



Insights into game careers

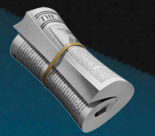
Mark Templin
2023

Topics

- Career journey
- AAA game making
 - QA testing as a foot in the door
- Indie game making
- Engines & assets
- Labour concerns
- Thoughts on “crunch” time
- Ask Mark Anything

Career journey

It's a winding road, usually for everyone

- There was a “classified ad” to work in SimCity.. and the rest is history 
- Getting RIF'd: a harsh reality/check in the major leagues
- Diving into UX Design: a very useful skillset in games, especially in reaching the mass market and making a thing fun
- The “bleeding edge” of tech: it's an expensive and rewarding experience
- Back in the saddle making “serious” games at the Game-Based Innovations Lab (GBIL) at McKinsey & Co.

Professional disclaimer

(of course ;)

Everything here is a poorly expressed opinion, owned solely by yours truly,

Mark Templin.

Professional experience

A mix of brands, devices & arenas

The logo for Maxis, featuring the word "maxis" in a lowercase, sans-serif font. The letters are colored: 'm' is blue, 'a' is yellow, 'x' is purple, 'i' is red, and 's' is green. A black circular arc is positioned behind the letters.The Facebook logo, featuring the word "facebook" in a lowercase, blue, sans-serif font.

Making “AAA” games

“Breaking into” the industry as a tester

careerist.com / 2022-12-01

Working as a video game tester comes with many advantages.

- Testing is a **perfect entry position** if you want to build a career in the video game industry. While working in quality control, you will be exposed to every aspect of game development. For many professionals, game testing can be the first step to game design, programming, or project management roles.
- As a tester, you have **access to pre-released games**. Developing a new game can take years. You get to see a game at different stages, monitor how it improves, and play it while the rest of the gaming world waits impatiently for the opportunity.
- Testers have **access to the latest devices**. Ensuring a game functions correctly on all platforms or consoles releasing it is an essential part of game testing. Sometimes this involves testing games on devices that are not available to the public yet.

Average Salary for a Video Game Tester

According to [Glassdoor](#), the average annual salary for a game tester in the United States is \$55,119. Estimated additional bonuses are \$4,111. However, total pay can vary significantly depending on an employee's years of experience, location, and company.

Although these numbers might not look very impressive, it is important to remember that game testing roles have relatively low entry barriers. Testing is an excellent first step to more lucrative positions in the game industry. For example, the average pay for a [game developer](#) is \$80,602, and experienced professionals typically earn six figures salaries. Those who stay in video game testing can become QA managers—another role with promising earning potential.

The video game industry is growing fast. According to the [PWC report](#), it is projected to reach \$323.5 billion in revenue by 2026. The demand for skilled professionals, including game testers, is likely to increase as well.

Making “AAA” games

Quality assurance (testing) as a step

- Climbing the QA ladder to a new role is *possible*
- QA testing is valuable career (résumé) experience
 - Read anecdotal evidence online for personal points-of-view
 - Studio management
 - A day in the work with the team
 - Career advancement opportunities

Making “AAA” games

Getting started

- Studios need to know that you have passion and the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities to get the job done
- Learning on the Internet
- Internships and contract gigs: typically worth the experience
- Remember: scale correlates to responsibility and specialization
 - Responsibility 🙌 Crunch to ship for a certain season/date
 - Specialization 🙌 In-house expertise –versus– generalist skillset

Making “AAA” games

Share your portfolio: highlight skills, take credit & own your role

((hosted on GitHub))

Portfolio of Andy Bae

Game Narrative Designer



5+ years coding stories and telling games

- Expert with gameplay loops and systems
- Author of short stories, novels, and fanfiction
- Champion for narrative design in all games

AndyBae

Main Skills



Game Design



Design Docs



Leadership



Storytelling



Unity



Unreal Engine



GameMaker



Version Control

Other Skills

Games reflect our culture, ideals, and emotional experiences.

I am a **game designer** with significant experience in **narrative design** and **programming**. I utilize my knowledge across **many technical fields** to bring game projects together, and ensure the gameplay is engaging and **drives the game's narrative**.

I am always looking to apply my skills in producing exciting game projects.

Experience

Game Designer @ This Game Studio

(Oct 2022 - Oct 2023 Full-time @ Remote from home)

Worked with a **team of designers** on designs and narrative for new features and content updates on a **top-selling free-to-play mobile game**.

Accomplishments

- Acted as **feature owner** for several new updates, managing all documentation and changes, to **meet release dates** determined by a publisher company
- Handled **localization** for almost all new features, improving processes and coordinating with UX designers and localization managers at other companies
- Took charge of **writing story beats** and **branching dialogue text** for ongoing narrative-driven content

Making “AAA” games

A master class hosted by Will Wright? Why not!?



