»Crunch as Curriculum«

Toxic Learning Culture and the Aesthetics of Overwork in Concept Art Education for the Games Industry

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Abstract Art schools that train concept artists for the video game industry face unique challenges, caused by the inherent complex nature of artistic traineeship. They must teach technical skills and prepare students for the realities of creative work in the video game industry, including tight deadlines, competition and pressure to perform.

A crowded job market and an overflow of graduates have created learning environments that often mirror the industry's own toxic habits, harming students' well-being and creative confidence during and after their studies. In this essay I ask: What would it mean to teach industry-preparedness in the game concept art space without reproducing toxicity?

Based on interviews with educators and students, as well as theories of the hidden curriculum, platformization, and care ethics, I show how ideals of passion and productivity in art schools reflect the game industry's normalization of overwork. The essay outlines five principles for a healthier curriculum: sustainability over performance, structural reform, teachers as protectors, differentiation as philosophy, and empathy as a diagnostic tool.

Keywords Games, Education, Concept Art, Overwork, Pressure

Abstract Kunsthochschulen, die Concept Artists für die Videospielindustrie ausbilden, stehen vor besonderen Herausforderungen, die aus der komplexen Natur künstlerischer Ausbildung resultieren. Sie müssen einerseits technische Fähigkeiten vermitteln und andererseits Studierende auf die Realitäten kreativer Arbeit in der Spielebranche vorbereiten, darunter enge Fristen, Wettbewerb und Leistungsdruck.

Ein überfüllter Arbeitsmarkt und ein Überangebot an Absolvent*innen haben Lernumgebungen hervorgebracht, die häufig die toxischen Praktiken der Branche selbst widerspiegeln und dadurch das Wohlbefinden sowie das kreative Selbstvertrauen der Studierenden während und nach ihrem Studium beeinträchtigen. Vor diesem Hintergrund stellt der Aufsatz die Frage: Was würde es bedeuten, im Bereich der Game Concept Art auf die Anforderungen der Industrie vorzubereiten, ohne dabei toxische Strukturen zu reproduzieren?
Auf Grundlage qualitativer Interviews mit Lehrenden und Studierenden sowie unter Einbezug von Theorien zum Hidden Curriculum, zur Plattformisierung und zur Fürsorgeethik zeigt der Beitrag, wie Ideale von Leidenschaft und Produktivität an Kunsthochschulen die Normalisierung von Überarbeitung in der Spieleindustrie widerspiegeln. Abschließend werden fünf Prinzipien für einen gesünderen Lehrplan skizziert: Nachhaltigkeit statt Leistungsorientierung, strukturelle Reformen, Lehrende als Schutzinstanz, Differenzierung als pädagogische Philosophie sowie Empathie als diagnostisches Werkzeug.

Schlagworte Games, Studium, Concept Art, Überarbeitung, Leistungsdruck

1. Prologue / Enter the Artist

Many young art students dream of a career in game art. Among the most coveted roles is that of the concept artist, a profession that attracts creatively gifted individuals seeking a commercial path in the games industry. Concept artists are responsible for visualizing characters, props, and environments, shaping the first impression of a game long before it is playable. Their work is foundational: it influences not only the game's aesthetics but often its overall creative direction.

Today, the concept artist is widely recognized as a key contributor to the creative development of games and other entertainment media. They are expected to master fundamentals such as anatomy, perspective, colour theory, and visual design, while also working within technical constraints to ensure their ideas can be implemented seamlessly into production pipelines (CG Spectrum 2025; Vancouver Film School 2025). To qualify for one of the rare jobs, aspiring artists often attend learning institutions that promise to prepare them, with densely structured curricula comprising skill-focused

modules like sketching, visual communication, 2D and 3D as well as sculpting and product design (e.g. Sawyer 2018).

This essay investigates how toxic or harmful learning cultures within game art education normalize overwork and creative self-sacrifice in aspiring concept artists. Through qualitative interviews with students and educators, it examines the psychological, institutional, and discursive mechanisms that frame overwork as a necessary step toward professional success. By analysing both personal experiences and broader educational practices, the essay aims to expose the implicit curricula that prepare students for a precarious industry shaped by crunch culture, visibility pressures, and fears of obsolescence due to AI. The goal is not only to document these dynamics, but to critically question what it truly means to be 'industry-ready', and to imagine alternatives.

