Twitter Thread by Damion Schubert, Zen Designer



Damion Schubert, Zen Designer
@ZenOfDesign

Late last night, I did a ranty thread where I talked about why game development is hard (and why that makes schedules hard to predict and things like crunch happen). The thread is below. This thread is some responses to my thread

/thread

> One hidden reason why games industry has a huge crunch culture is simple. At some point, you're going to throw away a huge chunk of your game, and you have no idea what that will be or how significant it's going to be.
>
> 1/thread
>
> — Damion Schubert, Zen Designer (@ZenOfDesign) December 18, 2020

Yes. AAA games are usually multiple miracles held together with ducktape.
https://t.co/alyz4N2EmT

> So... shipped video games are a miracle
>
> — Cormano (@coormanoo) December 18, 2020

Not really. It's because what you're talking about is designing something with the artistic ambition of a hollywood blockbuster with the technical complexity of a space shuttle.
https://t.co/wFf2AOqbFU

> do you think the misses of design and planning are because videogames are such a new medium, especially at the AAA scale?
>
> — Charles George (@Chargeorge) December 18, 2020

No games ship without overtime. But Supergiant claims to have shipped Hades with relatively little crunch and forced vacations.
https://t.co/ReO3NUl3um

> Are there studios out there that are the exception? If so, what do they do differently?
>
> — eduardorh (@edu723) December 18, 2020

Not just the games themselves. The connective tissue between them and publisher SDKs, billing platforms, telemetry needs, and other connective tissue is getting exponentially more ridiculous as well.

https://t.co/57lbQZftfF

> Followed. And also - players expect games to become bigger, better, more interactive, more stuff, more everything, realistic with 3d smellaround, sensaround and support for every gadget known to man. No matter how complex it is now, it will be twice that in a year or two. \U0001f61e
>
> — Christian Dumancic (@CDumancic) December 18, 2020

Google 'EA Spouse'. There's a reason EA at least makes an effort to do better.
https://t.co/uItHvjlqng

> I saw it said Crusader Kings 3 by Paradox was made with 0 crunch. I think Valve have a very healthy schedule as well and oddly EA are known for treating employees pretty well.
>
> — . (@coxtonyard1231) December 18, 2020

The first fifteen minutes gets a ridiculous amount of scrutiny, mostly from devs who know every beat of it.

But also it's the only part of the game that an exec will see if they just download a build and play without telling anyone.
https://t.co/EJH0RibfTT

> That's interesting. I'm of the opinion that the first 15 minutes of most games are the worst part and usually where I struggle most not to drop the game. It often feels simultaneously over designed and clumsy.
>
> — phbz (@RuiSFidalgo) December 18, 2020

Games are different because they almost always must be devoured linearly. If your first chapter isn't good, only 20% of your players will see the second chapter. Mobile companies have 'funnel graphs' that fanatically track this falloff.
https://t.co/omH86W0lnr

> I have a background in webcomics and it\u2019s to be expected that Page 1 will start to look like utter shit to you by the time you make Page 500. But it would be impossible to finish the damn thing if you go back and redo page 1! You\u2019ll just improve again and have the same issue!
>
> — Rawb \U0001f3f3\ufe0f\u200d\U0001f308\u2728BLM (@windpriest) December 18, 2020

There is some of that but honestly the problem is that the first draft of a game always sucks. Schedules work by breaking games into components, but it takes a lot of work to put those components together and make them sing.
https://t.co/2vW7OvB7av

> 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 11 are just great examples to show, how our industry is totally unprofessional, in terms of managing/executing sw dev projects :)
>
> Someone's art/tech masturbation without actual ROI. Bad task order/prio. No early gameplay testing. Shitty QA. Bad tech decisions.
>
> — Bal\xe1zs Simplex \xd3v\xe1ri (@simplex_fx) December 18, 2020

Demos usually have non-negotiable delivery dates. E3 isn't getting moved for anyone.
https://t.co/SON0x8elCP

> Eg: when someone ask you to hack shit for a demo, you should either -refuse (not neccessary directly, you could give est for the "right" way)
> -Communicate the tech dept very clearly + add it to backlog (might not work if your manager is also seriously unprofessional)
>
> — Bal\xe1zs Simplex \xd3v\xe1ri (@simplex_fx) December 18, 2020

Ever meet a producer whose job is to 'manage a relationship'? That means 'this relationship creates so much extra work we have to devote permanent resources to keep it from spiraling out of control'.
https://t.co/c4PVt8wWta