Making “AAA” games

Getting comfortable with a studio

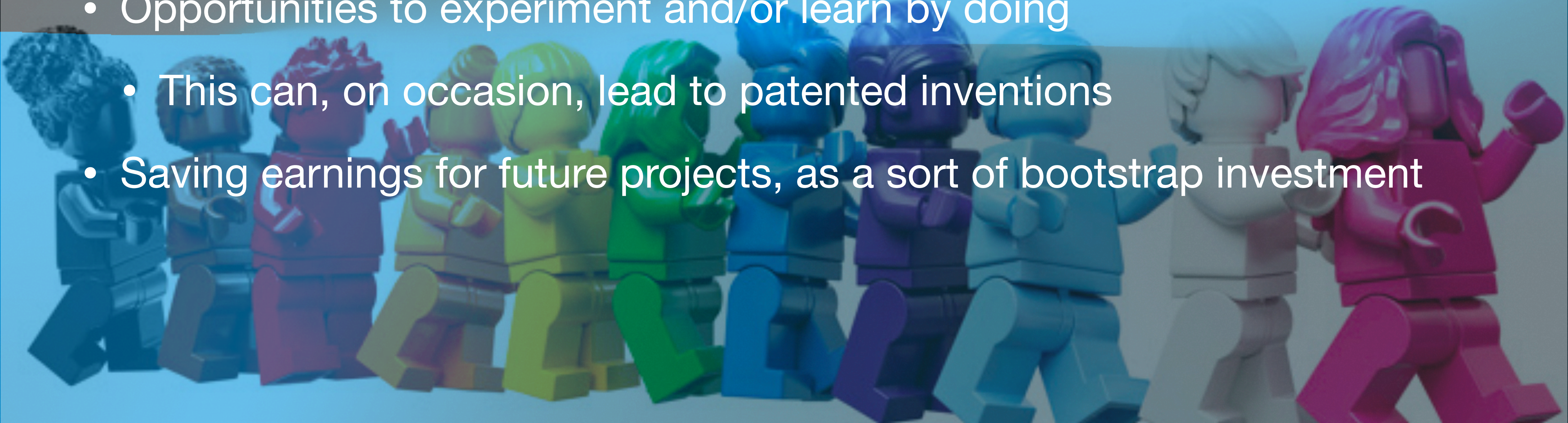
⚕️ **Make sure you can earn a healthy living and can take time-off**

- Consider how the team will benefit your career in the long term: dig past the foosball and ping-pong tables
 - Ask studios if they “crunch” and if so, how they reward or compensate folks therefor (“work hard, play hard”) 🧑💻 good old days.. are gone?
 - As a contractor, be sure to negotiate for a rate that reflects your talent, career position, and lack of benefits vs. salaried employment
- 📜 This factor, including how your talent is used, is a lesson that SAG/AFTRA members know well

Making “AAA” games

Soft skills and other long-term benefits

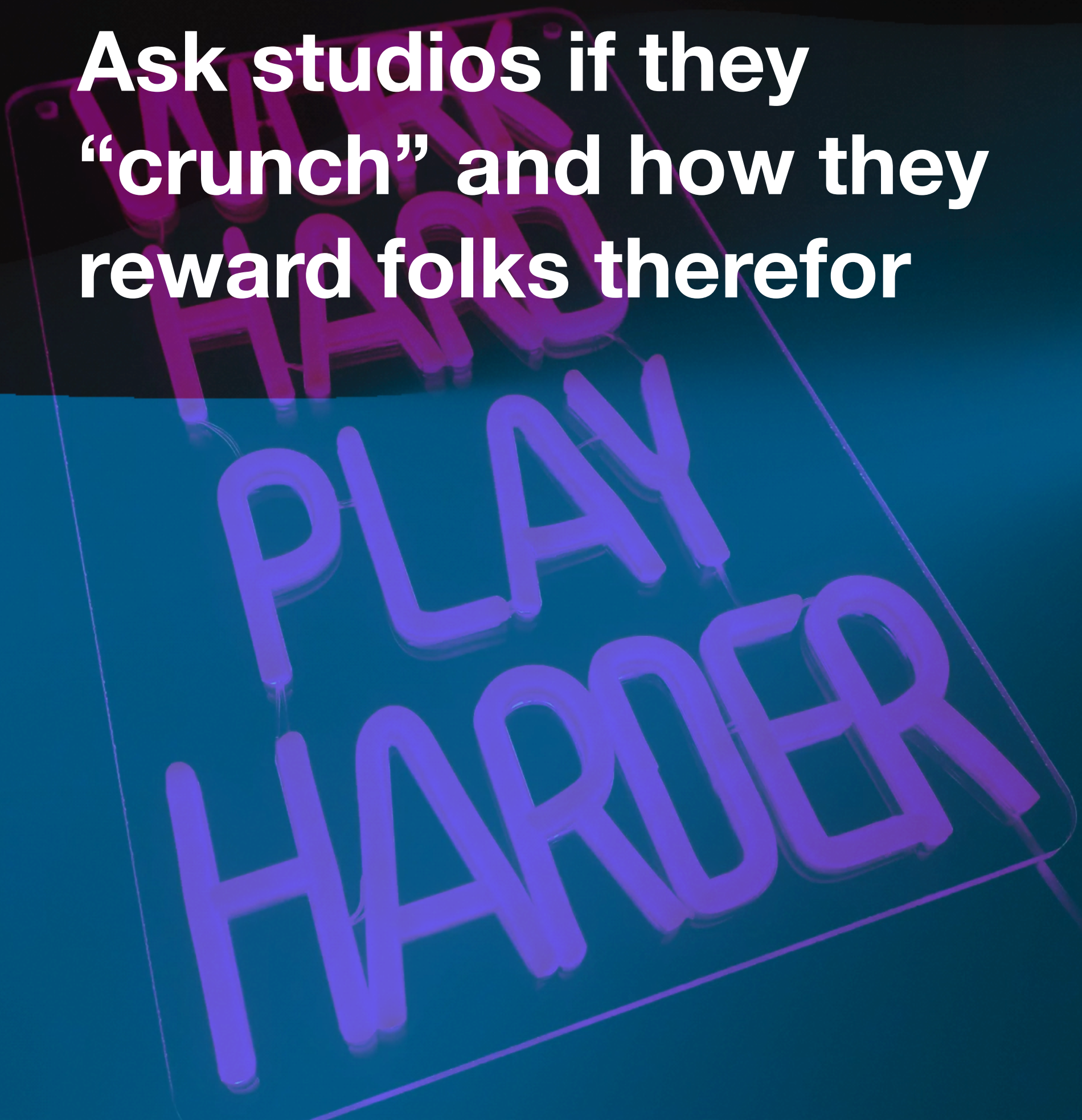
- Gaining experience: everything is cool(er) when you’re part of a team
- Building your brand history and portfolio
- Opportunities to experiment and/or learn by doing
 - This can, on occasion, lead to patented inventions
- Saving earnings for future projects, as a sort of bootstrap investment