2. Methodology

The interview material is decoded through a qualitative-interpretive lens with a focus on thematic condensation rather than full categorical coding. A total of five interviews were conducted via Discord video calls in German and English, each of which was recorded and fully transcribed and guided by a semi-structured interview framework. The German interviews were translated into English by the author. All interviews cited in this essay were conducted by the author between September and October 2025 with current or former students and educators in game art education. The goal is not statistical saturation, but to illustrate how toxic pedagogical narratives are experienced and reproduced within the educational context of game concept art. Interviews with students aim to explore individual experiences of workload, psychological strain, and institutional expectations, while interviews with educators provide insight into the curricular logic, pedagogical aims, and assumptions about industry readiness.

Seen from both perspectives, it becomes possible to trace how toxic learning cultures form, endure, and occasionally come under critique within today's educational systems.

The following text first outlines key theoretical concepts, before analyzing both structural and individual dimensions of axploitative learning cultures through qualitative interviews with students and educators. It concludes by proposing principles for a healthier approach to teaching in the field of game art.

3. Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. The small sample size and qualitative design do not allow for generalizable conclusions, but instead aim to provide insight into subjective experiences and recurring patterns within a specific educational context. The interview material is shaped by self-reporting and retrospective reflection, which may be influenced by personal bias, selective memory, or individual positioning within the field. Furthermore, as the interviews were conducted, translated, and interpreted by the author, the analysis is inevitably informed by the researcher's own perspective and disciplinary background. While care was taken to preserve meaning during translation, nuances may have been altered in the process. Finally, the study focuses primarily on European game art education and may not fully account for global variations in institutional structures and industry relations.

4. Theoretical Lense: Crunch as Curriculum

As Jesse Schell notes, the early integration of concept art during game development can provide a unifying vision for the player experience, aligning mechanics, narrative, and design from the outset (2019: 388).

In the early days of video games, art and graphics were typically dictated by technical limitations (e.g., pixel count, colour palette restrictions). Artists at the time were primarily tasked with promotional materials such as box art, rather than in-game visuals (RMCAD 2024; GameDeveloper 2023). This changed with the advent of more powerful consoles and growing consumer expectations for visually immersive experiences. (RMCAD 2024; Hawey 2025: 2). However, the emergence of the specialized role of the Concept Artist is not linear but developed gradually at the intersection of illustration, industrial design, and (film) production. Artists such as Syd Mead, who designed not only individual objects but entire visual worlds for films like Blade Runner, exemplify an early form of what would later become standardized as concept art. In parallel, artists like Moebius operated across comics, film, and video games, contributing to visual development processes before the role was formally institutionalized. By the late 1990s, the increasing complexity of digital production pipelines led to the emergence of dedicated "conceptual designers" within game studios, marking the consolidation of concept art as a specialized profession which then further branched into subfields

such as character design, creature design, prop design, vehicle design, and environment concept art. The increasing specialization of the role led to the development of dedicated training programs, online courses, and private schools aimed at preparing young artists for the demands of the industry. No longer was it sufficient to transition into games from adjacent fields like illustration or comics. Industry expectancies shifted: junior artists were now expected to possess not only artistic talent but also a deep understanding of production pipelines, visual storytelling, and software workflows.

By the late 2000s and early 2010s, a wave of specialized schools emerged, portfolio-driven programs explicitly marketed as pathways to 'industry readiness' (FZD School of Design 2010; Concept Design Academy 2012). These schools often promised direct access to industry mentors, streamlined workflows, and a competitive edge in the job market. The booming demand for visually appealing and story-driven content created pressure to train faster and more efficiently, leading to high-stakes, fast-paced learning environments.

One of the common justifications for these intensive programs and their excessive workloads is the aestheticization of overwork in the games industry itself, euphemistically referred to as crunching, or simply crunch.

