

Ten Survival Tips for Aspiring Game Development Students (Featured on GameCareerGuide.com)

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1 - Know what you want to do

The game industry is huge and has dozens of different career paths. It isn't limited strictly to art, programming, design, or writing; every one of these fields has a ton of sub-specialties. They're all appealing, but when it comes down to it you can't fill every position no matter how hard you try. When you get on a team you'll have one job to do and they'll want you to do it well, and when you apply for a position at a company they'll have one job that they're reviewing you for, whether it's character design, rigging, animation, engine programming, scripting, level design, quality assurance, or any number of other positions. Ergo, your abilities and portfolio should be fairly concentrated.

Depending on where you go this may not be an issue. Some schools are purposely structured to guide students to finding their specific calling within the game industry--provided said students' interests lie within a specific branch that the school specializes in, like programming or art. Others, on the other hand, will throw you into the deep end without warning. You'll suddenly find yourself on a team having never made a game before and having to make a game in four weeks. In either case you're liable to experience some confusion and may even find yourself doing a job you really don't like or butting your head up against a wall out of a misconception of what it is you really enjoy.

The key to avoiding this is introspection. Think of the people and works that influence you most, be they in gaming, film, or any other medium, and try to narrow it down to a top three. Think about your *other* interests and what it is you like about them, too. These facts can all be very telling of what you should do with yourself. If you're an actor inside, you may be interested in character animation. If you want in on something visual but aren't much for figure drawing, level design or environment art might be up your street. If it's the other way around and you're just fascinated by the human form, then it's character design. If you enjoy solving puzzles a lot then programming could be your area of expertise as it depends hugely on good logic and problem-solving skills. If you spend lots of time making board games and tabletop role-playing games, then straight-up design is probably your thing. If the games you like most are all narrative-driven, then maybe you should be a writer.

These are just a few examples of the different trains of thought you might have while thinking about this. In any case, whatever it is you see inside yourself, whatever it is that appeals to you the most about the games you love, try and connect that with some role in the gaming business--a focused, concentrated role. If you don't know what roles there are, ask. You may discover jobs that are vastly appealing which you never knew existed. The sooner you get a handle on who you are as a game developer, the sooner you can realize your potential and be all that you can be on a team.

2 - Don't overburden yourself

Simply put, don't overload yourself with classwork. This seems so simple, but so many game design students--myself included--have made this mistake in one way or another. Avoiding it depends largely on the school you go to, what kind of classes they offer, which ones you *have* to take, and what courses you feel you need in order to pursue the career you want. The big killer here is full-time credit requirements, and let me show you why with a personal example:

One semester I decided I'd take TC (Telecommunications) 445, 446, and 447 all simultaneously--that's game design studio 1, flash programming and animation, and 3D modeling and animation in Maya, respectively. Three studio classes, each with huge projects due every week. On top of that I was taking TC 339: Digital Games and Society, a game history class that was high enough level to have a fair share of papers and presentations to put together. All of them added up to 14 credits--with 12 being the minimum in order to be a full-time student, and the smallest number of credits for any of them was 3, so I was locked in. I couldn't drop any of these classes or I'd lose my scholarships and wouldn't be able to afford school.

They were all fairly enjoyable on their own, but together the work was just way too much to handle. Never mind the lack of sleep, I simply wasn't able to focus on any of my projects nearly as much as I wanted to. As a result nearly all of them came out half-finished. I ended that semester without a single portfolio piece and looked like a lazy moron in front of my classmates. One of them even went as far as to say to me "if you were actually working in the industry right now you'd have already been fired."

Well, I *wasn't* in the industry, I was in school, and as this incident proves you can make school ten times more hellish for yourself than any actual job. Really, this was the equivalent of working two or three *totally different* jobs, including an *actual* job that I was holding down at the worst dish room on campus for twelve hours a week and couldn't get out of. I left myself no way out and felt utterly defeated by the time it was over.

It all could have been avoided, though, if I'd simply substituted one or two of these classes with some other, easier required class--like a 200-level psychology course or something. As fate would have it, though, I left myself even *less* room than that because I'd already taken all the 100 and 200-level classes in a big lump a year prior to this incident, figuring I should get them out of the way for the real meat.

As you can probably tell I made sure not to repeat this mistake the following semesters and tried to space out my high-level classes a little more. A friend of mine criticized me my last semester when I opted to take "Bowling I" to pad out my schedule, saying I should've done something more challenging, but between my capstone project, a big 800-level independent study, a 300-level ancient history course, and preparations for graduate school I decided I had more than enough to worry about.