> One owner kept bypassing the art lead and the posted schedule to bust into the artists' offices and give them direct commands for new assets based on whatever he saw on tv the night before.
>
> When I told him to run those ideas past the lead and onto the schedule... I was fired.
>
> — Wetterschneider (@Stretchedwiener) December 18, 2020

Screw those money grubbing developers and their need for 'food' and 'rent'!
https://t.co/mNjNLrQMJd

> \u201cOops, we accidentally built a fun game instead of a money-sucking vortex of misery.\u201d
>
> — Mapache (@mapache) December 18, 2020

The economics work out this way for unique and beautiful snowflake games. You can't build a business on that assumption.
https://t.co/DJ5SKaGdI3

> Except you totally can. If you're doing constant content updates, you should have a constant stream of new players.
>
> — I'm PsyMar (not Constantinople) (@PsyMar) December 18, 2020

The worst crunch is not a death march. The worst crunch is the death march where it feels like it was all for naught at the end. Every dev should pour one out for the CDPR team tonight and hope that things turn out okay.
https://t.co/oFYS69dBOx

> And I really, REALLY fell for CDPR guys right now. I can see so much passion and talent behind those pixels. And while not on the same magnitude - I\u2019ve been in their place too, it just kills you, all this hard work for nothing.
>
> — Hideo Kijima (@KizymaYaroslav) December 18, 2020

Sometimes crunch is the only tool you have in the toolbox, but make no mistake, crunch is absolutely capable of destroying teams, and every leader and executive should consider the team the company's most valuable resource.
https://t.co/HX7DazKGiP

> Yeah. The last time I crunched I had this exact conversation with the executive team, explaining how excessive overtime actually drives productivity and quality down. I was told my "Empowering, coaching, mentoring style of leadership was inappropriate." I run my own ship now.
>
> — Anthony Castoro \U0001f4bc (@CastoroGamer) December 18, 2020

The biggest difference between AAA and indie projects is that the big boys will sometimes hit the things I mentioned in my thread MULTIPLE TIMES ON THE SAME PROJECT.
https://t.co/0MnyGGnEyF

> Thank you for the well-written and thought out insight (also, I followed \U0001f601).
>
> This thread was kind of surreal to read. I\u2019m part of a small indie team, and even we have experienced most of the things you listed. In a way, it\u2019s heartening to know that we\u2019re not just bad at this.
>
> — Snarfield \U0001f680\U0001f6f0\U0001f5a5 (@Snarfielld) December 18, 2020

What we're usually talking about is something like 'we only have 60 levels, but the guy doing naval combat wanted to be sure it was important, so every fight gives you a level'.
https://t.co/jgyQAKfYA6

> God, if I could beat an RPG in 2 hours, I would actually play them all the time! Not having time to play is the key reason I don't buy RPGs anymore.
>
> — DaisyFM \u2712\ufe0e (@peprally) December 18, 2020

My favorite genre of Kickstarter are people who think they're making a licensed MMO for $500K.
https://t.co/MvLNeLNrch

> Lets make a MMO noob! I heard it's EZ
>
> — DezertDragonSCVI (@DezertScvi) December 18, 2020

Ah yes, the non-stop dunkathon on Rise of Skywalker is my pinned tweet, if anyone else is interested.
https://t.co/Gi9EQRQSuE

> I\u2019m still here from last Christmas\u2019s Star Wars disaster
>
> — Falcon Crest (@Falcon___Crest) December 18, 2020

I think they're gonna be okay.
https://t.co/d0okfwlKKN

> Blizzard has no more good will. It's gone, they squandered it. But they do still have the war chest of cash
>
> — LordKraken85 (@Rohlfy85) December 19, 2020

My reputation precedes me.
https://t.co/ryoQpBMQKF

> LMAO!!
>
> Laughed so hard I could taste blood pic.twitter.com/sjfNGml2sK
>
> — RK_Revolthell (@Revolthell) December 19, 2020

I think this overlooks the fact that a lot of games ship at high quality just fine. Spider-man, God of War, Ghost of Tsushima are all great. (1/2)
https://t.co/xWb1adbdwR

> One thing I've always noticed even before Cyberpunk, people tend to assume games go "gold" or they are "finished". To me it seems like they're merely released in whatever state they could get it to.
>
> Maybe early access for bigger titles could be a huge solution, most AAA games
>
> — RK_Revolthell (@Revolthell) December 19, 2020

Could they have been bigger and better? Sure. And designers always want to push for that. But a lot of games wear out their welcome long before players reach the end, which means DLCing them is fine. (2/2)