Months of overtime, 100-hour workweeks, and 12+ hour days do not sound like the characteristics of a 'dream job'; they sound like red flags that should leave anyone with an alternative heading in the opposite direction. Yet within the video game industry, tales of 'crunch'- extended periods of drastic overtime-are commonplace (Cote, Harris 2023: 609).

As alleged thorough preparation for this culture of long workdays, the educational programs that prepare the students for their life in the video game industry often reflect these normalized ideas, conditioning them to accept the idea that "it is nearly impossible to produce exciting, memorable games without at least some crunch" (ibid.: 610).

5. The Hidden Syllabus

In a study by Sellers and Villanueva Alarcón (2023) the hidden curriculum is defined as "the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended assumptions, lessons, values, beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives not openly acknowledged in any given environment" (Sellers, Villanueva Alarcón 2023: 176). They argue that through institutional norms, interpersonal interactions, and structural prac-

tices, educational systems convey powerful messages about what counts as legitimacy, competence, or belonging. These messages are not part of the formal syllabus but are absorbed by students through everyday signals, thus shaping their identity, behaviour, and perceptions of success. In the context of creative education, the hidden curriculum can thus include toxic norms such as glorification of overwork, self-sacrifice, and performative productivity as prerequisites for 'serious' artistry.

In the interview with student V., they state:

> There are no breaks during your studies – as soon as submissions are ready, the next project phase begins. The reality of the job is more flexible and human. But crunch was often glorified during studies. One lecturer openly said that crunch is part of the job. Others who didn't come from industry never addressed it. (V-01, 2025)[1]

Student L. reports a hidden curriculum in their studies: "The requirements are not very high, but if you only meet the requirements, then it's often too little, I'd say, you always have to add a little more." (L-01, 2025)

5.1 Unsustainable Learning & Burnout

The success of any educational institution depends not only on academic standards but also on students' motivation, fulfilment, and emotional well-being. Yet research consistently shows that higher education environments expose students to significant psychological strain, with many experiencing stress, emotional difficulties, and declining well-being during their studies (Douwes et al. 2023; Majerová, Sokolová 2025). University study often coincides with major life transitions such as relocation, social detachment, and the sudden demand for autonomous decision-making, all of which heighten psychological strain (Worsley et al. 2021). When programs prove more demanding, competitive, or misaligned with students' expectations, the result is a pattern of exhaustion, reduced vitality, and declining educational satisfaction (Jin, Ye 2022: 4). Within creative education, these stressors are amplified by aesthetic ideals that conflate productivity with passion and endurance

1 To preserve anonymity, participants are identified by coded pseudonyms and neutral pronouns, e.g. V-01, E-01.

with excellence. These are conditions under which burnout becomes not an exception but a normalized mode of learning.

'Toxic learning cultures' in educational contexts refer to the systemic elevation of competitive productivity, meritocratic values, and perpetual performance pressure at the expense of psychological well being and creative autonomy. Recent literature on educational performance cultures highlights how school environments can normalize 'toxic productivity', linking meritocracy and chronic stress to negative mental health outcomes and reduced learning satisfaction (Sukmana et al. 2025). Conceptually related research on toxic organisational climates shows that environments characterized by harassment, bullying, and toxic leadership contribute to increased stress, burnout, and diminished emotional well-being in institutional settings (Rasool et al. 2021).

"In the first three semesters, I never slept on the last day of project submission deadlines" reports L. in the interview, a student with highly positive feedback from peers and educators for their work (L-01, 2025). "[A]fter that come two weeks where I can't do anything at all. There is just nothing left," they continue, indicating reduced ability to create and a need to recover from the strenuous studying.

"Many have become mentally or physically ill" explains V. (V-01, 2025), while another interviewee recalled that what once felt like "stress-free passion" became a voice in their head repeating external expectations (J-01, 2025). These narratives align with research defining art block as the affective endpoint of chronic performance pressure, when creation, once joyful, turns into a site of exhaustion and self-doubt (Głaziewicz, Golonka 2024). Educator S. states in the interview: "[…] they are very inhibited to just try things out, to make mistakes; making mistakes is generally not mentally possible for many" (S-01, 2025).

