Chapter 16
Selling Yourself and Your Ideas to the Game Industry

There is no one way to get into the game industry. If you have been reading along with the designer perspectives throughout this book, you have probably noticed that each individual designer has a unique story to tell about how he or she got a start designing games. No two took the same path, and you too will have to find your own way. But in this final chapter, we provide you with a number of strategies for selling yourself and your vision to the game industry. The three basic strategies we discuss are:

1. Getting a job at a publisher or developer
2. Pitching and selling an original idea to a publisher
3. Producing your ideas independently

Most game designers do not start out by selling original concepts; they get a job at an established company and work their way up the ladder. When they have some experience, they might break off to start their own company or pitch ideas internally to the company they work for. But how do you find your first job in the game industry? What are the qualifications? What should you bring to an interview? These are questions that do not have easy answers. Unlike many career paths, game design does not have an established route to success. The ideas we suggest are ways to maximize your chances in a very competitive arena.

Getting a Job at a Publisher or Developer

Getting a job at an established company is the most practical way to start off in the game industry. You will gain knowledge and experience, meet and work with other talented people, and see the inner workings of game production firsthand. But even at the entry level, the game industry is very competitive. Aside from the obvious routes of responding to job postings and contacting the HR departments of game companies, we have several strategic recommendations that might help you get your first job.

Educate Yourself

When contacting companies and going on interviews, the most important thing you bring with you as a beginning game designer is a solid knowledge of games and the game industry. Being able to articulate concepts in gameplay and mechanics, knowing the history of games, and understanding how the companies you are speaking to fit into the business of games are all important ways to show your skills.

Academic Programs

Many colleges around the country are beginning to offer degrees in game design. This includes top-tier universities, like USC, Georgia Tech, and Carnegie Mellon, which have established curricula and game design research labs. There are also trade schools, like DigiPen and Full Sail, which specialize in placing people in the game industry.

These days major game companies like Electronic Arts, Activision, Microsoft, and others look to academic game programs first for new hires. Electronic Arts hired 100 people straight out of university in 2006. They hire mostly from top game design, computer science, and visual design schools and tend to hire applicants who are strong in both computer skills and people skills. The majority of their new hires start at the company as summer interns and are offered full-time jobs after graduation.

If you choose to attend a game design school, keep in mind that a well-rounded program might better prepare you for a career in game design than a curriculum focused only on tools and techniques. Additionally, studying subjects outside the field, such as history, psychology, economics, literature, film, or other topics you are passionate about, will stimulate your mind and imagination and give you interesting perspectives from which to design games.

That said, there is one bias that game companies do have: They are more likely to hire people with technical skills. If you take some courses in engineering or computer science, it will give you an edge over the competition. While you should not make tools your learning focus, you should become familiar with the applications used to make games. Programs like Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and Flash; 3D Studio Max; Maya; and Microsoft Project and Excel are all important nonprogramming tools that you might want to become familiar with, and most game programs will offer some training in these tools.

Play Games

You can teach yourself about design by playing as many games as you can, reading about their history and development, and analyzing their systems. We assume you love games, so playing them a lot is probably something you do already. But just playing is not enough. Get in the habit of analyzing the games you play. Challenge yourself to learn something new from each game you play. Be active in online game communities like GreatGamesExperiment.com, Kongregate.com, and GameDev.net. As we discussed in Chapter 1, develop a sense of game literacy, which can help you to discuss games at a deep system level and communicate your ideas about them with concrete examples.

Design Games and Levels

If you are following along with the exercises in this book, you should have designed at least one original game prototype by now. This experience is one of the most valuable tools you have in your search for a game design job.

Good solid paper game prototypes and well-written concept documents can form the basis for a great beginning portfolio. If you have the skills to turn your designs into software prototypes as well, you should do so. Even if you do not plan on pitching your ideas to a publisher at this point, polish your prototype and concept document anyway. During that crucial moment in a job interview when they ask you what experience you have, you will be able to show your work and discuss the process of design, playtesting, and revision in detail. This will differentiate you from other applicants because even though you are a beginner, you will be able to display actual experience of the development process, even though your games have not yet been published.

