

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO VIDEO GAME DESIGN





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SO YOU WANT TO BE A GAME DESIGNER?

Then you've hit the jackpot.

We're going to show you the way to become a great designer, even if you're just starting out.

Who Will Benefit Most From This Guide?

This guide is for aspiring video game designers of all levels, and was created to help you **make informed decisions** about your education, career, and future as a successful designer.

You'll Learn:

- ▶ The different jobs in gaming
- ▶ How to get started
- ▶ The path to getting a great job
- ▶ Education and college options (Do you need college?)
- ▶ Internships and work experience
- ▶ The hiring process
- ▶ Promotions & career advancement

This guide can be read from start to finish, or you can dip in and out based on what seems most relevant to you.

Designing Games is Awesome – But it's Not Easy!

Game design is a competitive business, and in order to **secure a position as a junior designer** you'll need to put yourself above the rest.

Check out the sections on **work experience and education** to find out how to give your resume an edge, and then read about the hiring process to find out exactly what you can expect on your way to landing your first job.

Game design might seem like a hard business to get into, and it can be, but with the **right edge you'll have no problem outshining the competition.**

So let's get right into it!



WHAT IS A VIDEO GAME DESIGNER?

Your **main objective as a video game designer** is to:

- ▶ Plan
- ▶ Create
- ▶ Design video games

Traditionally, the role of a video game designer has been more of an **artistic** or front-end side of things as opposed to **video game developers who usually work on the technical side**, also known as the back-end.

These terms are similar to ones used in other industries. For example:

- ▶ **Web designers** handle the front-end graphics (how the site looks and feels)
- ▶ **Web developers** mostly handle the back-end (what the users can accomplish on the site) or what is commonly referred to as the 'engine' or 'brains' of the site.

Designer vs Developer

Just as in the web development community, the video game industry often uses the terms developer and designer interchangeably.

This small difference can be quite confusing to someone just starting out. For this reason I've made every effort to separate these two jobs, even though their duties often overlap in many places, especially at smaller game studios.

We'll cover the specific differences between designers and developers a little later in this guide.

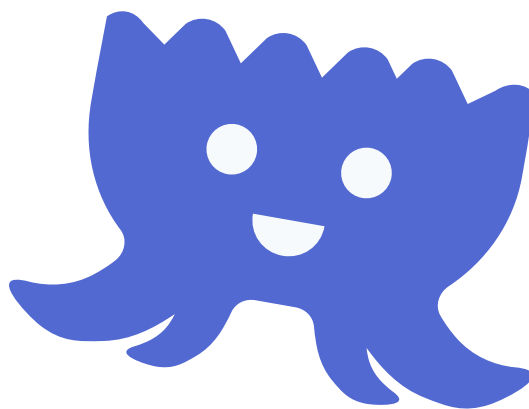
Designer vs Animator

Similar to the confusion between developers and designers, animators can often be lumped in the same group. However, there are some significant differences.

Designer: A game designer is responsible for the game's storyline and game play style. From the storyline, game style, to how responsive the buttons should be.

Animator: An animator is an artist who harnesses the process of taking a static image, be it an object or landscape, and applying techniques to make it move in the desired way.

In most cases, a designer will oversee the animators. Making sure the laws of interaction make sense within the concept of the game.



WHAT DO VIDEO GAME DESIGNERS DO?



Generally, video game designers that work for one of the big gaming studios will be placed in a highly specialized role. As opposed to indie designers who usually juggle multiple roles.

For example, some video game designers might work exclusively on the pre-production team. Meaning your priority is to come up with clear deadlines and objectives that should be honored by the production team.

On the other hand, a different designer working for the same company may be assigned to a team that handles the storyboard or character designs.

These specializations can be narrowed down to cover every aspect of the creation process.

Depending on the organization, the number of people assigned to each specialized team can vary from just a few to hundreds of people.

These highly specialized teams usually allow for faster games, and contain fewer errors. This approach to making video games can only be achieved by established companies, which have multi-million-dollar budgets.

Smaller gaming companies have to take a different approach because it's nearly impossible to compete with the resources of the big studios.



