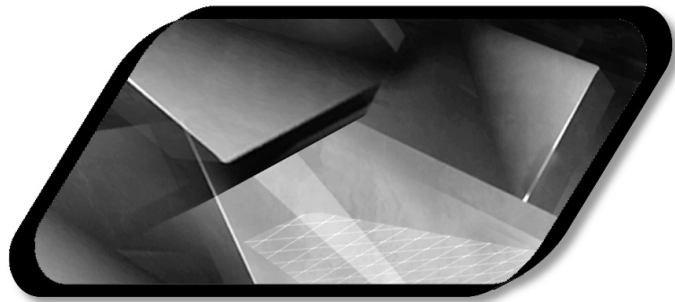


CHAPTER

7

How to Get a Job





THE title of this book is *Break into the Game Industry* because, when you're on the outside, that's what it feels as if you have to do. Like breaking into a bank vault, there are several ways to go about it.

You can try to break in with explosives—make a lot of noise with self-promoting gimmicks, telling everyone how incredibly brilliant you are, and how unbelievably stupid *they* are if they don't give you a job right this instant. It's seldom a good idea: you set off alarm bells and attract a lot of negative attention. Trying to blast your way in, either as a safe-cracker or a game developer, is strictly an amateur approach.

Another way to get in is to get to know someone who already works there and will open the door for you. With bank vaults, this is called an “inside job”; with games, it's called “networking.” It is undoubtedly the quickest and most reliable way to do it, and in this chapter I'll talk a lot about networking.

The third way to break into a bank vault is to dig your way in with steady, determined effort. The truth is that looking for a job in the game industry is a lot like looking for a job anywhere else: you read job ads, research companies, send out résumés, and go to interviews. Job-hunting is a job in itself: you have to show up every day and work hard at it in order to see results. However, not all of the advice in traditional job-hunting manuals applies to the game industry; there are a few important differences. I'll discuss them in this chapter.

PACKAGING YOURSELF AS A PROFESSIONAL

You may be an amateur now, but you need to think of yourself as a professional—a professional who's just temporarily out of work. Before you begin job-hunting, you must create a professional appearance: a package of materials that shows off your talents and skills, and represents you to the world. These materials consist of the following items:

- 】 **Your résumé and cover letter** All job-hunters need these things, and I'll discuss them in depth later in this chapter.
- 】 **Your portfolio or demo** You won't need a demo if you're applying for a position in testing or customer service (although it certainly can't hurt), but you will absolutely need one if you're applying for any development position like programmer, audio engineer, or level designer. I'll discuss demos in detail also.

- › **A business card** You may wonder why you need a business card if you don't have a job yet. The reason is simple: you need something to hand to people that will remind them later that you exist, and that tells them how to get in touch with you. If you can design a clever card that will intrigue people or make them laugh, so much the better. The game industry is about entertainment, so people appreciate business cards that show some creativity. Still, avoid anything too gaudy or corny. You want them laughing with you, not at you. If in doubt, go for understated elegance—it's always safe and besides, they're the cheapest to print.
- › **A professional web site** A web site isn't absolutely required, but it definitely helps. It doesn't have to be big or complicated. A professional web site allows you to document your experience and show off your work, cheaply, 24 hours a day, all over the world. You can put your résumé on your web site, your portfolio, and anything else that you think shows you off to advantage. Most Internet service providers offer a little web space along with their accounts, and you can craft a perfectly decent web site with pure HTML if you want—no need to buy a fancy package unless you want fancy features. One word of warning, however: If you do put your résumé on your website, you may not want to include your home address, for privacy reasons. Also, if your résumé, or any part of your web site, includes your e-mail address, you will probably begin to receive “job-seekers' spam”—advertisements for worthless degrees and doubtful business opportunities. You can discourage this by writing your e-mail address as *janedoe “at” janedoecorp.com* and not including a “mailto:” tag.

Introducing Mary Margaret Walker: Recruiter Extraordinaire

I'm a game developer, not a human resources person or a recruiter, so when the time came to talk about specific job-hunting techniques, I turned to an expert: Mary Margaret Walker. She's an old friend and the owner of *Mary-Margaret.com*, a recruitment and business services firm. She knows everything there is to know about getting work in the game industry, and she's also got a great web site that's full of useful information for newcomers: www.mary-margaret.com. Throughout this chapter, you'll be seeing snippets of her wisdom. Oh, and if you get in touch with her, don't call her Mary!

NETWORKING: IT'S NOT WHAT YOU KNOW...

I used to think that the old saying “It's not what you know, it's *who* you know” was one of the most cynical things I had ever heard. I thought it meant that the old-boy network would always win out; it didn't matter how well-qualified you were for a job, somebody with the right connections would get it instead. Later on I realized I

was only half-right. It's true that occasionally someone prefers to hire his incompetent friends instead of better-qualified strangers. But if that's going on, you probably don't want to work at his company anyway. Any business that consistently puts friendship ahead of ability in its hiring decisions is headed for trouble.

There isn't much of an old-boy network in the game industry anyway. This is a young, ambitious, entrepreneurial business. Results are what count—can you do the job or can't you? The industry is competitive enough that people who consistently perform well are among the mostly highly prized. Nobody gets a fat salary just by knowing the fraternity handshake, and nobody gets to retire on the job. Game companies can't afford it.

The truth about “it's not what you know, it's who you know,” which I came to realize after I had been working for a few years, is more subtle than simple cynicism. What it really means is that the most important factor in finding a job is not being well-prepared, it's knowing where the jobs *are*, and that means knowing people—lots of people, the more the better. In tribal societies, and in many non-western societies still, people keep track of their extended family relationships very carefully. That's because in those societies even your distant cousins are a resource, people you can call on if you need help. In the western world, we've replaced family with professional contacts. They're your most important business resource—the people you get in touch with if you need something.

This is one of the reasons that professional conferences and trade shows have so many parties. The first time you go to a convention, it may seem as if the whole thing is just a non-stop beer bash. But the companies throwing these parties aren't just spending their money for fun; they're doing it to get their employees together with other people: to renew old relationships and make new ones. This process is called “schmoozing.” One of those chance meetings over the wine and cheese platter could turn into a contract worth millions, or a new employee who can bring something really valuable to the company.

INSIDE INFO

Make a friend in the industry. It's just too tough to get in without one ... Get in any way you can, prove yourself, and start going after the job you *really* want once you are on board.

—Lee Rossini, Director of Marketing, Sierra Entertainment

Where to Meet Game Developers

So, how do you start networking? You hang out where game developers hang out. Here's a list of things you can do. Some of them cost money, but others are free.

- 1) *Read game development web sites, participate in on-line forums.* On the Internet, nobody can tell if you're a raw newcomer or a seasoned pro, so dive in. Don't take any one person's opinion as gospel; find out what the

common wisdom is. Use your real name, and give extra credit to other people who use theirs; it's easy to hide behind an anonymous handle, but someone who uses her own name is putting her professional reputation on the line with everything she says. Avoid flame wars; you won't learn anything from them. Ask for help if you need it—lots of people do, professionals and amateurs alike—and give help if you have it to give. The game industry thrives on shared information.

- 1) ***Attend local developers' group meetings; if there isn't one, start one!*** In cities all over the world, developers get together on an informal basis once a month or so for pizza and beer and to shoot the breeze. Find out where this is happening and go to a meeting: the IGDA has a list of chapters around the world. (Visit www.igda.org/chapters for details.) The meetings normally don't cost anything and in my experience they're always welcoming to newcomers. If you can't find a group, see if you can start one. Look for a pizza place or a pub with a back room that will let you use it for free if you'll bring in a bunch of people who will buy food: weekday nights are best because the room will probably be idle anyway. Unless you live in a really small town, chances are there are at least 10 or 15 other people in your area working on games, none of whom are aware of each other. Pin a note on a bulletin board at the public library or community center, and at the local college's computer science and art departments. Post to the community web site. Put a free announcement in the local paper.
- 2) ***Join the IGDA.*** The IGDA is *the* professional society for the interactive entertainment industry, and it doesn't have any admissions restrictions: if you say you're interested in game development, that makes you a game developer as far as it's concerned. The IGDA has all sorts of programs and activities to advance the state of the profession in various respects, which you'll be welcome to participate in once you're a member. There's a discount rate for students.
- 3) ***Go to conferences and trade shows.*** This is the most expensive option, but it also gives you the most direct exposure to a lot of developers at once. The gold standard is the Game Developers' Conference, held annually in San Jose, California. It has a range of fee levels, and if you're really strapped for cash, you can volunteer to work at it part-time, which gets you into everything for free. Volunteering is a great way to meet people, too. There's also the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), which is cheap if you only go to the trade show. Many of the people staffing the booths are in marketing and sales rather than game development, but there are still a lot of developers around and their badges are distinctive. Look in Appendix C for more

information about industry events. Travel and lodging, rather than the price of admission, will probably be your biggest expense.

Researching a Company

A key part of job-hunting is knowing what companies you want to work for, and doing research on companies that you've learned are hiring. The place to start is the company's web site for the most direct look at the company's products. Visit the "Jobs" or "Careers" page—most companies have one—to check out the current openings and learn the names of the people they want you to send your résumé to (this isn't the *only* person you should send it to, however). This will also tell you in what format they want it (mail, fax, or e-mail) and whether or not you should include a demo with it.

Go to the "Contact Us" page to find out where the company is located, although a surprising number of small development companies don't list their office addresses; you may have to do a little spadework to dig this up. Large corporations with multiple offices may have a "Locations" page. If they have a "Corporate" or "About Us" page, read it to learn about the management; this will tell you about their experience, philosophy, and company goals. Read the "News" or "Press" page to see their press releases and find out what they've been up to lately.

Also, check out the company's magazine advertisements. This will tell you a little about the company's corporate culture. Even though the ad may have been created by an ad agency, it had to be approved by someone at the company. If they have sexist ads or stupid ads, somebody at the company is sexist or stupid. It may not matter to you unless you're planning to work in marketing, but it's something to consider.

Scan the Internet for news about the company. You can check out the gamer bulletin boards, but take what you read there with a grain of salt: gamers love to complain. Obviously, you want to know if the company's products are any good, but it's better to rely on the published game reviews or even corporate news for that. Use the search features on business web sites like Yahoo! Finance or CBS Marketwatch to find out how they have been performing as a corporation.

Build yourself a database, or even just a spreadsheet, of companies. Include their official contact information, plus the names, e-mail addresses, and telephone numbers of everyone you have ever heard of there. Include the names of their key products, and add any other notes that you think might be useful. Once you have this information, you'll be much better armed to make a pitch to them: companies really appreciate it when a potential employee already knows a lot about them.