Entertaining “AAA” game studios

Ask studios if they “crunch” and how they reward folks therefor

SAG-AFTRA members make the rules of the game clear with respect to artificial intelligence



Systematic production has its drawbacks

(Not just that they might want to clone you ;)
Creativity is sometimes sacrificed for an established vision (IP)

Sir Ken Robinson
1950 - 2020



The problem is to remain an artist as we grow up.



I believe this passionately, that we don't grow into creativity,



Or rather, we get educated out of it.

Making “indie” games

Realities

- Simple and fun are hard, especially with a small team
- 20/80 user-generated content quality rule
- The playing field is fairly level for indie game makers.. and still free
- You have an opportunity to “build your brand”

Making “indie” games

Simple & fun are hard: experimentation is

Experimentation with a tightly constrained virtual world is key to rapidly iterating on core mechanics and interaction design

Project Tango devices track position with great accuracy, allowing you to place digital objects in the real world and interact with them. Multiple devices can work together and share the same digital world.



Don't expect an epic story mode where you roll up continents, though, or a seemingly insurmountable goal like crossing the solar system with your enormously long body (that would be Noby Noby boy, and it [took 6 years](#)). This looks to be more of a fun sandbox for all ages that demonstrates the possibilities of augmented reality.

“Keita Takahashi is one of the most consistently fun creators in gaming. His work is always surprising, always funny, always suffused with just a hint of an uncanny edge.” — *Wired*

Making “indie” games

How will Unity’s community and software evolve?

About 1,360,000 results (0.46 seconds)

James M. Whitehurst

Interim president and CEO of Unity Technologies

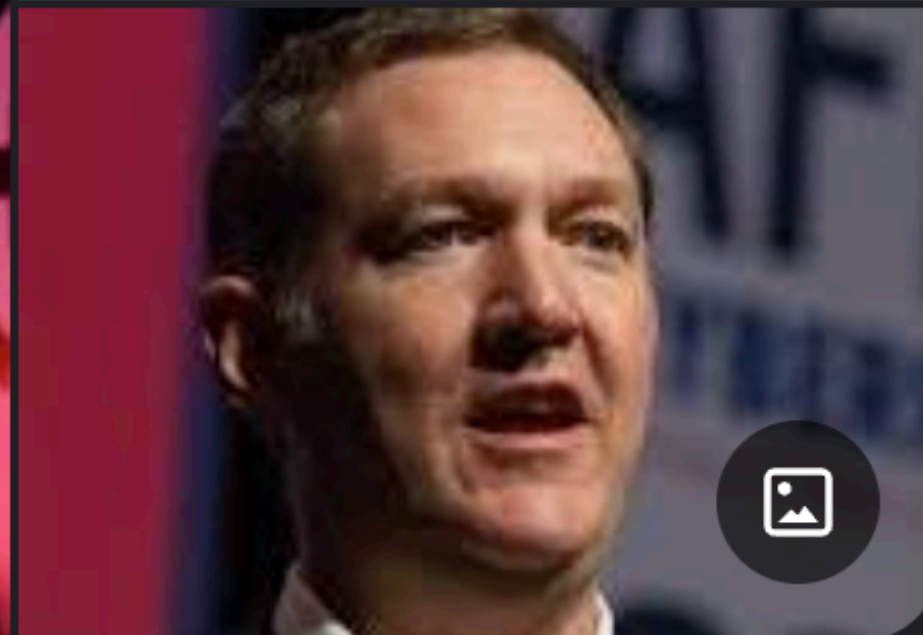
Overview

Education

Videos



NurPhoto/NurPhoto via Getty Images



LinkedIn

Jim Whitehurst | LinkedIn

I'm proud to work as Senior Advisor at IBM, a defining hybrid cloud and AI organization that has changed and improved the world since 1911.

Age

56 years

Books

The Open Organization: Igniting Passion and...



Engines & assets

80% of feature sets for 2D & 3D overlap + platform/cloud services

- Select an engine based on its 🔑 strengths and your/team's KSAs
 - Playing and mod'ing templates out-of-the-box is easy now
- Make coding easier and more 🔑 accessible to “creatives” with AI (GitHub co-pilot) and visual programming (Unity VS)
 - Learning curve for engines and projects had to be leveled out for adoption
- Sandboxy Toolkit: for “creatives”, proof-of-concept, and the community

