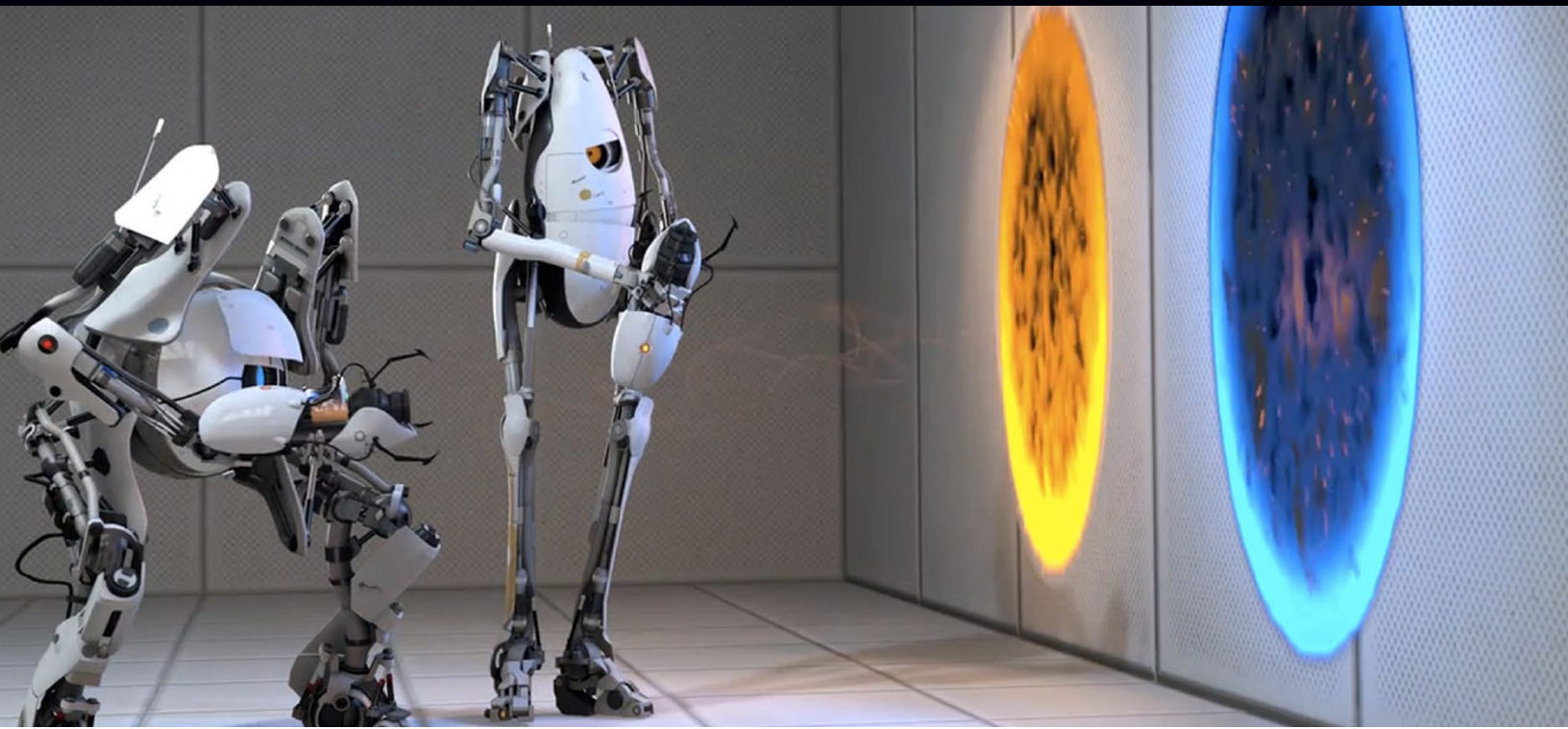


10 Steps to Becoming a

Professional Game Designer





10 Steps to Becoming a

Professional Game Designer

If you live and breathe video games, your enthusiasm for gaming may have brought you to this fundamental question: “What is it like to be part of a team that actually makes games? Can I do this for a career?”

