



The Student's Guide to GDC

by [James Stewart](#)

With the recent downsizing of the Electronic Entertainment Expo (E3), the Game Developers Conference (GDC) is the undisputed premiere annual event of its kind. This year's conference, held March 5-9 at San Francisco's Moscone Convention Center, boasted 16,300 attendees and 260 exhibitors-both numbers about 30% higher than last year.

Given the increased stature of the conference and the continued expansion of the games industry in general, GDC holds numerous opportunities for students. The 2008 conference will once again be held in San Francisco on February 18-22. To assist readers interested in pursuing careers in the industry, learning more about real-time rendering or other game-related technologies, or simply geeking out to a favorite pastime, *Crossroads* presents this brief guide to getting the most out of GDC. By reading this article, you will learn how to attend GDC on the cheap, get a job, hear about emerging technology, and maximize your haul of free stuff.

Get Oriented

GDC hosts several smaller, highly specialized conferences, such as the Mobile Conference and Serious Games Summit. The Expo, Career Pavilion, and a schedule of 300 or so tutorials, lectures, and round tables comprise the real meat of the conference.

The Expo, large enough to be divided into two separate buildings at the 2007 event, most closely resembles an industry trade show. Game, hardware, and middleware developers-alongside a smattering of schools, booksellers, and other organizations-hawk their wares in a maze of convention booths. The Career Pavilion, though less flashy than the Expo, is the place to go to find a job. The various seminars and sessions take place in rooms spread out all over the convention. Though the scheduling of these events is initially daunting, they are organized into "tracks" such as programming, business/management, game design, audio, and visual arts.

Get to the Conference (without Going Broke)

Aside from the cost of travel, food, and lodging, just gaining admission to the conference can be prohibitively expensive. A variety of GDC passes are available, each allowing different levels of access. The 2007 Giga Pass, which allows admittance to all lectures, panels, and round tables in addition to the Expo and Career Pavilion, carried a price tag of \$1,850. Less expensive passes are available but carry more restrictions. Depending on your goals while attending the conference, more affordable options are available:

1. Student Pass

For \$75, students can gain access to the Expo, the Career Pavilion, and a career seminar. At the 2007 conference, these passes could be purchased by students 18 and older with proof of enrollment (such as a current student ID). Though this is the most affordable of all passes, it is also the most restricted. It provides access for one day only, and it does not allow access to any tutorials or other sessions, which may limit social networking opportunities. Despite these limitations, a Student Pass remains an ideal option for job hunters looking to distribute resumes.

2. IGDA Scholarship

The Independent Game Developers Association (IGDA) awards 25 scholarships each year to students wishing to attend GDC. Though the competition is fierce, winners receive a Classic Pass (which provides access to most sessions, though strangely not the formal tutorial sessions that would be of most use to students) and are paired with an industry mentor for the duration of the conference-a valuable source of advice. Requirements for application include a current IGDA membership (\$50 for students) and completion of several short essay questions.

Jason Anderson, a 2007 scholarship recipient from Michigan Technological University wrote, "Attending the GDC as a student scholar greatly enhances the experience. First of all ... you are already connected to 24 other students who are in the same boat as you. It was great to meet everyone and spend the week getting to know everyone, and see all of the interesting things they are working on or have completed.... Also, you are given a mentor from the industry to talk to, answer questions, and share experiences with.... Personally, I think this is the best part of the scholarship. Having the opportunity to spend time with an industry mentor is an invaluable experience."

Scholarship recipients are asked to submit brief reports of their experiences at GDC. Students curious about attending the conference, or those seeking good advice from their peers, should check out http://www.igda.org/scholarships/reports_gdc2007.php for the responses from 2007's winners.

3. Volunteer

Volunteering to work at the conference is the most affordable way to attend, at the cost of a little elbow grease. In exchange for 20 hours of service checking badges, guarding doors, packing tote bags, or performing other generally mundane chores, "Conference Associates" receive a Giga Pass (almost unlimited access while not on duty). Other benefits include early access to the conference, a system to share hotel expenses, and, of course, the obligatory T-shirt.

There might also be opportunities to volunteer if your school hosts a booth. Institutions from the University of California and DeVry University were present at the Expo, along with numerous schools devoted to game development or visual arts. Though there are several levels of access that exhibitors can purchase, students who volunteer to staff these booths receive at least an Expo pass, possibly more. Even better, some schools are willing to pay travel and lodging expenses for volunteers.

4. Develop a Game

The Independent Games Festival (IGF), which will celebrate its tenth anniversary at next year's GDC, is the only known route for students to actually make money at GDC. Aside from a \$500 travel stipend and a chance to demonstrate their projects at the IGF booth, finalists could potentially take home some portion of the \$50,000 in prize money, ranging from the \$20,000 Seumas McNally Grand Prize for Best Independent Game to \$2,500 for categories such as Design Innovation and Technical Excellence.

Though creating a game that will be competitive in these awards is a potentially massive undertaking, students working on their own games and mods should consider submitting their efforts at <http://www.igf.com>.