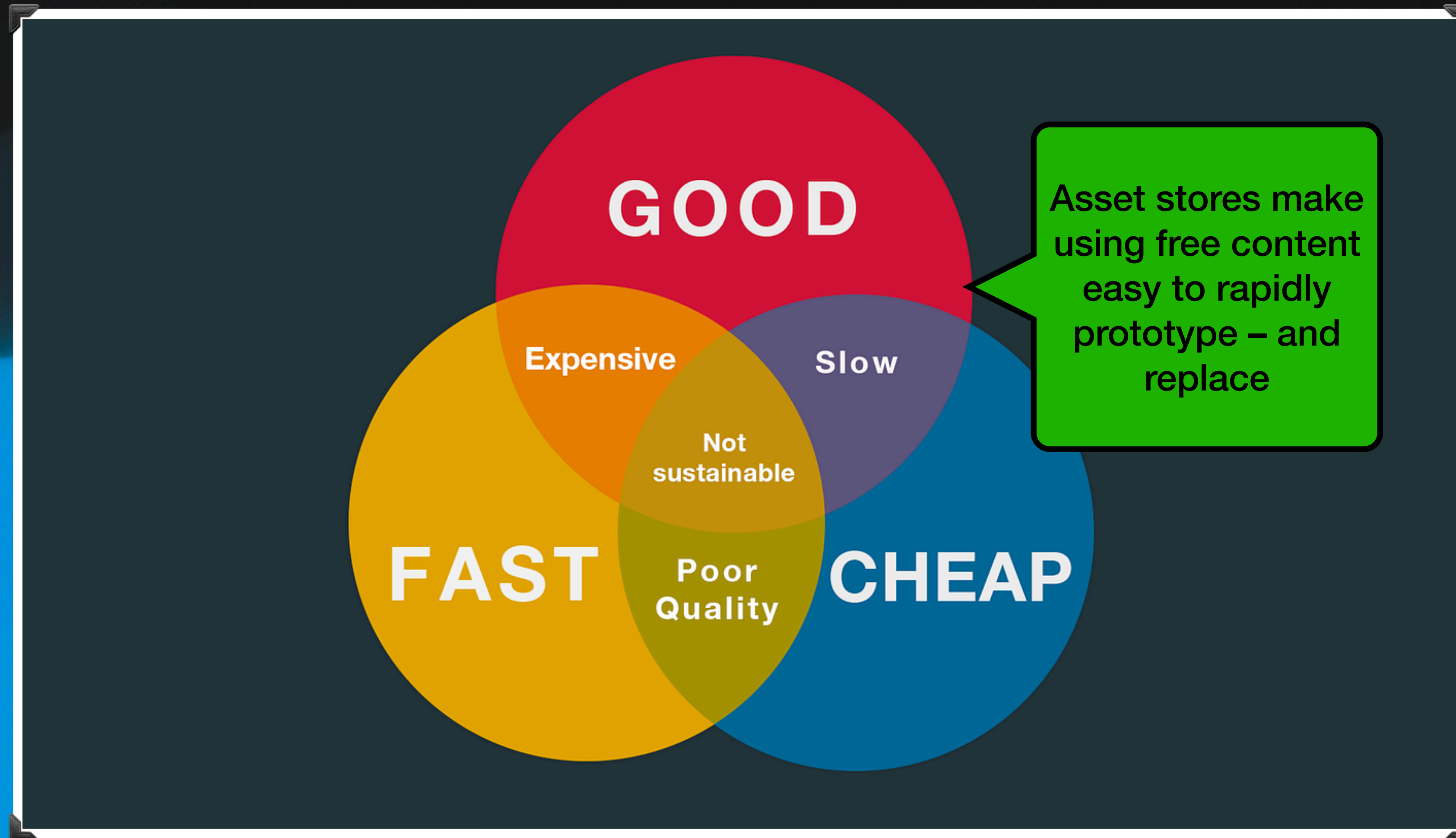
Engines & assets

Learn how the engine works, then make workarounds
(Don't fight the engine ;)



Engines & assets

Fast and cheap are easy — good is up to you



Engines & assets


Sandboxy Toolkit: as asset pack focused on making games easier for creatives that get blocked by technical limitations (and no desire to be an engineer)

- Based on Unity – because that’s what I know best 🤪
- Designed to make built-in Unity systems easy and fun to use, as well as connect to other components
 - This is known as “middleware” – providing users with features at level above the core systems
 - “SBXY.SoundParticle” — a class that mashes-up the core particle VFX, physics, and audio systems
- A platform that provides simple metrics and allows me to store and use 🔑 **anonymized** game and user data