Our answer is a resounding, “Yes!” And we’re not the only ones who think so. Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt has said that “The game world is good training for a career in tech. It teaches players to build a network, to use interactive skills and thinking.” Even if you plan to go into a different technology career, the principles and skills behind gaming are valuable building blocks for other careers.

“If I were 15 years old, that’s what I would be doing right now.”

- Eric Schmidt, Google Executive Chairman

So what exactly is a Game Designer?

The term is used quite generically these days. In fact, most commercial game development companies are made of large teams with many individuals contributing to the game’s success. There are programmers, producers, level designers, modelers, animators, technical artists, testers, marketing and finance specialists, and more.

But the trends are shifting quickly. Indie games, casual games, social networking games, and games for handheld devices have become crucial (and rapidly growing) segments of the gaming industry. The barriers for creating, publishing and distributing games digitally have been removed considerably in recent years, spurring astonishing levels of creativity and opportunity to reach the masses via the internet. These days, a single person can not only conceive, create, program, and publish his or her own games, but also achieve a high degree of commercial success as well.

A career in game design is also a smart move in terms of stability and earning power. The annual sales of the video game industry have surpassed \$20,000,000,000 annually (that's \$20 Billion, with a B). And most analysts believe that this figure is understated, especially since migration to non-traditional games has become so important and hasn't yet been factored into "retail sales."

A career in game design is also a smart move in terms of stability and earning power. The annual sales of the video game industry have surpassed \$20,000,000,000 annually (that's \$20 Billion, with a B).



The takeaway here is that, no matter what, games have to be conceived, coded, tested, and sold. There is room for top talent—talent with solid, proven portfolios. According to the Game Career Guide issue of Game Developer Magazine, the average annual game development salary in 2010 was calculated to be an impressive \$80,817. And if you are a programmer or a producer, you can expect to break six figures. So yep, the gaming industry is a good long-term bet.

Start the transition from playing games to making them with these ten steps!

1. Play games!
2. Take game design classes.
3. Learn essential software skills.
4. Choose a specialty.
5. Start a portfolio.
6. Earn a degree.
7. Look for an internship.
8. Keep playing games.
9. Network.
10. Continue learning.

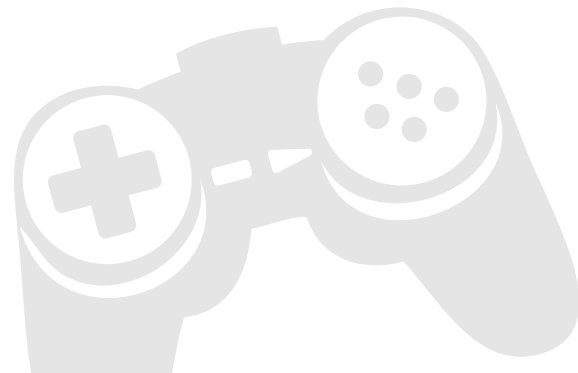


Image from Half-Life 2. © 2012 Valve Corporation

Step 01: Play games!

Look at games from a different perspective. Pretend you are a game designer or play tester. What could you improve? What gameplay changes would contribute to more immersive entertainment?

Spend time gaming, but do it constructively. Don't let negative stereotypes about gaming stop you – screen time is research time. Not only is it fun and entertaining, it can build the foundation for your future career!

“Video games are bad for you? That’s what they said about rock-n-roll.”

- Shigeru Miyamoto, Nintendo



Image via gamerzones.com

Step 02: Take game design classes.

Take some classes to learn the fundamentals of game design. You have many options from school-offered extracurricular classes to summer programs like those offered by iD Tech Camps. Choose the type of game that you love playing and find out how it works. After you've taken a couple of classes in your favorite game or software, branch out. Building a broad base with lots of cross-training (ex. learn game modding and 3D modeling in addition to game design) will help you in projects where you may be required to work on more than one aspect of the game.