About Recruiters

A recruiter—also known colloquially as a headhunter—is a person or firm hired, almost always on a commission basis, by a game company to help them find talented people

to fill open positions. If you get a job through a recruiter, it won't cost you anything: the employer will pay them a fee for having found you.

Recruiters spend a lot of time talking in a friendly way to game developers, which can lead to the misapprehension that their role is to find jobs for them. Rather, their role is to find developers for jobs. As such, they seldom are looking for entry-level people; they have been hired to find rarer, more difficult-to-locate senior people.

Recruiters are a great resource for information about the industry, particularly current information like salary ranges and job markets in different parts of the country. Because their whole job is schmoozing, they are usually chatty, well-informed people, who are happy to give you a little of their time and advice for nothing. Don't abuse this privilege, however: they have to earn a living, too. When you're talking to a recruiter about job opportunities, tell her frankly that you're a newcomer so that you and she both know where you stand. Don't send a résumé to a recruiter and then call her up once a week asking if she's got anything for you—if she does, she'll certainly let you know, because that's how she gets paid. Remember, recruiters are working for the companies that hire them; they're not your agent or career coach.

A few unscrupulous recruiters grab all the résumés they can get and spam them to as many employers as they can, hoping to make their money through sheer numbers. This is bad for you, as it means your résumé gets sent out—along with a ton of others—for jobs for which you aren't qualified. Rather than present your application in the best light, your résumé comes to the employer as part of a slush pile—it might not even be read. The only way to prevent this is to carefully choose your recruiter. A good recruiter will want to talk to you and get a feel for your qualifications and career goals, so as to match you up with appropriate job opportunities. She will also assure you that your résumé will not be sent anywhere without your permission.

How to Schmooze

To schmooze you have to attend the industry events where developers congregate, particularly the Game Developers' Conference and E3. But before you schmooze, you need to do some preparation. First, figure out which companies you're interested in. Once you have your business cards, a list of companies you want to talk to, and you're at the event, you're ready to go. If your memory is poor, like mine, make yourself a cheat sheet with a couple of quick facts about each of the companies you're interested in. Keep it in a pocket and glance at it surreptitiously before you go talk to somebody from one of those companies.

If a company is throwing a party at a conference or trade show, that's the place to start, because that's where the largest concentration of its employees will be—generally. In a few cases the company will intend the party specifically for the press or for VIPs and they will have told their less-presentable employees—the developers—to stay away from it. However, if that's the case, you probably won't be able to get into the party anyway.

What you're looking for at a party is a company employee who doesn't seem to have anyone to talk to at the moment: someone getting food or a drink, for example. Your next best bet is to approach two employees talking together. You might find an employee who's talking to someone from another company, but in many cases these are old friends who are seeing each other for the first time since the previous year's convention, and they won't feel like chatting with a stranger. You'll have to eavesdrop a little to see if it sounds as if they know each other; if it doesn't, hang around and wait for your opportunity. The worst situation is to try to break into a group of people all from the same company—like as not they're talking shop about something confidential, or gossiping about their management, and really won't appreciate the intrusion.

When you've spotted your target, just go up and introduce yourself. Tell them flat out that you're really interested in their company, because it sounds like the kind of place you might want to work. There's no benefit in trying to hide the fact that you're a job-seeker; if the person doesn't know about any open positions they'll tell you so right away, and that will save you a lot of time. On the other hand, if they're looking to hire someone, they'll want to find out more about you. Don't start off by handing them your business card—that looks pushy—but wait and see if the conversation seems promising. If it does, ask at the end, “May I give you my business card?” and “Can I get one of yours?” Trade cards, and tell them you'll get in touch after the event is over. Then be sure and do it.

Don't bother giving out copies of your résumé at a party or trade show booth: the people there won't have any place to put it, and the chances are about 80 percent that it'll get lost as they're packing up to leave anyway. Get their business card, and send your résumé to them in the mail or via e-mail afterward. Wait at least a couple of days after the event is over, however: most people work phenomenally hard getting ready for a show and need a couple of days to decompress afterward, as well as catch up on all the e-mail they missed while they were gone.

Your follow-up is incredibly important; odds are these people will not remember you, since they'll have been incredibly busy, stressed, and meeting a lot of other people for the first time at this event. For the best chance of a response, send them a polite, brief e-mail message. (Phone calls are often an intrusion for busy game industry people.)

Talking about Yourself

Don't rehearse a line of patter; it's not natural conversation and will make you sound like a used-car salesman. However, you do need to be able to describe yourself and your experience smoothly and articulately when someone asks you about it. Before you go talk to someone, imagine that you're them, and ask yourself the kinds of questions they're likely to ask: Where did you go to school? What did you study there? What have you been working on? Which tools do you use? What made you choose them? How did that work out? Know the answers ahead of time so that you'll be ready.

Be Real!

There's an old joke that sincerity is the key to success: if you can fake that, you've got it made. I'm sure you've met people who seemed perpetually on the make: eager to further their own ends, indifferent to anything else, and who lost interest in you the moment they discovered you couldn't do anything for them—oily, insincere, social-climbers. Whether fairly labeled or not, Hollywood has a reputation for being full of such people.

The game industry is not, thank goodness. We don't have “who's hot and who's not” lists; we don't have “best-dressed” lists; we don't care who has been seen with whom at what nightclub. Because of its large technical component, game development is about performance, not personalities. For the most part, game developers, especially those in the trenches building the content, are honest, direct, sincere people who tell the truth and expect the same of others.

I bring this up because I don't want you to think that schmoozing is just a means of greasing your way into the industry. The contacts you make won't necessarily become your friends (though undoubtedly some will), but they are real human beings, not just a way to get a job. You're a professional now, and they are your colleagues. Give them the same degree of respect and attention that you want them to give you. Be real.

YOUR RÉSUMÉ AND COVER LETTER

There are dozens of web sites and job manuals out there telling you how to write a résumé, so I'm going to concentrate on résumé-writing for the game industry. Most of the rules are the same as for any other business, but a few things are different.

Mary Margaret's Résumé Tips

Great résumés are not lists of facts; rather they are a collection of powerful assertions that convince the employer that you have what it takes to be successful. Prepare your résumé as professionally as you can. Be truthful.

This is the résumé structure that we have found works best:

- 1.** Summary
- 2.** Employment History
 - › Position, company, location, dates (the first line in each job listing)
 - › Treat multiple positions within the same company as separate jobs
 - › Lead paragraph, only if you feel it is necessary
 - › Bullet items of responsibility

3. Skill Set

- › Areas of expertise
- › Specific technical skills (tools you know, and so on, how long you've used them, and whether you've used them professionally or in a classroom)
- › Platforms
- › Programming Languages

4. Education

- 5.** For experienced developers: Project History or Chart. There is a link at www.mary-margaret.com where you can fill in some fields and generate a project chart.

More tips:

- › In the experience section, list your previous employers, your job title at those employers, and your dates of employment. Most recent experience should come first.
- › Avoid using paragraphs. Instead, create bullets of your tasks and accomplishments. Incorporate the titles on which you've worked and your role on them.
- › In the education section, note the school and degree awarded. If you are still in school, include the degree on which you are working and the anticipated date of completion.
- › Strive to present your qualifications in a verbally powerful, visually enticing, accurate, symmetrical, and easy-to-read manner.
- › Do not list your age or date of birth on a résumé meant for U.S. employers.
- › If you are female and concerned about discrimination, do not list your gender. If you would like to remove the focus from your gender, consider using your initials rather than your first name: B.E. Davis rather than Bette Davis.
- › Do not list your salary history on your résumé. You may be asked to provide that at a later time.
- › It is not necessary to say that references will be provided upon request. Either include your references or wait to be asked for them.
- › It is not necessary to list jobs older than 10–15 years, particularly if they are not relevant to your job search. You may indicate that you have a longer work history by adding “Previous job experience details on request,” or something similar.

Don't Get Cute

You may read advice in other job-hunting books that suggests strange ways to make your résumé stand out—printing it on colored paper, doing it in a funny font, and so on. They're hoping that amid a large stack of résumés, such tricks will make yours look different, and the hiring manager is more likely to pick it up.

That kind of thing might work if you're applying for a job at Wal-Mart, but I wouldn't try it in the game industry. All too often this sort of gimmick is just an attempt to distract the reader from the fact that the applicant doesn't have much to say. The minute I see a résumé printed with multiple colors of ink, or folded into origami, it makes me suspicious and inclined to read it with a distrustful attitude—can't this person's record speak for itself?—exactly the opposite reaction from what the applicant was hoping for.

The bottom line is that there is no substitute for real content, saying clearly and cleanly what you can bring to the job. Spend your time polishing your portfolio or demo, not thinking up ways to make your résumé look cool.

Never Lie, but Always Spin

Never, *ever*, tell a lie on a résumé. Don't make up jobs you never had; don't make up degrees you don't hold. The industry is still small enough that most hiring managers can verify any fact on your résumé with a phone call or two. Apart from being immoral, lying on your résumé is dangerous. Your résumé forms part of your job application, and lying on a job application is a firing offense. Even worse, if you get caught, the word will get around. Your company will refuse to give you a reference, and people will talk about you in hushed tones and giggle. You may find it hard to get another job. It's not worth the price.

I've always said that your goal in writing a résumé is to *put the best possible face on the truth*. You don't lie, but you spin: choose to emphasize the things that show you in the best light, and eliminate anything that doesn't. For example, several years ago I got a letter from someone saying that his college grade point average wasn't that good, and wondering how to handle this fact on his résumé. I told him the answer was simple: leave it off! There's no rule that says you have to put your GPA on your résumé, and I certainly never have—mine's not that great either. If the company wants to know what it is, they can ask you.

Job-Hunting Tip: Show Them You're Adaptable

When I'm interviewing job applicants, I'm looking for ... smart people who can cope with day-to-day variation. In a small company like CogniToy, you can't get too comfortable doing only one task. I wouldn't normally ask a programmer to design the color palette for a new title, but a willingness to step up and do whatever task needs doing is pretty important to an entrepreneurial organization.

