

Foot, Meet Door

How to Navigate the Gatekeepers and Land Your Dream Game Job

With 20,000 hours of gameplay under your belt, you're ready to put all that hard-won education to work in the games industry, right? Like any game worth pressing on plastic, the game industry offers fun and rewards, but only after you've mastered many rules, levels, and demanding skills. Playing games isn't going to get you very far in this highly competitive, deadly serious business.

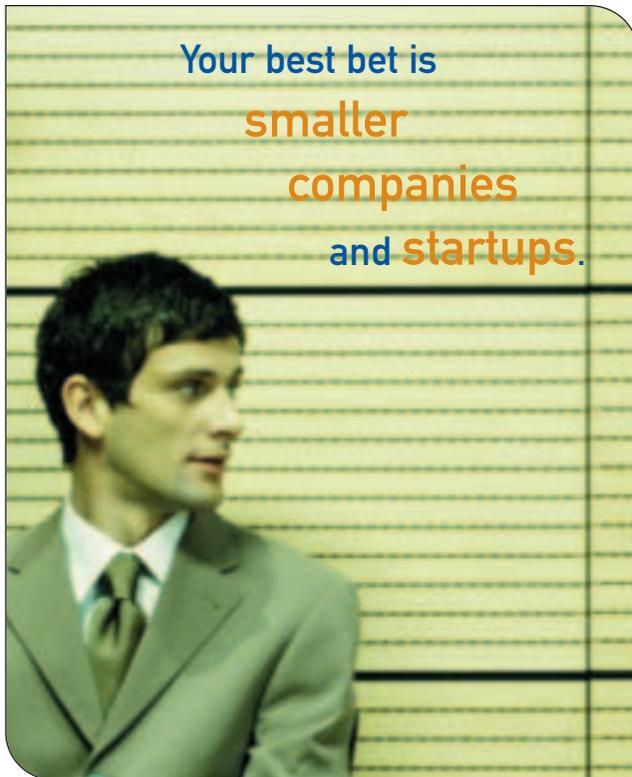
Amy Bendotti, recruiter for Nintendo of America, puts it more bluntly: "What we look for is experience, 100 percent. We hardly ever hire entry-level because we don't really have to. For artists, we don't really look at anybody who doesn't have at least two years experience and hasn't at least published one title."

If those sound like tough entry requirements, brace yourself: Although the game business is thriving, so are schools that teach game-related skills, and many more qualified game artists, game designers, and game programmers are lining up for more employment than there are jobs waiting to be filled. And tough economic times have shut down a fair number of projects and studios, putting a lot of experienced talent out on the street.

It's a classic Catch-22: You need experience to get hired, but it's impossible to get that experience if you can't get hired.

If you're trying to break into the industry, your best bet will be at smaller companies and startups which may be willing to take a chance on you if your can-do attitude and willingness to

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take a chance outshine your lack of experience. Some companies, such as Black Ops Entertainment, will even administer a test to see how you'll fare in a real-world scenario. According to Tim Johnson, the company's director of human resources: "For a 3D artist or environment artist [for *TERMINATOR 2*], we would ask them to model a scene with 5,000 polygons over an underground bunker, with some destroyed areas, rubble, steel bars exposed, cracked concrete, those kinds of things. We ask to see six maps at 256×256 [pixel] resolution to texture the front areas as metal, cement, and rubble types of things."

What You Need to Know

There are many schools that teach the basic skills of the game industry. Although employers take notice when they see graduates of programs at respected schools such as Sheridan Institute of Advanced Learning and Technology in Toronto or Ringling School of Art and Design, in Sarasota, Fla., they are far less interested in what school you attended than in the skills and portfolio you took away.

There are three major categories of game jobs in which you stand a chance of getting hired if you're new to the business: design, art, and engineering. Game designers are the writers and architects of the game; they come up with the game concept, the rules for gameplay, the interface, and the visual

themes and puzzles that make it interesting and entertaining to look at and play. But in a team of 20 employees working on a single game, there's likely to be only one or two game designers. If those odds don't deter you, you'll need a solid grounding in creative writing; a good understanding of visual design, including 3D graphics; and basic familiarity with game programming. Most designers need at least a few years in the industry or a collection of game mods and writing to earn their wings.

Artists make up one of the biggest parts of any game crew, and on a 20-person staff, you're likely to see a dozen artists who do everything from concept sketches to 3D modeling, texture mapping, lighting, and animation. These jobs may be highly specialized, or several may be combined into a single role, depending on the studio.

"At Sammy Studios, we're very interested in artists," says Sean Miller, lead artist at the medium-sized Southern California startup currently working on four new games. "[They should be] artists first, more than technical people, although we do have some technical artists. It's very important to us that they have really strong art skills. We are very interested in artists who have a traditional background, if not professionally, at least traditional skills that they can demonstrate in their reel or portfolio."

Animators are a special breed, and are primarily expected to animate characters with a solid understanding of the principles of animation. But in some studios, animators are also responsible for rigging characters, and where realistic humans are used extensively, such as in sports games, they're also in charge of directing motion capture sessions and working with motion capture data that comes out of such sessions.

