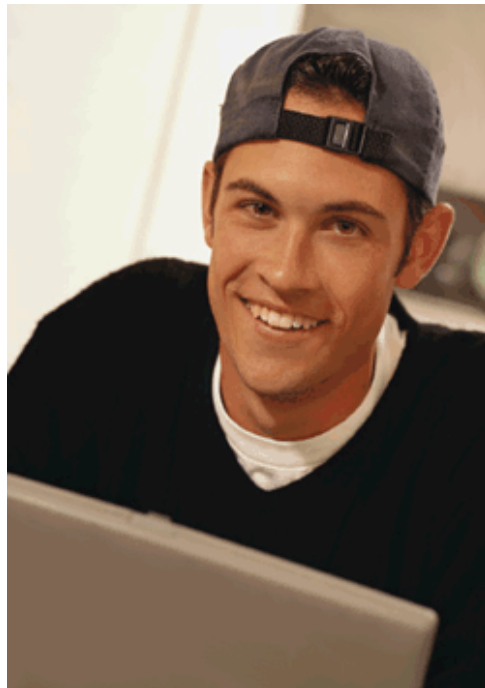


 FabJob® **GUIDE TO**

**BECOME A
VIDEO GAME
DESIGNER**



BY PHIL MARLEY

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Welcome

Welcome to the **FabJob Guide to Become a Video Game Designer**. In this guide we offer you a **step-by-step plan** for breaking into the games industry.

If you are an **absolute beginner**, this guide will help you develop your skills and prepare yourself for your entry into this highly competitive industry. It will then take you through the application and interview process, including networking and tradeshow, and prepare you for that all-important first day on the job.

If you have **already designed a few games** and are looking to make your mark on the industry, this guide will help you to successfully sell yourself and your ideas to developers and publishers, or expand into related fields.

Have you ever played a video game and thought to yourself:

I want to be the person who thinks these things up. I want to be the person who creates the characters, who designs the puzzles, who makes it fun to play!

I have this great idea for a game...if I could make it happen, it could be a hit!

I could do better than this. I could make this game more fun, more involving and more realistic!

If so, this guide is for you!



This guide will help you to break into the games industry as a game designer. Whether you want to create console or computer games or whatever genre you're interested in, the information you'll find here will give you the edge you need to make it in this

competitive industry by assisting you in gaining the experience you need, helping you develop your creative skills and guiding you through the process of applications and interviews. You'll know what skills development studios are looking for—and you'll be able to demonstrate that you have them.

The information in this guide is presented in a **step-by-step** manner.

The **Introduction** will tell you more about what a game designer does, what **traits** are characteristic of the successful designer, and what you can **expect** from a career in game design.

Chapter 2, **Developing Your Skills**, will assist you in figuring out which game designer **talents and abilities you already have** and how to put them to work for you. It will also help you decide which ones are the best ones for you to work on developing to boost your resume. Each skill discussion includes **resources** for you to follow up with!

In Chapter 3, **Getting Ready**, we'll take a look at what types of **education** you can pursue, both formal and informal. Then this section will focus on how you can bypass the tradition catch-22 of jobs and experience by getting the **'work' experience** you need to get hired...**before you even get hired!**

Chapter 4, **Getting Hired**, is the heart of the guide—here's where you'll discover all the essential information you'll need to secure a position in the industry. From **insider information** on how the future of the industry is shaping up to expert tips on how to secure and ace an interview, you'll learn everything necessary to place you substantially **ahead of your competitors**.

Finally in Chapter 5, **Being Successful on the Job**, we'll look at how to **advance your career** and the different paths you can choose once you've broken into the industry. I'll also share my opinion as an experienced game designer about how you can take advantage of **trends** in the industry to **create games that will sell and be successful**.

So if you're ready to launch yourself into a career that's limited only by **your own imagination**...read on!

1. Introduction

The term ‘game designer’, while common in North America, is by no means universal. **Ernest Adams**, an industry veteran, once said, “With one or two extremely rare exceptions, there’s no such thing as a full-time game designer.” What he means is, *there’s no such thing as a person who just thinks up cool ideas for games.*

What there are, however, are what he refers to as ‘**assistant producers**’ and ‘**associate producers**’—people who design missions and levels and perform a myriad of other tasks, as described in this section. These people, of course, are the ones we’re interested in: what we’ll refer to as ‘game designers’.