5. Write an Article

Students who write for school newspapers, game-related websites, or other media might attend GDC as press. With a few restrictions, a Press Pass offers full access to the entire conference, and everyone in the Expo area will be interested in speaking with you (excepting, perhaps, reviewers who have recently given a company's product a resounding "thumbs down"). Some publications cover the cost of food, travel, and lodging, although, if you work for such a publication, you probably already know this.

A word of warning: the e-mail address that you submit for your contact information will be shared with all exhibitors regardless of your publication's typical beat. Expect lots of exclamation-point-riddled e-mails proclaiming the release of product X at booth Y!

Get a Job

The statistics related to finding a job at GDC are either promising or daunting, depending on your point of view: 70% of attendees disclose that they are interested in job opportunities, and 1-in-5 submits a resume as a result of attending the conference.

The Career Pavilion, though once part of the Expo, is now in a separate exhibition hall. According to an HR representative who preferred not to be quoted directly, the Career Pavilion was moved so that employers could more easily monitor employees looking to switch jobs. Whether or not this is actually the case, GDC is a famous hiring hotspot for the industry.

At GDC 2007, companies such as Microsoft, Electronic Arts, Activision, Sony, Nintendo, and many more had booths in the Career Pavilion with human resources representatives, producers, and others on hand to accept resumes and answer questions about their organizations.

From the activity at 2007's Career Pavilion, it appeared that the release of next-generation consoles and the accompanying increase in the scale, complexity, and development time of next-generation titles has resulted in lots of hiring in the traditionally hard-to-break-into games industry. From an informal survey, it seems that programmers are most in demand, followed by artists. Design remains the most

difficult route into the industry, though more companies than ever advertised their need for designers at the Career Pavilion. From a student perspective, however, design seems to have the fewest number of entry-level positions available.

Though the games industry has a few eccentricities of its own, much of the traditional job-hunting advice applies. Two related pieces of advice apply specifically to GDC. First, bring business cards that include your name, specialty, e-mail address, phone number, and the URL of your portfolio (you do have a portfolio, don't you?). Second, the best opportunities are usually found outside the Career Pavilion. You might find yourself chatting with a potential employer at one of the sessions, while walking through the Expo, riding an elevator, or at one of the restaurants, bars, or industry parties surrounding the conference. At those times, it will be awkward (and a bit unprofessional) to hand over your e-mail address scrawled illegibly on the back of an old receipt—better to have a business card.

Even if you are not attending the conference to find a job, a business card is an easy way to foster ongoing communication with new friends and contacts you are likely to make at GDC (or any other conference, for that matter).

Get Free Stuff

Free T-shirts, toys, and software are available in abundance at GDC. Accumulating this stuff isn't exactly a science, and there is a reason companies give it away. Regardless, three rules apply:

1. Go early to get the best stuff ("best" being a relative term, perhaps).
2. Leave extra room in your luggage so you can get your loot back home.
3. In all circumstances, be polite to your fellow attendees and the exhibitors. Avoid wanton avarice.

If a GDC T-shirt is on your wish list, it is best to get it before the weekend portion of the conference, when the attendance swells. At GDC 2007, attendees had to first fill out a survey before getting a shirt, and the time to get through the line was rarely less than half an hour. Register early, get in line, and bring something to read.

Learn Something

Aside from blatant careerism and boatloads of swag, GDC is a great place to learn

about the state of the art in the games industry. An assortment of tutorial sessions, lectures, round tables, and keynote speeches provide more information than is possible for a single attendee to consume-in fact, the conference organizers provide a scheduling tool on the GDC website to assist in resolving such dilemmas.

The tutorial sessions can be all-day affairs that offer the deepest explorations of topics found at GDC. The "Advanced Visual Effects with Direct 3D" course covered numerous uses of Microsoft's DirectX 10 API, one example being Sarah Tariq's session "Real-time Volumetric Smoke Using D3D 10."

For attendees with shorter attention spans, numerous hour-long sessions were available. The major themes of the 2007 conference in these sessions were concurrency, agile development (i.e., Scrum), and workflow/tools issues relating to next-generation development.

Not all of the sessions at GDC 2007 were particularly technical. At a "Game Publisher's Rant," Lee Jacobson-Vice President of Business Development and Acquisitions at Midway-recalled several horror stories from working with (unnamed) development studios. According to Jacobson, he once worked with a developer that claimed to have two teams working on a title. He met with the first team, went to lunch, and returned to the studio to meet the second team-who turned out to be the first team wearing different clothes.

The sessions ran the gamut from lectures to the highly participatory. At the AI Roundtable hosted by Steve Rabin of Nintendo and Neil Kirby of Bell Labs, the audience was also the panel. The hosts split the attendees into two groups, solicited a list of topics from those present, and went down the list item-by-item, with the group as a whole sharing their thoughts on each topic.

Again, the sessions themselves do not necessarily offer the best learning. The conversations after the sessions, whether with the presenters or fellow members of the audience, allow attendees to make contacts and form friendships based on mutual interests. As with everything else at GDC, the real value of attending the conference is found in the interactions surrounding the various events, not just the events themselves.

Biography

In March 2007, James graduated from The Guildhall at Southern Methodist University. He currently works for Stormfront Studios in San Rafael, California.