To sum this all up, figure out where to draw the line at project-based classes and try to space them out with easier, more lecture-based classes. Do research before you dive into a new schedule;

credit hours scarcely reflect the amount of work you'll end up doing. This rule is vital, because when it comes to your projects, especially group projects, you want to be focused and you want whatever you make to be something you can be proud of.

3 - Think like a designer, not a fan.

Being that you like video games enough to want to spend your life with them, there's probably one company, one series of games, or even one game designer whose style you particularly dig. Simply put, you worship them like gods among game designers.

Stop it. Stop it right now. They aren't gods. They're people. They make mistakes, they don't know everything, their answers are not always perfect, and they certainly don't have *every* possible answer to every problem. They're not smarter than you are, just way more experienced and generally more mature. For that reason you should respect them, but under no circumstances should you elevate them to the level of abject worship.

I realize that this can seem really contradictory. You're *going* to see a right and a wrong way to make a game no matter what, it will be colored by the games that you enjoy playing, and you'll likely just naturally want to make similar projects to the companies whose work you like best and who you would like to work for; in fact, demonstrating a propensity for that sort of material can help you *get* work with them. Even so, placing too much faith in someone is dangerous. It makes you blind to their flaws and overly accepting of their successes, which also makes you blind to the *reasons* behind their successes. People generally have a poor, imprecise, superficial concept of what it is they enjoy without a good deal of analysis and introspection, and developer worship further boils down this oversimplification into a one-word phrase, be it "Nintendo," "Square-Enix," "Blizzard," "Valve," or what have you.

Maybe it's even simpler than that; maybe it's just single games; "Half-Life" or "Final Fantasy," but the point still stands. Their work becomes your vision of perfection, but it isn't really *your* vision, is it? It's theirs, distorted through a subjective filter in your brain that biases your idea of why their product is successful to your preferences and limited experience. This is called "confirmation bias" and is a well-documented psychological effect. Your design process stops being actual, purposeful, original design that shows a knowledge of gameplay elements and mechanics and becomes more just running down a list of features that you *think* are supposed to be in every game based on what you know about your favorite titles. If that's what designing a game entailed, then companies wouldn't need *you* to make a game, they could just hire a thirteen-year-old.

This is one of those reasons you should avoid referencing other peoples' games when you're talking about your own. For instance, "Diablo-style RPG" is one of those phrases that's kind of caught on as a holy grail of gaming thanks to reviewers' perpetuation of this phrase, but it's just a really quick shortcut to describe a game to someone else who doesn't know anything about game design. As a developer yourself you ought to have more sophisticated ways to talk about your ideas than simple, offhand, referential dialog. You should be able to break things down into smaller parts and be able to

play with *elements* of the games that you like, looking at pieces of games with the same level of scrutiny as a reviewer affords to an entire game.

It's not enough to understand what you like about *Bioshock*; any fifteen-year-old can talk about the atmosphere of the game and the dialogue, but they can't figure out what makes those work or why it's engaging to play. You need to understand *why* you like it. Pick apart the Plasmid system in great detail--on its own, in relation to guns, in relation to Tonics, in relation to the game's AI, in relation to the game's *story* and how exactly Plasmids support it in subtext, and from every other angle humanly possible. Pick apart the game's *economy*, dissecting the *exact role* of vending machines and the game's crafting system and how they make players think about money as a resource with respect to every other system. Do this with *every* game that you can find the time to, and be as critical as possible--*especially* if you like it. If you like a game, you should be interested in knowing why it's good and seeing it made even *better* as opposed to simply ignoring its flaws.

Just as being overly accepting of something is unprofessional, so is being overly dismissive, and even when games seem derivative at face value and even when they're from genres or series that you don't generally like, you will find that there are very, very precious few professionally produced games that have absolutely nothing of value to teach. If you *don't* like a game, that's no excuse for not understanding the appeal in it or finding features that it implements well in addition to the things that set you off about it. As a matter of principle you should, in fact, be able to understand what it is that *does* set you off about it in as great a detail as you can understand what you *love* about another game. Finally, your analysis of *both* should stand on its own objectively. Depending on references to outside games in *either* case is just lazy.

It's like my 3D modeling professor tells me: as of the moment you start deciding that you want to make games, you aren't a fan any more. You are a professional. Hold yourself to that standard.