Before we jump into the skills and experience that you will need as a designer, first we’ll take a look at the life of a game designer: the **reality** and the **rewards**. We’ll go over the abilities you may already have that are essential for the successful game designer, and finally the guide will help you decide if you have what it takes to break into the video game industry and make your mark!

1.1 What Does a Game Designer Do?

If we compare the development of a game to the production of a film, then the on-screen action (the ‘actors’, scenery and special effects) is the work of the programmers and artists. The **game designer is the scriptwriter**—the person who has the initial idea, fleshes it out into a complete concept and then writes a comprehensive document that describes every detail of his vision. He is also part director, part artistic director, part lead cameraman and often a whole host of other jobs from music supervisor to public relations liaison.

The designer’s job is first to **have an idea**, the shape that idea into a workable concept. Next the concept must be sold to a publisher, who will then ask for a detailed specification document (a ‘spec’). These documents, which are often hundreds of pages long, detail every aspect of the game, from the plot and characters right down to the awarding of bonus points, sourcing of sound effects and localization (which languages the game will be available in).

The designer then works with the rest of the development team to produce the game. During this process a number of prototypes may be created and abandoned and key parts of the game may change quite dramatically. The designer must ensure that the game remains **true to the original vision** while making improvements to the concept if possible.

As the production of the game progresses and tools are created (or brought in), the designer begins the next stage of his job—**implementing the game data**.

In a **'first-person shooter'** like the *Quake* or *Half Life* franchises, this means building the levels: sculpting the walls of each individual room and corridor, then 'painting' them using textures the artists on the team have created so that one wall looks like marble, another like steel. The architecture and lighting must be carefully considered to create the correct atmosphere. Then monsters or other characters for the player to shoot or interact with must be placed and their movements choreographed. Sound effects and music must be triggered in the correct places to create sudden moments of panic and surprise in the player. Weapons, rewards and power-ups must be placed. Finally, the level must be repeatedly played and all of these elements tweaked until it plays well, both as a level on its own and as part of the overall game.

In a **flight simulation**, the task of implementing the game data is quite different. Considerable time will be spent on the 'flight model'—how the aircraft moves through the air in response to the game controls. Enemy aircraft will be placed and the artificial intelligence they use will be devised in conjunction with the programmers to make them cunning ace pilots. Similarly, a designer working on a driving game will spend a great deal of time tweaking the 'driving model', making sure that the car skids and corners in a realistic but fun way, as well as building the tracks.

For any game that involves **real-world elements** (places, technology or characters) a degree of research will be involved. Designers on flight simulations use highly detailed reference books to help them accurately recreate the military hardware in the game. Designers working on a futuristic fighting game may study anything from martial arts to the armor worn by Roman gladiators in order to create a thrilling yet believable experience.

The designer never works in a vacuum—the ideas and suggestions of other team members must be incorporated where appropriate, and conflicts between the desires of the publisher and developer must be resolved with tact, diplomacy and an open mind.

As the levels take shape and the game's production schedule draws to a close, the title enters a period of **heavy testing**. Inputs from focus groups and quality assurance departments both internal and external must be discussed and acted on, because the game may be too hard, too easy or too confusing, for example. The designer must tweak the difficulty of individual levels, the intelligence of the enemies and a hundred other factors until the perfect balance is found.

A variety of **additional tasks** often fall into the lap of the designer. The sourcing of sound effects and music, the co-ordination of any external assets (such as voice actors to provide speech for game characters or clips of video that are to be incorporated into the

game) and liaising between the development team and the media are all common requirements. If the game is to be made available in more than one language (as the vast majority of games are today) the designer is often responsible for bringing together the vast amount of translated text and audio and incorporating it into the game.

1.2 What Makes a Good Designer?

The designer has the idea for the game, helps sell the idea to a publisher, expands the idea into a specification, implements the game data, tweaks the game play and performs any other tasks that aren't directly code or art related. Sound like something you might like to do? Next, see if you've got what it takes!

1.2.1 Character Traits

There are a number of characteristics that make someone suitable for a design position. Most importantly, a designer must be:

Creative

Ultimately, it is the designer's concept that will become the essence of the finished game. Without fresh new characters and plots, new twists on game-play and constant new surprises, the game will emerge stale and unplayable.

Methodical

Although most testing is performed by the quality assurance department, the designer must take an active role in bug-finding and reporting. Additionally, the creation of levels is itself a lengthy task—every monster, every power-up must be placed, tested and re-placed, every wall carefully textured, every sound effect repositioned until the correct atmosphere is created.