—Kent Quirk, President, CogniToy

More Suggestions about Résumé Content

Here are a few other things to know about writing a résumé:

- 1) ***Include the tools you know as a separate item.*** Mary Margaret said this in her list of tips, but it bears repeating. Experience with particular tools—audio, art, programming, database, whatever—is distinctly valuable in the game industry, and if you bury this information inside your employment history, it might get missed. Back when I was a software engineer, I used to list the languages I knew and the operating systems I had worked with as a separate item above my employment history. But whether above or below, be sure to include it!
- 1) ***Revise it as appropriate to match the job you're applying for.*** Obviously, you shouldn't make up work you didn't do, but if some aspect of your experience closely matches what the company says it's looking for in the job ad, revise your résumé to highlight that fact. Use the same keywords they do, where appropriate.
- 1) ***Highlight key points with boldface or underlining, but don't go nuts.*** You want the reader's eye to jump to the most important facts about you, but you don't want your résumé to look like a blotchy mess. The titles of games you've worked on, such as *Total Age of Doomcraft & Conquer: Romero Alert*, should be set in italics just as book titles are; that makes them stand out automatically.
- 1) ***Don't worry about keeping it to one page.*** A lot of job-hunting manuals tell you that your résumé shouldn't be more than one page. This is nonsense. If one page is all you need, that's fine—don't pad it—but if you have relevant experience, include it. It would be silly to leave off a detail that could be exactly what an employer is looking for, just in order to meet an artificial rule about length.
- 1) ***Don't include irrelevant material.*** The flip side of the previous advice is, don't include stuff in your résumé that nobody will care about. As soon as I got my first job as a software engineer, I dropped the items from my résumé that said I had worked packing textbooks and digging up soil samples.

Crafting the Cover Letter

Since the introduction of e-mail, letter-writing has experienced a renaissance, but a formal business letter isn't the same as an e-mail message to a friend. You don't want to shoot yourself in the foot by creating a great résumé and then ruining the effect with a sloppy, inarticulate cover letter.

The purpose of the cover letter is to politely introduce yourself and present your résumé. You should explain how you heard about the job, why you believe you are a good fit for it, and end with a request for an interview or at least some further communication. Your résumé is usually written in a telegraphic style to save time and space, but in a cover letter, you should use full sentences and proper paragraphs.

HR departments get a lot of totally inappropriate résumés from people who just spam all the job advertisements willy-nilly. It's HR's job to weed out these goofballs, and you want to avoid getting weeded out along with them. Part of the function of a cover letter is to reinforce the message of the résumé, which is: *I'm a serious candidate for this job*. The HR person probably won't even send the cover letter along to the hiring manager; they'll just read it and throw it away. As long as it discourages them from throwing your résumé away too, then it has done its job.

Here are some more rules to observe about cover letters:

- 1) **Rewrite it for each company you send it to.** Do *not*, under any circumstances, use an obviously generic cover letter. This is the surest proof that you are a résumé-spammer, and will get your materials tossed in the trash in the blink of an eye. Include content that shows you know something about the company.
- 2) **Don't be arrogant.** Another common mistake is to try to create an impression of enthusiasm by claiming that you *know* you're the right person for the job. Don't send a cover letter that says, "Your search is over—I'm the one you want to hire." My reaction as a manager is, "I'll be the judge of that, thank you," and to view your résumé with a jaundiced eye. There's an important difference between confidence and arrogance, and a wise job applicant stays on the right side of that line. Never forget: your objective is to get yourself an interview, to make the reader want to meet you in person. Don't do *anything* that is likely to put them off.
- 3) **The reader is a stranger, and formal politeness is called for.** She is not your friend or buddy. If the letter is going to Susan Wilson, don't begin it, "Sue," or "Hey Sue," or even "Dear Susan." The correct form of address, until you are told otherwise, is "Dear Ms. Wilson." If you don't know who will be reading it, begin "Dear Sir or Madam," but this is a last resort: you should address it to a specific person if at all possible. *This advice goes double in European countries*, where business styles are more formal than in the United States.
- 4) **Use real English words.** No shortcuts like "u" instead of "you." No cell-phone or online d00d-speak. You can use standard game-industry terms like "mod" and "RPG," but avoid slang. You're a professional now, not a fanboy or girl. You want the reader to get the impression that you are serious and that this is important to you.

- 1) **Keep it short.** Half to three-quarters of a page is about the maximum; or in e-mail, a corresponding amount of text. Remember, the HR department may be reading dozens or hundreds of these.
- 1) **Spell- and grammar-check everything.** And do it twice, once with the spell checker and once by eye, because the spell checker isn't going to catch it if you accidentally write "you're" for "your."

INSIDE INFO

Mary Margaret's proofreading trick: read *backward*. This prevents your eye from seeing what it expects to see.

3 BUILDING YOUR PORTFOLIO OR DEMO

You've learned how the industry works, you've gotten the training you need, but how do you prove that you can do what you say? In other industries, they rely on long, long interviews. In the CIA, they give lie detector tests. In the game industry, they look at your demo or portfolio. I can't emphasize this enough: *you must create a demo or portfolio to break into the industry in a skill-based position*. People who have already held a job in the industry can rely on their experience and, of course, their game credits, but newcomers need material.

Mary Margaret's Tips on Demos

Demo—Reel—Portfolio: These are terms that are often used interchangeably, but they can also be considered three different things. The term "portfolio" is most often used to describe the actual folder, or portfolio, of traditional works that all professional artists should have. "Reel" most often means the VHS tape of an animator's work, though its definition has expanded to include files of animations carried on a CD-ROM. "Demo" is the most all-encompassing term, and can be used in any circumstance. It is generally your entire presentation, a "reel" of animations or stills and a "portfolio" of other work.

- 1) Have your demo in as many different formats as possible—have a web site, have a CD reel and have a file that can be transferred to videotape easily. Use a video transfer service—you can find them in the Yellow Pages.
- 1) Pay attention to how your target company wants to receive your demo or reel—the easier you make their job, the easier it will be to get your demo seen. Do not assume you know better.
- 1) Demo files on CD: test your disc across different computers to make sure your content works!

- › Only include your very best work. Never include anything on your demo or reel that you have to make excuses for.
- › Always give credit where credit is due. Include a credits list and a shot list. If everything on your demo or reel was created by you, make that clear as well.
- › Having a reel on VHS takes away many of the technical headaches at the viewing end of the process. Once you make your first videotape, keep it and do not give it away. Instead, use it as a master so you will not have to make a copy of a copy—this way you ensure the quality of your video.
- › Substance over style! Make sure the demo material you include shows the wide range of your talents, and your well-rounded skills.
- › Display many different genres and art styles in your demo or reel—do not let one particular genre hijack your demo. If you have only worked on one kind of game, you need to spend time outside of work expanding your reel.

More about Demos

I have just a few more points to add to Mary Margaret’s advice. You can mail in a demo with your résumé, or save it for the interview. *Be sure to check the Jobs page of the company’s web site to find out which they want, and in what format.* If they ask for one and you don’t send it, or send it in the wrong format, they may ignore your application entirely. If it goes in with your résumé and your résumé is only going to HR, however, there’s a good chance nobody will see it and you almost certainly won’t get it back. You have a much better chance of getting it looked at if you’re sending your résumé directly to the hiring manager. If you *are* mailing it in, it needs to be self-running, and as foolproof as possible. As Mary Margaret points out, this is one of the benefits of VCR tapes or video DVDs: they work in any machine. It’s also a good reason for putting your material on the Web. The instant access of the Web is incredibly useful to a busy hiring manager. However, when you’re creating your web site, avoid unusual plug-ins that require the hiring manager to download new software. It’s annoying and potentially time-consuming, and some companies also prohibit downloading of any software not authorized by their IT department.

Whether you send your demo with your résumé or not, you should always bring it to your interview, and be prepared to talk about it. I’ll discuss the actual presentation at greater length in the section called “Handling the Interview,” but here are some tips on building a demo for presentation purposes:

- › *A self-running demo should show your best work in the first three to five minutes, and have the best material first.* Longer than that and you’re likely to lose your viewer’s attention.

- 1) ***A demo or portfolio that you present in person shouldn't be longer than ten minutes or so.*** You can afford for this to be a bit longer than a self-running demo because a) you have a captive audience; and b) by the time you've gotten to the interview stage you already know they're interested in you. However, don't overdo it. Build in natural cut-off points—transitions between projects or styles—at which you can stop if your interviewer is looking impatient.
- 1) ***Be sure it illustrates and supports your message.*** Don't throw in everything you've ever edited, drawn, or programmed. Think of your demo as a kind of visual résumé: you want it to show you in the best possible light.
- 1) ***Like your résumé, tune your demo for your audience.*** If the job is making artwork for a gory first-person shooter, leave out the cute bunnies you did during that project in college—unless they clearly demonstrate a talent that transfers over to gory first-person shooters.

What about Nudes or Erotic Material?

If you're an artist, a knowledge of anatomy and the ability to draw from life are valuable attributes. Art directors prize these qualities, and if you possess them, your portfolio should reflect it—especially if you're applying for jobs where you will be drawing or animating people.

However, use some discretion! Nudity is one thing; blatant sexuality is another. As in everything else about job-hunting, you want to avoid offending your interviewer, and your presentation should be tailored to your audience. Few games call for erotic material, so there's no need to include erotic material in your portfolio unless you *know* that that is what your interviewer wants to see.

I know of one case in which an artist proudly showed off his collection of photographs of celebrities, which he had retouched to make them look naked. The interviewer was completely repulsed by this display of adolescent lubriciousness, cut short the interview, and showed him the door. While it did demonstrate a certain facility with *Adobe Photoshop*, there are plenty of other ways to illustrate the same skill without giving offense.

In short: life drawings and classical poses are okay, and even recommended, as part of a portfolio; porn is not, unless you're interviewing at a company that makes porn itself.

Job-Hunting Tip: Don't Mail in a Mountain of Stuff!

When I'm interviewing job applicants, I'm looking for ... somebody whose single-minded mission is clearly to make my life easier and my product better. Nothing else is important to me. Long demo tapes and lots of info to sort through show me that the applicant is thinking of his own well-being, not mine. So when I establish

that I am dealing with somebody who doesn't realize how busy I am, and who wants some of my time for nothing, I get all panicky and I freak out and throw his promo pack into the furnace.

—George Alistair Sanger, *Legendary Audio Guy, The Fat Man*

ON THE HUNT: FINDING AND APPLYING FOR JOBS

Once you have your résumé written and your demo prepared, you're ready to start job-hunting seriously. This is the long, hard, and sometimes discouraging part of the process: tunneling into the bank vault. Ultimately, only persistence is guaranteed to pay off. But there are more and less intelligent ways to go about it, too.

How Do You Find the Jobs?

Here's how you look for job openings in the game industry, in order from most to least effective.