As many programs offer only short breaks (Jin, Ye 2022) or, due to the timing of the student projects, no breaks at all during the term, this can quickly turn into a vicious cycle of blocked creativity and output. "Despite the desire/need to create something or express one's emotions, one cannot muster enough energy or space to achieve it" (Głaziewicz, Golonka 2024).

Drawing on sociological theories of practice, toxicity in creative education can be understood as a feedback loop between institutional structures and student subjectivity, in which external expectations are internalized and reproduced through everyday practices (Smith 2020). Hidden expectations and the fear of failure create a cycle in which external pressure becomes self-discipline, self-discipline becomes overwork, and overwork leads to burnout and creative paralysis, only for the cycle to begin again.

While the present study focuses on education, it resonates with broader industry dynamics. The Gamergate movement, for example, brought to light not only the misogyny in gaming communities but also the denial and resistance toward discussions of structural toxicity (Chatzakou et al. 2017). Similarly, global discourses around burnout, gendered labor, and precarious work have exposed how affective exploitation is both denied and glorified, especially in industries that frame passion as privilege. These public debates contextualize the institutional dynamics explored here, situating the classroom as an early site of normalization for broader cultural toxicity.

5.2 Performativity & Visibility in Creative Education

The value of creative education is not only defined by what students produce, but by how visibly they perform their commitment. Within studios and online spaces, artistic identity becomes a public display of endurance, where fatigue and self-sacrifice signify authenticity. As one interviewee (E-01, 2025) recalled, "We tried to show it like, 'Look at me. I ruined my health.'" Such expressions of suffering act as moral signals in a culture defined by constant visibility. In this sense, the overworked art student is not merely responding to external evaluation but enacting a learned mode of self-policing in which visibility itself becomes a moral demand.

Within today's platform-driven creative culture, visibility has become synonymous with professional survival. Sites like ArtStation and Instagram celebrate relentless productivity, turning creative practice into an ongoing performance of activity. As one interviewee noted, "Even though I had a full-time job, I stayed active on Discord, LinkedIn, and Twitter […]. I kept working after hours to maintain my portfolio" (V-01, 2025). Another reflected that "You see what others are doing and how far you are from that" (J-01, 2025), describing how constant exposure fuels comparison and self-doubt. These accounts reveal how the demand to remain visible transforms artistic identity into a form of unpaid, perpetual self-promotion.

For example, ArtStation's and other platform's feed designs can pressure artists to post continuously to remain discoverable. In this context, the act of resting or experimenting invisibly becomes risky: absence can mean irrelevance. In the interview one student says: "You constantly compare yourself. Some people post new stuff every day, and you think: Why am I so slow?" (L-01 2025).

Similarly, David Nieborg and Thomas Poell (2018) describe this condition as part of the broader platformization of cultural production, where visibility metrics and algorithmic ranking mechanisms reconfigure how creative labour is valued. What was once an internal drive toward artistic excellence is now mediated by engagement data and social proof. The interviewees' sense of constant comparison mirrors this shift: productivity and worth are measured not by creative insight but by public visibility. "I noticed that I no longer create for myself, but so that it looks good when I show it." (L-01 2025)

Building on this, T. L. Taylor (2018) argues that live streaming platforms transform play into a form of performative and affective labour, in which creators are expected to display authenticity, emotional engagement, and passion as part of their work. For students and early-career artists, who show or livestream their artwork, this 'performance of care' can become indistinguishable from self-exploitation: the display of dedication feels like it must be continuous, emotionally charged, and socially validated.

Together, these dynamics illustrate how digital platforms extend and amplify the pressures of art education. The online gallery becomes a stage for competitive self-branding, where exhaustion, productivity, and visibility converge into a single, moralized image of success.