In addition to making physical and digital prototypes of original games, you can demonstrate your game design skills by building levels for existing games. As we discussed in Chapter 8, many games ship with level editing and mod building tools that are both powerful and flexible. There are also mod and level-making competitions that you can enter that might help give you the visibility and recognition you need to secure that first job. One strategy for getting in the door at a game company is to make levels or mods of that company's games, then submit these examples of your work along with your résumé.

Know the Industry

As we discussed in the previous chapter, it is important to stay informed about the industry you want to be a part of. Read books, magazines, and Web sites that can help you find out the latest news and trends. Having a grasp on the latest industry news when you go into an interview or meeting is a good way to show your knowledge of the space, and it will allow you to take advantage of opportunities that might arise with the latest announcements.

Networking

Networking is a powerful tool for people at all levels of the game industry. By networking, we simply mean getting out and meeting people within the industry. You can do this by going to industry-related events, attending conferences and conventions, reaching out to people in the industry via the Internet, and getting introductions via friends and relatives who know people in the industry.

Organizations

Joining organizations related to the industry is one way of meeting people. One of the best to consider joining is the International Game Developers Association, or the IGDA. The IGDA is an international organization of programmers, designers, artists, producers, and many other types of industry professionals that fosters community and action for the furthering of games as a medium. The organization has local chapters in many geographic locations; you can find out if there is one near you by going to www.igda.org/chapters.

Chapters often hold networking events, lectures, and other opportunities to meet people who are working in the industry. There are membership fees for this organization, but if you are a student, you can get a reduced rate.

Conferences

Another great opportunity for networking is at conferences. Two of the top conferences in the United States are the Game Developers Conference and South by Southwest. Developers and publishing executives attend these events en masse, and you will have the opportunity to meet people from all levels and areas of the industry. There are lectures and seminars on any number of topics, and you might be surprised at how accessible some of the top talent in the industry is at these events.

Exercise 16.1: Networking

Make it your goal to attend at least one networking event per month. This can be a conference, a party, a meeting, a lecture, or any other opportunity in which you can meet people in the game industry. Start a database of the contacts you make at these events.

Internet and E-mail

Another networking resource is the Internet. You can meet many people in the industry in online communities, such as the forums on IGDA.org, or you can find internships or positions in the jobs and projects sections of Gamasutra.com. E-mail is a very efficient tool for reaching out to people, but it is not necessarily the most powerful or persuasive way to introduce yourself. You can find lists of developers and publishers in the companies area of Gamasutra.com, and you can go to their Web sites and contact them via a "cold" (i.e., unsolicited) e-mail, but do not be surprised if you do not get a response. Game companies are flooded with e-mail from people who want to work in the game industry, and the chance of your e-mail getting to the right person without an introduction is slim. That does not mean you should not try, but do not be dismayed if the response to your carefully written e-mail is silence.

One problem is that HR departments are often not the best way to reach the decision makers for project hiring. We recommend searching for the individual addresses of people inside the company. Find out who is the producer or line producer on a particular game title, and then try to get an introduction to this person. Do you know someone in the industry, or otherwise, who knows them? If so, get a personal introduction. If not, try to find his e-mail address from press releases or postings on the Web and contact him directly.

Before sitting down to write your e-mail, research this person's background and the games he has worked on. Personalize your e-mail to him based on your research. A little knowledge and a well-written introduction of yourself and why you are contacting him can go a long way. If you are lucky, your e-mail will get a response. Even if there is no job at the moment, you will have made a contact, and you can introduce yourself in person at the next industry event or conference.