- 1) **Network, network, network!** I can't make this point often enough: the majority of jobs in the game industry are obtained through personal contacts, not through mailing résumés in blindly. Get to know as many people as you can by the means that I suggested in the "Networking" section earlier in this chapter. Talk to people you know at different companies. Ask them if they're hiring or if they have any projects that will be staffing up soon. If they don't know about anything, ask them if they know anyone else who does. Don't make a nuisance of yourself, pestering one person repeatedly; gather more leads, and move on to them, and so on.
- 2) **Read the industry news.** Is a game company opening a new studio somewhere? They'll probably be hiring at that location. Has a publisher just signed a major license? They'll need people to build that product. Did a famous designer leave his employer to set up a company of his own? He'll probably have brought several senior people with him, but he may need junior ones. Did a publisher just hire a major name from Hollywood to run some part of their business? That person may be building his own empire.
- 3) **Check company web sites. Frequently.** Most companies have a "jobs" or "careers" page on their web site. If there's a company that you're interested in working for, check its web site often. You'll want to be able to respond promptly when an opportunity comes up.
- 4) **Read job ads in developer magazines and web sites.** A job announcement in a magazine like *Develop* or a web site like Gamasutra is tightly targeted to the developer community; you can be pretty confident they're serious.

- 1) **Read job ads at job web sites.** General job web sites aren't nearly as useful as developer web sites, but don't ignore them entirely. They will also have jobs in fields that are only tangential to the game industry, but that you still might find interesting: educational software, multimedia, web site design, and so on.
- 1) **Read job ads in newspapers and the general media.** Something of a last resort, but game companies do occasionally advertise in the newspaper. You can't call your job search truly thorough unless you're checking the paper along with everywhere else.

INSIDE INFO

A job ad that doesn't give the employer's name has been posted by a recruiter. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it does mean that you can't do any research on the company, and in order to find out more about it, you'll have to contact the recruiter. Don't just send in your résumé; contact the recruiter first. Try to find out more about the position, and if you really are a suitable candidate. Only once they've demonstrated to you that it's really worth pursuing should you send in your résumé.

Mailing out Your Résumé

If at all possible, you should try to get your résumé into the hands of the hiring manager directly, rather than into the gaping maw of the HR department. The function of the HR department—among many other things—is to filter out applicants whom they believe to be unsuitable, and you want to avoid being filtered. When you know about a job opening that looks interesting to you, try, by all legal and ethical means, to find out who the hiring manager is and send your résumé directly to him or her. You should *also* send one to the HR department as a matter of courtesy. HR people can get really annoyed if you completely ignore them, and, as ever in job-hunting, the last thing you want is to annoy a potential employer. But your primary goal is to get it into the hands of the person who really has the power to hire you, by the most direct means possible.

Do Not Spam Your Résumé

As I said earlier, an awful lot of people send out their résumé to any and every job ad they see, regardless of whether they're really interested in the company or a good fit for it. Don't do this. The first time an HR department sees your résumé, they may take it seriously until they realize that you aren't appropriate for the position, but every time they see it after that, they'll know you're just a spammer and toss it in the trash. Only apply for jobs you can make a solid case that you are appropriate for.

How to Send It

You can send in your résumé by a variety of means, and each has advantages and disadvantages. Many companies have a preferred method, which they'll specify in their advertisements or on the Jobs page of their web sites—be sure to check first.

- › **Fax** Quick but expensive on account of the phone call if it's long distance. Faxes also have the downside that the fax machine at the other end is sometimes jammed and often shared among several people; all too often, the pages get picked up by the wrong person. Faxes don't look that nice, either: if you use images, they will be degraded; if you use colors, they will be lost.
- › **Mail** The classic, although it's slow and costs money. This can be a good choice if you know it's going straight to the hiring manager. People at game companies don't get that many real letters in the mail any more, so yours will probably stand out. Crisp white paper looks and feels good and can be part of your professional image if you want it to be. Another benefit of mail is that, if your résumé doesn't go straight into the trash, the recipient actually has to *do* something with it: it's likely to float around her office reminding her of your existence, unlike an e-mail message. One disadvantage is that if she wants to show your résumé to other people, she can't conveniently forward it, but has to make photocopies. Don't expect to continue the conversation by mail, however; if they get back to you it will be by phone or e-mail.
- › **E-mail** Fast, cheap, and convenient: you can send documents, images, even executable files or PowerPoint presentations containing your demo (though some e-mail systems reject attached executables as a security measure). The one disadvantage of e-mail is that the recipient probably gets one or two hundred messages a day—many more if it's the HR department—and your mail may get lost amid the spam. That's why it's important to follow up every message.
- › **Couriers or overnight delivery** Save your money. Don't try this as a tactic to impress people—they won't be impressed, they'll just think you're rich. Unless the company says they're only accepting applications up to a certain date, and you have to get a compact disc or tape to them before that deadline, it's not worth it.

HANDLING THE INTERVIEW

So you've gotten over the first hurdle and scored yourself an interview! Instead of being one of a hundred applicants, you're one of about five. Now you have to convince them in person that you're the right candidate for the job.

The traditional job-hunting manuals are full of advice about interviews, so I'll just reiterate the key points quickly, and then turn to the areas in which the game industry is different from other businesses. The standard rules about interviews are

- › **Show up on time.** This doesn't only mean arrive five minutes before you're due; it also means to allow yourself plenty of time to get there and find the place. If there's any question at all about where it is, ask for directions when

you set up the interview. If you're driving, find out in advance where you should park. If you're relying on public transportation, take normal service delays into account. The last thing you want is to arrive flustered, ruffled, and out of breath from having to run the last block.

- 】 **Bring three or four copies of your résumé.** At least one of the people you'll be talking to won't have one, or will have left it in her office.
- 】 **Smile. Be positive. Sit up straight. Shake hands and look 'em straight in the eye.** You want to seem cheerful but not flippant, sober but not dull, well-informed but not a know-it-all, confident but not arrogant. At entry-level you don't have a whole lot of experience to offer the company, and they know it. What they're looking for is a bright, attentive, friendly person who will work hard and fit in well. Your personality has to stand in for the experience you lack, so make sure it shines!

About Phone Interviews

Your first interview may be over the phone. Even if you live near the company, the HR department is likely call you to perform a sort of reality check before they invite you in for an on-site interview, especially if there are many candidates for the position. In some cases, the caller will be reading from a script provided by the hiring manager and writing down your answers without actually knowing what they mean, which can be a little disconcerting.

When you send in your résumé, be aware that you might get a phone call from the HR department at any time. This is yet another stage at which you can be filtered out of the pool of applicants, so be prepared. If you don't want to be phone-interviewed without warning, have a conventional excuse prepared in advance. ("Sorry, I was just on my way to the hospital to visit my grandmother—when would be convenient for me to call back?")

Mary Margaret's Interviewing Tips

Background, preparation, and presence combine to help you win the job you desire in the game of interviewing.

- 】 Be prepared! Gather as much information about a company as you can prior to an interview. Play the game or games that the company has made.
- 】 What to wear: Business casual is the norm for interviews in our industry. Avoid jeans with holes or rips, but be comfortable.
- 】 The following web sites offer basic information and sample questions for interviews:

- › www.careerbuilder.com/gh_int_htg_questions.html
- › www.job-interview-questions.com/list.htm
- › <http://content.monster.com/jobinfo/interview/questions/>
- › Artists should bring their best work along to the interview. Ask ahead of time what format the hiring manager would prefer: VHS, CD, traditional portfolio, or something else.
- › Engineers should be prepared to discuss both code and contributions to recent projects. Expect to answer a few code questions on the white board during the interview.
- › Always ask a lead for more leads. If you meet someone helpful and useful, ask them if they can refer you to anyone else who may be able to assist you in your job search.
- › Send a thank-you note after the interview. It can be a handwritten card or an e-mail message. This is also a good place to fill in or correct what you didn't say but should have said.

The game industry is a heavily environment-driven one, so it is important to get a feel for the people, the culture and the corporate structure. To get to the heart of these issues, ask such questions as:

- › Is there anything you wish you had known before you came to work here?
- › Describe the corporate culture to me.
- › Tell me about a recent internal event that made an impact on the company.
- › Describe some of your star performers to me.
- › When top performers leave, why do they leave and where do they go?
- › What are the biggest problems facing this department over the next two years?
- › What does the company plan to do over the next year to make things better?
- › If you were my best friend, what would you tell me about this job that you haven't already said?

Dress Properly: Neither Too Poorly nor Too Well

There's an old saying that when you're hitchhiking you should dress like the people that you want to pick you up. People are more comfortable around their own kind, and one of the ways they determine who their "kind" are is through clothing. The same is

true in an interview. I've never worn a suit to a job interview in my life, because I knew none of the people who would be interviewing me would be wearing suits either.

The game industry is famously informal, but a job interview is still a slightly official occasion: two strangers meeting for a business purpose. Therefore, you need to walk a middle ground between the T-shirts you'll see on the people in the office and the business suit that all the job-hunting manuals will tell you to wear. If you're a man, a polo shirt is about the minimum, unless you already know the company and what kind of reception you'll get.

A lot depends on the local culture, too. The east coast of America tends to be more starchy than the west coast, and small companies tend to be more relaxed than big ones, so adjust accordingly. Obviously, if you're applying for a job outside the United States, do some research to find out what's expected of you—but in all cases, the game industry will be less formal than other software industries in the same country.

Who Will Interview You?

When you go to an on-site interview, chances are you'll be interviewed by several different people, not just one. It's not an efficient use of your time or theirs to keep having you come in to meet different people; instead they'll have you meet them all on the same day. When you set up the appointment over the phone, ask how long to plan for, because it could be two or three hours. Also be sure to ask who to ask for when you arrive; it will probably be someone in HR.

The people you'll talk to are likely to be the following:

- 1 **Your prospective boss** Naturally, the hiring manager is the most important interview. If you don't already know who this is, be sure to find out! Game developers can be socially clueless at times, and it's not unusual for someone to walk into the room and say, "Hi, I'm Joe," without ever mentioning that he's actually the boss. Under ordinary circumstances you will meet this person one-on-one, particularly once you start talking about salaries.
- 1 **Someone from Human Resources** This person's role won't be to assess your qualifications for the job but to tell you about the company's benefits and policies. He'll know them better than the hiring manager will, and you can ask lots of questions.
- 1 **Your prospective boss' boss** This is less likely for a low-level position like tester or customer service, but in positions with more responsibility, there's a good chance your boss' *own* boss will want to meet anyone being considered for the team. She's unlikely to make the final decision, but she may exercise veto power over anyone she doesn't like. This interview will probably be short, and more about assessing your personality than your skills or experience.

- › **One or more prospective coworkers** Since game development is a such a collaborative activity, it's essential that you get along well with your coworkers. Their opinions count, but during the interview they'll see you as more of a colleague than an employee. With them you can let your hair down just a fraction, and ask questions like, "Do you feel the company has given you the equipment you need to do your job?"

Be prepared for the possibility that you may be interviewed by committee: three or four people in a room at once to save time. Psychologically, this is disadvantageous because you'll be outnumbered, but there are ways to handle it. Imagine that you're a professor and they're the students. If people start firing questions at you, take your time responding, and say calmly, "Just a moment, please, I want to finish answering his question first."