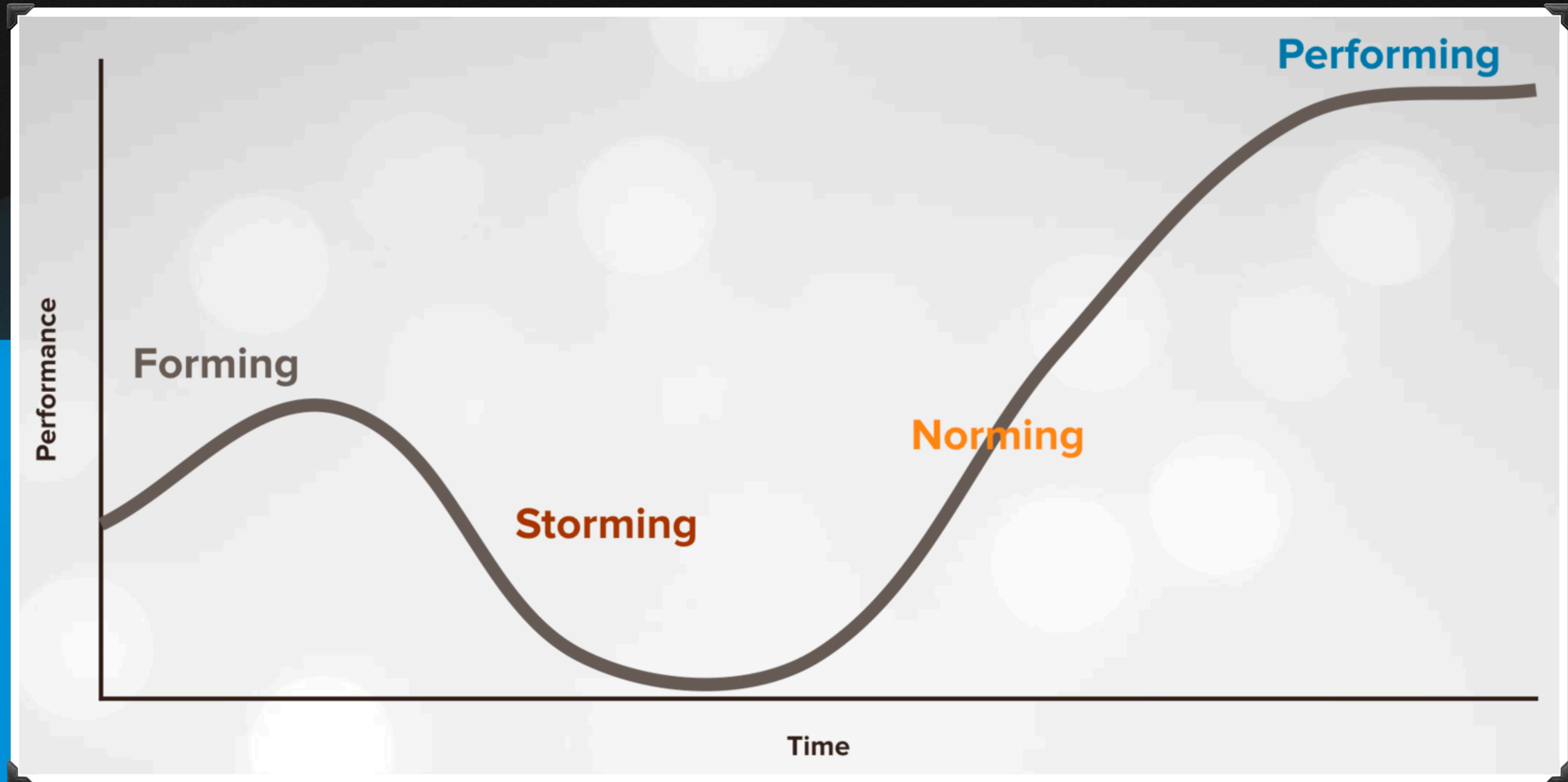
Making it work in the video game industry

Highlights from experience

- There are benefits to learning how a role “should” work (in the industry)
- Studios with established tool chains & pipelines make it easier to learn how the mash-up is made at a system level
- “Individual contributors” to projects wear from many hats to one very specialized hat
- In every case in my experience, cross-discipline teams working well together are key to success
- Learning how to get from forming to performing is mission critical 

Making it work as a game making team

🔑 Improving team performance over time



Labour concerns in the entertainment industry

Experiential feedback

- What to make of news/networks: go with the flow
 - EA: From a leader to “bad” and back again, so the story goes, like a wave
- As a manager:
 - Making beliefs and values clear as a team, then practice makes permanent
 - Encouraging immediate feedback, dissent, and problem solving
 - Making the effort to develop a culture and community
- Getting overworked is a concern...