Good research and writing notwithstanding, do not expect too much from each message that you send. Professionals working in the game industry receive a lot of unsolicited inquiries. If they do not write back, do not be surprised or upset. They are probably in the midst of production and too busy to answer their mail. But if you continue to persevere, your odds will increase with every message you send.

Exercise 16.2: Follow-Up Letter

Write a follow-up letter to a person you have met via your networking efforts to talk about job opportunities in her company or to show her your original game idea. Try to make your letter both persuasive and courteous. Be sure you are prepared for the meeting should she respond. The next few exercises will help you to do that.

An important note about networking is to not expect too much from each activity you do. If you go to an event and do not meet anyone who can help you, do not consider it to be a failure. Networking is a cumulative endeavor. It is seldom that a single meeting will result in a job opportunity. Usually, you will have to meet people several times at events and follow up with them each time before opportunities open up. Even if a networking event opens up no opportunities, you will still learn a lot by simply mingling and interacting with the people there.

Starting at the Bottom

What jobs should you be trying to get in your quest to enter the industry? If you are an artist or a programmer, there are entry-levels positions in these tracks at most companies. You will need to have a good resume/portfolio. These positions are competitive, but demand is high for this type of talent. As the size of game teams has grown, the largest percentage of new jobs has been created in the art and programming groups.

If you want to produce games, there might be production assistant or coordinator jobs (or internships) that you can apply for. But if you want to design games, the outlook is a bit more complicated. The best job you could get would be as an assistant designer or level designer. Truthfully, however, these positions are difficult to come by unless you are experienced or already working within a game company. Many people who become game designers do so by starting in another track and jumping over into design when they have gained experience in the industry. For example, many game designers first work as programmers or producers.

Exercise 16.3: Résumé

Create a résumé focusing on your game design experience. Even if you do not have much professional experience, make sure to include references to all the design work you have done in the exercises throughout this book, courses you have taken, or organizations you belong to, such as the IGDA.

Interning

A good way to get into the industry in any career track is by interning. Game companies, especially publishers, bring on summer interns from colleges regularly. These are generally not paid positions, and they are not as hard as getting a paying job. But before you take an intern position, make sure the company is serious about letting you become involved in actual projects. You do not want to spend three to six months making photocopies or acting as a receptionist. This won't advance your career much or teach you about the industry. A good internship will allow you to learn about some aspect of the business. Interns often do research, testing, or assist producers or executives. It is a great way to get to network and to increase your knowledge.

An Interview with a Game Agent

by Richard Leibowitz

Richard Leibowitz is the president of Union Entertainment, a talent management and production company specializing in video games.

Game Design Workshop: *How did you become a game agent and why?*

Richard Leibowitz: After considering careers in law, finance, and politics, I decided to combine the three in entertainment and took a position at Paramount Pictures as an attorney in the Domestic Television department. From there, I went on to head Rysher Entertainment's International Business and Legal Affairs department, and later returned to Paramount when Paramount acquired Rysher. During that period, I became fascinated by the video game industry and left Paramount in 1999 to apply my entertainment deal-making and legal experience to the video game business by cofounding the first Hollywood-style agency in the business.

GDW: *What's the role of an agent in the game industry today?*

RL: In my opinion, there are three types of agents in the game industry today: hunting agents, packaging agents, and Hollywood agents.

Hunting agents simply make phone calls to publishers on behalf of developers, whether they are clients or not, to solicit and secure work-for-hire deals. For example, a hunting agent calls a publisher and learns that the publisher is requesting proposals from developers to make a game based on a recently acquired license. The hunting agent then contacts developers, tells them of the opportunity, finds or settles on one of them, and presents that developer to the publisher. If the publisher selects that developer, then the developer will typically pay the hunting agent a modest percentage of the developer's resulting compensation.

The packaging agent is similar to the Hollywood producer in that he/she identifies and secures content, attaches the best available developer and other talent (e.g., writers and designers), and shops that content/developer package to financiers/publishers. Unlike producers, though, packaging agents do not generally engage in development activities, and instead of a producer's fee, packaging agents will receive a percentage of the license fee from the property's licensor and a percentage of the developer's compensation from the developer.