Showing Your Demo or Portfolio

The interview is your opportunity to show off your talents and skills through the preparation you've done. It's your big chance, and you don't want to blow it.

Here are some things to keep in mind to make sure your presentation goes well:

- › **Rehearse and practice.** A demo or portfolio isn't just a random collection of material; it's a presentation, and it should be structured to make a point. Know your material thoroughly, and be able to move through it smoothly. Rehearse, both by yourself and in front of someone else—preferably a colleague who will understand what you're talking about. Don't over-rehearse to the point that you sound bored or glib, though. Your goal is to seem comfortable, confident, and justifiably proud—but *not* conceited—about your work.
- › **Anticipate questions.** Get someone obnoxious and unpleasant—we all know someone!—to ask you hard questions as you practice your demo on them. Prepare your answers in advance. If the demo does something the viewer doesn't expect and might see as a flaw, be ready to explain it.
- › **Bring your own computer if at all possible.** You don't want to delay things, and run into problems, trying to make your software work on someone else's machine. Bring your own laptop and everything you need. The only thing the company should have to provide is an electrical outlet. If your demo runs on a console machine, then you can use one of the company's own machines, but let them know in advance that you'll need one. The same goes for a videotape, audio CD, or DVD.
- › **Be sure of your gear.** You never want to begin a demo, or any other presentation for that matter, with the words, "I hope this works." Be absolutely

certain that your equipment works right the first time. And put a shortcut to your demo on the desktop so you don't spend 20 seconds opening folders while your interviewer twiddles her thumbs.

- 1 **Bring copies you can leave behind.** There's no better way to keep your name in someone's memory than by having a copy of your work floating around their office. If your demo is really unusual or spectacular, they'll probably want to show it off to other people after you've gone.

What about Tests?

Personally, I don't believe in giving people tests in interviews, but some companies do it to determine how well an applicant does what he says he can do. It's one thing to say you've been programming C++ for 5 years, but have you been doing it well, or have you been depending on other team members for a crutch? Also, many companies send a test *before* any interview. If you are sent a test, take it, and then talk intelligently about the questions and answers in the phone call.

The areas in which a job applicant is most likely to be tested are programming (to see if you know the language and concepts required) and art (to see if you know how to use the tools). If taking tests bothers you, then use the phone call when you're setting the date of the interview as an opportunity to ask if they're planning to give you one. That way at least you'll know it's coming. Unfortunately, there's no good way to get out of a test, and the company is perfectly within its rights to ask that you take one.

INSIDE INFO

Number-one tip for white-board interviews: If you don't know the answer, don't make your interviewers wait while you try to figure it out. Just tell them you don't know off the top of your head, or tell them where you would expect to look up the answer, and move on to the next question. Most reasonable interviewers will give you points for not wasting their time.

Some people just have a hard time with written tests; their scores don't reflect their actual ability. (The smartest girl in my high school didn't do nearly as well on her SATs as you would have expected from her excellent grades.) If you're one of these people, don't make excuses for yourself; that just looks weak. Instead, say as little as possible about it. Act confident, as if it were no more than a formality like filling out the application form. Emphasize your qualifications, your demo or portfolio, and your enthusiasm for the position and the company. If you feel you've done badly on the test, and they do want to talk about it during your interview, you can point out that working on hypothetical problems by yourself for an hour doesn't have much to do with working in collaboration with a team for a year or so.

Job-Hunting Tip: Show Them You're a Team Player

Being able to fit in with the other people on the team, both in their own department (art, design, whatever) and in other departments, is at least as important as being good at the work itself, in my opinion. Someone who is brilliant at what they do but is unapproachable or precious about their work, or who has very rigid opinions, is a potential team-breaker and that can cost the company far more time and grief than many people imagine.

—Kim Blake, *Producer, Particle Systems*

THE COMPENSATION PACKAGE

Your compensation as an employee of any company actually consists of a lot more than just your salary; it's a whole package of benefits. Some of them may be new to you if this is your first full-time job. When you're computing the value of a job offer, it's important to take *all* the compensation into account, not just the salary. If a company doesn't offer any health insurance, for example, then you'll have to spend a lot of money out of your own pocket to buy some. What's more, health insurance premiums aren't tax-deductible unless (along with other medical expenses) they add up to more than 7.5 percent of your annual income, which isn't very likely. On the other hand, if the company buys health insurance for you, it's tax-free.

In this section, I'll describe the various kinds of compensation you may be offered. One caveat, though: I'll only be talking about American companies. Employment regulations vary considerably from country to country, and many nations have government-mandated vacation policies, for example.

Financial Compensation

"So how much am I going to get paid?" you're probably wondering. The answer, of course, is "It depends." It depends on what kind of job you're looking for, how much education and experience you have, how big your employer is, and what part of the country you're looking in—among other things. These are not questions you should ask in your initial interview, but if it looks like the company may be serious about you, get answers to these questions!



To get a general idea of what you'll be paid in your chosen field, read *Game Developer* magazine's annual salary survey. You can download the most recent edition at www.igda.org/biz/salary_survey.php.

Money is the thing most people think of first when they consider compensation, but it can come to you in several different forms. Not all companies offer all of the following:

- 】 **Salary** Obviously the primary ingredient, your salary is simply the base amount you get paid to do your job. A larger company will have a salary scale that ties job titles to particular salary ranges. Your salary also normally goes up with promotion and good annual performance reviews—though not necessarily, if the company is having a bad year. If you’re a full-time employee, you’ll be classed as “exempt,” which means exempt from government regulations about wages for hourly workers. You won’t have to punch a clock, but you won’t get overtime, either.
- 】 **Bonuses** A bonus is just a flat cash payment in addition to your salary, often made on an annual basis. It’s the company’s mechanism for rewarding good performers. Some companies will have detailed bonus plans that compute the size of your bonus based on your salary, seniority, or some measure of your performance; at others, it’s awarded entirely at your boss’ discretion. Still others do not offer bonuses at all. Bonuses are subject to all the same tax rules that salaries are.
- 】 **Royalties** If you get royalties, this means your employer pays you a percentage of the money that the game you worked on earns in sales. (This isn’t the same as royalty deals between a development company and a publisher.) Royalty plans made multimillionaires of the early Atari programmers, but they’re not so common any more. Royalties have the disadvantage that if an employee is taken off one project that they know will be a big seller, and assigned to another one that seems likely to make less money, they resent it bitterly: the reassignment is actually costing them money.
- 】 **Profit-sharing** A better arrangement than royalties, profit-sharing doles out a certain proportion of the company’s total profits to the employees, regardless of what individual products the employees were working on. If the company has a bad year, of course, there may be no profits to share.
- 】 **Stock options** A stock option is an opportunity to buy a certain number of shares in the company at a certain price. The hope is that the value of the company will go up, the shares will be worth more over time, and you will be able to buy them cheaply and sell them again for much more. *If a company does really well, a stock option can be worth many times your actual salary.* If it does badly, on the other hand, it can be worthless. Normally, you don’t get a whole stock option as soon as you join a company; you earn it over time, a process called *vesting*. This period is typically four or five years. For example, suppose I join a company and receive an option to buy 1000 shares at \$1 a share, vesting in yearly increments over four years. At the beginning,

I can do nothing; the option has not vested at all. After I have been there a year, the first 250 shares have vested. I can *exercise* the option and buy 250 shares from the company for \$250. If, in the meantime, the value of the stock on the stock market has gone up to \$2 a share, I can immediately turn around and sell them again for \$500: a \$250 profit for me (less taxes). But I don't have to exercise if I don't want to; I can just wait and exercise another time if I like. The following year, another 250 shares will be vested, and so on. If a company's stock isn't traded publicly on the stock market, however, you may be limited in who you are allowed to sell the shares to. If you leave the company, you have to either buy your vested shares or lose them. There's a lot more to know about stock options, so ask the company's HR department for full details.

- 1) **Employee stock purchase plan** An employee stock purchase plan (ESPP) is a government-regulated scheme in which you can choose to have a certain amount of your salary (usually between 1 and 10 percent) withheld by the company for a fixed period (usually six months to a year). At the end of that time, the company will use the money to buy shares in the company for you at a discount, typically 85 percent of its publicly-traded price. If the value of the stock goes up during that period, you pay 85 percent of the original, lower price that it had at the beginning of the period; if the value has gone down, you pay 85 percent of the current price at the end of the period. In other words, it's a no-lose situation for you as long as you can do without the money in the meantime. You can also pull out of the program in the middle and get your money back. If you leave the company, you must pull out.

Time-Off Benefits

It's considered bad form to go to a job interview and immediately start talking about taking a vacation, but companies must have some policy or other, and you'll need to find out what it is. Ask the HR person, if there is one, rather than the person who will be your boss. In European countries, time-off benefits are usually regulated by the government and will be the same everywhere.

- 1) **Vacation** This is simply paid time off. You normally get a certain number of weeks per year, and that number goes up the longer you work for the company. Typically, you don't get it in a lump at the beginning of every year, but earn it over time as you work. Different companies will have different rules about how it accrues, and the amount of vacation you have available will usually appear on your pay stub as a certain number of hours. The company will also have a maximum amount that you can save up, and beyond that point you won't earn any more until you've used some. You can't take vacation any time you want; the company has to approve it in advance.

- 】 **Holidays** This is paid time off for the whole company. In America, this is typically about ten days per year. A common scheme is to get Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, two days at Thanksgiving, and five days between Christmas and New Year's Day. People who want to observe other religious holidays can usually work out some kind of deal by working weekends, but talk to HR about it.
- 】 **Sick leave** Some companies have sick leave policies in which you only get a certain number of paid days per year, usually five or ten. However, I've found that it's more common for companies just to use a "reasonable good sense" approach: they don't keep track unless it starts to seriously affect your job. Sick employees who come to work anyway tend to infect other employees, which only makes things worse. If you're sick, stay home!
- 】 **Sabbatical** A rare but wonderful benefit, borrowed from the academic world. After you've been at a company for a certain number of years, they may give you several weeks off with pay as a reward, or some similar form of compensation. When I had been at Electronic Arts for seven years, they gave me seven weeks off. I used that time to start writing this book!
- 】 **Comp (compensatory) time** When people have been working really hard, wise bosses give them a few days off after the project is done, usually "under the table." Don't bother asking HR about this; as far as the company is concerned, it doesn't officially exist. This is one of the things you can ask a prospective coworker about. Be subtle about it, however. Don't say, "So, do we get comp time for working so hard, or what?" Instead say, "So what happens when a project is over? Is it straight on to the next one?"

