

Kenn Hoekstra weighs in with additional advice on breaking in, along with resources to help you find your first job.

—Bob Bates

GETTING A JOB IN THE GAME INDUSTRY

by Kenn Hoekstra

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Wow do I get a job in the game development industry?" I can't tell you how many times this question has crossed my desk in the six plus years I've been at Raven Software. If I had to venture a guess, I would say that this is probably the most commonly asked question at every game company in the world.

So what's the answer? Every game developer I've talked to has a different story, and I have yet to find two that are exactly alike. About the only thing that ties them all together is an overwhelming desire to play and make games and a certain degree of good old-fashioned luck.

With that in mind, let's try to find the answer....

KNOW GAMES

A lot of the questions in my job interview with Raven Software were about games. What was the last game you played? What's your favorite game? How long have you been playing games? What's the worst game you've ever played? What's your favorite console system and game? It was a far cry from any job interview I'd ever had before.

Raven was trying to determine, among other things, my commitment to gaming, my knowledge of games, and how they work as well as what I liked and didn't like about gaming in general. In short, they wanted to determine if I truly knew and loved games and gaming. Which brings me to my next point...

LOVE GAMES

This may sound like a silly thing, but most game companies list "love of gaming" as a legitimate job qualification. 3-D Realms, makers of the *Duke Nukem*' series of games, listed the following requirement for a recently posted programming position:

"Die-hard game player. If you don't have a passion to play them, you typically don't have the passion to make them."

Further down on the application was this question: "What are the last five games you've played?"

The reality is that game development takes a lot of time, energy, and commitment. A game developer can expect to put in long hours throughout a project's development and even more hours during "crunch mode" when deadline pressure mounts. The bottom line is if you don't love what you do, you won't be very effective in doing it.

BUILD YOUR SKILL SET

No matter which area of the game industry you want to work in, you'll need a specific set of skills before you can even get your foot in the door.

PC Knowledge and Aptitude

It's a PC world out there. Despite the popularity of the Mac platform with many artists and sound designers, the game development industry is overwhelmingly PC-dominated. Proficiency with the PC, including intimate knowledge of Windows packages and basic hardware and driver support, is a must. If you're not comfortable with using a PC, I suggest enrolling in a few computer courses at your local technical college.

Art Background

Art is the most common denominator in nearly every game company position. Level designers are much more capable of building aesthetically pleasing environments if they have a fundamental art background. Even programmers need a basic understanding of artistic principles in order to facilitate their interactions with the art department. Taking art or figure drawing classes can give you an advantage over other candidates with no background in art.

Tools of the Trade

Start researching industry standard programs like Microsoft Office, Visual Studio .net, 3-D Studio Max, Maya, Lightwave, SoftImage, QERadiant, Unreal Edit, PhotoShop, Painter, and Paint Shop Pro. Freeware versions and/or demos of most of these programs are available online and many university art programs offer training courses for these programs.

Education and Gaming Schools

An increasing number of colleges and universities are developing game development programs and certificates for the next generation of developers. Some of the best known programs include:

- ◆ **Full Sail University** at <http://www.fullsail.com> is a school in Orlando, Florida that offers courses in Game Design & Development, 3-D Animation, Film and Recording Arts. Full Sail graduates generally have solid demos and skill sets and the university boasts an extremely high graduate job placement percentage.
- ◆ **DigiPen Institute of Technology** at <http://www.digipen.edu> is a program in Redmond, Washington that offers Associate Degree programs in 3-D Computer Animation, and Associate and Bachelor's Degrees in Computer Science. They also offer summer workshops for video game programming and 3-D Computer Animation.

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- ◆ **The Guild Hall** at <http://guildhall.smu.edu> is an 18-month certificate program at SMU that offers specializations in Computer Art, Level Design, or Software Development. The program was developed in conjunction with game industry professionals to help candidates develop the skill set they will need to work effectively in the industry.
- ◆ A list of other game development programs can be found in the Schools section of this book, or at <http://www.gameprogrammer.com/links/schools.html>, with links to their respective home pages. It's worth a look.

IN-ROADS TO THE INDUSTRY

There are several ways to get into this highly desirable industry.

Know Someone in the Game Industry

I have to be honest with you: nothing helps your chances of being hired more than knowing someone who's already in the industry. Game companies get thousands of applications each year and it's a lot safer for them to hire someone they know than it is to hire someone they've never met. This reduces the risk of breaking team chemistry and the person who knows you can give the management a lot more insight into your personality and skills than any interview session can. A good number of Raven Software employees secured interviews with the company based on recommendations from friends who were already working there. I've found that to be true for most other companies as well.

Make Game Modifications (Mods)

Since game companies began releasing development tools for their games, there have been a growing number of companies hiring developers from the mod communities on the Internet. The days of hiring individuals with little or no experience and giving them on-the-job training are, for the most part, over. Companies are looking for individuals who already have experience using their game development tools to produce game content so they can bring them in and put them right to work.

At Raven Software alone, there are at least two dozen employees who were hired solely on the basis of their mod work.