Some great courses include:

iD Tech Camps

- Adventures in Game Design
- RPG Game Design & Graphic Arts Hybrid
- 3D Game Design – Racing Games
- Game Design for iPhone® & iPad® (I & II)
- Game Creation – Arcade & Platform
- 3D Game Design – Role Playing Games
- FPS Game Design – Unreal® Development Kit
- 3D Game Modding – Portal™ 2
- 3D Game Modding – StarCraft® II: Wings of Liberty™
- 3D Game Modding – Portal™ 2 & Half-Life® 2
- Autodesk® Maya® – 3D Modeling & Animation

iD Gaming Academy

- iD Game Studios 101
- 3D Modeling & Animation with Autodesk® Maya®
- Level Design – Unreal® Development Kit
- Programming for Xbox 360®
- Game Development for iPhone® & Android™ with Unity

Step 03:
Learn essential software
(and soft!) skills.

Taking courses will expose you to essential software and programming languages. After the initial classroom introduction, develop your skills and go more in depth. Consider practicing on your own, doing online research, or learning more through textbooks.

A thorough knowledge of the following industry-standard programs will be helpful:

- C++
- Java
- Clickteam® Multimedia Fusion 2 Developer®
- Adobe® Creative Suite
- Unreal® Development Kit
- Autodesk® Maya®
- Microsoft® XNA®

But it's not all about the technology either. The gaming industry is extremely collaborative, and being able to work well with others is essential.

The gaming industry is extremely collaborative, and being able to work well with others is essential.

Soft skills that are very important for a game designer include:

- Teamwork
- Creativity
- Problem solving
- Communication
- Critical and creative thinking

Step 04:
Choose a specialty.

Choosing a specialty will allow you to focus and achieve excellence in a narrower field. There are many types of game companies, and within those, many types of jobs in the gaming industry. Explore, do online research, and continue taking classes. You will quickly learn where your strengths and interests lay.

Possible specialties you may consider include:

- Developer/programmer
- Writer
- Designer
- Tester
- Artist
- Texture artist
- 3D animator
- Audio engineer
- Producer

Step 05: Start a portfolio.

Hopefully the game design classes you take are hands-on, allowing you to build projects and practical examples of your skills. Gather those projects and turn them into a portfolio. Even if you take a class that doesn't focus on creating projects, make that your own prerogative. Save your work, create examples of all of your different skill sets, and start a portfolio.

Note: As you gain more experience and create more portfolio pieces, remember to keep your portfolio to a reasonable size. Showing a few samples of your best work is far more effective than showing 50 unedited pieces of work.



Step 06: Earn a degree.

You can go the four-year university route, or the specialized game school route. It may be wise to research and choose a school with faculty that are either actively involved in the gaming industry, or have good contacts.

As a starting point, look into some of these as options. Here is a ranking of the Top 8 colleges that offer game development majors, courtesy of the Princeton Review:

1. University of Southern California, Interactive Media Division (Los Angeles, CA)
2. DigiPen Institute of Technology (Seattle, WA)
3. Drexel University, RePlay, Digital Media & Computer Science (Philadelphia, PA)
4. Becker College, Game Design and Game Programming (Worcester, MA)
5. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), Games and Simulation Arts and Sciences (Troy, NY)
6. The Art Institute of Vancouver, Game Art & Design/Visual & Games Programming (Vancouver, BC, Canada)
7. Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI), Interactive Media and Game Development (IMGD) (Worcester, MA)
8. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Singapore-MIT GAMBIT Game Lab (Cambridge, MA)

Or, if none of the schools on page 5 are a good fit for you, any top school with a recognized department in one of the below majors is also a smart start:

- Interactive Media & Game Development
- Computer Science
- Computing/Information Systems or Information Technology
- Engineering or Mathematical Sciences
- 3D Modeling & Animation
- Graphic Design and Digital Media
- Even history, literature, mythology, sociology, and psychology can be useful, especially for game designers and conceptual artists

It makes sense that if you attend a college near one of the big game development studios, your chances of interviewing (even for an internship) are better.

