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Chapter 26   > > > > > > > > > > > > > > > >

Getting a Job in the Game Industry

*"You work in games, huh? That's cool; so, what
do you do, just play games all day, huh?"*

—Most anyone outside the game industry

Who Is Trying to Get into Games?

As I write this chapter at Taldren we are conducting interviews for artists, from modelers and texture artists to riggers and animators. We are staffing up for our Black9 game that was announced in late 2002.

There are roughly three groups of people we are looking at: young people who have just finished school, people who have a lot of experience in a related industry, and people who have experience in the game industry. Naturally, the folks who have the experience in the game industry are generally more desirable to hire, as it will cost us less in training to get the maximum production out of the programmer, artist, or designer. The folks with experience in other industries such as stop-motion animation, 3D modeling for film, SQL business programming, or aerospace engineering generally all have a strong work ethic and an interesting background that might be of some value to your game shop. The younger people straight out of college,

especially the newer game schools such as DigiPen and The Art Institute of California, are usually full of energy and raring to go as they have just finished paying tens of thousands of dollars to learn how to make games and are now eager to really make games.

Recently I had two folks come in from the animation/film industry. I asked them why they thought they would like to get into games. It was interesting that both of them said they were looking for a stable position. While game companies are not as solid as working for Sears or General Electric, apparently we are more stable than these film and animation houses that staff up for a project, put everyone on 1099s, rip through the work, and then lay them off.

So they want a nice, stable job? Hmm, I was hoping for something along the lines of having an everlasting burning passion for creating games and that they are pounding on my door to apply that passion to our games! We are not

your local Department of Motor Vehicles where you can regain your confidence with a nice steady job and then wade back into film when you feel better. So first of all, express your passion for creating games.

You Want Me to Do What? Oh, I Would Rather Do This

The other sorts of misfits for the game industry are the folks who confuse working in the game industry with getting paid to play games. Twice I have employed guys who have reported to me that they are not "into" their current assignment, and that is their explanation for not getting their task completed. Sometimes I think all young people should join the military, work on a farm, or do asphalt roofing for a few years before entering the game industry. I have found over the years that the folks who have had crappy blue-collar jobs in the past truly appreciate sitting in air-conditioned offices being paid to be creative. The people without this background often confuse the word "hobby" with "work." While it is true you should enjoy your work, we all have jobs to get done, and there is quite likely at any given time something we would rather be doing!

Hours of the Game Industry

The truth behind the game industry is that most work is done at independent game development houses that are working against a milestone-advance payment schedule, and the work must simply be performed on time.

Anyone will tell you that employees who put in a solid 40 hours a week, with a full benefits program, who are well paid, and who spend their nonworking hours with friends, family, and other rewarding activities are most productive and happy. Working 120 hours a week is not very efficient and does not result in high-quality work. Most developers have hearts of gold with the best intentions, the author included, who start off each project with the simultaneous goals of making the best game possible while having sane and humane schedules for their staff. The game industry is a brutally competitive industry where folks all around the world love to make games and are willing and able to pour their souls into the games; we all are like this. It is like being a professional entertainer or athlete in that you must train hard for a long time, often poorly compensated, for the chance to become successful later in your career. Here at Taldren we are now three years old, and for each of our projects we have strived to improve our project estimation capabilities. However, we continue to find ourselves needing to work the occasional Saturday, and a few weekends a year we must work through the weekend at crunch time.

I have another axiom that covers this phenomenon: The younger the development house, the harder they must work to be competitive. The largest, highest profile projects are

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naturally going to be signed up with the more successful, well-established developers. These developers will have a lot more leverage and control over the relationship with their publisher and will most likely be able to achieve better advances, a longer schedule, and in general be able to develop with their more experienced team members at a more healthy pace than a start-up shop with their first contract. People looking into the game industry should understand this dynamic and find some other job if they are allergic to long hours and a load of work.

You Did Not Scare Me—I Love Games AND I Want In!

Okay, if the above comments did not dissuade you from wanting to enter the game industry, then come on in, the water's great!

So what do you know how to do and what would you like to do? Generally speaking there are six broad classes of skill sets in the industry:

1. Programming
2. Art
3. Testing
4. Producing
5. Audio
6. Design

I listed the skill sets in descending order of ease for breaking into the industry. Skilled programmers have the easiest time getting into games. However, Visual Basic programmers generally do not cut the mustard. Strong artists from other industries can often slide over without difficulty. The easiest way into games with the least skills is to become a tester at a publishing house; the only requirements seem to be a passion for games and some degree of written communication skills.