Hollywood agents include those at the established Hollywood talent agencies (e.g., CAA, William Morris, UTA). Each of the agencies has at least one person dedicated to games, although the services they provide vary greatly. For the most part, Hollywood agents represent their film clients' interests in the game world and earn a 10% fee for doing so. Often, this is what I'd describe as "passive representation." For example, if a publisher wants to secure an actor's name and likeness rights and/or hire the actor for voice recordings, then the publisher will contact the relevant Hollywood agent to secure such rights and/or services. However, some Hollywood agents are more proactive,

actually packaging developers with film projects at the agency and then selling those packages to publishers. Typically, a publisher will pay the Hollywood agent a percentage of the package budget (i.e., license fee, actor's rights and services fees, and development budget).

GDW: *How is a typical deal structured between a developer, publisher, and your company?*

RL: Union provides a wide array of specialized services and has a successful track record. As a result, there are many development companies and individual talent that utilize Union's services. The most common deal structures between Union and its clients are: (1) straight monthly retainer; (2) a success fee equal to a percentage of the client's compensation for the project; and (3) a combination of the first two—a lesser retainer plus a lesser success fee.

GDW: *What do you look for in a client?*

RL: We look for what we know publishers look for—talent. Publishers hire two types of developers: established developers with robust and proven technology or brand new developers comprised of superstar talent and capable management.

GDW: *What do you think the role of a game agent will become?*

RL: There will always be a place for game agents—even the biggest and best developers can take advantage of an agent's contacts and deal-making abilities. That being said, I believe the role of a game agent in the future will favor the packaging over the hunting variety for at least two reasons:

1. Internal business development personnel: Developers often have business development personnel on staff to secure and sell projects. Typically, the associated costs for the developer to employ such personnel and hunt by itself are equal to or less than what the developer would pay a hunting agent.
2. Publisher demand for projects: Publishers are extremely risk averse. One way publishers reduce risk is by hiring the best development companies, and another is to green light projects based on preexisting and identifiable underlying content (e.g., Harry Potter). Packaging agents add value to developers and pique publishers' interest when they attach developers to desirable content. By so doing, the packaging agent will most likely either (1) secure a deal for a developer that the developer wouldn't have otherwise secured, or (2) make it possible for the developer to demand a premium (e.g., higher development budget, better royalty rates) for its services.

GDW: *Will agents be as established in the game industry in the future as they are in the film and television industry today?*

RL: In the near future, I believe publishers will follow the movie studios' paradigm and rely upon game agents, and independent game producers, to present compelling game project packages. The present game industry parallels the film industry in its early days. However, the pull of Hollywood is evident in many areas of the game business, and as talent emerges as a power in the game business like it did in Hollywood, the game business will want the same kind of services and structure—including knowledgeable intermediaries such as agents—that have served Hollywood so well for so long.

Further, just as in Hollywood, content is king in the game industry. However, much more in the game than in the film business, "content" can mean both the underlying property (e.g., Spider-Man) and technology. Special effects extravaganzas aside, technology is not generally what distinguishes filmmakers. Consumers will pay the same $10 to see a low budget romantic comedy as they will to see a $100 million epic. By contrast, at up to $60 per next-gen game (not including console and add-on costs), applying the right tech to the right property can make a huge difference in creating a rewarding game experience worth the consumer's time and financial outlay. Therefore, good packaging agents—those who know how to identify and to combine developer (i.e., technology) and property to create a compelling package and who can bring packages to publishers beyond what the publishers might identify on their own—are most likely to add value for developers and publishers and prove most successful as the game business evolves.

Exercise 16.4: Internship

If you are a student, an internship is a good place to start. Go to the career center on campus or visit their Web site and look for postings. Another option is to approach game companies directly and ask them if there are any internship openings.