Health-Related Benefits

It's a sad fact that in America, the spiraling cost of health care has a powerful effect on people's employment plans, especially if they have dependents. Many people don't dare leave their jobs without having another job lined up first, because they'll lose their health insurance. However, there is a law called COBRA (which stands for Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act—how's that for gobbledygook?) that enables you to continue on your company's health plan—at your own expense—for up to 18 months after you leave, as long as the company employs 20 or more people.

There are actually quite a few health-related benefits that companies can offer:

- 】 **Health insurance** This is the big one, and almost every American company will offer it. Some companies have just one plan; others let you choose between a traditional insurance scheme, in which you pay a small part of all your medical bills and they pay the rest, and a health-maintenance organization (HMO), in which most treatment is free but you are restricted to certain

doctors and hospitals. Normally, you get to choose between one plan or the other when you are hired, and can switch at one other fixed time during the year, a period called “open enrollment.” If you already have an illness of some kind (a “pre-existing condition”), many plans won’t cover treatment for it until you’ve been with them for as much as two years. Check with the plan documents for details.

- 】 **Disability/Long-term illness** This is another important benefit that young people tend to overlook. If you are unable to work for a long period, either through an accident or illness, disability insurance kicks in after several weeks (usually around six) off the job. It pays you a percentage of your salary, typically between 66 and 75 percent, for as long as you are unable to work, up to the rest of your life in some cases.
- 】 **Life insurance** This is typically a flat-cash death benefit to your heirs if you die while you’re employed by the company. It’s usually not as much insurance as you really need, however, especially if you’re the sole earner for a family.
- 】 **Dental care** Dental plans often pay for 100 percent of the cost of routine preventive care, and a large percentage of other treatment. Specialist treatment, such as orthodontia and treatment for temporomandibular joint syndrome (TMJ), is frequently excluded, however.
- 】 **Vision care** This typically consists of free eye exams once a year, cheaper glasses, and more sophisticated care, if needed. Not many companies offer this.
- 】 **Employee Assistance Program (counseling)** A few companies offer limited psychological counseling services should you suffer extremely stressful events—a natural disaster or the death of a relative, for example. These services are only sufficient to help you through a crisis; they’re not intended to be a substitute for therapy.

Find out Who Is Covered!

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To judge the value of a company’s health benefits, it’s essential to find out whom they actually cover. In a few cases, they only cover you, the employee, full stop. This is rare, however. More commonly, the plan will cover you, and you can add your spouse and children at an extra cost, which will be deducted from your paycheck. (It will almost certainly be cheaper to do this than to try to purchase health insurance for them on the open market.) Larger, more successful companies will offer complete protection for you and your whole family.

Be sure to take this into account when you’re calculating the *actual* value of your salary: if you have numerous dependents, it could add up to several hundred extra dollars per month.

Retirement Plans

Okay, you're just getting started, so the last thing on your mind is retiring and getting a gold watch. Think again. The population of America is aging. The number of people taking money out of Social Security is going up faster than the number of people putting money in. You're going to have to take responsibility for your own retirement; you can't be sure Social Security will be around when you need it.

Very small companies won't have any kind of retirement plan at all; you're on your own to manage your own savings. The best way to do this is with a traditional or Roth IRA, and a tax advisor can explain the benefits of each.

Larger companies will offer a retirement plan, but it's unlikely to be the traditional pension scheme in which the company holds the money and pays you a certain percentage of your salary after you retire for as long as you live. Those have been discredited in the scandals of the past few years, as some companies were caught mismanaging the pension fund or even misappropriating the money.

In the game industry, the retirement plan is much more likely to be what's called a *401(k) plan*. In a 401(k) plan, you contribute a percentage of your salary (that you get to choose) into a personal fund that is managed for you by a financial services company. The money you put in isn't subject to income tax. Once you retire, you can start taking money out of the fund, and only then is it taxed. You can also transfer the fund to another company's 401(k) plan if you change jobs. You can go on using the same fund even if you quit, too. Best of all, you, not the company, get to choose how your money is invested, usually from a suite of available opportunities ranging from safe but slow-earning instruments such as certificates of deposit, to high-risk things like aggressive-growth stock funds. You can even borrow money out of your own fund for certain approved items like medical expenses or buying a house.

Company Retirement Contributions

Many game companies are too small to be able to afford to contribute to your retirement fund: you'll have to do it all on your own through salary deductions. Bigger companies, though, will match a certain percentage of your own contribution. They may tie it to the company's own financial performance, though—so, if the company is doing badly, they won't contribute. HR will tell you what their policy is.

Miscellaneous Benefits

Most companies have a variety of other fringe benefits. These can include things like education reimbursement, child care facilities, a subsidized cafeteria, membership in a gym, discounts on the company's products, trips or events for the employees and their families, and so on. These benefits are only really worth taking into account if you know you will use them and they actively save you money. Subsidized child care, for example, won't be of any use to you if you don't have children, but could save you a

fortune if you do. Such benefits do give you an idea of how successful the company is and how much it values its employees, however. If the company's holiday party consists of a free bottle of beer for everyone who's still working on Christmas Eve, that's one thing; if they rent out a nightclub and have dinner and a band, that's another.

Work Policies

Game development is hard work; schedules are tight and hours are long. Very few people put in 40 hours a week and go home. Most people's work week is 44–48 hours during normal periods, and 48 to even 60 or more during crunch time.

To compensate for this a little, and to make it easier to manage, most game companies have *flextime*: flexible working hours. Some are completely flexible; as long as you get your job done, they don't care when you come in or leave. The collaborative nature of game development means that you will spend a surprising amount of time in meetings and just talking things over with your teammates. In order to make sure people are there when they're needed, a lot of companies have a "core hours" policy: they require you to be present between 10 A.M. and 4 P.M. every day, for example. As with compensation issues, the HR manager should explain all this at your interview. If your personal life dictates a strict schedule—picking up children from day care at a certain time, for example—be sure to ask about it.

NEGOTIATION

As an entry-level employee, you won't have a lot of flexibility here. A big game company will have a standard set of salary ranges they offer, and their attitude is likely to be, "There are plenty more where you came from; take it or leave it." Obviously, you want to earn what you're worth, but at this point you simply don't have the leverage to bargain hard. That doesn't mean you shouldn't bargain at all, however! Don't take a bad offer just because you're grateful for any job you can get. A year down the road, when you're working 16-hour days and a little of the shine has worn off the job, you may regret your haste. Remember, they wouldn't offer you the job if they didn't think you could do the work.

The two key principles in salary negotiation are

1. Defer salary discussions for as long as you can.
2. Know your value in the job market.

The reason for the first principle is simple: the longer your discussions with the company are, the more seriously they'll take you as a candidate, and the more reluctant they'll be to write you off for purely financial reasons. On the other hand, if you state your salary requirements directly on your résumé, the company is likely to eliminate

you immediately if your target is outside their range. You want to pique their interest and make them want to talk to you. A flat salary demand is likely to cut that short.

As for the second principle, it's essential you understand your value for two reasons: one, because it will help you to set a realistic goal; two, because it will give you ammunition when the subject of salary finally comes up. Do the research. Read the *Game Developer* salary survey. Discuss it with recruiters—they have up-to-the-minute information. Talk to other developers who have held a similar job in a similar part of the country.

As a newcomer, you do have one advantage: they can't ask you what your current salary is, because either you don't have a job at all, or the job you have isn't relevant to the game industry. Here are some traditional ploys for avoiding naming a salary early in the process:

- 1 *"I don't really know enough about the position to know what to ask for. Obviously, I want to be paid in line with the market for this sort of job. Could you describe it in more detail, and tell me what range you consider appropriate?"*
- 1 *"I'm quite flexible about salaries; it depends a lot on other things such as the benefits plan, opportunities for promotion, and other forms of remuneration like bonuses or stock options. Perhaps we could talk about them first, and then I can form a better idea."*
- 1 *"As long as its consistent with the going industry rate I don't think we'll have a problem, but let's make sure we're right for each other first."*
- 1 *"Well, as an employer I imagine you have a better idea of industry standards than I do. What do you think would be appropriate for someone with my education and qualifications?"*

Here are some more tips for salary negotiation:

- 1 *The basis of your salary is the way in which you will contribute to the company's bottom line—how you are going to make them richer.* Forget the L'Oreal ads that say, "Because I'm worth it." Intrinsically, you're not worth anything to the company. What's worth something is your personality, energy, skill, and experience. Your approach must demonstrate that: make it clear you will make a valuable contribution to the company's enterprise.
- 1 *Find out other details as well.* Ask how often you'll be reviewed, how, and by whom. Get them to tell you what promotional opportunities are available—how they perceive the career ladder at their company (remember, my examples in Chapter 6 were all hypothetical). Ask what sort of salary progression they would expect for someone in this position over the next

three years or so. Take all this data into account when you're weighing up the value of their offer.

- 1) ***If you get two job offers, don't try to start a bidding war between the companies.*** You might conceivably be able to pull this off if you're a senior executive, but at entry level, forget it—they'll just cross you off and pull another résumé out of the stack. One of the reasons a company wants to hire you is because you've demonstrated that you really want to work for *them*. If you make it obvious that you'll work for whoever pays you the most, it doesn't demonstrate much commitment or interest.

Reasons to Accept a Lower Salary

You obviously want to get the best salary you can, but it shouldn't be your only consideration. Suppose you get two job offers and one of them includes a higher salary. Should you take it automatically? Absolutely not. Nor should you reject an offer for salary reasons alone until you're sure you understand their entire offer and you haven't missed anything. There are many reasons to accept a lower salary in exchange for some other, often longer-term, benefit.

- 1) ***The other company benefits are excellent.*** Never forget that company benefits often have an actual cash value, especially if you expect to make use of them. As I said earlier, if company A offers you a good salary but no health insurance, and company B offers a slightly lower salary but does include health insurance, company B's offer is probably better. With company B, you won't have to pay for your own insurance, you won't be taxed on it, and the insurance company can't turn you down—they have to take *all* the company's employees. Weigh the cash value of the company's other benefits, and factor them into your salary calculations.
- 1) ***The product you'll be working on is highly respected.*** Working on a well-respected product is good for your long-term career growth. There's nothing like being credited on a hit game. In the long run, it's usually worth a few dollars off your salary to work on *Command & Conquer* than on a real-time strategy game no one has ever heard of. Future employers will brighten up and pay more attention.
- 1) ***The company itself is highly respected.*** As with a respected product, there's prestige in working for a respected company. If you get a job for Sony, Activision, or LucasArts, you won't have to explain who they are to future employers: they'll know.
- 1) ***The company's future looks bright.*** A big salary at a company that's circling the drain isn't worth much: you could be out of a job in a few months anyway.