I once had a guy in an interview tell me he spent a month on making 'jump' feel good in a game. The rest of the table thought that was crazy, but I was sitting here thinking 'this guy gets it'.
https://t.co/Ha7gSSq6gA

> Agreed. Fun can not be dictated by a design doc, the design must be playtested and iterated upon.
> "There, it's done, it's perfect," said no gamedev ever. There is always room for polish and devs will crunch rather than losing a feature they really want to keep from cutting.
>
> — CodeLobe (@CodeLober) December 19, 2020

You can add people, or you can add time. In almost every case, those options are tried first. What, did you think some of these games set out to be eight-year dev cycles with 500 people on day one?

https://t.co/ooSB0yqBkq

> None of those problems inherently require crunch.
>
> Crunch is what happens when those problems interact with a hard deadline for completion. This interaction doesn't just happen as the deadline approaches, it's baked into early scheduling and planning decisions.
>
> — Gopher (@GopherAtl) December 18, 2020

Yes, and crunch makes it happen faster. There's always a new kid eager to take that job and break into the new exciting realm of games, but the amount of institutional knowledge the org loses when someone burns out and quits is tremendous.

https://t.co/kL3Y5JqvqH

> I also would like to add, these problems compound and cause people who LOVE their job to slowly become less endeared to it and lots of experienced people burn out/move to the software side of things due to the low pay, long hours, problems with diversity, and -constant- stress.
>
> — Gregor Thunderdragon, last of his name. (@MagusFirebeard) December 19, 2020

I don't doubt it.

https://t.co/mXmwRbGx6A

> We crunched... oh how we crunched...
>
> — Erich Schaefer (@mediumclawboy) December 19, 2020

The companies who do the best are the ones who do annual releases that CANNOT MISS THEIR DATE. Think Madden. But this is usually very nearly a content-only game (new uniforms, new stadiums!) and they still work intense hours.

https://t.co/OK0A75x3zS

> And, frankly, they tend to be conservative in their design, tech, and art requirements.
>
> — Mike Sellers - always working on N+1 projects (@onlinealchemist) December 19, 2020

Being good at it is one of the most important skills a creative director can have.

https://t.co/iQEBf2R8xZ

> Btw, communication with "suits" is part of the job. But we kinda suck at it.

— Bal\xe1zs Simplex \xd3v\xe1ri (@simplex_fx) December 18, 2020

The best tactic I've found is to figure out ways to make people in these positions realize they have to choose between two realities (you're not getting everything, here's the price tags on everything you want).

It doesn't always work.
https://t.co/VLzsbU9Hjz

> I've been on the painful end of a project manager who won't stand up to product owners and allows insane scope creep. I'd say iterative/episodic releases would work until the culture is fixed but they produced the Witcher just fine.
>
> — T04ST (@T04ST1E) December 18, 2020

Nobody, not even evil CEOs, want to ship shitty games. They are acutely aware of the damage they do to their companies, their brands and their IP when they do so.

But they have to somehow make sense out of fiscal realities. Games are still a business

https://t.co/9BvHd2lnoY

> THANK YOU. This helps me understand development and crunch a lot more. Seems like 99% of people think it\u2019s just evil CEO\u2019s wanting to be evil and work people to death. Or there\u2019s not enough people Or the mgmt isn\u2019t good. Its more complicated then we could imagine
>
> — Derek584 (@Derek5841) December 18, 2020

Something to think about: This Christmas is the last Christmas you can ship with just PS4 quality graphics. If you missed this Christmas, you basically have to start committing to upgrading all your art for 2021.

https://t.co/jIpDgcI3oF

> Redoing the art because the game took so long to produce that hardware got better is a painful Sisyphean exercise.
>
> — Wetterschneider (@Stretchedwiener) December 18, 2020

You might like my GDC talk called "Behind the Curtain" for GDC 2012 where I talk about the lunacy that was doing Bioware stories in an MMO.
https://t.co/rA3XVZOTbZ

> Well written and informative. Any insight you could give on how writing for a game is? Are a lot of ideas just thrown out even if developers have already created parts or cutscenes that go along in that direction? Do they just scrap them?
>
> — Pillow (@zzzpls) December 18, 2020

Everyone in leadership in a games company should be familiar with the "Second System Effect". Google it.
https://t.co/vFgoLS5M9U

> You forgot to mention the ridiculous notion of starting from scratch after a massive project ships, just because people want to design
>
> — Ahmed Salama (@Salamatizm) December 19, 2020

Plot twist: You think you have it tested with automaton, but it turns out your bots in no way mimic actual players in any way that's useful.