“Crunch” time

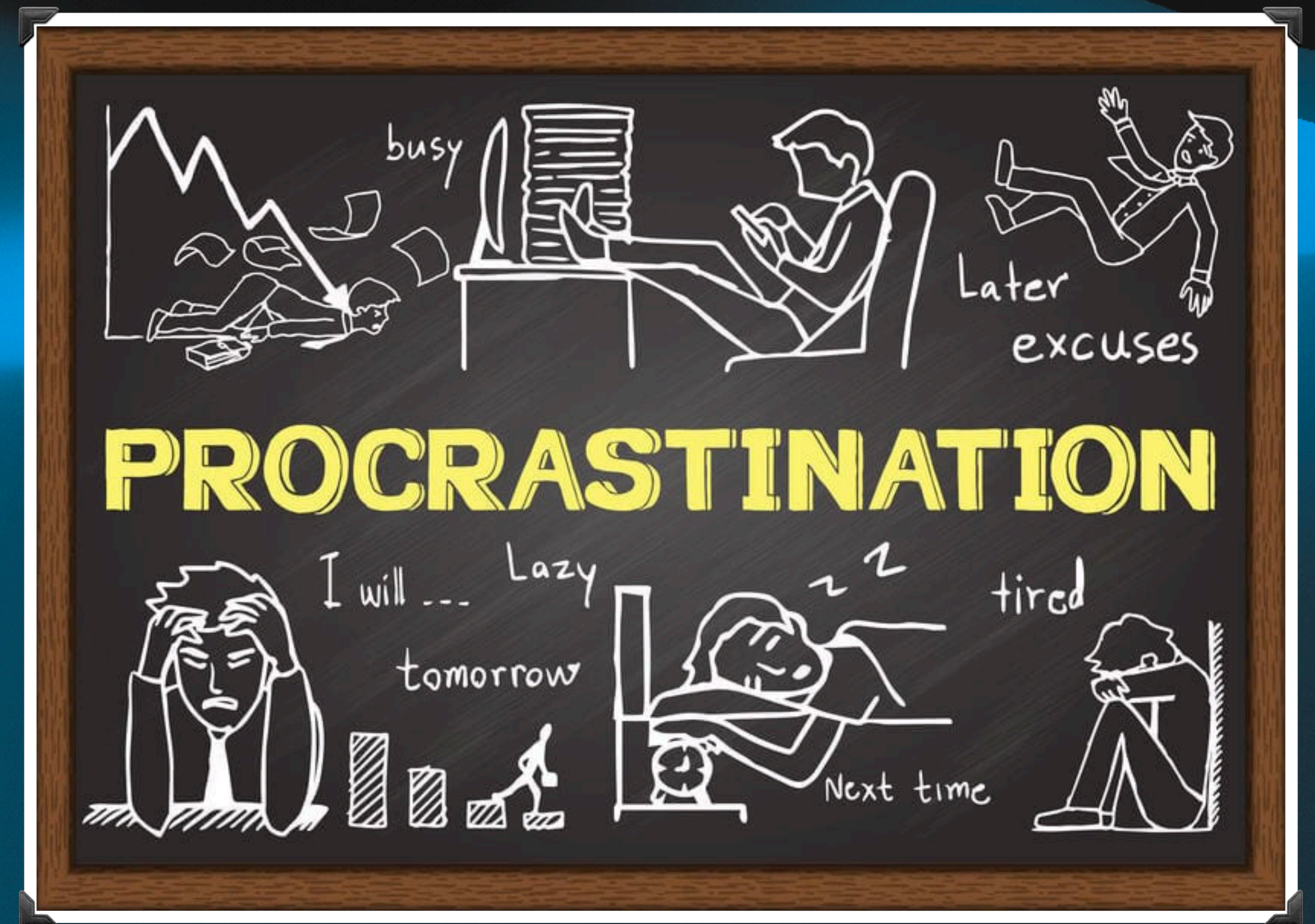
⚠ Caution: definitions may vary

- What is “crunch” and why does it happen?
- Minimizing crunch
 - Earlier efforts are always cheaper than changes later
- Technical/design review
 - Using lists to prioritize discussion
 - Turn “crunch” time into intensely focused collaboration

Crunch time

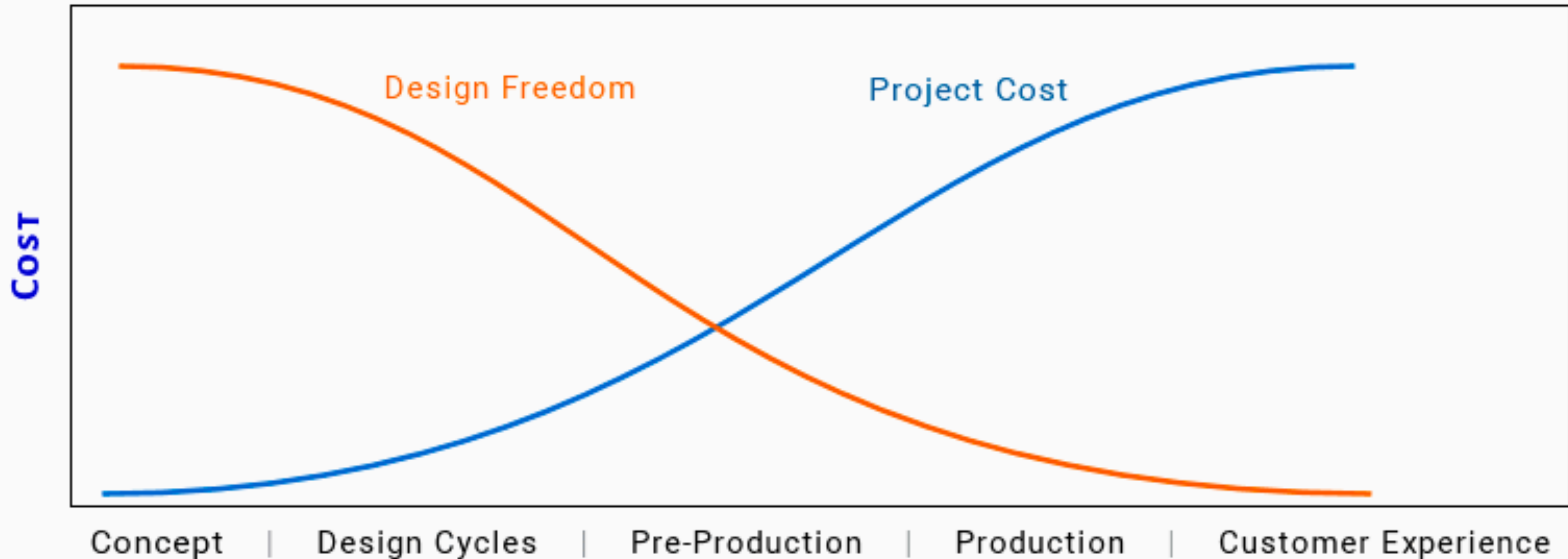
What is “crunch” and why does it happen?

- A symptom of bad habits
-  Avoid procrastinating about...
 - **The scope** of the project
 - **The design:** get at least a sketch drawn on paper (and out of minds)
 - **The plan** and if relevant, the schedule (deadline?)
 - **A way to play test for feedback**