Producing jobs are both easy and difficult to get. Producers in the game industry often come from the testing or occasionally programming side of development; however, increasingly folks are being hired into producing slots at publishers who have some other management experience such as in the film or music industries.

Audio jobs are difficult to get in my opinion, due to the relatively low number of jobs industry-wide and the willingness of so many talented individuals to work for relatively low compensation.

Design is the single most difficult job to get in the industry and I am sure the hardest job to get as your break-in job. Some old-time paper RPG designers from TSR were able to transition into well-paying jobs at Interplay's Black Isle studio in the heyday of the Baldur's Gate series. The most common way for new people to get into design positions is in the 3D first-person genre where exceptionally talented and dedicated folks create compelling levels on their own that get picked up by fans and become popular. However, I argue these folks typically work for free on their own for a year or two before their work is noticed, so their first position is essentially as self-employed intern.

How to Get a Job as a Programmer

Program bunches. Learn C at a minimum—I highly recommend C++—and have a passing knowledge of assembly so that you are not ignorant of it. Pick a simple game such as Pac-Man, Frogger, Pitfall, or Sub-space and do your best to recreate the game on your PC with high frame rates and interesting improvements to the fundamental gameplay. Find an artist on the Internet to create some artwork for your game. Now you have your own game in your portfolio. Depending on your time and skill set this might take you one to six months to create. If your code is well written and your game plays well, you probably have enough demonstrable strength to get an entry-level job at a game company working with their internal scripting language to develop missions or scripts. This is your foot in the door, this is where the vast majority of programmers in the industry start: performing the coding work that is considered safe and tedious, allowing the more senior programmers to concentrate on the more challenging aspects of the project. As you demonstrate growth and ability, you will quickly be handed more and more challenging work—don't worry!

This has been my path into the game industry. I started as a scripter on I Have No Mouth And I Must Scream, developed by the Dreamer's Guild for Cyberdreams. When I was hired I came from space science work at JPL with a strong professional background in FORTRAN and a basic understanding of the syntax of the rest of the major languages including C and C++. For No Mouth, we used an internal scripting language called SAGA that worked pretty much like an unreliable C without low-level abilities. I was steadily given more responsibility until two years later I led my own team on a gambling game project, Caesars Windows95. From that position I transitioned fully into management as a senior producer at Interplay on Starfleet Command I, and now I am fortunate to run my own development studio, Taldren.

Programming is a valuable skill set that is not about to go out of demand. As a game programmer you are also the ultimate arbitrator of how a feature will turn out, so to the closet game designers out there (that would probably be everyone), this is a great job to exercise your creativity.

When you go in for your interview, be prepared to answer programming questions in real time. The Internet is full of great sites with helpful hints on how to handle the programming test such as http://cplus.about.com/cs/careers/. Why am I pointing out a site to you that probably has spoilers for the questions I and other developers would have asked you? The reason is simply memorizing the solutions will not help you; you will be called upon to explain your code in front of the senior technical staff in the company, and if you are fudging they will notice. Go ahead and scour sites such as the one above, use it to prepare yourself, and become a stronger programmer.

Typical starting salary for an entry-level programmer is about $40,000. Various factors such as the relative wealth of the company and the cost of living in the area will cause this number to be higher or lower.

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Artists and Their Portfolios

Artists have it both easier and more difficult than programmers; on one hand, it is a lot easier for the interviewer to review a portfolio or a demo reel to see how strong the artist is, but on the other hand, it is all too easy to create an impression that may be incorrect if your portfolio and demo reel are not top quality.

Animators, modelers, texture guys, and riggers, the most convenient format for delivering your portfolio of work to a game company is in the form of a VHS tape. Take some time to plan out your demo reel; think about what impression you want to deliver. Will you take your existing work and arrange it, or will you create new work especially for the demo reel? Be careful not to show too much material from a single genre such as traditional fantasy, sci-fi, or comic book work unless that is all you are capable of performing. While showing your range of ability is important to be sure you are considered for every job you want, do not include weak material just for the sake of variety.