In boom years, studios may hire recent graduates with only a great traditional art portfolio or demo reel, but in today's economy, you'll need to know the particular technical skills and software packages a studio is using — for artists that typically means either Alias/Wavefront's Maya or Discreet's 3DS Max, and painting tools such as Photoshop or Deep Paint — and you're going to be expected to know your art form as well as any student of Renaissance painting.

Matt White, manager of traditional art at LucasArts, elaborates, "Take any opportunity that you have to start learning the technology component to the job you want to do — on your own — because you're going to be competing against people for the job who may be very strong artistically and have those skills. So don't ignore it. . . . And play games. Play games and have strong opinions about the art in the games, and be ready to talk about them."

Game programmers need to know prevalent programming languages (typically C and C++), and they must have an understanding of game engines and artificial intelligence. Typically, they'll need at least a B.S. in engineering or computer science. For some jobs, it's critical to understand rendering systems and shader-coding techniques. Other positions might

demand more scripting skills in environments such as Maya's MEL. One area that's increasing in demand calls for people who can engineer production pipelines.

Kevin Cureton, technical art manger at Electronic Arts in Redwood City, Calif., describes some of the skills that he uses along with traditional C++ programming and scripting with tools such as Perl and Python: "A lot of it is understanding the artist's workflow. . . . We end up defining where they are going to place all that data. We give them the structure in which to operate. Once that data's in place, then it has to be run through a series of processes, transform[ed] into something that can actually be run on the game machine, put into the right location so it can be found, and typically it's got to be built into a game executable. So there are a lot of data translation stages that are involved and that we don't want the artist to have to do by hand."

Finding Jobs

Game industry jobs are relatively easy to find online, since most employers post at least some of their openings on their

web site. Gamasutra.com, *Game Developer's* sister site, and Gamejobs.com offer directories of employers and new job listings. But if you have any personal connections, use them.

"Let's put it this way," explains Emmanuel Shiu, art director at Sony Computer Entertainment America. "One person knows somebody, the other doesn't. Whose tape am I going to see first? My friend's, of course. So I end up hiring him before I even see the other guy's demo tape."

As a result, many jobs are never advertised because they're filled through personal referrals. But referrals don't have to come through a cousin or a best friend in the business.

"In any school, there are working professionals," Shiu points out. "That's always your first avenue, because you'll say to your teacher who's at, say, Electronic Arts . . . 'I have this demo reel. This is what I want to do. Tell me your honest opinion.' If he thinks it's good, he'll tell you who to talk to."

If you haven't already, it's time to start impressing teachers with your hard work and devotion to learning, and start networking at 3D or development user groups and at events such as E3, Siggraph, and the Game Developers Conference, learning to make new contacts whenever you can.

Reeling It In

If you do find promising jobs online, it's time to pay special attention to the submission requirements posted by the employer. It's easy to make a mistake in how you submit your résumé or reel that can kill your chances before you even get into the system.

When preparing a résumé, be sure you have a version that's reader-friendly in text-only format, since this is how you'll have to submit it to the database-driven systems of companies such as Microsoft and Electronic Arts. And be sure to reorganize your résumé to list your skills and particular toolsets at or near the top, since this is what recruiters increasingly rely on to cull out hundreds of unlikely applicants. If your résumé doesn't list the key words they're searching for, you're out of luck.

And finally, when it comes to the portfolio or demo reel, remember the 15-second rule. Whether you're showing an online portfolio, printed work, or an animated demo reel, with you have 15 seconds to grab a recruiter's attention and impress him or her with your talent. Forget the grand finale and the sexy audio track — recruiters want to see that you

can do the job at hand. So put your very best piece up front, especially if it directly applies to what the employer is working on. And whatever you do, be sure your reel shows only your best work.

"You tend to judge them by not only the strongest piece on the reel, but also by the weakest piece," explains Sammy Studios' Miller. "Very often, the thing that gets you put into the 'no' pile is going to be the weakest piece. We expect people to be able to tell the difference between good and bad. If you put something on your reel that's bad, it becomes something we have to consider."

And yes, after you've sent in your reel, landed an interview, and demonstrated your enthusiasm and eagerness for the job, remember a thank-you note. "I'm not talking about an e-mail," says Jo Ann Pacho, a recruiter for ArtSource. "I'm talking about a hand-written thank-you note, and mail it to that person." It's a way to prolong a good first impression, which you can then hope to continue on your first day at your new job. *ZF*

ADVERTISER INDEX

COMPANY NAME	PAGE	COMPANY NAME	PAGE
Academy of Art College	50	Numerical Design Ltd.	C3
Anthro	5	NXN	19
Carnegie-Mellon	51	Octopi	52
Charles River Media	16	Orbital Media	47
Climax Group	48	Oregon 3D	22
Collins College	51	Premier Press	11
Discreet	C2	Programmer's Paradise	7
Edge of Reality	47	RAD Game Tools	C4
Full Sail Real World Education	53	Red Eye Studios	54
Garage Games	69	Savannah College of Art & Design	52
i2i Animation	46	Secret Level	13
Illinois Institute of Art	49	Softimage	15
Integrity Ware	54	Stormfront Studios	46
Konami	47	Stottler Henke	17
Lucas Arts	48	University of Advanced Computer Technologies	54
Mojo Audio	53	Vancouver Film School	51
Morgan Kaufmann	3	Xoreax Software	16
New Pencil	53		