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So You Want to Be a Game Designer, Part 1



By Walaika Haskins
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For those who love video games, a career designing them may seem like a dream job. However, being a career video game designer isn't all just fun and games. Detail work and repetitive tasks are often part of the job as well. Being the world's biggest gamer isn't going to cut it, either. You'll also need things like imagination, formal training and experience with creating games, not just playing them.

In the tech industry, there are few careers with a cool factor equal to the title "game developer." For a whole host of gamers, making a living out of creating video games is akin to finding the holy grail, winning the lottery or becoming a renowned actor or musician.

For their legions of fans, the best game designers are nothing short of rock stars. While very few attain the personal success and following of someone like Will Wright, creator of "The Sims" and "Spore," the career offers opportunities to help create something that could possibly be played by millions of people.

However, just because a person enjoys playing video games does not mean that game design would be a good career fit.

"Thinking that 'Hey, I like playing games, so maybe I'd like making them' is sort of like saying, 'Hey, I really like taking baths, maybe I'd like to be a plumber. You might want to be a plumber, but it will be for very different reasons that you like to take a bath,'" Jesse Schell, game designer and author of *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses*.

So, what does it take to become a game designer? Wright initially studied architecture at Louisiana Tech, moving to robotics and [computers](#) only after a try at mechanical engineering. Is a college degree necessary? What other personal characteristics and skills do design

studios look for?

Wanted: A Hard Worker

Few jobs are as glamorous in reality as they might appear to outsiders. Although game design might seem as though it offers a work life filled with fun and games, in truth, it requires a great deal of dedication and hard work.

"The biggest misnomer is people think you just sit around and play video games all day, and it is actually a lot of hard work. It's much harder work than people think," David Hodgson, author of more than 70 gaming guides, told TechNewsWorld.

Anyone entering the field needs to be prepared for that reality of the job, Hodgson emphasized.

Other important characteristics: A game designer should be highly imaginative, a well-developed attention to detail and a love for minutiae and repetitive tasks.

"Having the ability to visualize and imagine all types of scenarios and outcomes for a character or being able to fully visualize or imagine what a world might be like is critical. You also need to be able to articulate those thoughts and able to convey those ideas. The perfectionist piece is also there -- being able to provide a high level of detail," Fiona Cherbak told TechNewsWorld. Cherbak is chair of the special interest group [International Game Developers Association Women in Games](#) and VP of marketing for GameRecruiter.

Strong planning and organizational skills and the ability to know when to scale back a design are also essential, according to Hodgson.

"That is incredibly important. There have been developers that have closed because they had grand schemes that they weren't able to fulfill. You need to be able to identify both your own limits as well as the limits of technologies. You also need to know how to meet milestones and stay on schedule," he said.

They also need to be team players and able to accept constructive criticism.

Practical Experience

Another requirement a potential game designer needs, of course, is a little practical experience.

"Yes, you need to be a gamer," said Cherbak. "What type of gamer and how much you game can probably depend, but it's very difficult, if not impossible, to understand game design without being an experienced game player. The best game designers are people who invariably spend an awful lot of their time playing games."

In other words, the more experienced a gamer a person is, the more capable and skilled they will be as a game designer or game writer. The writer develops the plot, writing the characters' dialog and the branching storyline. The designer works hand in hand with the writer, coming in with game play -- essentially the systems and experiences that the player's character goes through.

"You don't just have one story," Cherbak explained. "You have many stories depending on the type of game it is, and so the game designer's job is to develop the game experience or game play that character will have depending on the choices that a gamer makes. Unless you've played a lot of games, it is very hard for you to begin to imagine [what] all the potential outcomes or systems might look like and understand the game play potential in that world."

People with good [education](#) and training but little first-hand experience may have a difficult time competing in the job market, according to Cherbak.

"[People] can try but the reality is that they will have a very tough time because they are not going to be knowledgeable enough about all the styles of game play that are possible. Unless you've played games heavily for say five, 10 or 15 years, if you haven't played a lot of games but want to be a game designer, you're not going to have the depth of practical knowledge or experience that someone who has been playing the games will have," she explained.

Prospective game designers should also have experience creating other types of games. Game designers need to be able to answer the question, "What do I want this game to be like," and then figure out how they can make that possible. It's something not everyone wants to do because it requires a lot of difficult thinking and experimenting, Schell advised.

"They should have an understanding of what it is truly like to create a game. A good way to get started is to explore making other kinds of games. Have you ever made a card game or a board game? Anybody can make those. Anyone can sit down and make a new card game in 30 minutes? If you don't enjoy doing that, you're probably not going to be too interested in making computer games," he said.

Getting In the Door

A degree with the words "game design" from a university or vocational school is not a must for those interested in the career. However, as with most professions, having the piece of paper attesting to a formal education in the field, or at least a similar field, is always helpful.

"Game designer is a tricky job. Some people have a programming background or one in art. Some have an archeology background. Designing a game is kind of like planning a party. You need to think about what would be fun and getting together the right people as well as a sense of the timing of things," Schell noted.

That said, however, potential employers place more emphasis on a prospective game designer's portfolio of games. There are two paths that can help someone break into the field, according to Hodgson.

"One of them is through the explosion of mobile gaming, specifically iPhone games. See what's working and what isn't working, and make your own version [of a game], but not too close to the original," he advised.


"Or, get together with a programmer and design a game. That's how the guys at ['Portal'](#) got started. They were [students](#) with a concept for game that fires two holes. The seed for the game was very simple, and there are ways you can do that as well -- in a home brewed way," Hodgson continued.

The Internet 🌐 is replete with both open source 🔍 and proprietary game development tools and software development kits (SDKs) for various platforms, including the [Xbox 360](#) 🔍.

"You need to have an online presence. You can use existing mods like 'Fallout 3,'" Hodgson explained. One version of the game for PC includes a kit that allows the player to create his or her own content. "You can create an encampment, build a storyline for the characters ... If people are enjoying it, you'll catch the attention of people."

A more traditional route would typically involve finding an internship with a reputable studio while or after completing a formal education. Then seek full-time work with a studio.

A good roundabout way to enter the field is through a development firm's quality assurance department as a game tester.

"If you don't have or can't afford a formal education, you get in through the [game] test department," Hodgson explained. "You become the QA guy. Instead of lounging around eating Doritos, what you do when you can is you network with the more influential people at the studio. And then instead of being let go after every project is completed you're kept on and can work your way up to game designer from within." 

Stay tuned for Part 2.

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