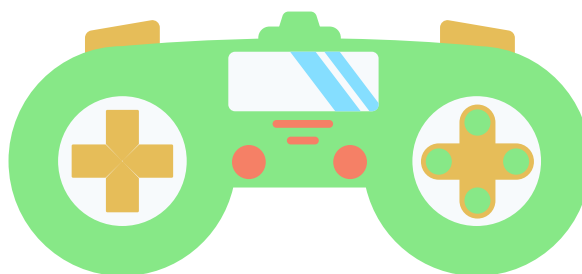
THE VIDEO GAME JOB MARKET

There **has never been a better time** to get into this industry.

According to The ESA, **the Entertainment Software Association**, gaming raked in over \$43.4 billion dollars in 2018 alone. From 2007 – 2010, the industry has grown by a factor of three.

Gaming Earnings Growth:

| | |
|-------|----------------|
| 2007: | \$9.5 million |
| 2018: | \$43.4 million |



The entertainment industry continues to be a lucrative industry for individuals seeking to make a decent living.

How Much Money do Designers Make?

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics the average game designer makes just over \$60k per year while the **top 10% of them make over \$110k**.

Couple this with an **expected 6% job growth** over the course of the next decade and you'll realize just how lucrative video game design can be.

Self Publishing

What's even better is that self-publishers virtually have no limit to the amount they can earn.

Nevertheless, self-publishing isn't as straightforward or guaranteed as traditional employment.

Many designers and small teams struggle for years trying to make things work. Despite this harsh truth, games are here to stay.

As technology evolves and new hardware is introduced, users will continue to purchase newer, more innovative games that exploit the new technology.



HOW TO GET STARTED

Anyone who is serious about a game design career is encouraged to start learning right away.

If you are still in high school, consider yourself lucky, as you have a huge advantage. Hypothetically speaking, if you're 16 or 17 years old you will have 5 to 6 years of game design experience by the time you've graduated college.

Comparatively, your peers who didn't get started until college will graduate with only 1 or 2 years of experience. However, just claiming to have 6 years worth of experience isn't enough to get you your dream job.

Start Creating Today

Build your resume with actual proof. Right now, your goal is to develop a solid portfolio which demonstrates your game design knowledge and skills.

One of the most practical ways to establish a portfolio and gain experience is to dabble in the mobile gaming market- place. This is true even if your end goal is to land a job with a mainstream publisher, as many of the skills you develop will easily transfer.

Get the Right Education for Your Goals

For those who've already graduated high school (or even college), don't be discouraged. As long as you're committed to working hard and staying focused, you can become a successful and well-paid game designer.

While there are no guarantees, if you're willing to dedicate a couple years of your life learning how to use the tools gaming studios use, finding a great job will be much easier.

Focus on learning these tools:

▶ Blender ▶ Unity ▶ Unreal Engine

The Bottom Line

Breaking into the game development industry may seem like a daunting task, but it can easily pay off in dividends in the long run. In a career, you should do something that engages your creativity, challenges your problem-solving skills, and allows you the ability to think critically. Game design provides a positive and promising outlet for those looking for it and can change your life forever.

At this stage in your career you should be focused on mastering a skill or tool, while growing your portfolio.

If you're dedicated, after a couple years you should have a decent looking portfolio.



From here, your goal is to continue learning new skills while looking for openings at video game startups and smaller studios.

Without a degree, be ready to spend a considerable amount of time searching for opportunities.

Always remember to make sure your portfolio stands out. This is what will get your foot in the door.

No matter which route you choose to take, the goal is to get started right away. Like now!



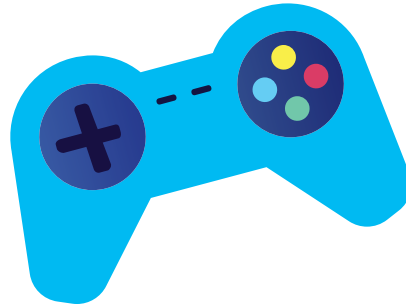
DO YOU WANT TO DESIGN OR DEVELOP?

Let's talk about the **difference between game design and game development**.

The two are often used interchangeably, but they are very distinct career paths.

Game design includes the creation of:

- ▶ New game concepts
- ▶ Mechanics
- ▶ Story lines



Game development refers to the making of games, from the animation through to the engine programming.

Think of it in terms of cars. You have an auto mechanic, or a game developer, those who build and maintain the framework.

The game designers resemble a car designer, those who improve and design functionality, look, and feel for vehicles. The car designer has no product to enhance without the input and framework from the auto mechanic.

