

How to Break into Video Game Design

by Alan Drummer

If you're an avid gamer, you may be able to [build a career](#) working on what you love: Video game design is a huge opportunity. Today it's an even bigger industry than feature films. But you probably knew that. In fact, you might have helped make it that way, based on all the cash you've forked over for game titles. In 2004 alone, analysts say, gamers in the United States paid close to \$10 billion for hardware and software, beating the U.S. movie box office total of \$9.2 billion.

If you're hungering to get some of your cash back by launching a career as a video game development pro, America's education industry is standing by to help. Over 300 schools offer game development courses, according to the industry Web site gamasutra.com.

The question is, even with good courses or a degree under your belt, how are you going to separate yourself from all the wannabes and actually win a spot on a game development team? To help you make the right moves, industry pros have a few words of advice.

Multimedia and Web Design Schools

- [Westwood College](#)
- [The Art Institutes](#)
- [American InterContinental University - Atlanta](#)
- [IADT Las Vegas](#)
- [IADT Nashville](#)

Prepare to Work Hard

You'll need to [find your specialty](#) fast and work incredibly hard. For instance, to find the 22 artists that made Rise to Honor for PlayStation 2, lead artist Julian Liao looked through hundreds of resumes and reels. Meanwhile, over at Electronic Arts--perhaps the biggest game developer in the world--there are usually several thousand applications for the 60 intern spots each year.

A great transcript, no matter how dazzling, will not get you in. You need a knockout portfolio or reel if you're an artist or animator, or some experience making working game prototypes if you're a designer or programmer.

"I'm a huge believer in project-based learning," says Bing Gordon, former chief creative officer at Electronic Arts, where he oversaw 2,200 developers. He has become the first holder of the Electronic Arts endowed faculty chair at the USC School of Cinema-Television. "Class or textbook learning gets stale in a matter of years" he says. "More important is to take advantage of time in school to do apprentice-type projects. Try to build games. Or do projects for credit with game companies."

Computer-Aided Design Schools

- [Westwood College](#)
- [IADT Toronto](#)
- [Vatterott College](#)

Learn by Doing

Gordon recommends that you [find a school](#) near a game developer with whom you might be able to negotiate that project experience. He sees the difference that academic training in game development is making. "Students who are now in school are not only playing games in their spare time, but also building game-like assets. They are doing Maya animations and CAD modeling in art classes, and creating games and game tools in their computer science

classes. They're showing up on our doorstep ready to make dramatic, immediate impact, and prepared to be project leaders within three years."

Specialize and Stand Out

Find what you're best at early, the pros advise, and push on it hard to stand out. "Really know what you want to do, and specialize in that," Julian Liao says. I've seen so many people send us reels, especially on the art side, that encompass so many different things. But they don't do one thing really, really well. It's almost in a sense like less is more. I'd rather just see one image or something really good that sparks something in me and gets me to say, wow, you're really creative."

One sought-after design job is to create a detailed level map that describes gameplay each step of the way. Mat Kraemer performed this role for PlayStation 2's *Rise to Honor*. "Game designers need to know a little bit of everything, such as animation, modeling, and design," he says. "The most important thing is an excellent understanding of scripting and C++ coding. Some of the best designers in the world are well-established programmers. Those skills together are the most sought-after design talent."

Kraemer got his foot in the door, like many in the industry, as a quality assurance (QA) analyst, or tester. Testers can make up as much as a third of a game developer's payroll as a title nears completion. "Having started as a tester really helps me in my design job," he says. "As a tester you play the game differently than as a consumer. You want to find all the bugs. You want to rip it apart. I tested tons of games that made me angry or frustrated. I've seen pitfalls other designers have fallen into and I want to avoid them. It's a good way to learn what to do and what not to do in game design."

If you do make it onto a development team, it's not unusual to work six- or seven-day weeks for months or even a couple years. But during that push, you just might make history.

"In the next decade," says Bing Gordon, "digital technologies will bring almost unimaginable changes to the entertainment industry. Video game quality will improve 150 times, cell phones will become pocket high-definition TVs, all media will be remixable and instant-messageable, and game techniques will be used to provide human-centered education. Today's students, who are already the world's leading experts in new technology, are the best bet to have the vision and energy to invent such sweeping change."

Will you be one of them?

About the Author

Alan Drummer is a writer and video producer based in Burlingame, California. For six years he made videos on the world of video game development for *PlayStation Underground CD Magazine* and *Official PlayStation Magazine*, and wrote Web features for playstation.com. His other features have appeared on the History Channel and in publications such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *San Francisco Magazine*, and others.