4 - Try and avoid making enemies

This one is self-explanatory. Try to avoid antagonizing people. This seems like such an easy rule to think about but there's a hundred ways you can break it, especially since gamers tend to be strongly opinionated when it comes to their tastes. The game industry is so small and the barriers to entry are big enough without people talking smack about you or harboring grudges, though. The last thing you need is for that one guy you *really* hated in school to get ahead of you years down the line and become a major player at a big studio or publisher only to remember how much he didn't like you in school when your application hits his HR guy's desk. Developers and publishers talk, and anything from personal squabbles to mere *perceptions* that you're a lazy team member can come back to bite you in the rump at any time. To avoid having this happen try and be open with your teammates. Be personable and social, and let them know how things are going with your life if real-life problems start to get in the way of your work.

Sometimes you really just can't avoid it, though. There's always that one person who seems to seriously grate your cheese. What you do about that depends entirely on your reasons for not getting along with them. If it's something petty, like taste in games, swallow your pride. Stuff like that ranks

somewhere below "color of socks" as a reason for hating someone. If it's something bigger than that, though; something political or philosophical; you could have a lot of problems. Just be the bigger person and try to avoid exploding at them or talking behind their back. They aren't worth it.

However, don't let people walk all over you, either. As student game developers your classmates *will* do so without even realizing they're doing it. The simple fact is that they aren't psychic, they don't know what your needs on a project are, and *all* of you need to make one another's needs clear to each other in order for a collaboration to work and in order to establish trust.

5 - Work on what you want to work on

They say that you have to spend a few years doing what other people want you to do before you're given license to do what you want to do.

This is the absolute biggest load of crap you can ever be told or *will* ever be told, and there's a few reasons why, the most important of which is that you'll actually put forth effort and do good work for a project you enjoy and will likely slack off on a project that you have negative feelings about. You'll have to compromise a lot, especially as far as project scope is concerned, but there's absolutely no reason that you should be working on a game that you don't think you'll be interested in when it's finished or doing a job that you don't want to do.

People will tell you that you should try and find "points of pride" and try to *make* the project into something you'll be interested in. The reality is that you can't work on *exactly* what you want to work on *all* of the time, so this is a valuable skill to learn and you should practice it whenever you can, but there does get to be a point when it's too much of a stretch and you compromise yourself too much for your own good. Where that point is can be very subjective and depends a lot on your career goals, but there's one universal rule of thumb: you should consciously get something out of it. *Somehow* it should contribute to those goals rather than step away from them, otherwise it simply isn't worth your time. More often than not you can make this work out, and the key is knowing what you want to do and asking yourself if you're doing it on your current project. To put it simply, if you're a writer and you're writing, if you're an artist and you're making art, if you're a programmer and you're programming, or if you're a designer and you're designing, then you can make it a good project for yourself no matter how much you've got to compromise on its scope and complexity.

6 - Know Your Limits; remember K-I-S-S.

I've seen so many students attempt projects well beyond any kind of reasonable scope. For whatever reason, we who would work in digital games love to run against the grain and try to get huge ideas seen through. It comes chiefly from a desire to innovate, tell stories, and live up to the standards of production of major game companies. Unfortunately, none of these are easy things to do in the gaming world, even for professionals. Innovation often takes a revolutionary idea--usually as the result of sheer accident--and a ton of computer engineering to pull off, and storytelling in games often requires a lot of gameplay apparatus that no student group can put together, including complex environments and interactions. Use your projects to create modest but polished, finished projects, not

as an outlet for your ambitions. Start small, with a basic concept for a game, get the basics implemented, and then add features *if* you have time. As a very wise colleague of mine once said: under-pitch, but over-deliver. In terms of whole student projects, nothing looks better than that.

7 - Do what serves your focus best; work on individual projects in your spare time.

That's not to say that there isn't a place for your ambitions, though, or appealing to professional standards. If you know what your focus is, it's not hard to work on something close to it. For every job to be done, there's an equivalent *outside* game design.

For artists this is an easy step. If you're an animator, animate. If you're a modeler, model, and if you're any kind of artist at all, study art and try to be a better artist in general, not just a better *game* artist. If you're a writer, write and get published. If you're a programmer, program, but not just games, and don't preclude yourself from scripting either. With as many third-party engines as are out there to take the place of one you build from scratch, it doesn't hurt to be familiar with a few of them, and their scripting languages' coding at this point has reached the level of complexity of full programming languages.

