified former staffer said.

Implicit within all this is that jobs in video games development are very desirable and Rockstar makes some of the best and most popular ones in the industry, where a resume credit delivers an enormous career boost. So developers have said they feel powerless to confront long hours or expectations and immediately replaceable if they don’t like them.

On Friday, Oct. 19, Rockstar Games told Kotaku that Rockstar Lincoln was changing its overtime practices in light of the publicity. Though never saying the studio worked under “mandatory overtime,” Kolbe acknowledged that “the requested scheduled overtime felt like an obligation to some, if not many of the team.” Here, “requested” means a manager requesting overtime of an employee.

“We therefore spoke to them to make sure it is clear that the OT is not mandatory,” Kolbe said.

Kolbe elaborated on Rockstar Lincoln’s overtime environment to VentureBeat. Rockstar Lincoln uses a great number of contract workers for its QA testing. Kolbe acknowledged that because of the nature of that work — getting another contract, or promotion to staff, depends on doing diligent work — some may have felt overtime was mandatory. But, “it is absolutely not the case that we have based decisions around contract renewals or long term hiring purely on hours worked,” she said.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Though some reviews (including Polygon's) acknowledged the working conditions under which it was made, the stories seem not to have harmed Red Dead Redemption 2's critical or commercial reception. Review scores came in yesterday and nearly all check in at the industry-coveted 90 or better.

As for the workers, the issue of organizing video games developers into a union has rarely gone beyond the level of a robust discussion. Having this topic attached to 2018's biggest game, in advance of its launch, certainly gains some traction and visibility for labor advocates. At Game Developers Conference 2018, Game Workers Unite, a grassroots labor campaign, had a significant presence. It's likely this will again be a major topic at the developers gathering next year.

Legally, it's important to remember that in all of the stories alleging abuses or bad practices against Rockstar, the evidence is anecdotal. It's repeated in numerous accounts, but it doesn't immediately point to the likelihood of a lawsuit or labor prosecution the way other workplace issues, such as discrimination or sexual harassment, have. It also depends on the labor laws in the locations where these allegations take place. That said, the workers in the original case making crunch an issue did win a class action settlement. In many cases, it rests with the employees to bring an action, and with careers and creative dreams at stake, the will to do so is unclear.

Red Dead Redemption 2's next development will be when the companion multiplayer world Red Dead Online, expected to be an enormous revenue driver for parent company Take-Two Interactive, launches sometime in November.

Vice

1. **Should you boycott 'Red Dead Redemption 2' ? (26/10/2018)**

Not playing the best game of the year could be the best way to protest the extreme working conditions at Rockstar Games. But not the only one.

By Le Jeanbart

October 26, 2018, 9:01pm

This article first appeared on VICE Quebec.

Red Dead Redemption 2, the most anticipated game of the last five years, comes out today. If you are at work, it's likely that today's "absentees" are probably playing it. And if you follow the news of the world of video games, you are likely aware of the recent controversy surrounding the working practices at Rockstar Games, which included some employees working 100-hour weeks to get the game delivered on time. 100 hours is 14.3 hours a day, 7 days a week. The internet has rebelled and, as so often is the case online, many have proposed a boycott as a means of protest.

So, should you boycott Red Dead Redemption 2 ?