Designers and Developers Need Each Other

It's a crucial relationship that allows everything to run as smoothly as possible.

The engineer is the one building the product and the **framework in which the designer will work their magic**. Without a framework, the designer has nothing, and without a designer, the engineer merely has lines of code and an empty world.

And there is no point in the developer or engineer building something that no one is going to use. The designer's job is pointless if there's no one to build or develop the game.



START THINKING LIKE A DESIGNER

Try and decide between game designer or developer as early as possible.

What you choose to make **the focus of your career will depend on your talents and interests**, but you still need a good understanding of what the other career path does in order to be the best you can be.

This guide is about game design though, so let's get to it.

Step 1. Start Talking About Game Design

One of the most important things an aspiring game designer can do is to simply talk about design.

You probably already talk about bad design a lot, if you're a fan of video games. But it's a lot harder to talk about good design because sometimes the design is so good you don't notice it's there.

This section is all about learning to talk about design in an insightful and helpful way, and it will become a vital skill – both for interviews, as well as explaining your ideas to your development team.

Step 2. Identify and Discuss Poor Design

As I already said, talking about bad design is easy; we all do it, all the time.

Think of a game you dislike.

Go on, do it now.

When you want to be a designer, it's not enough to just think

"I don't like this game", you need to think about why you don't like it.

To start, this can be as simple as; "character X is boring".

But why are they boring?

Keep asking questions until you can't ask any more, and you'll have found the root of the problem.

Now you've identified what's wrong. Next you need to learn how to fix it.



Step 3. How to Fix Bad Game Design

Fixing bad game design is sort of the same process as identifying bad design, but backwards.

Think about how you would fix the main problem you have with the game.

Perhaps you didn't like having to hold X to run.

So you'd want to fix that – **but how would that affect the next layer up?**

Keep working up the chain, ironing out kinks, until you think you've 'fixed' the game into a more acceptable state. Then, after making note of what you changed and why, work out what else needs fixing.

Sometimes it's more about small changes than big ones, and experiment with both little changes and literal game-changers.



Step 4. Identify and Discuss Good Game Design

Good design can be hard to talk about. It's much harder to identify why you like something than to identify what's wrong with it.

Thinking about good design often starts with a feeling; **I like this game**, I love this character, this mechanic works well.

Then, once you've begun to pinpoint what makes a good game great, you can begin to dig deeper.

Take mechanics for example – if you think a particular mechanic works well, **why does it work well?**

Perhaps you don't know. But it's easier to think about a change again – what would happen if you changed it for another mechanic?

This should help you identify what goes into making a game good.



But why did they do that?

Whether or not you think a design choice is good or bad, it helps to **think about why the designer made that choice.**

The point of all of this is to start thinking like a professional game designer now. Really digging into the job from the very beginning can help you identify the specific parts of the job that you do and don't like.

These preferences will guide you as you make important career decisions down the road.

Next, we'll look at the specific routes for getting your first game design job.



CAREER PATHS: HOW TO BREAK INTO GAMING

I would be lying if I said there was only one way into the game designing industry. **There are so many ways to do it** I couldn't even count them all.

For example, I became a designer by:

- ▶ Completing a degree in Artificial Intelligence (think robots trying to read and understand, that was my dissertation project),
- ▶ Taking business classes
- ▶ Starting my own studio

I am now a consultant designer.

However, there are some more common paths into the industry.

By far the most common route involves:

- ▶ Game design-related courses and specializations at college
- ▶ Internships and work experience
- ▶ Securing a role in an established company (as a junior designer)

WHAT ABOUT INDEPENDENT GAME DESIGN?

Generally speaking, if you're **working for an independent game studio** you will be **required to handle a variety of different tasks** over the course of production.

Instead of focusing on mastering a specific skill or tool, **you'll need to learn a variety of skills, including:**

- ▶ Technical
- ▶ Artistic
- ▶ Analytical

Any aspiring video game designer planning to publish their own ideas or land an indie studio job should be **ready and willing to handle multiple jobs**, including:

- ▶ Programming
- ▶ Networking
- ▶ Sound design
- ▶ Matchmaking implementation

But don't worry, we'll cover these obstacles in greater detail below.