If you're a designer it can seem especially difficult since entire *games* are your business and it takes the skills of both you and everyone else on the team to do it, but here's the key fact that people forget a lot of the time: *games* are your business, and they've been around since well before we were putting them on computers. Make it your prerogative to know the non-digital side. Pick up role-playing game books and war games like Warhammer 40K. Check out board games like Carcassonne and Settlers of Catan. Don't just play them, though, learn what makes them tick. *Make* board games and tabletop role-playing games. Make design documents, plan out paper prototypes of all those complex digital games you *want* to make, and *analyze* games like a Literature major analyzes a piece of writing.

On the technical side of things, remember that the *entire* game isn't the only thing that needs a designer--levels and user interfaces, for instance, are mere components of the whole, but at the same time they're each so sophisticated that they require the attention of level design and usability experts. Build levels in Unreal 3, Hammer, Crysis, or any other major engine, organize modding groups, make flash games, and develop ideas for user interfaces into prototypes that you can test; *all* of these look good in a portfolio or on a resume and *all* of them are important things to be able to do in order to work as a game designer.

As a general rule, though, a group project shows that you can work on a team and produce. These individual projects are where you can show your individual skills, contributions, and ideas free from the pressures of a group project, like game designs that are beyond your means to produce but that you can theorize, think out, and learn how to pitch properly; or models, characters, and levels (well, plans and artwork for them at least) that are normally too complicated to be able to implement on a strict timeframe. You've got all the time in the world to develop *this* stuff; after all, it's your number one interest!

8 - Work on things outside of class

I've told you enough about what you should be working on already. As to *when* you should be working, the answer is simple: *all the time*. The game industry is a meritocracy that's known for its twelve-plus hour work days. If the limit of what you're doing to prepare for your chosen field is classwork, then you're already failing to live up to that standard--even if you're getting straight A's.

To put in perspective just how much you need to do:

- Character modelers will often crank out a Zbrush sculpture of a character or creature each *day*, if not then within a week. These practice sculptures have exactly nothing to do with their day job. They do them because they like doing it and for practice.
- Game designers don't just *design* games, they produce and *test* them, and keep *video records* of their tests, and make continual refinements to their designs.
- Same with level designers.
- Game writers are expected to already be published before they're employable. This means publishing a novel, short stories, or actually getting screenplays made into films and television shows.

These facts can be daunting at first, but if you think carefully about what you pay the most attention to in a game then you can probably identify something that you *think* you do better than the pros. The reality is that you probably don't and that you probably just have a different point of view or philosophy, but you're probably still right up there if you've done enough research and put enough thought into that subject that you feel like you can challenge professionals.

The problem that we sometimes face is finding a way to materialize that passion and to *keep* materializing it. It's especially problematic when we're in school, split in a dozen different directions by classwork, conflicting advice, pressures of scholastic legitimacy, and both our peers' and our *own* expectations of ourselves. The key to solving that problem: just let go. Forget scholastic legitimacy, forget what other people think about your interests, just do what you'd *already* be doing in your spare time. But be official about it; keep records of important milestones in your personal projects. Keep a blog and a portfolio of them for your prospective employers' reference and *show* them your passion for your work.

9 - Never stop playing games

For obvious reasons, you should be playing games. They help alleviate stress, they engage and exercise the mind, and they make for valuable material for analysis and learning.

This rule goes much deeper than that, though. When you're up for a job interview, you *will* be asked what games you've been playing recently, and there's an expectation that you're familiar with the company's catalog. If you answer "I haven't had a lot of time to play games lately--I've been too busy

working," consider the interview as much a failure as if they asked what *work* you do in your spare time and all you have to say is "I only do classwork."

If you aren't up to date on current trends or if you're a strung-out workaholic who never just finds time to relax, you're a good deal less desirable an employee than someone who can do the same work as you but knows how to have a bit of fun every now and then. You may be going into an environment that has twelve-hour days, but that just means that knowing how to enjoy yourself--*especially* on the job and with your peers--is even *more* important.

10 - Never give up

The working conditions as a game design student are a hundred times more stressful than the working conditions in the industry itself. You're spending money rather than making it, probably accruing a huge debt while that's going on; your living conditions probably suck; you're probably being torn in a hundred different directions; the job market you're trying to break into is aggressively exclusive--such that there's no guarantee that you'll even find gainful employment once you get out of college; and to top all that off, every *week* as you keep an eye on gaming news and trends you'll be given reason to wonder if it's all even worth it. You will get discouraged; you will doubt yourself; and you will consider giving up.

Don't.

It's my observation that most people who want to work in games are dreamers, and a dream is worth fighting tooth and nail for. Hopefully with the survival tips I've shared with you that fight will be a little easier, but the most important part of all this is you and what you want.

Go for it.