A Good Communicator

Designers often must convince publishers to sign up for a two-year project that will cost in excess of two million dollars, all on the strength of a good idea and a well-written proposal. The ability to communicate ideas clearly and effectively is essential both for this aspect of the job and for the

day-to-day development of a game. If you can't explain to an artist exactly how you envision a character moving, you can't expect the end result to look anything like your original idea!

1.2.2 Strong Technical Skills

A designer is required to call upon a wide range of technical skills to complete his work. He or she must be able to **write technical documentation**, to **script dialogue** and to create convincing characters and well-paced plots with structured stories. He or she will need to supplement innate communication skills with those needed for **public speaking**. A knowledge of **ergonomics** is useful so that control interfaces can be designed to be comfortable to use—similarly, a knowledge of **Human-Computer Interaction (HCI)** will allow a designer to make the menus, controls and even puzzles more intuitive.

Basic **computer skills** are valued and with the growth of the Internet, experience on **online development** is starting to be seen as a major plus. Although a designer does not need to write code or create artwork, some skill, or at least an understanding of these crafts is helpful, if only to aid communication with team members of these disciplines. Since a designer might well have one or more assistant designers working under him, especially towards the end of a project, **management skills** can also be important.

Finally, a **familiarity with the intended audience** is vital - although many designers are considerably older than the average games player, most remain very much in touch with the trends of their intended audience, both in a direct way (watching the same movies and television shows) and in an indirect way (knowing which games were successful last year and what audiences thought of them). Since the games industry models itself very much on the movie industry, with elements of the television industry now beginning to creep in, knowledge of both these industries is always a bonus.

A good designer need not have all of these skills, but every one that he possesses will be a bonus when it comes to getting hired. All of these skills can be learned and improved, and advice on how to do so forms Chapter 2 of this guide.

1.2.3 Enthusiasm for Games and Sound Gaming Knowledge

Game designers must play games, and play them to excess. Most people who want to be game designers will already be enthusiastic gamers, able to reel off character

names from their favorite beat 'em up or the solution for one of the harder puzzles in an action-adventure game. While a depth of knowledge of one game is often an asset (most designers have a favorite game they could talk about for hours!) it is **breadth of knowledge** that is more important.

There are a number of resources throughout this guide that will keep you on top of the latest in gaming trends and news. If you would like to get started right away, check out the following websites:

IGN.com

By far the most widely used and popular gaming site, they cover all platforms with up to the minute reviews, tips, opinions and breaking news.

<http://www.ign.com>

Gamespot.com

This part of the mighty Ziff Davis publishing group is comparable in quality and coverage.

<http://www.gamespot.com>

GamePro.com

Has information for games in every gaming platform as well as an "Ask the Pros" section in which editors answer various technical and other questions.

<http://www.gamepro.com>

1.2.4 An Understanding of the Industry

However abstract the work or relaxed the environment, the games industry is still a business like any other. Myths perpetuated by consumer magazines and the understandably narrow focus on the industry that gamers have means that would-be designers can often lack a clear picture of how the industry functions. This can be seen as **naiveté** or put down to a lack of research in interviews, especially if the interviewer has been in the industry for a considerable amount of time.

Luckily, there is **no great mystery** as to the inner workings of the industry and a clear understanding of them can be gained from the information contained in this guide. As well as describing how developers and publishers operate, a number of myths will be exploded to help you as the would-be designer avoid slip-ups in interviews and demonstrate your understanding.

1.2.5 Proven Design Experience

This is a problem common to many careers: companies are unwilling to hire candidates with no experience, but the candidate cannot gain any experience until he or she is hired. The solution is for would-be designers to **gain experience before approaching a developer**. A number of methods exist, any of which can give the reader a massive head start over other applicants. We'll take a look at some of the ways you can get experience in the industry in Section 3.2.

1.3 Perks and Benefits

Like many 'fab' jobs, being a video game designer offers numerous perks and benefits that don't typically befall the average nine-to-fiver. Here are some of the reasons why the job of designer is so coveted...and so worth the effort in the long run!

1.3.1 Creating Worlds

One of the most appealing aspects of a designer's role is the creative freedom offered to conjure up whole new stories and concepts, be they alien planets or mold-breaking characters. Of course, the designer often works under constraints—it is rare in today's industry (though by no means unheard of) that a designer gets the chance to create a game completely from scratch. Far more often the requirement will be for 'A PlayStation 3 racing game' or 'A PC adventure game that could be completed in eighteen months'.