5.3 The Aesthetics of Overwork & Industry Mythmaking

The culture of performative visibility is reinforced by educators who in some cases, knowingly or not, model exhaustion as a professional virtue. Yet this modeling is often based on a mythology of industry experience rather than its lived reality. Student interviewees noted that many teachers were no longer active in production or had left the industry precisely because of its unsustainable conditions. One student recalled: "Teachers said: 'When I was your age, I worked harder. If you want to be cooler, you need to work harder'," (E-01, 2025) while another added that "[o]nly one lecturer had actually worked in the industry – he was the one who said crunch is just part of it" (V-01, 2025). These accounts suggest that the educator's authority frequently rests on a secondhand image of the professional world, that is even inherited from a system they may have escaped. In this sense, teachers become false mirrors: they reproduce the rhetoric of endurance without the corresponding context of labour relations, risk, or remuneration. One student marked in the interview (L-01 2025): "It's something that gets glorified. People say, 'I worked so hard,' and next semester everyone does it again."

Within creative education, the rhetoric of being industry ready functions as an invisible moral framework that extends beyond the acquisition of technical skills. Under the guise of professional preparation, it transmits a set of unspoken expectations: constant availability, emotional resilience, and the willingness to endure hardship as proof of commitment. One student described this internalized pressure bluntly: "I must now perform well… otherwise I won't get a job later," (L-01, 2025). These narratives illustrate how the ideology of readiness legitimizes exhaustion as a necessary precondition for employability. As Farrier and Whittaker argue, this pervasive mindset

> so strongly influences the possibilities for students, they can be anxious about being 'industry ready' before they've had the chance to explore or define fully what kind of practitioners they want to become (2025).

Likewise, a recent Times Higher Education commentary notes that the emphasis on employability success has narrowed creative learning into "a competitive race for visibility and performance" (Coffield, Markham 2024), masking structural inequities behind personal responsibility. Even studies in design pedagogy warn against this reduction, arguing that creative education must preserve space for "risk-taking and productive failure" (Henriksen et al. 2021). The pursuit of industry readiness thus becomes part of the hidden curriculum (Sellers, Villanueva Alarcón 2023): a regime of affective labour and self-discipline that is never listed in the syllabus yet silently governs what it means to be a 'successful' concept art student.

6. Outlook: What a Non-Toxic Curriculum Could Look Like

When reflecting on the systemic harmful traits that permeate higher concept art education, it becomes essential to propose tangible responses. This final section outlines five key starting points, supported by concrete methods, that educators can integrate into their daily teaching. Small shifts in individual practice can begin to repair systemic failures and model alternative, sustainable ways of learning.

As a professor and curriculum designer, I ask: What would it mean to teach industry-preparedness without reproducing harm? The following principles are directly derived from the patterns identified in the interview material and theoretical analysis above.

6.1 From Performance to Sustainability

A sustainable approach reframes success in professional concept art as longevity: the capacity to maintain creative health across years, not just semesters. It values recovery as part of the learning cycle. For students and teachers alike, managing energy rather than time becomes central. Students who understand how to renew physical, emotional, and cognitive energy are more likely to sustain meaningful practice beyond graduation.

Shifting from performance to sustainability means recalibrating assessment criteria, which in some schools is already reflected in the grading system. Educator S. states in the interview: "I think more exercises would be quite good, […], so that students realize, okay, making mistakes is perfectly fine." (S-01, 2025) Reflection, iteration, and rest are recognized as forms of progress. Actively asking for help or even extension of deadlines in this scenario are not treated as mistakes and punished but praised as it takes courage and foresight from the student.

6.2 Structural change

Lasting reform in concept art education requires structural change. The systemic issues identified throughout this essay (compressed timelines, lack of industry alignment) cannot be solved by better intentions alone.

One promising direction lies in dual study programs that integrate sustained studio work, not as an add-on or short internship, but as an embedded component of the curriculum. Time spent within a functioning game studio offers students insight into real production cycles, communication hierarchies, and workflows while allowing them to apply academic reflection to practical challenges. Such programs bridge the gap between academic ideals and industry realities, reducing the shock of transition after graduation.

A second structural lever is extended program duration. As interviewee S. (S-01, 2025) noted, "more time would be the biggest factor I would change." Longer study periods enable depth over acceleration, giving students the temporal space to iterate, recover from setbacks, and build genuine creative maturity.