Trim your demo reel down until every bit of it is vital for demonstrating who you are and then cut just a little more. Having the eye to revise, edit, and trim your own work is the mark of a professional. One time I had to endure a demo reel that offered over 12 different walk animations for a cartoon dog. The only impression I developed was that the artist himself could not decide what his best take was, and he was shifting that burden to me!

Demo reels with a sound track to add an aural dimension almost always are received with much greater enthusiasm. A clever technique for animators is to use the voice track from a popular movie and animate a character to lip-synch a few lines from the movie. I recently saw the demo of an animator who did this to the famous righteousness of God speech Samuel L. Jackson delivered in *Pulp Fiction*. The character delivering the lines was a cross between a Chihuahua and a gremlin, with perfectly bugged-out eyes to pull off the anger in Samuel Jackson's line. This was brilliant for the production values of the line, the voice-over was AAA quality, and I was free to enjoy myself and appreciate the quality of the animation. In fact, I believe this was a strong demonstration of the guy's ability to animate to a given specification rather than a crutch or a cheat of any kind.

Bradley W. Schenck is Taldren's senior art director, and in his career he has seen about 5,000 resumes, has interviewed more than 500 people, and has directly hired about 50 people in positions of game artists. The key thing he looks for besides manifest skill and talent as shown in a reel or a portfolio is an emotional, bone-deep statement of why the artist loves the aspect of art he is pursuing. For animators, solemn statements about the weight of a body in motion make Brad crack a thin smile. He is looking for people who think about their art when they are driving, taking a shower—their quiet time.

Typical starting salaries for artists are about $35,000, with the usual factors at play.

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How Do I Become a Tester?

Starting as a tester is a venerable tradition. All publishers have their own QA departments staffed with testers. While developers may or may not. Developer QA staffs, however, often double as a line producer/MIS guy or has some other double duty.

The easiest way to become a tester is to call up the publishers and simply ask if they have any openings. Most publishers will not hire testers who are not local, so if you are not local to the publisher you would like to work for, visit the city where the publisher is located and appear local.

I Have a Great Idea for a Game—I Want to Be a Designer!

If you have no experience in the game industry and you are not the creator of some intellectual property that is being adapted in the production of a game, then your only real avenue into straight game design is mod-making and level making. Find a game you love that facilitates user modification such as Neverwinter Nights, Dungeon Siege, Quake, or Unreal and think of something new and different you can create with these game engines and push

through and make a new game. The most famous example of this method is the mega-hit Counter-Strike, which is a mod of Half-Life; the Counter-Strike crew now have their choice of opportunities.

However, most game designers in the industry work their way through programming or art and have gradually assumed greater design responsibilities over the course of their projects.

So You Want to Be a Producer

The final job position I will discuss is the producer. The producer comes in many different flavors in the game industry such as coach, line producer, executive producer, associate producer, project leader, project planner, and project manager. Several of these titles are synonymous, and in general a producer is a person who gets everything else done that programmers, artists, designers, testers, and audio folks do not perform. Most producers start at the bottom as line producers and work their way up as they demonstrate that they can handle more responsibility. Another common method is for an art

director or a technical director to be promoted into a project leader role at a game development studio. However, at publishers it is increasingly common to hire senior producers from other industries where the individual held a management position.

Being a producer, I believe, is one of the most difficult jobs as you must relish pressure, have excellent communication skills, both written and oral, be able to resolve personality issues, be decisive, and thrive under constant task switching. It is true that the project leader usually has the most influence over the final shape of a game, but

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rather than a great prize, this is a heavy responsibility.

If you feel you were born to lead a team of creative folks, then start at the bottom and consistently demonstrate your willingness to work towards the best interest of your team and game, be proactive, and challenge yourself to

solve new problems. If you do this, your leadership skills will be recognized rapidly, and no doubt you will be promoted to the role of a producer. The reason is that there is, at least in my opinion, a profound shortage of folks out there who truly have what it takes to inspire their teams to the greatest of efforts and make the best games.

Go to GDC—Free!

A great place to meet game developers is at the Game Developers Conference (http://www.gdconf.com/) held in the spring in San Jose. It is a little-known factoid that you can be a volunteer at the conference working several hours each day in exchange for a full pass to the event. This will save you about a thousand bucks!

At GDC there are two prime avenues for networking for a job in the industry; the most straightforward is of course the job fair. Here you will find dozens of companies looking for new people. Your resume will go into the pile, and if you wrote a good one, maybe you will get a call back. The problem with this approach is that your resume will go to the HR department and sit for a while, gathering dust.