Crunch time cost

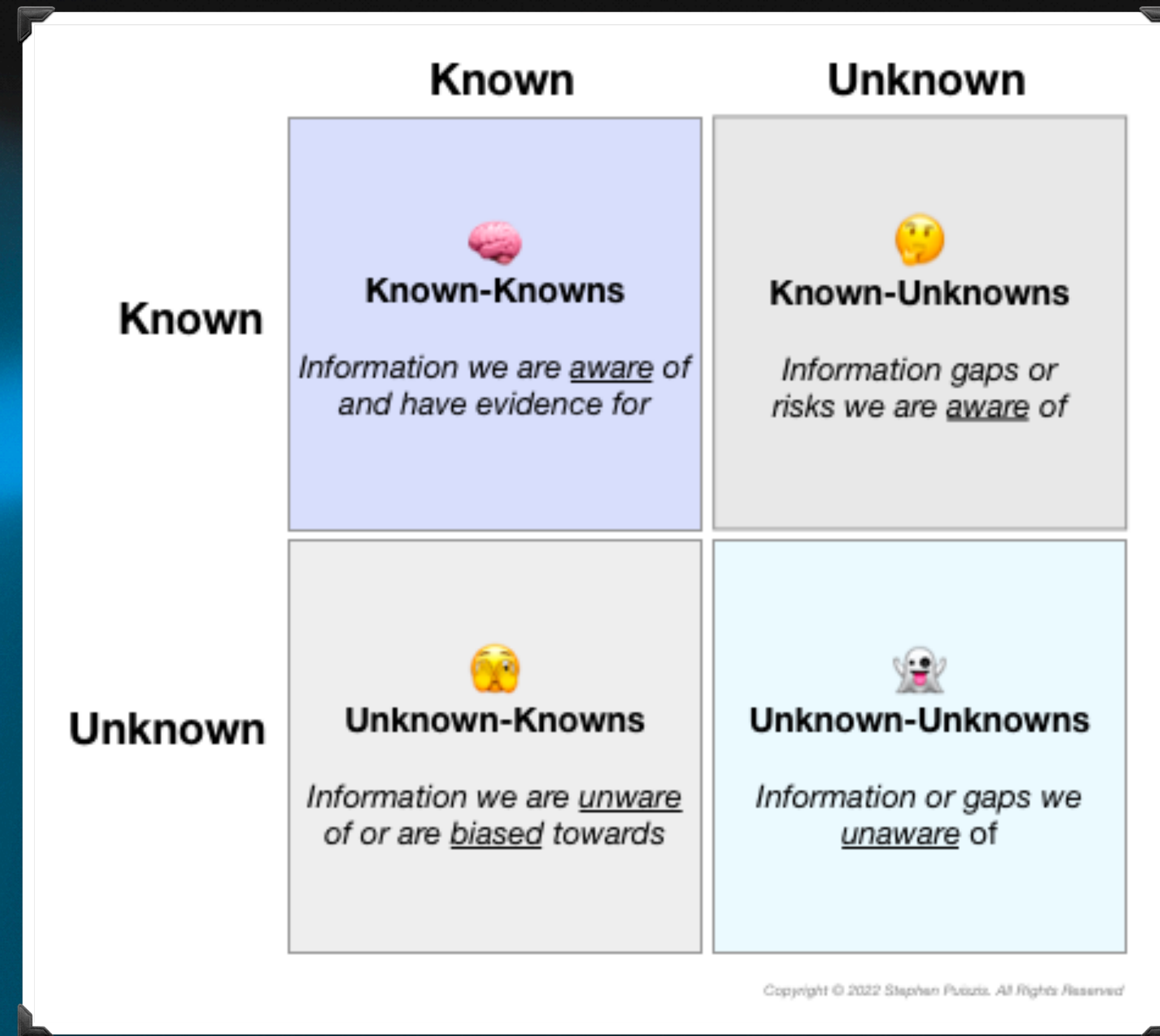
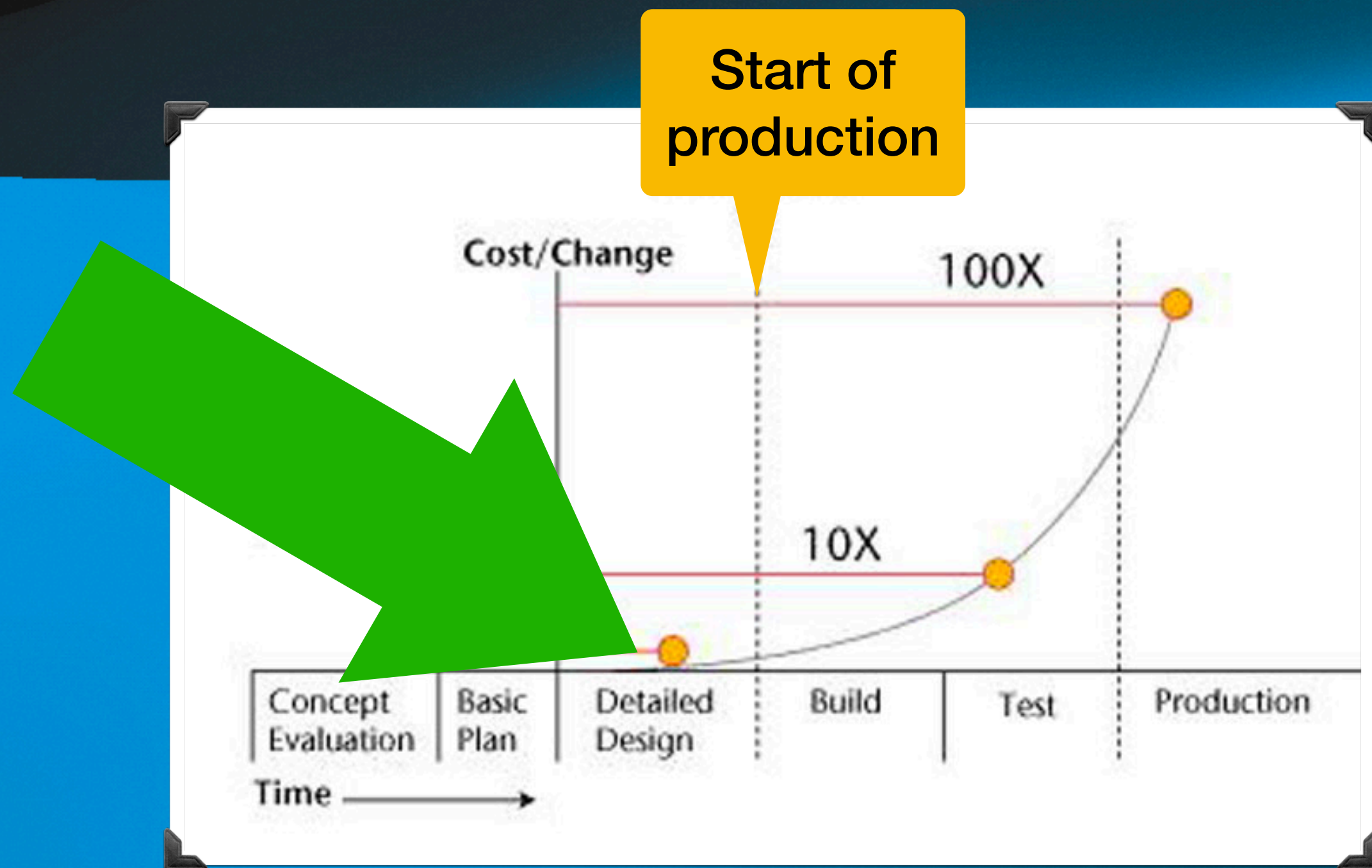
Ideation & pre-production are always cheaper than change later