Although indie Game Design is very different from at a studio, the same basic steps should be followed:

1. Get a good education
2. Gain experience

GETTING A GREAT EDUCATION

It cannot be stressed enough that **getting a college degree will help your career.**

Most colleges provide:

- ▶ Direct access to the industry
- ▶ Valuable networking opportunities
- ▶ May even be able to set you up with an internship or two

You don't need to be in an Ivy League school, but if you can't decide between two schools, choose the one with the better reputation.

Game design degrees vary by institution, but there are **common elements to all game design courses:**

- ▶ Computer science
- ▶ Game design
- ▶ Practical programming
- ▶ Mathematics
- ▶ Logic

You might be wondering why I only mentioned the word 'game' once in a list of subjects in a game design degree. It goes back to what I wrote earlier about the interplay between designer and developer.

To be a good designer, you need to understand what your developers are working with, so you design to their specifications.

Let's look at each of the subjects listed.

[Find a school](#)

Computer Science

Loosely speaking, **computer science is everything about how computers work and why they work.** This includes hardware, software, and everything in between.

You'll learn about:

- ▶ Operating systems
- ▶ Programming methodologies
- ▶ Algorithms
- ▶ Input/output

Learning about the constraints within which computers operate will give your design direction – and you won't start demanding impossible things from your developers.

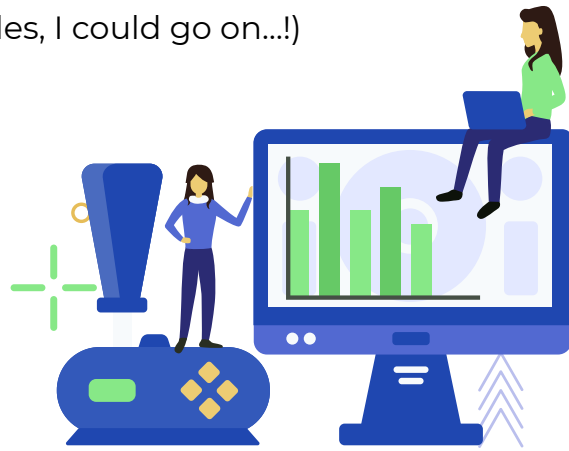
Game Design

Arguably the most important part of a game design course is the bit on actually designing games.



You'll learn about:

- ▶ Mechanics
- ▶ Game Logic
- ▶ Storyboarding
- ▶ Structure of design
- ▶ How to produce all the documentation that the design team will require of you (game design documents, character profiles, I could go on....!)



It's as much about practical game design as it is about administration of the process, and it's about making you a valuable part of the team from day one.

Programming

From time to time, a designer may be asked to step into the shoes of a developer and perform simple coding tasks to make the game run more smoothly.

This transition between roles needs to be smooth for both you and the company. Programming courses will help make it just that. Additionally, knowing basic coding will give you an advantage when applying for jobs.

From algorithms to 'for-loops', you'll know all about how to make a computer do what you want.

Mathematics and Logic

Formal logic is a bit of a beast (X is true if and only if Y is false and Y is true if and only if...), but unfortunately it's something you need to learn because it makes it a whole lot easier to define your ideas about mechanics design (you know, all that stuff you learned in your game design course).

Mathematics is similar; being able to calculate a route between two points might seem meaningless. Until you look at the context of programming enemy AI to find the player.

Other Things to do at College

College should, above all, be a fun experience. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't combine fun with enriching experiences that will help further your career.

Do You Love music?

Then take a formal composition course and learn how to write music. Games need soundtracks, and being able to advise on this element will make you a more valuable game designer.

The same can be said for other creative classes, and anything that builds leadership and business skills.



Work experience

An important aspect of your college experience should include enrolling in an internship or work experience program.

Volunteering or interning over the summer can be very helpful in landing you a permanent position somewhere.

Employers love students with work experience in the industry. Securing at least one placement as part of your degree or over a summer is a worthwhile thing to do, no matter how hard it may be.

[Find a school](#)



CAN YOU SKIP COLLEGE?



With the rapid advancement of technology and more gaming devices becoming available, some people have ditched the traditional college approach altogether.

Instead, choosing lower paying positions with smaller studios not requiring a college degree.

The Mobile Apps Effect

Mobile devices like smart phones and computer tablets allow practically anyone with the drive and desire to become game designers. But it isn't easy.