https://t.co/6U5oWSXKET

> Plot twist: This happens with every order of magnitude of active users.
>
> — Tammo 'kb' Hinrichs (@kebby) December 18, 2020

Once the deal is signed, usually the moneymen will leave you alone until the numbers you originally told them start to be STUPIDLY wrong.

https://t.co/PlXN5mQ6XP

> This is the part that kills me, when you're working with publishers and producers who have done this many times before but still think you can plan a multi-year game down to the man-week from the outset and have any degree of reliability. Even though it literally has never worked
>
> — Alex Beckers (@acbvictory) December 18, 2020

I love this.
https://t.co/ot7bAQQUDN

> Have seen all of this, can confirm. I describe it as \u201cmaking a film except the camera, lenses and lights all get reinvented and replaced, and now work differently, every 12 months\u201d
>
> — Jeff Zugale, Starshipwright (@jeffzugale) December 18, 2020

The best hope is to not leave preproduction until shit is nailed down. If you can solve the core loop and figure out the art style before you really staff up, you could save a lot of pain. It never seems to work out like that.
https://t.co/73J53cnmhx

> While I agree with this, I also think that the core part of our job is figuring our way through these issues without resorting to burning out our teams. We have to control the narrative of budget/ time/ quality
>
> — Athena Z Peters (@AthenaZPeters) December 18, 2020

Christmas is a big deal because most kids can't afford $60 games but Grandma can. Going digital isn't going to change the harshness of this deadline.
https://t.co/Gs8XFAP2hN

> That thinking, for the most part, is a relic of the retail sales model we leveraged for decades. More bodies in stores looking for gifts meant more potential sales. We\u2019re not totally there quite yet, but the digital marketplace for AAA games is changing this practice.
>
> — Ben Jones (@Bagelbeard) December 18, 2020

First draft RPGs are usually a joke, because they're put in before you have all the systems that can feed into them.
https://t.co/s8Ioe0qu5b

> This is a really good and important thread, but can you please tell what this full RPG you can beat in two hours is called.
>
> — Marshall Lemon (@Marshall_Lemon) December 18, 2020

Yep, and a ton of work, but usually pretty easy to manage if you start early enough.
https://t.co/VhJOkSzYMY

> Xmas event/feature always involves a big end of the year push
>
> — vivekramkumar (@vivek25) December 18, 2020

It's hard to ship a big game without SOME overtime or light crunch. The big warning flag is when managers schedule months of crunch in advance.
https://t.co/Y8QHIE9TFW

> Crunching for 9 months straight actually makes the problem worse - the game would have still been behind schedule without crunch but it may have actually been *less* broken.
>
> — Ido Yehieli makes games (@tametick) December 18, 2020

Many games, when they go from paid to F2P, get as many as 10X the users.

And every game that's NOT free is competing now with games and other entertainment that IS free.
https://t.co/xJ1NgXe5GL

> Many gamers understand that and have valid complaints that the new monetization schemes make games inherently unfun
>
> — Boris Chuprin (@noop_dev) December 18, 2020

Ayup.
https://t.co/kmlHAeO9C6

> One you missed - games take years to build and you often see games that are in your genre/space come out and WILDLY change player expectations. You frequently have to make changes or else come out as hopelessly outdated.
>
> — dallasdickinson (@dallasdickinson) December 18, 2020

A common example are engine improvements allowing for better art. Another is failure to optimize the engine requiring you to simplify art and worldbuilding.
https://t.co/VrTM6xecRd

> you haven't even touched on the domino effect of any one department redoing their work and every other department having to redo their work to match and the prioritization / hierarchical positioning of who gets told abt the changes and when. GAME DEVELOPMENT IS HARD.
>
> — Cookie Hiponia Everman (@cookie_everman) December 18, 2020

Honest to god, it's USUALLY not bugs, it's "this just isn't good enough".

What may be lost in my original thread is that 90% of the time, the rework I described is ABSOLUTELY THE RIGHT CALL, you just wished it happened sooner or was managed better.

https://t.co/3DaCm1bafM

> testing as an industry is ignored, minimized, and under-utilized. we needed a union...
>
> — slvrsrfr (@hrldofgalactus) December 18, 2020

One fun thing is when contract houses uses the Varsity Team to land the contract with you, and then pass the work to the JV team once the ink is dry. The quality slowly degrades (1/2)
https://t.co/URk1iTa1SO

> I've only ever worked on games of smaller scale but isn't this also a management/process failure? What are the feedback and approval processes? I've quickly cut loose OS houses not hitting the mark.
>
> — Emily Greer (@EmilyG) December 18, 2020