PHASES OF DEVELOPMENT (SEQUENTIAL PROCESSES, BUT NOT A TIMELINE)

Crunch time cost minimization

Technical/design review can help focus the team on the “how”



Ask Mark anything about...

30m

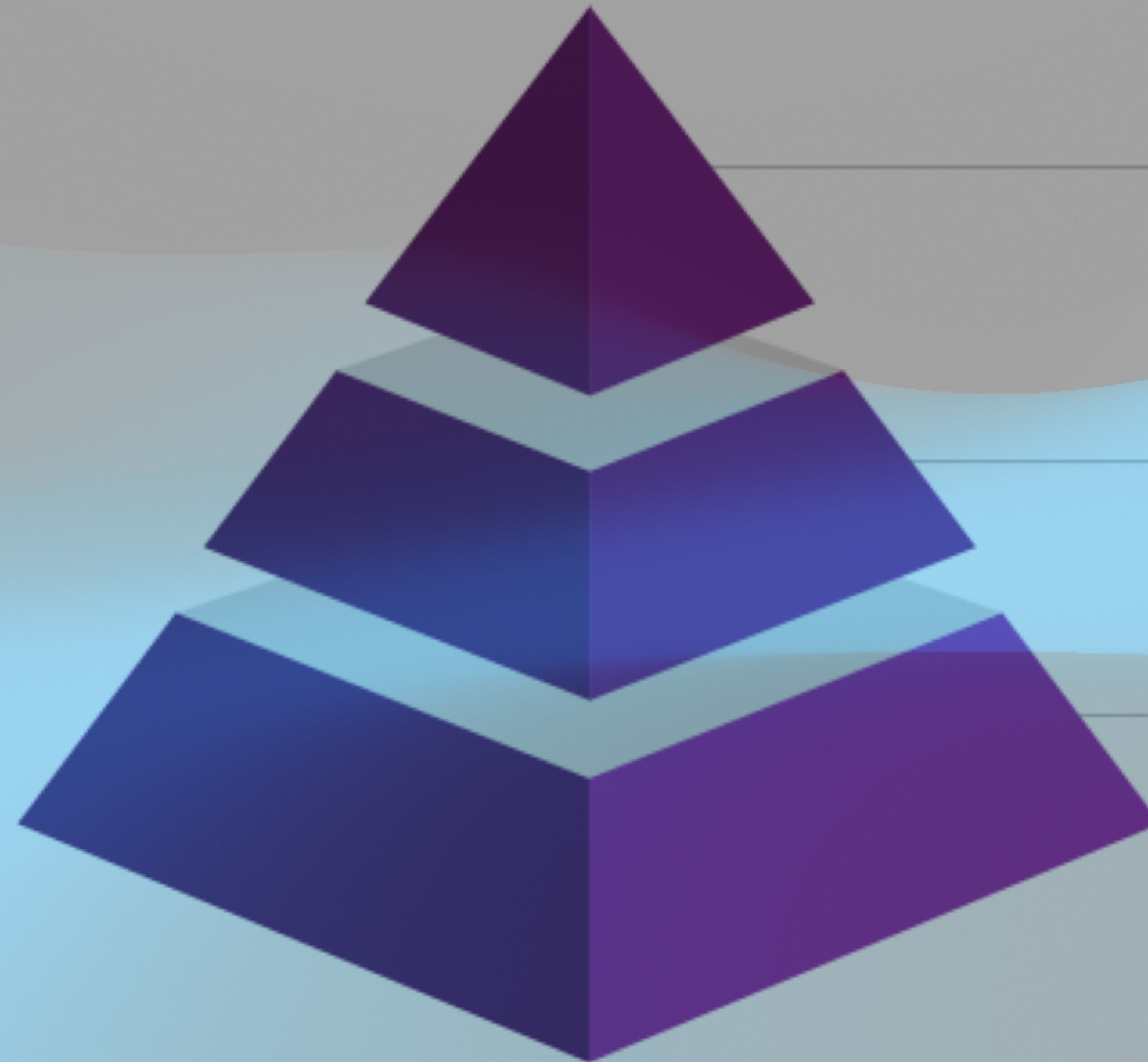
- Professional experience
- Entertainment industry
- Labour concerns
- Thoughts on “crunch” time
- Game design
- ...

Thank you!



Game design

Build pyramid



3

Emergence

Delight that surfaces subtly & unexpectedly

2


Balance

Fun, ease & utility achieved through play

1

Simplicity

The foundation of usability & focus



“The most creative professionals always played with a problem, for much longer before they tried to resolve it; because, they were prepared to tolerate that slight discomfort..that we all experience, when we haven’t solved a problem.”

— John Cleese on Creativity in Management, Video Arts (1991)