Finally, increasing touchpoints with active industry artists, through guest lectures, mentoring partnerships, or collaborative modules, exposes students to diverse professional realities rather than a single idealized trajectory. These interactions recalibrate ambition toward authenticity, preparing students to

navigate the industry (and its online representations on platforms) more critically. Structural reform, then, is the groundwork upon which all pedagogical ideals depend.

6.3 Teachers as Protectors, Not Gatekeepers

Within the hidden hierarchies of art education, teachers often inherit the industry's mythology of toughness: the idea that critique must hurt to matter, or that pressure reveals true talent. Yet this stance reproduces the very harm it claims to prepare students for. One interviewee, E., states:

> Later in the industry, I saw similar patterns: producers saying, 'You mean nothing, just do your job.' But I also see improvements. New generations are less toxic. Still, some people think overwork made them strong, so they repeat it. (E-01, 2025)

Reimagining the teacher as a protector means defending students' right to sustainable growth. Protection does not imply overprotection, it involves boundary-setting and transparency. The teacher models how to navigate systems without capitulating to them.

In this role, the educator shifts from judging performance to stewarding potential. S. states in the interview: "So I think it's very important that as a teacher you follow through on most of what we tell the students" (S-01, 2025). The goal is no longer to filter who is 'industry-ready', but to prepare every student to enter the industry without losing themselves to it. S. further elaborates: "For me, industry readiness means developing adaptability, being able to prepare for situations, adapt, and think in terms of problem solving. It's extremely important." (S-01, 2025)

6.4 Differentiation as Philosophy

A non-toxic curriculum must move beyond the expectation of uniform output. As McKee argues, "the duty of the lecturer is not to lift every student to a set bar – but rather to ensure that each student learns as much as they are individually capable of achieving" (2020: 77). Building on this, adaptive structures such as flexible deadlines, modular assignments, and reflective checkpoints can help distribute intensity more evenly across a term. What McKee calls "choice of

task" (ibid.: 80) might, in this context, become a broader framework for agency in the students' academic and professional lives. As one interviewee put it:

> I dream of building an environment where education doesn't end when classes end – continuous mentorship, focus on the person, not just skills. Education should round you as a person, not as a tool. (E-01, 2025)

6.5 Empathy as diagnostic literacy

Toxicity in educational contexts often emerges through the misinterpretation of student behaviour, where signs of exhaustion, withdrawal, or reduced engagement are attributed to a lack of discipline or motivation rather than structural or psychological strain (D'Arcy 2025). These misreadings reinforce a hidden curriculum in which endurance and constant productivity are valued over well-being and sustainable creative practice. Empathy offers a corrective lens for these distortions, it can be seen as a form of diagnostic literacy that helps educators take a different perspective, as framed by Warren (2018: 173). It enables teachers to ask not what's wrong with the student, but what in the environment is producing this reaction. In their 2025 study on the role of teacher empathy in influencing student mental health outcomes, Ampofo et al. show:

> Higher levels of perceived teacher empathy correlate with reduced stress, anxiety, and depression while enhancing student engagement in learning activities. Furthermore, student engagement mediates the relationship between teacher empathy and mental health outcomes.

In creative disciplines, this form of attentiveness is already familiar: artists and designers routinely shift perspectives to understand the context from and in which they have to create. Applied to teaching, it becomes a method for recognizing when something is wrong systemically. Empathy, then, does not soften academic rigor. It replaces judgment with interpretation and transforms misunderstanding into data for better design, both of artworks and of learning environments.

7. Conclusion

While the findings presented here offer insight into recurring patterns within concept art education, they are not statistically representative. The interviews serve as qualitative case studies that show tendencies rather than general laws. Further research, both quantitative and comparative, will be necessary to examine how widespread these issues are and to test which pedagogical strategies can meaningfully counteract them.

As a next step, further research will explore how these toxic learning dynamics can be countered through pedagogical experimentation. In 2026, I plan to conduct a practice-based workshop with students and educators from creative disciplines to critically reflect on their experiences and co-develop alternative teaching models. This workshop will serve as both an intervention and a data-gathering opportunity, expanding the empirical basis for understanding how toxic narratives can be challenged within the classroom itself.

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