Yesterday it was charged that Electronic Arts is in the process of being sued by a large group of employees for unpaid overtime. While the lawsuit has been quietly happening for some time, it came to light today when Slashdot posted a link to a blog by “EA Spouse” located at LiveJournal.

In it, the blogger charges her significant other has spent as much as 90 hours a week at work, and that crunch time was planned and announced well in advance. It came to light through all of these allegations that a group of employees is suing the company because of this. In this week's Gamers' Thumb, James and Troy examine overworking developers in the industry.

**James:** I've heard murmurings for quite a while of Electronic Arts chewing up and spitting out employees. It seems that everyone worked at EA at some point, and everyone seems happy to be away from it. Regardless of that, this doesn't just fall on EA, but it is an industry wide problem.

It's important to understand that in software development, crunch time is expected. Nothing ever goes completely right, I've worked on quite a few coding projects (though nothing to the scope of a game) and many have come down to the wire or all nighters. As they say, the first 80% takes 20% of the time and the last 20% takes 80% of the time. Usually in those last few months of bug testing and fine-tuning, programmers, artists and designers don't get home as much as they'd like.

The problem lies in that EA is allegedly abusing this by making employees work longer hours way ahead of time. Electronic Arts has a yearly development cycle for most teams, something that is pretty impressive for the large amount of studios it has. Whether this is a few producers or a company wide issue from pressure at the executive level remains to be seen.

You can also argue EA's side and say if you don't like it, you don't have to work there. I agree somewhat with this but I also don't think anyone's job that they were hired for should be contingent on working extra hours as early in the development cycle as is being claimed with no benefits or
rewards. Maybe EA could bring on some more talent to help? I don’t know the situation, but unless it’s the last week, I don’t think anyone should ever work 90 hours in a week with no benefit.

Finally, this kind of harkens to the statements made by Naughty Dog’s Jason Rubin. He is tired of the way publishers treat their developers, like they can be cast off. The main problem right now is that it’s true: for every person in the industry there are several more who would like their job so game companies have no problem burning people out. I was told by a former employee of the online branch of a certain publisher that the company hires people without significant others, pays them tons of money to work overtime (at least pays) and when they get married or tired of the long hours, moves them to Management. Not a bad way to go when you have so much talent coming out of college each year.

It’ll be interesting to see how this is resolved, as it involves the very foundation of the game industry.

JS

Troy: This is kind of a bizarre incident but there have been rumors spread around the industry for some time about stuff like this happening. Apparently at least some of those rumors have some factual evidence with them.

Obviously, there are two separate sides to this. As James said, if you take EA’s side, you know what you’re getting into when you sign on. Making video games isn’t the easiest industry to stay afloat in, so every one of your developers needs to be giving 110% all the time to make the best product they can.

Of course, when it comes to these 85 hour work weeks, that is a bit harsh. If these workers were getting paid the overtime they deserve, maybe this wouldn’t be such a huge deal right now. This Senate Bill 88 that EA refers to seems to be a way out of this, although I have a feeling this may be changed in the near future partly because of where this case could be going. As much money as EA rakes in per year, they should be able to afford more programmers, or at the very least, afford to pay overtime to its current employees. -TR

Tidbits

GOLDENYE: ROGUE AGENT has gone gold...Nintendo revealed its winter and spring lineup, most notably the release of the new LEGEND OF ZELDA title for the GameCube...Microsoft has raised its estimated first-day HALO 2 sales to 125 million dollars...THE URZ has been sent to stores and should currently be on store shelves...

On Shelves

Another huge week: METROID PRIME 2: ECHOES

The logo for Electronic Arts.
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is the big console game along with METAL GEAR SOLID 3: SNAKE EATER, and HALF-LIFE 2 will keep PC gamers busy. Don’t forget Activision offerings CALL OF DUTY: FINEST HOUR and VAMPIRE: BLOODLINES THE MASQUEARADE. KING ARTHUR is the movie adaptation of the week. EA has NEED FOR SPEED UNDERGROUND 2 and GOLDENYE: ROGUE AGENT. VIEWTIFUL JOE 2 should appease sidescrolling fans. The DS also sees its first two games, SUPER MARIO 64 DS and SPIDER-MAN 2 DS, even though that handheld won’t be on shelves for another week. That’s 11 games in five days...

Gamers’ Thumb is our weekly Video Game column.