QA

The most common paid entry-level job is as a QA tester. The pay is usually low, and the hours can be long, but it is a decent way to start your career because QA testers are exposed to the whole development team. You will be writing bug reports that go directly to the programmers, artists, and producers. Managers might take note of talented QA testers because many of them started in QA themselves. When production teams are being built for new projects, some companies will give a good QA tester who has paid his dues consideration over an outsider. More importantly, QA testing gives you front row seats to the development process. You will get to see games evolve and come together from early builds to the final release.

Pitching Your Original Ideas

When you have built up some experience by working in the industry, you might want to develop and pitch your own original ideas to publishers. As we discussed in Chapter 13, publishers are more likely to fund ideas that come to them with an experienced team, a stellar idea, and a good, solid project plan.

Let's assume that you have been able to get a meeting with a potential publisher (a trick in itself). What do they expect to see? How will the process unfold? The following section explains some industry practices for established developers seeking to sell their ideas to publishers. Even if you are not yet at that stage of your career, it is worth understanding the process so that you can anticipate what you will have to do when you do get to that point.

The information and recommendations in this section are based on the IGDA Business Committee's *Game Submission Guide*. In preparing this document, the IGDA surveyed and interviewed professionals throughout the industry to get a picture of trends and common practices for game submissions. The full report is available for download from the IGDA Web site. With the IGDA's permission, we have used the report to create the following recommendations.

Pitch Process

Game publishers receive thousands of submissions a year from developers. Many of these are immediately rejected for a variety of reasons, including inadequate submission materials. Less than 4% of submitted ideas are actually published. Of the ones that become products, only one or two become hits. Do not be discouraged by these statistics, though, because the odds of rejection are similar in all creative industries.

As a developer, you can increase your chances of getting past the first step with a publisher by making acceptable pitch materials. Good pitch materials will identify your team as experienced professionals, and they will convey your ideas in an exciting way. When you are pitching to a publisher, they are asking themselves: "Can these people be trusted with millions of my dollars?"

The first step in pitching is to get to someone who reviews third party submissions. You can sometimes find a contact address on the publisher's Web site or by calling the main switchboard and asking for someone in third party product acquisitions. Again, do not be surprised if your phone calls do not get returned. Always be courteous, but also be persistent.

When you eventually get a pitch opportunity, you should be prepared to sign a submission agreement or confidentiality agreement. This document will basically say that whatever idea you are going to present might already be in development at the company or has been presented to them by another developer. In any case, you will have no recourse if they end up producing a similar idea without you. Despite the one-sidedness of this document, you should sign it. Refusing to sign will show that you are not familiar with the process. Submission agreements are standard practice in every creative industry including books, film, and television.

It is best to pitch in person. However, sometimes publishers will request to review the materials on their own first. Either way, present yourself and your materials in as professional a manner as possible. You do not need to wear a suit, but ripped jeans and an old T-shirt are not appropriate.

Depending on how aggressive you are, getting through the pitch process can take anywhere from 4 to 16 weeks. Make a checklist or spreadsheet of every publisher you contact. It is okay to present the same pitch to multiple companies, but dealing with publishers that have multiple individuals evaluating your project can get confusing, and you do not want to lose track of your progress.

Pitch Materials

The package you present has to instill confidence in different types of people within the publishing company. They will be evaluating your team first, your creative materials second, and your project plan third. Make your materials easy to understand in a very short time frame because not everyone at the publisher is going to read them in their entirety. Here are some materials that the IGDA guidelines recommend preparing:

1. Sell sheet
2. Game demo
3. Game AVI
4. Game design overview
5. Company prospectus
6. Gameplay storyboards
7. PowerPoint presentation
8. Technical design overview
9. Competitive analysis

1. Sell sheet

This is a "short attention span" document that explains your idea as well as the target market. The sell sheet should include: game title, genre, number of players, platform, ship date, two-paragraph description, bullet point list of features, and some game art.