The better way to network for a job is to actually go up and speak to developers. After attending one of the conference sessions go up to the speaker and ask a good question and then follow up with an introduction about yourself and state that you are

looking to break in and would like some advice on where to start. If they know of a job opening, they will steer you there more quickly than your resume will in the HR department. The reason is simple: They will see you standing there and will be able to look you in the eye to gauge your determination and sincerity. Also, rank-and-file developers usually know of job openings well before HR does. The truth is that team members, recalling that a buddy of theirs over at this other game shop is wrapping up his project and is looking for a change, fill the vast majority of positions in the game industry. In other words, I believe 90+ percent of jobs in the industry are filled by word-of-mouth and shuffling about. The HR department only gets a job description if the company has been unable to fill a position through this word-of-mouth method. Also, it takes guts to walk right up to someone and ask for a job, and we developers like to find people with guts.

What About Those Recruiters?

I will save you, the recruiters, and game companies a lot of time; if you are new to the industry, fresh out of school, just start knocking on doors yourself as you do not have enough material in your resume to sell yourself. If you have a lot of experience from another industry, you might benefit from the use of a recruiter, but knocking on doors may still be your best bet. Recruiters are somewhat difficult to digest for the smaller independent developers such as Taldren; recruiters not only charge 20 to 30 percent of the prospective employee's salary as a fee, but they also pump up that salary to the highest levels that wealthy and/or desperate publishers are paying for their internal teams. So when I see the resume of someone without experience in the industry come through a recruiter, I just toss it in the trash, as I do not want to pay such a premium for someone who still needs experience. The only resumes I want to see from a recruiter are from those with significant experience from another developer or publisher who is likely to make a significant contribution to Taldren; that is worth paying such a premium.

Resumes, Demo Reels, and the Interview

I am placing these logistical steps for how to get a job at the end of this chapter because I think they are the most mundane, overly discussed topics on the subject. I have already discussed how you will really find your path into the game industry. This section will just be a short section on how to present yourself.

Honesty vs. Modesty

No matter what, you must be honest when creating your resume or demo reel, or performing your interview. First of all, it is unlikely that you will be able to fool the people you are trying to get to hire you; second, even if you do manage to fool them, you are only setting yourself up for tragic disappointment all around when you do not live up to your own advertisement. Or perhaps worse, it is never discovered and you end up working for some marginal company who cannot properly evaluate your skills and talents for what they are.

Having said that, you are still responsible for selling yourself to the company. Focus on the skills, talents, energy, and interests you genuinely do have and display them in the most attractive light.

Make sure your resume's objective clearly focuses on the job position the company is offering. If there are multiple job openings you are interested in and they are not identical but you feel you would be strong at any one of them, then tailor your resume for each position. You should of course write a cover letter that positions you as perfectly suited for the job posting the employer has described.

A pet peeve of mine is programmer candidates who list six or more programming languages on their resume.

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The vast majority of programmers I know specialize in a language or possibly two, such as C and assembly, or C++ and assembly, or C++ and SQL. The game company wants to know what you are *excellent* at, not how many different programming language books you bought or whether or not you know FORTRAN77.

This goes beyond just programming languages and can be applied to the rest of the knowledge sets you might put down on your resume. I suggest you be sure your main skills and talents are highlighted on your resume, and the others you have had past exposure to, if you must list them, should include some qualification such as "familiarity with Unix scripting languages such as sed, awk, and Perl or "familiarity with the UI of LightWave."

Here is a listing of recruiting companies:

Interact
831 S. Douglas St. Suite 119
El Segundo, CA 90245
phone: (310) 643-4700
(800) 333-5751
fax: (310) 643-4750
Info@InteractJobs.com

Mary-Margaret.com Recruiting and Business Services
Specializing in Entertainment Software
toll-free voice: (877) 662-3777
toll-free fax: (877) 662-3888
robin@mary-margaret.com
www.mary-margaret.com

Prime Candidate, Inc.
Pat Bigley
phone: (818) 784-1976
fax: (818) 501-1853
paddi@ix.netcom.com
www.primecandidateinc.com

Instant Studio
Eric Wills
President
phone: (480) 358-1417
fax: (480) 358-1439
eric@instantstudio.net
www.instantstudio.net