If the company really looks solid, however—it's well-funded, sensibly managed, and has a steady track record of successes—then it can be worth sacrificing a few dollars for the sake of that stability. The company's growth will mean higher salaries and more benefits in the future. This is particularly true if you're offered a stock option at a public company: if you have a great deal of faith in the company and their performance has been good for several years, then a stock option can be well worth trading away some immediate cash for.

- 1) ***You won't have to move.*** This is mostly a consideration for people with families. Moving is expensive, and at entry level, companies seldom offer a relocation allowance. It also causes a lot of emotional wear and tear, particularly if your spouse also has a job that he or she will have to give up, and you have children who will lose their friends and have to change schools. In both financial and personal terms, there can be good reasons for taking a job in an area where you already live.
- 1) ***The job comes with considerable creative freedom.*** As I've said repeatedly, few people get to work on their own ideas in the game industry; they're usually working on someone else's ideas. Having the freedom to develop your own ideas is a rare privilege, and one that can be well worth giving up some cash for, if you can afford it.
- 1) ***The job sounds like exactly what you want to do.*** Don't underestimate the importance of quality of life. If you're typical, you'll spend nearly 40 percent of your waking life every year at work, and on occasion it will be much more than that. Which is more important to you: spending that time doing something you love, that makes you feel happy, positive, and energized, or getting more money to do something you simply tolerate?

Reasons NOT to Accept a Lower Salary

Small companies in particular look to shave costs wherever they can, and may try to persuade you to accept a lower salary in exchange for other things. Some of those things aren't worth having, as follows:

- 1) ***A cool-sounding title.*** Titles in the game industry aren't exactly meaningless, but they're not standardized, and a fancy title won't impress anybody unless you're working for a really big company. Being "Senior Creative Director" at a ten-person shop doesn't say much. It's certainly not worth trading away money for. Ignore the title and concentrate on the actual job responsibilities.
- 1) ***Vague promises of a big bonus or a raise later on.*** Never count on any bonus unless the company has a bonus plan explicitly spelled out in writing. The plan should state how much you'll get (typically as a percentage of your

salary), when you'll get it, and if there are any circumstances in which you *won't* get it, such as a poor performance review or low profits for the company. In that case, the bonus is something you can factor in, and may be worth accepting a lower salary for. But remarks like "We'll see how things look in three months," are meaningless: leave them out of your calculations.

- 1) ***A big stock option at a privately held company.*** It's difficult to judge the value of a stock option if the company isn't publicly traded. You'll have to ask to whom you are allowed to sell the stock—and if so, whether anyone will want to buy it. You'll also have to find out what the owners' long-term plans are, and judge whether or not the company has much chance of succeeding at them. If the owners want to eventually go public or sell the company, then there's a chance you could make a fortune—if they succeed. If they want to keep it private indefinitely, then while the stock may appreciate in value, there may not be any way to recoup that value. (This advice doesn't apply to startups in which you get in on the ground floor as one of the principals. As a newcomer, however, you're unlikely to be offered that opportunity unless you make it for yourself by founding your own company.)

Get It in Writing

Don't accept a job offer on a handshake alone. When you get an offer that you like, and you agree to take it, end the conversation with something like, "So, I'll watch the mail for your offer letter." If they look surprised or uncomfortable, be suspicious: any company with an ounce of professionalism mails out formal offer letters—for full-time work they may even be required by state law. An offer letter is the company's stated commitment to hire you at the salary and other terms you've agreed upon. It should also include your start date.

DISCRIMINATION AND WORKPLACE ISSUES

In this section I'm going to address some of the concerns that women, members of minority groups, gays and lesbians, and non-westerners (people from Asia, not people from New York!) might have about trying to find work in game development. For the most part, the news is good. Although the game industry is primarily an entertainment business, it was founded by engineers and to some extent their pragmatic ethos still pervades the workplace. As with other high-tech industries, interactive entertainment is largely a meritocracy. If you can write tight, bug-free software that does amazing things, you can be a three-headed alien from planet Zweeble for all that other programmers will care. They'll be much more interested in your code than in you. This attitude tends to spill over into art, music, writing, and the other development crafts as well: people respect performance.

Here are a few tips to help you spot whether a game development company might discriminate against you, or be an uncomfortable place to work:

- 1) ***Company culture flows down from the top.*** Obviously, your job interview will tell you a lot about your immediate coworkers, but if you want to get a sense of the company's values as a whole, find out what you can about the man or woman at the helm. Bosses set the tone and pace of an organization, and they tend to surround themselves with people who think and work the way they do. If the CEO cracks dirty jokes himself, you can be pretty sure there'll be a lot of dirty jokes around the office.
- 1) ***Big companies tend to be more professional than small ones.*** This isn't always the case, but on the whole, the bigger a company is, the more likely it is to enforce the workplace rules and regulations. That's partly because a large company has deep pockets; it has to toe the legal line or risk being sued by a disgruntled employee. Aside from that, big game companies have experienced HR staff who are trained to prevent these kinds of problems and to resolve them when they arise. I don't mean to suggest that small companies are bad, only that three-guys-in-a-garage are not going to think about these issues much, and may not be prepared to deal with them when they come up.
- 1) ***Keep your eyes open when visiting a prospective employer's offices.*** Don't snoop, but pay attention to everything you see. How many women and minority employees do you see, and what positions are they occupying? Are there racist or sexist posters or other decorations around? Where are they—in public places like the hallways, inside individual offices, or nowhere to be seen? This tells you something about the company's degree of tolerance for such things. Bear in mind that a lot of games use pictures of women in tight clothing as part of their own advertising, so they may be legitimate posters for the company's own products—in which case you'll have to decide if you want to work for a company that makes such games. Don't jump to unwarranted conclusions, but take mental notes for comparison with other companies you visit.

Women

The game industry is, to put it bluntly, male-dominated, and as a result, our games don't appeal to women as well as they might. In order to reach more female gamers, we need more female developers. It's not that every woman telepathically knows what all women want from a game, but taken collectively, a game company with female developers is more likely to get it right than one without any. *The Sims*, the best-selling PC game of all time, appeals equally to men and women, and its development staff at Maxis is just about equally balanced as well. This is not a coincidence.

However, Maxis is something of an exception. Although the sex ratio in the industry is beginning to change, a woman who wants to be a game developer needs to be aware that she will probably work with a lot of men and comparatively few women, especially at smaller companies. There's nothing inherently wrong with that, but it can leave female developers feeling rather isolated. Make no mistake, however: women can, and do, make it to positions of real power in the game industry. The Director of the Xbox Advanced Technology Group at Microsoft is a woman, as is the Director of Development at Sony Computer Entertainment of America. The Executive Vice Presidents of Publishing at THQ, Activision, and Electronic Arts are all women. Numerous women run their own companies as well. If you have the drive and dedication for it, there's no limit to how far you can go.

INSIDE INFO

While there isn't much of an old boys' network, there is very much a quiet network of veteran industry women. Many of us faced serious challenges breaking into the industry, especially those who entered the business over ten years ago (when very few women were working in games), so we're willing to help newcomers, especially younger women. If you are at a trade show or conference, look for the women who are especially dynamic, and approach them politely. At the Game Developers' Conference, Microsoft organizes the "Women Celebrating Women in Gaming" event, where they specifically introduce some key industry women and invite newcomers to ask them questions.

—Ellen Guon Beeman, Producer, Monolith Productions

Overt hiring discrimination based on gender is comparatively rare, especially in America. It's slightly more likely to occur in hardcore graphics programming than in any other field, because there is still something of a macho culture about it, and there are fewer women there than in general gameplay programming or art, for example. At the résumé stage, you can defend against this by using only your initials rather than your name on your résumé. Once you get an interview, let your demo speak for itself. As I said before, people respect performance.

You're more likely to experience sexist attitudes from fellow students in school, or from amateur coders, than from companies. These guys are usually kids who treat game development as a form of showing off rather than a profession. Do *not* waste your time and energy arguing with adolescent trolls on message boards. Instead, channel that energy into building a great demo that will get you a job. They'll still be shooting off their mouths while you're getting paid to make games.

The IGDA has a committee dedicated to supporting female game developers, and an active e-mail discussion forum. Membership is not limited to IGDA members. For details, visit www.igda.org/women.

Inside the Job: Advice for Women in the Game Industry

- 1. *Business was only a man's world because it used to be profitable to keep it that way. That's no longer true.*** The western world could not keep the standard of living that it has grown accustomed to if women didn't work. The United States government has put many laws in place to stop discrimination and encourage women to enter the workforce based on that belief. It also gives both women who work in a traditionally male field, and their managers, a way of reframing this thorny issue in concrete terms. Legal and moral issues aside, a company will most clearly understand that discrimination is not in its best interests when they realize that it is unprofitable. At the individual level, every company needs each worker to be their most enthusiastic and productive from the moment they step through the door to the moment they leave. Photos of nude women as screensavers lead to low morale, which leads directly to poor work. Glass ceilings mean that a company loses the benefit of having a qualified and productive employee in the place where she does the most good. For both the employee and the company, it's not a personal matter but a cost/benefit issue, with tangible rules that help make decisions.
- 2. *Don't doubt that you can do the job.*** Women won't apply for a job they don't think they can do; men just assume they can do the job they get. It's trite but true. Aim for the higher, better job and figure it out when you get there. It really is what everybody else does.
- 3. *Toot your own horn.*** When you do a good job, crow about it (or at least mention it to your manager). Don't assume people will notice. It's up to you to publicize (and put on record) your own successes.
- 4. *Never be the office mother, martyr, hussy, or feminist activist in the office.*** Having a style is useful and comfortable, but it doesn't pay to be stuck in a stereotype. Many coworkers, managers, and underlings really want to put people in boxes. It's easier for them to relate to, because they have an internal template for dealing with those types of relationships. The main roles women can fall into are mother, martyr, hussy, or feminist activist.

 - 1) Don't become the office counselor or confessor. Even if someone seems really pathetic, send them to their manager or human resources, or the employee assistance program. It's not your job.
 - 1) Don't clean the kitchen, or volunteer to organize social events any more than your fair share. And when the toilet backs up, and he comes to you saying he doesn't know what to do, smile and tell him what a plunger is

for.* When someone does you a disservice, professionally and courteously correct him on the spot and if that doesn't work, talk to your manager immediately. Suffering in silence is unprofitable and unnecessary.