2. Game demo

A playable demo is one of the most important submission materials you can produce. Seventy-seven percent of the respondents to the IGDA's publisher survey said that a playable demo is essential to a pitch package. Demos can be built in differing degrees of completeness. The important thing is that the publisher can get to evaluate the final gameplay.

Selling Ideas to the Game Industry

by Kenn Hoekstra, Pi Studios, LLC

To be brutally honest, it's *very* difficult for someone outside the games industry to get their ideas past a company's front door. For that matter, it's not all that easy to get a game company to look at your ideas if you work for them. There are a number of reasons for this.

First of all, there are legal reasons that revolve around the legal possession of an idea. Let's say a company had a similar idea a year ago and they've spent a million dollars or more developing that idea up until this point. The company says, "Sure, I'd love to hear your new, innovative game idea," and it turns out the idea is the same as the one the company has been working on. When the game comes out, you have a "he said/she said" lawsuit on your hands over whose idea the game was in the first place. That is a hassle that no company wants. To combat this situation, most companies delete ideas and suggestions unread or send them back "return to sender" through postal mail.

Another reason game ideas are hard to sell is that most people outside the industry don't understand the fundamentals of game development. They don't understand technology limitations, development times, financial concerns, scheduling, or any of the multitudes of other headaches involved in developing a new product. Their idea proposals say things like, "You would recreate New York City to scale and have four million unique-looking and -sounding individuals that you can interact with, and you can have 500,000 of them on the screen at the same time when you join them in Times Square for the New Year's Eve ball drop. That's when the aliens attack and severely damage the city, so all of the buildings have to be half destroyed as the city is plunged into chaos and eternal night. Then you and your band of 10,000 resistance fighters lead the charge with 500 unique weapons and squad-based tactics, and the game would toggle between first person, third person, top down, and map views," and on and on and on and on and on. You see what I mean? A vast majority of game idea submissions suffer from this problem. I call it "newbie ambition." Game development is mostly about figuring out "what cool stuff you can do in a limited time period with limited cash."

Yet another reason for not accepting game ideas is a question of who takes the risk. The game company is spending 5 to 10 million dollars (or more) on the development cycle for the game and, in turn, they are taking all of the risk. Why, then, should they pay someone from outside the company for their game idea when they aren't taking any of the risk? Generally speaking, every game company has more ideas of their own on the back burner than they will ever have time to produce, and thus, there's no reason to accept outside ideas.

Think of it this way. Everyone at one time or another has tried to write a novel or has had a great idea for a novel. How many book publishers will take an idea for a novel if they have to pay someone else to do the writing? None. Therefore, the people with the ideas have to write their own books. How many of them start writing?

How many of them actually *finish* the novel? When they're finished, how many get published at all? And of those who are published, how many are published without changes made by the publisher? See what I mean?

Think of game companies as established entities in the entertainment business. Generally speaking, game companies think they know everything there is to know about gaming because they've paid their dues and worked their way to the top. Just as you won't sell a *Star Wars* sequel to George Lucas or a Spec Ops book to Tom Clancy, odds are you won't sell your big game idea to a game developer. Sadly, it's just the nature of the business.

The only possible exception to the "outside game ideas" rule is if you are a world-famous person in the entertainment industry. If Stephen King, for example, came to a game company with an idea for a horror game, who wouldn't listen? The potential to have a famous name on the box can sometimes outweigh the "we have our own ideas" rule.

Now, if you do want to get your idea made into a game, there are a few things you can do:

- Inquire with the company first. Ask them if they want to hear your idea and offer to sign an NDA (nondisclosure agreement). If you're not interested in money or lawsuits, tell them in writing they can have your idea no strings attached if they want to use it. Don't just send the idea in unsolicited. It will be deleted unread, ignored, or mailed back to you.
- Get a job at a game company. If you're on the inside, your chances of getting your ideas noticed or accepted are much greater because most of the legalities disappear.
- Get a team together and make the game yourself. If not the whole game, make a solid, working demo. This will show publishers that you're serious and it will give them something concrete to look at. Game development is a very visual business, and it's a lot easier to judge a game idea from a demo than from a piece of paper or a wordy verbal description.