Another factor to take into consideration is location. It makes sense that if you attend a college near one of the big game development studios, your chances of interviewing (even for an internship) are better. Here is an incredibly informative map that lists game development studios by geography: gamedevmap.com.



[gamedevmap](http://gamedevmap.com)

Map image via gamedevmap.com

Some of the bigger U.S. markets are:

- The San Francisco Bay Area (Electronic Arts™, Zynga, etc.)
- The Los Angeles Area (Activision®, THQ®, etc.)
- Austin (Blizzard® Entertainment, BioWare™, etc.)
- Seattle (Valve®, Microsoft Game Studios™, etc.)
- New York City (Kaos Studios™, Take-Two Interactive™, etc.)

Step 07: Look for an internship.

Get professional experience to show companies that you're more than just a gamer. You can look for an internship in game design, game programming, etc., or you can even apply for a job as a video game tester.

There are endless companies involved in the video game industry—publishers, console-makers, chip makers, etc. Big names in the industry include Activision®, Sony®, Nintendo®, Microsoft®, Valve®, GameSalad®, Electronic Arts™, Nvidia®, Zynga (made popular by the games Mafia Wars, Farmville, and Cityville on Facebook).

If you want to go for one of these big-name catches, you will need a portfolio that shows “proof of technical skill” and knowledge of professional game development tools. The competition is stiff—but if you have the passion and the drive—you can knock down doors and break into the industry.

It is also wise to remember that top gaming companies want top talent. Where would you start looking for top talent if you were a gaming company? In many cases, you'd start at the best colleges and universities in the country.

Step 08: Keep playing games.

Passion counts. Stay up-to-date with the latest video game offerings and always keep playing games. Not only will you know the important news in your industry, you may also gain inspiration and ideas. Creativity is often just as important as your skills, so keeping an open flow and being aware of industry trends is incredibly helpful.

“Freshness is important. If a game is fresh, new, intriguing, challenging, and enchanting, it will sell, and sell well.”

- Roberta Williams, co-founder of Sierra Entertainment

Step 09: Network.

Game design is an incredibly team-oriented field. Not only is it important to be tech-savvy, you also have to be people-smart. As in many fields, networking is an essential ability for any professional game designer. Meet new people, go to industry events, and get to know future colleagues. Build your reputation, show that you are versatile and reliable, and you will be on track to getting more work later on.

The gaming community is – contrary to negative stereotypes – incredibly social. Go online, read blogs, join clubs, etc. The more people you know, the more opportunities will pop up.

Step 10: Continue learning.

No matter what stage of your career you're in, keep learning. Be curious, pursue new knowledge, and look for new ways to apply your existing knowledge. Talk to people in the industry and gain insight about their path into professional game development.

“Everyone who has a computer fancies himself a game designer, just as everyone with a guitar wants to be a rock star. There is nothing wrong with that if you remember that success is a long, hard road.”

- David Crane, co-founder of Activision

Good books for game designers include:

- Game Design: Principles, Practice, and Techniques – The Ultimate Guide for the Aspiring Game Designer
- Game Programming for Teens
- The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses
- Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals
- A Theory of Fun

Or, subscribe to industry related magazines:

- Game Developer Magazine
- Game WEEK
- Games Business

And don't forget to join online communities:

- gamesindustry.biz
- gamasutra.com
- gamedev.net

Sound tough? Maybe, but don't let anybody tell you “you can't do it.” Try harder than the rest, and you will be successful.



Image from Unreal Tournament® 3, © 2012 Epic Games®, Inc. All rights reserved.

For more information about our Video Game Design courses, visit internalDrive.com.