Also, in all these cases, there's this inherent desire to 'let it ride' because doing otherwise blows up your schedule - hell, it takes time just to find a new art house! (2/2)

Another fun one is "Hey, you know that guy we fired? Turns out he HASN'T been doing anything for the last 3 months!"
https://t.co/WsETNCEA9R

> My other favorite one is where the outsourcer turns in a bunch of assets that legal rejects because the OS just slightly painted over things they found on Google. Cool cool cool.
>
> — Chris Koeppel (@badgermancer) December 18, 2020

If it's not fun, they won't spend. If it is fun, but they can do everything for free, they won't spend. If it is fun but they can beat it in 2 days, they won't spend. It's a difficult needle to thread.
https://t.co/7e7nsg9CBL

> So they intentionally have to make these games less fun by design? I mean we all knew it implicitly but it's good to have someone say it out loud.
>
> — DonLasagna YTChannel (@DonLasagna) December 18, 2020

Believe me when I say the 'nephew' is something that is not unique in this industry (although sometimes it's a son or grandson). I can count 3 instances I know of alone.

https://t.co/PRjoTbRLn4

> Is this about how Ubisoft\u2019s CEO\u2019s nephew was bored playing AC1 so they adding some things to the game?
>
> — theducktitan (@theducktitan) December 18, 2020

Shitty, unstable engines and tool chains that get justified when you think you're shipping in a year so it's just a little suffering... and then that year turns into two... into three...

https://t.co/u5rbTFfly9

> Don\u2019t forget how much of what you laid out so well is subject to shitty, unstable engines and tool chains. They just compound the misery.
>
> — Jeff Ross #DaysGone #PlayStation #Sony (@JakeRocket) December 18, 2020

My pet peeve is super obvious bugs (we call them 'clown shoes bugs at Boss Fight) go unfixed for months because someone decides it's a P3 and you never see it again.
https://t.co/UZgrSo0SQ2

> This one extra hurts after working on a QA team that put in a fair bit of feedback that got ignored for months to years, but then watch a team scramble to implement it in the 11th hour because someone who wasn't QA gave the same feedback
>
> — Crazyer (@crazyer6) December 19, 2020

As mentioned previously, crunch is a production failure, but it's also an incredibly difficult production problem often with no easy answers, and we usually DO try the alternatives (more time, more people) first if its at all feasible.

https://t.co/JEAsGsr49a

> You are killing it in this thread. Best summation of crunch I've ever seen. I've been getting physically angry at so much simplist crunch talk on twitter recently, I didn't even know where to start. So thank you, I can just point people to this thread now!
>
> — Erich Schaefer (@mediumclawboy) December 19, 2020

Makes more sense than you think. Giving your game to a fresh set of eyes is usually a great way to point out super obvious shit. The problem is just when that opinion gets more weight than other playtesters for political reasons.

https://t.co/TY0uUQ3h9m

> This is what surprises me the most https://t.co/KZ9TfP7GO2
>
> — Jota Jota (He) (@JotaJotaPRA) December 19, 2020

Nine women can’t get together to have a baby in one month. https://t.co/5GYZYlCSoT

> Adding people can also be risky. It takes time to onboard new people, usually one of the experienced people on the project need to take time out of their work to do it, leading to reduced productivity until onboarding is complete, but not necessarily boosted productivity after
>
> — \u30ed\u30c3\u30d7 (@southro_p) December 19, 2020

Absolutely. Hell, unless you scavenge the carcass of another project you’re lucky to even find, hire and relocate a candidate in a month https://t.co/YxwWAW0BGh

> Fun fact, adding people ALSO requires adding time. Because people need training.
>
> No matter what, you're going to need more time. https://t.co/aNpZV5NmbO
>
> — Talarian (@Talarianjs) December 19, 2020

If it’s in your blood, you can’t imagine doing anything else. There’s something exhilarating about trying to straddle this gap between tech and art and the high you get when you *discover something* are magical. https://t.co/yHCAmwsiFT

> This thread is well worth a read. As someone who knows nothing about game development, I must say the whole thing sounds like absolute hell https://t.co/JgA1EPNbiA
>
> — Cyber Pen (@synthwavepen) December 19, 2020

This guy gets it. https://t.co/SuBxYHaB10

As QA I was once asked in a phone interview what test cases could be made for Mario's jump. I said "holy cow, that's the central mechanic!" And went off for about 10 minutes.

— Kynetyk knows what you did wrong last build (@KynetykKnows) December 19, 2020