It's a great misnomer that game companies (or any companies for that matter) employ idea people or think tanks to push the company in bold new directions. Hard work and contribution to a greater goal or the greater good of a company is the only way to get anything done in the business world. That goes for your own company or any company you're working for. Unless, of course, your family owns the company. Then all bets are off on the hard work and contribution part.

About the Author

Kenn Hoekstra has a bachelor of science degree in English from the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. He has designed 3D game levels for Raven Software's Take No Prisoners, Hexen II: Portal of Praevus, HexenWorld, and Soldier of Fortune: Gold Edition. He also served as project administrator for Heretic II, Soldier of Fortune, Star Trek: Voyager: Elite Force, the Elite Force Expansion Pack, Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast, Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix, Jedi Academy, X-Men Legends and Quake IV. Kenn has written several game manuals, the official Soldier of Fortune Strategy Guide, the screenplay for Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix, and has published several articles on the games industry. He is currently working on Mercenaries 2 for the PS2. Kenn lives in Houston, Texas and is working as an executive producer for Pi Studios, LLC.

3. Game AVI

If you cannot produce a playable demo, then a game AVI is the next best thing. It is a video file that shows the characters and gameplay. The most credible AVI will be one created using your game code. However, some established developers make them using just storyboards and narration.

4. Game design overview

This is a game design explanation written without excessive details. If a publisher is interested, they will want to see that you have thought through the whole project, but they will not want to read every last detail. Ideal contents include: game story, game mechanics, level design outline, controls, interfaces, art style, music style, feature list, preliminary milestone schedule, and a list of team members with short bios.

5. Company prospectus

This is a short document that talks about the managers in your company and the team members. It is like a résumé for your company. Ideal contents include: company information (including location and project history and proven abilities), company details (including technologies used, number of employees in each department, and other differentiating information), titles in development, titles shipped (including platform information), and full team bios.

6. Storyboards

These are still images from your game. They can be in sketch form or final art or both. They are nice to include in a paper package because an executive might want to review your documents when they are away from a computer and cannot run your demo or game AVI. Ideal contents are: visual walkthrough of gameplay with text explanations, play control diagrams, and character profiles.

7. PowerPoint presentation

This is a compilation of key visuals and points from your other pitch materials. It is easy to make, and it might be useful if the publisher wants to get the top points when you are not in the room. For example, one person inside the publisher might want to present the idea to another when you are not around.

8. Technical design overview

This is a technical design document without excessive details. It describes how your technology works as well as the intended development path. It should include complete explanations while being accessible for nonengineers. Ideal contents are: general overview, engine description, tools description, hardware used (development and target), history of code base, and middleware used, if any.

9. Competitive analysis

This identifies titles you are competing against. It shows that you understand the market and your relative position within it. Ideal contents are: summary of your concept's market position and reason for success and pro and con descriptions of competitive titles with sales figures, if you can get them.

Exercise 16.5: Preparing Your Submission Materials

Go over the preceding list, and with your team members, prepare as many of the submission materials as you can. Make sure to include all of the work you have done on your original game prototype, your design document, and your project plan.

Exercise 16.6: Pitching

From your networking database and the research you have done, target a list of companies to whom you can pitch your original game. Use all the methods described previously to find a contact within the company and set up a pitch. Even if this exercise does not result in the sale or funding of your idea, this is a great way to network and will help you to meet more people in the industry and possibly get a job.

What Happens after the Pitch

Before leaving your pitch meeting, you should ask when you should expect a preliminary response to your pitch. This will set both your own expectations for a response as well as the publisher's expectations that you intend to follow up.