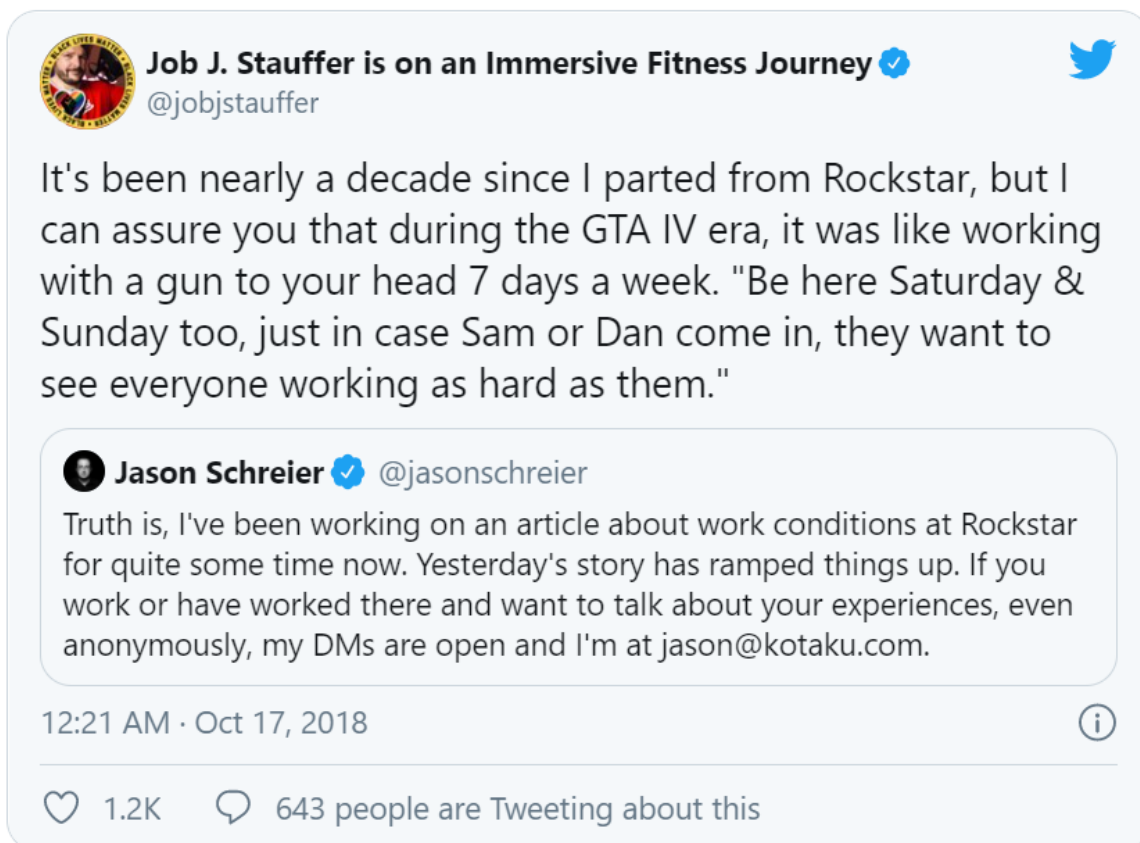
Let's study the facts. Is it true that employees worked 100 hours a week? Yes and no.


Dan Houser, co-founder of Rockstar, set this particular bomb off in interview with New York Magazine : "We worked 100 hours a week, several times in 2018." Working 100 hours is inhuman and we already know that "crunches ", or intensive periods of extra work, are commonplace in the video game industry, in addition to not being paid overtime on many occasions.

Mr. Houser quickly explained later , saying that it applied only to him and three other employees, and that no one is forced to work overtime at Rockstar.


Several employees and ex-employees gave their views on Twitter, and the speech varies considerably depending on whether they are still part of the company or not. There was also an extensive story on Kotaku that interviewed nearly 80 current and former Rockstar employees, many that described Rockstar as a culture built on overwork and fear.

Among former employees, the reactions are rather negative . "I did 80-hour weeks at Rockstar until I went into depression. If I had not done so, they would have terminated my contract. There are many ways to force someone. "



 **Job J. Stauffer is on an Immersive Fitness Journey** ✓ @jobjstauffer

It's been nearly a decade since I parted from Rockstar, but I can assure you that during the GTA IV era, it was like working with a gun to your head 7 days a week. "Be here Saturday & Sunday too, just in case Sam or Dan come in, they want to see everyone working as hard as them."

 **Jason Schreier** ✓ @jasonscreier

Truth is, I've been working on an article about work conditions at Rockstar for quite some time now. Yesterday's story has ramped things up. If you work or have worked there and want to talk about your experiences, even anonymously, my DMs are open and I'm at jason@kotaku.com.

12:21 AM · Oct 17, 2018

1.2K 643 people are Tweeting about this

Not surprisingly, among current employees, the comments are more nuanced. "Since the time I've been here, work practices have really improved. The crunches for Red Dead Redemption 2 were much better than the days of Grand Theft Auto 5, where I could do more than 70 hours a week for a month," said Phil Beveridge on Twitter.



"I have worked in several studios and, honestly, Rockstar North is one of the best experiences I've had. I could have left the office sooner and achieved my goals, but I would not have been completely satisfied with the quality of my work. "

It's hard to say for certain but it does seem that the situation at Rockstar is improving. Especially since the bad press. The culture changes, quietly. Maybe too quietly. But is the boycott the best way to get the message across that the culture needs to change faster?

On the consumer side, there is a bit of egoism and ownership. You read it in many comments online. It's "my game" that "I've been waiting for eight years," etc etc. Many do not believe those who say they will boycott the game. It's easy to say that on Twitter, while downloading the game to your Xbox anyways.

Because it is the most anticipated game of the year from the studio that gave us Grand Theft Auto 5, the entertainment product that has generated the most lifetime earnings, raking in about \$6-billion. And critics already unanimously say that Red Dead Redemption 2 is a masterpiece.

The best argument for not boycotting the game is that many people who worked there, exploited or not, do not want you to do it. They are proud of their work, they want the most people to witness and venture into the world they created. In addition, their end-of-year bonus is directly linked to the sales of the game. By boycotting the game, you may be hurting Rockstar's wallet, but you're also hurting everyone you're trying to "protect."

Perhaps then, the best way to help them is by loudly denouncing the practice of crunches, so that the industry knows its culture is being watched, game of the decade or not.

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