- 1) As hard as it is to say, a woman in the office can be discounted through her sexuality. Realize that people draw conclusions from the clothes you choose. Just as a sloppy dresser is viewed as lazy and disorganized in the office, a woman who wears something low-cut will have a hard time getting her male coworkers not to stare at her breasts.*
 - 1) Resist the urge to speak for all women—even if you know that the e-mail sent around (the one about the remote control for girlfriends*) is beyond the pale of decency. Women shouldn't feel they have to carry the burden of political correctness in the office. That's management's job; they get paid for it.
- 5. *Decide what makes you happy, what makes you content, what you can live with and what you can't.*** Women have a larger burden in trying to balance home and work life. Often they want to meet every request and can't meet them all and end up disappointed and guilty. One way to sort out all the competing needs is to make them concrete. Think about them, write them down, and then create plans for execution. Issues move from being emotional, unconquerable messes to concise, small tasks.

* All examples taken from real life!

—Clarinda Merripen, Human Resources Manager, Cyberlore

Minorities

When the game industry was founded in the late 1970s, it consisted almost exclusively of young white men as game developers, and middle-aged white men as producers and publishers. Of course, there were a few exceptions, but they were so rare as to be almost oddities. Today, a quick look around the Game Developers' Conference makes it clear that this is changing: there are definitely more African-American developers than there used to be, although they remain under-represented, while Hispanic developers are even more under-represented.

Darrell Porcher is a developer with a longstanding interest in improving the diversity of the game industry, and he runs the Harlem Game Wizards group in New York. Darryl Duncan worked his way into games from the music industry, and is now the owner of GameBeat, a highly regarded audio and music firm. Since they know more about the subject than I do, I asked them to contribute their thoughts.

INTERVIEW WITH DARRELL PORCHER AND DARRYL DUNCAN

Do you believe there are barriers that face minorities in game development?
.....

Darrell Porcher, Harlem Game Wizards I have two good friends who aspired to be game developers. One was fronted money and allowed to stay rent-free and job-free as he pursued his dream. The other was laughed at and scolded, and had no choice but to continue to work, and create in spare moments. It's a question of support and opportunity. The barriers that face minorities in game development are not always "black and white."

Do you think members of minorities experience barriers in education for game development?
.....

Darryl Duncan, GameBeat I feel the opportunities to learn game development are equally available to minorities as well as to non-minorities. But from an economic point of view, perhaps fewer minorities are able to take advantage of these opportunities than their non-minority counterparts.

Darrell Porcher, Harlem Game Wizards Educational barriers exist in communities where there is no access to computers and software. Growing up in Harlem, New York City and the south Bronx, there were minimal computer resources other than arcade video games. These were some of the very few sources of any appreciation for what computers could do. While most educational systems had some minimal computer classes, they seldom went into any depth about any career paths, other than data entry or spreadsheet manipulations. In my case, game development as a career was a joke, much more so than wanting to play sports or get a "good job." In the urban community, we are sometimes taught to focus on flash over substance.

Do you feel there are barriers in hiring and job opportunities for minorities, especially at entry level?
.....

Darryl Duncan, GameBeat I think that you could ask five different African-Americans in the industry and get five different answers. My opinion is that, yes, discrimination does in fact exist in the game industry and it's hard to think that it wouldn't when you talk about a business where only a very small percentage are non-white. The only true tool a minority can use to overcome such obstacles is to make sure that his or her talent is at such a level that no one can deny what their contributions can and will be. It's the skill and quality of one's

work, be it audio, graphics, or programming, that is often the measurement that places them at a particular social level (and salary level) within the company. So, I personally feel that a minority can use his or her talents and skills to rise above any discrimination that might exist and achieve the level of respect that he or she deserves. Any discrimination comes from not knowing or wanting to know about another race or culture, and often a shared art form or common respect for one's work can bridge these gaps. To be honest, while others do not and would never "see" it, an African-American employee knows in his or her own heart and mind when this sort of bias or discrimination exists, even if it appears nonexistent to non-minorities.

Darrell Porcher, Harlem Game Wizards The game development community is largely blind to ethnicity if you can truly get the job done, or show something cool to get in the door. But the exposure to the game development world has only recently changed and thus, minorities, particularly in urban communities, do not see gaming as a career—other than becoming a sports figure to appear in a game, or quite recently, a hip-hop star.

There is a common belief that Japanese people possess stereotypes about black people. Given the dominance of Japanese console companies, do you think this is true and if so does it represent an obstacle to the careers of black developers?
.....

Darrell Porcher, Harlem Game Wizards Having worked for some major Japanese companies, I have found there is more of a stereotype associated with Western culture as a whole. Americans are lazy, undisciplined, and so on. It's a case where we need to prove ourselves up front more than our counterparts in Japan do. But fortunately, I have found that if I can make the screen sing with art, music, and amazing programming feats, everyone is appreciative and respects what I have done. In fact, they try to take it to the next level or, better yet, challenge me to produce the next cool thing.

Darryl Duncan, GameBeat I don't feel there are any working conditions that are biased for minorities. I mean a cubicle is a cubicle and social cliques will form within any company. I remember when I first started working at EA Florida, I was one of only two African-Americans there. During my lunch breaks I would often observe seven or eight guys in a circle all sort of looking down at the floor, giggling and seemingly enjoying themselves. One day I decided to head over to see what the heck this seemingly ritualistic gathering was all about. As I approached the outside of the circle I noticed they were kicking

around some type of little bean bag object to each other using their feet. I asked a couple of passers-by what they were doing, and they looked at me like I was from another planet. Of course they were playing hacky sack, and I had never seen this played in my life. For some reason, just about every white guy in the building participated in this lunchtime event at one time or another and I was the weird one. Yeah, I felt like an alien from outer space, but this was simply something that was never done or heard of where I grew up. I tried it a couple of times and always kicked the darn thing across the room as if I was a field goal kicker. Needless to say I gave up and decided to just watch.

What do you think about racial stereotyping in games, and the general “whiteness” of games as a whole? Is this a problem? Would the industry benefit from a game designer equivalent of Spike Lee?
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Darrell Porcher, Harlem Game Wizards There is a definite problem in how heroes and game characters have been portrayed in games. I have seen numerous studies showing that when major fashion magazines use non-white models on the cover, sales drop at least 20 percent for that issue. Games are big business these days. The problem is, when a hero is of color these days, it’s typically an exaggerated version of an iconic character. In game design, people have said, half the player wants to escape and be someone they could never be, and the other half wants someone they can identify with. Shuane Anderson, from the Culture Rock Network Yahoo forum (which is dedicated to minorities in gaming) refers to characters speaking in Ebonics to cater to the existing mindsets. The fact that these images are allowed is very much due to the fact that the amount of diversity, specifically non-Asian or non-Caucasian developers, is relatively small. The good news is that it is increasing with more information. Organizations like the IGDA make an effort at outreach. Grassroots organizations like Culture Rock and my own organization, the Harlem Game Wizards, provide game development as career outreach programs.

Darryl Duncan, GameBeat Well this is a heated topic of debate among African-Americans, but my take on it is this ... I think all games make fun of one cultural stereotype or another. I do not feel blacks are the only group who have games that use stereotypical characters. I can think of many games that pick fun at white stereotypes, too, so I think we as a race get a little too sensitive when a game that depicts black stereotypes is released. This is an issue that is very connected to the motion picture industry, too. The problem is when there are *zero* games with black characters or black heroes in them. I would like to see some games where the *main* character or the central figure of a game is a black (or other minority) character.

But I personally do not expect an all-white development team to make a main game character that is black unless they, in their personal lives, had heroes or role models that were black. Since most white kids are not raised with these types of role models or figures in their lives, I can't say I expect them to make them central characters or heroes in the games they develop. I feel we cannot change any imbalances in the game industry or the motion picture industry until we change the imbalances in the real world, and that is an entirely different issue indeed.

Gays and Lesbians

In my experience, the majority of game developers are not particularly well-informed about gay and lesbian issues; they're mostly just interested in games. So while developers may be ignorant about the subject, I doubt that gays and lesbians will experience any direct hiring discrimination in the game industry. It is extremely unlikely that you'll be asked in a job interview what your sexual orientation is. On the whole, game developers tend to be either liberal or libertarian (although there are exceptions). Whatever their political bent, they have a wide streak of individualism and a distinct distrust of authority. Passing judgment on how other people live isn't part of game developer culture.

As far as I have been able to discover, relatively few game companies have implemented equal benefits policies for same-sex partners. Many smaller companies don't have enough clout to demand changes from their insurance providers, and some are so small they cannot offer benefits to employees' dependants in any case.

Non-Western Game Developers

Here, at least, the news is quite good. For the last twenty years the game market has been dominated by the presence of Japanese consoles—it was Nintendo that revived the video game industry's flagging fortunes after the Atari crash of 1983. This close relationship with Japan has necessarily led to a great many connections between America and the Far East. East-Asian game developers are welcomed and highly respected, for both their creative and technical skill. The recent explosive growth of online games in South Korea has led to increased numbers of contacts between that country and America as well.

We're also starting to see growing numbers of developers from India and elsewhere in South Asia. This has long been the case in other areas of high technology; when I worked for a Silicon Valley CAD company in the 1980s we had a sizable number of Indian employees even though the company was situated in America and Belgium. It makes perfect sense that South Asians should be moving into game development as well, particularly since South Asia will become a huge market for games in the next decade or two. Also, because English is widely spoken in South Asia and many

Commonwealth countries, developers from those regions seldom experience the language problems that complicate relations between American and Far Eastern companies. I have never heard of any difficulties for South Asian game developers in either the Western job market or Western workplaces.

Another rapidly growing area of game development is in the former Warsaw Pact nations, many of which are now joining the European Union. In fact, there is so much programming talent there, and it is so much less expensive than development in California or Boston, that there is starting to be concern about American publishing companies looking for developers overseas. Most of these people are working in their own countries, however, rather than coming to the United States. I am not aware of any of them encountering difficulties working in the U.S., however, apart from the need to learn English, of course.

WRAP-UP

Job-hunting can be a long, discouraging, and emotionally demanding task. In order to prevent it from wearing you down, you have to go into it with the right attitude: it's professional, not personal. If someone doesn't return your phone calls, it's almost certainly because they're too busy, not because they have anything against you. Try again in a day or so. If you get nowhere with a company, don't rule them out for life, just make a note by their name that says "not this time." Move on to the next company. Keep at it—both the networking and the digging.

Almost everybody I've spoken to in the game industry believes that their own "breaking in" story was a special case. They think that they didn't get their job in the "normal way"; they just got lucky. They met somebody at a party; they just happened to hear about a job from a friend; they saw an ad in a magazine left on a bus, or whatever. After hearing enough of these stories, I came to realize that there *is* no "normal way." These people didn't just get lucky; they made their own luck by keeping their eyes and ears open, and actively pursuing their dream. There's always a little bit of luck required in job-hunting, but the effort you put into it can change the odds in your favor. Don't give up: with patience, persistence, and a positive attitude, you *will* get a job in the game industry one way or another—and then you, too, will have a "breaking in" story to tell.