Prompt follow-up on the developer's part is important, but over-eagerness can quickly wear on a publisher. A good guideline is to follow up with a short "thank you" e-mail immediately after your pitch, and provide any supplemental materials or copies of documents that were requested during the meeting.

If a publisher is interested, they will likely get back to you quickly, but if you do not hear from them immediately, it might just mean that your contact is traveling or busy in other meetings. If you do not receive a response after 7 to 10 days, you should contact the individual who set up your meeting with no more than one e-mail and one phone call per week to check on the status of your pitch. Contacting the person more than this will be seen as bothersome and is unlikely to help your cause.

What will likely be happening at the publisher during this time is an internal review process among multiple people. It is unlikely that one person will be empowered to make a decision. Most publishers are organized around three groups:

- Sales and marketing
- Production
- Business/legal

Within each group are decision makers who have input on external submissions. The people you pitch to will likely be from the business/legal group. If they like it, they will take it to the other internal groups and try to build consensus. These groups often have competitive relationships because of their differing roles in the company. Ideally someone will feel strongly about your idea and fight to convince the other groups that it will be successful. If these groups like it, the publisher might ask a technical executive to dig deeper into your project. It is a great sign if the publisher starts asking for technical details.

In essence, the final decision will be based on a combination of many possible risks. These risk factors can include: time to market risk, design risk, technology risk, team risk, platform risk, marketing risk, cost risk, etc. If the publisher goes through their process and decides that your project is worth the risk, they will prepare a detailed return on investment (ROI) analysis that will determine profit potential for the title.

If the publisher deems all risks and the projected ROI to be acceptable, then the publisher might send you a letter of intent for the project. This is a great day, but your submission process is still not over. As a final step, the publisher will probably want to execute a full contract. Or they might unexpectedly kill the project at this point for internal reasons. As a rule of thumb, do not believe you have a deal until you see a signature from the publisher on the final contract. And do not spend any of the money you expect to see from the publisher until it is actually in your company bank account.

If your pitch does not make it to this stage, know that you are not alone: You are in the company of 96% of all other submissions that the publisher has reviewed and passed on that year. Each time you go through this process, you will learn more about how to pitch your ideas, and you will have more and better contacts to pitch them to.

Independent Production

Like other large media industries, the game industry has its share of independents who choose to self-produce and distribute games. This is a hard route to take, and scraping together the money to support a team through months of production can be an arduous process. Some independent developers have other jobs, some do work for hire to support their original game development, and some use credit cards and

loans from friends and family. Like independent films and underground music, independent games are a long shot for their creators. More often than not, they are never finished or never find a distribution channel. But independence has its privileges as well—the ability to experiment with truly original concepts, the freedom to change ideas midstream, and the knowledge that you own your ideas and their implementation.

For most independent developers, the goal is to produce a game that will be picked up and distributed by a major publisher. If this happens, the developer will be able to negotiate a fairly good deal in terms of ownership and royalties, and the publisher will be taking much less risk in terms of advances. Unfortunately, most independently produced games do not get picked up, and their developers must resort to trying to sell them directly via the Internet or using them as a demo to get a publishing deal for a different game. But that is no reason not to go the independent route if you have a truly original idea and the passion to produce it. The edges of industries are where innovation often thrives, and your game might turn out to be exactly what the game-playing public did not know it was looking for. See the "Business Opportunities for Independents" sidebar on page 386 for more information on independent development.

Conclusion

As you can see, there are many ways to become a game designer and to get your ideas produced. Whether you get a job in the industry and you work your way up the ladder, try to get a deal to develop an original game for a publisher, or strike out on your own and produce your ideas independently, what really matters is not the path you choose but that you find a way to realize your dreams and make the type of games you truly believe in.

Whether you find yourself working at a large company, wind up producing games on a shoestring, or just wind up designing games as a hobby, never lose sight of your own personal vision, and keep in mind that the only way to fail is by not making games at all.