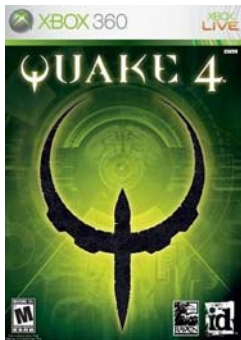


Even so, such briefs still allow a huge amount of **creative freedom**—the designer is allowed to think up a story, build characters, write dialogue and create a world for the game to take place in. Few careers offer so much creative freedom...at least not with a regular salary!

1.3.2 Playing Games All Day

Part of your job as a designer will be maintaining a comprehensive battery of knowledge on the latest games so that you can identify new trends and new ideas, as well as learn the directions other developers have taken that have worked—and those that haven't.

To ensure this, it is seen as vital that you **play at least the most popular titles** on the more popular platforms. A designer working on a racing game might justifiably play through a number of recent racing games to compare and contrast them... during work time! Other, less relevant games are generally played outside working hours, but often on company equipment. Lunchtime provides an opportunity for fans of networked games like *Quake IV* to indulge themselves on a network of powerful machines with none of the lag they're used to at home!



Finally, most designers will continue to play games at home. Far from becoming tired of games after joining the industry, good designers find themselves playing more games than they ever did before. The need for designers to remain gamers is why “a genuine love and enthusiasm for games” is often listed as a job requirement in this field.

1.3.3 Atmosphere and Dress

The games industry is famed for encouraging a relaxed working environment. Hours are often flexible (though they can be long) and **jeans and T-shirts** are the preferred mode of dress for most development staff. With the exception of the larger shows and meetings with companies outside the industry, wearing a suit is rare, even for those in management positions. For the programmers, artists and designers, it's almost unheard of.

Offices are usually modern and open-plan, the walls liberally covered with posters advertising the latest games and films. Desks are commonly littered with music CDs, magazines and—particularly in the case of designers—action figures and other toys. Numerous studios now have a ‘**chill out**’ room equipped with easy chairs, arcade machines, fozzball or a pool table.

1.3.4 Free Games

Realistically, not all companies offer employees free copies of every game they produce. Nevertheless, designers usually have **access to many of the latest titles** through demo CDs, the company’s games library and the other designers they work with. The availability of the designer’s powerful PC for playing games is an added bonus, as is the company network, across which games of *Quake III* and similar games are run on a daily basis.

Development studios must keep up with the latest platforms and therefore usually possess at least one of each, including platforms unreleased to the general public, such as next-generation consoles or early versions of PC graphics cards. Therefore designers often get to play not only the latest games, but get to play them on hardware their non-industry friends won’t see for months to come.

1.3.5 Shows and Travel

As in most industries, members of the games industry gather at **annual shows** to sign new deals and assess the competition. Most development staff attend shows that are held in their own country, and designers are the most likely members of staff to be asked to attend those shows that take place in other countries.

These shows are not open to the general public and act as showcases for publishers and developers. All the forthcoming games for the next year can be seen and played—for free! Since the three largest shows take place on three different continents, the **opportunities for travel** are excellent. Additional opportunities come with working for foreign publishers and traveling to oversee the localization process, both of which are becoming more and more common in today’s global marketplace.

1.3.6 Parties

The games industry, like any other part of the entertainment industry, indulges itself with a certain amount of hype. The vast sums of money involved in developing a game

today, and the correspondingly vast potential profits have created an atmosphere in which large, **extravagant** parties are the norm. The largest take the form of after-show parties, often taking place on the last night of one of the three big industry shows. (See section 4.3 for more details about when and where these shows are held.)

The bills for such parties are so large that one company cannot foot the bill—rather, one company will host the party while others contribute other elements: for example, paying for just one of the free bars. The bar bills alone can run into the tens of thousands of dollars for a single night and big-name bands are often booked to play. A successful game may mean a trip to an **industry awards dinner**, the games industry's equivalent of the Academy Awards, a recent one of which began at 10 p.m. and lasted some seven hours!

1.4 A Career Open to Everyone

Anyone with a genuine passion for games and a creative mind can become a games designer. By using the techniques described in this guide, you will learn how to develop your skills and vastly improve your chances of being hired. Broadening your gaming knowledge is a simple but vital process and will bear fruit both during the selection process and beyond. Gaining a clear understanding of how the industry works, and obtaining hands-on experience of design will help you still further.

Armed with these tools, any of you can apply for a position as a designer, certain that you stand a substantially higher chance of being hired—and are likely to command a **substantially higher salary** when you are!