Make a Demo

Similar in many ways to mod making, creating your own game demo is a fantastic way to get a game company's attention. This method is particularly effective for programmers. Degrees in computer programming, management computer systems, or computer science

pale in comparison on your resume to actual, finished game code. Whether it's an original idea or a clone of an existing genre, producing your own game demo shows potential employers that you are familiar with games and what makes them work.

Get Your Start in the Q/A Department

Most large game companies and publishers have a quality assurance (Q/A) department that tests games at the end of their development and reports bugs and related problems to game developers. Quality assurance testing isn't glorious by any means and the pay isn't spectacular, but it is an important, entry-level sector of the industry that is constantly looking for help.

One nice aspect of Q/A testing is that everyone starts out on a level playing field. If you are diligent and hard working with an attention to detail, you'll find that you are able to advance within the department and put yourself in a position to graduate from quality assurance tester to Q/A lead and beyond. I've seen Q/A testers move into development positions, associate producer positions, and various other posts after proving themselves in Q/A.

Get Your Foot in the Door

Getting a job in a company's mailroom or as an administrative assistant, tech support guru, data entry, or other support staff position can help you get your foot in the door. This affords you the opportunity to make friends with the staff and get firsthand experience seeing how the company runs. If you make the right friends and learn the right things, you're one step closer to that development job.

Secure an Internship

Internships are not all that common in the games industry in general, but you can find them if you search hard enough. The best way to get an internship at a game company is to volunteer your services free of charge. Raven has used unpaid internships as a low-risk means to gauge a potential developer's skill and passion for making games. Over the past six years, we've hired several artists and level designers after stints as unpaid interns.

Be Willing to Relocate

Game companies are scattered all over the world, with large concentrations in California, Texas, and a handful of major U.S. cities. If you're not willing to relocate, it's going to be extremely difficult to get a job with a game company. Work-from-home positions do exist, but generally are only offered to employees who have worked on-site at a given company for a number of years.

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Be a Team Player

Being able to work not only independently, but also as part of a team is crucial to game development. In the old days, there was a “lone wolf” mentality pervading the business with developers working alone in their basements and garages to produce game titles. In this day and age, however, teams are increasing in size to 20 or more developers per project. You need to be able to get along with a variety of people working in a variety of disciplines. Be prepared to demonstrate this ability to your potential employer.

Be Persistent

Trying to get into game development is not for those who are easily discouraged. In many cases it can take years to hone your skills and break down that first barrier that gets you the job you’ve always wanted.

RECOMMENDED READING AND RESOURCES

As with any industry, there are several trade resources that should be on your “must read” list. Even if you aren’t working in the game industry yet, you should become familiar with these resources to keep up with industry news and future trends.

- ◆ **General Game Development.** Game Developer Magazine Online at <http://www.gamasutra.com> is a fantastic resource for the game development industry. There you will find hundreds of articles by industry professionals, company profiles, industry news, job search resources, and a plethora of other industry information.
- ◆ **Level Design.** Check out RUST at <http://www.gamedesign.net>. It is the most comprehensive resource for level and game design on the Internet. If there’s anything you need to get started building levels for your favorite game, you’ll find it here.
- ◆ **3-D Modeling/Animation.** Check out PolyCount at <http://www.planetquake.com/polycount/>. PolyCount is to 3D modeling and animation what RUST is to level designers. If there’s anything you need, you’ll find it here.
- ◆ **Game Programming.** Want to teach yourself game programming? Head to <http://www.programmingtutorials.com/> to find programming tutorials for just about every programming language imaginable.
- ◆ **Sound & Music Design.** Electronic Musician Magazine at <http://www.electronicmusician.com> is a great resource for audio tutorials, samples, and product reviews for sound design equipment and software.
- ◆ **Tools, Demos, and Source Code.** 3D Gamers at <http://www.3dgamers.com> is one of the best free download locations on the Internet. Game titles are indexed by title and by genre and subdivided into official company releases and third party game files, which

include source code, toolkits, and software development kits. Best of all, they have servers all over North America to help you get the fastest download speed possible. If you have a slow dial up connection, they also have a CD burning feature that allows you to select the tools and demos you want and have them burn it onto CD and mail it to you for a modest fee.

- ◆ **Everything Else.** Google it at <http://www.google.com>, the most comprehensive search engine on the Internet. Try typing in “game development” or “level design” or “game jobs” and see what you find. The game development world is at your fingertips just a few clicks away.

CONCLUSION

Breaking into the game development industry is difficult and there is no golden path to securing that dream job. There are several methods available to you, as I have just described, and you need to decide which way is right for you. Whether that involves making a demo, getting involved in the mod community, or securing an entry-level position at a game company you’re interested in, getting a job in game development takes skill, hard work, and commitment. It also helps to have a bit of luck on your side. Don’t give up. Don’t get discouraged. And always have a backup plan.

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* and has 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* and *Soldier of Fortune II: Double Helix*. 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 *Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy*, *Quake IV* and *X-Men: Legends*. Kenn lives in Madison, Wisconsin with his wife, Michele, and his Jack Russell Terrier, Toby.