These mobile gaming marketplaces provide the perfect on-ramp into the world of professional video game design. The process of creating mobile video games for these smart devices is simple in comparison to traditional console games.

By taking the mobile approach you'll have less overhead and fewer hoops to jump through, initially.

These new methods of distribution allow anyone with a functional product to compete in marketplaces that can be accessed by hundreds of millions or even billions of users worldwide.

But even still, we recommend attending school to help you grow your knowledge-base as quickly as possible. Plus, systemized education can expose you to people and aspects of the industry you may have initially missed out on, allowing you to build a valuable network.

If you're really against attending a tradition college, consider an accredited online school.

[**View Online Schools**](#)



Mobile Apps vs Console Games

Generally speaking, it's nearly impossible for someone without a large budget (usually low to mid six figures at the minimum) and a large team of people to publish a console video game.

However, since the release of the Play Station 3, Sony has made it a little easier for low budget studios to produce indie games for their machines.

The same is somewhat true for the Wii and Xbox360 as well as the latest generation of consoles.

How to Start Small

Mobile game designers can start producing games with a rather small team of people for far less time and money.

For example, (minus development cost) you can publish your games to the Google Play (the digital marketplace for Android users) store for free, after a onetime \$25 fee.

Apple on the other hand charges a \$99 for a yearly membership no matter if you upload one or one hundred games to their marketplace called the App Store.

The megahit **Temple Run** serves as the perfect example of what can be **accomplished by small teams and low budget indie studios.**



This game, which became an overnight sensation has reached over **one billion downloads**.

However, it wasn't designed by a million dollar corporation or even a decent sized indie studio.

If I asked you to guess the **number of employees Imangi Studios** (the company behind Temple Run) had when they released the first version of the game, what would you say? Thirty? Fifty? One hundred? The game was developed by **three people**: a husband-and-wife team consisting of Keith Shepherd and Natalia Luckyanova, along with the help of artist Kiril Tchangov.

Today, Temple Run is considered one of the most popular mobile games on the market and had easily crossed a billion downloads by 2014 despite the fact that it was developed in someone's bedroom.

The point is the mobile video game market allows very small teams of talented individuals to combine their skills to produce amazing video games for these new platforms and devices.

You Have Plenty of Options

With that being said you shouldn't assume that I'm trying to persuade you to become a mobile game designer.

These alternate routes are meant to illustrate that there are many paths to success, so stay flexible.



Are You Determined to Make This Your Career?



The journey to becoming a professional video game designer is filled with challenges you will have to overcome.

This is **not a career for those who lack motivation and drive**. You will be required to dedicate many, many years of your life to honing your skills.

Those who are not fully committed won't last long.

On the other hand, those of you that are 100% dedicated and patient enough to learn will be rewarded in the end.

HOW TO FIND AN INTERNSHIP

The best way to find an internship is through your school.

Most college game design programs can help you find valuable internships or part time positions.

Outside of your school, there are loads of websites out there, from the bottom with Craig's List all the way up to purpose-built job-hunting sites, where employers can list internships and work experience opportunities.

Most of these sites have the employer pay the fee for listing the job, so that you can **browse positions for free.**

If you live near a city, send in resumes to any local studios.

If you live too far away, offer to work remotely. Although this isn't common.

Above all, persevere.

You will receive rejection letters. Don't let them get you down, it's all a part of the process.

Eventually you'll find a position, and if you don't, you can work on your own for now and try again later!

THE HIRING PROCESS

The path to becoming a game designer doesn't end with school. Very rarely do people walk straight from college into a paid designer role with a studio.

Most recent graduates will have to apply to various positions at different studios. Be prepared to settle for a studio that may not have been your first choice. Getting your foot in the door is what's important at this stage of your career.

Writing a Resume and Cover Letter

Your resume should include a brief overview of your professional and academic background, and leave the interviewer wanting to read your cover letter.

How to write a good resume is beyond the scope of this guide, but there are plenty of guides online.

As a rule, your relevant work experience should come first, followed by your education, and any 'other skills' (where you would include leadership skills, etc).

A cover letter accompanies your resume and explains who you are and why you would be perfect for the job.

Be brief, but be passionate. Show your enthusiasm and your understanding of the industry.

Initial Screenings

A 'screening' refers to a process which weeds out the unqualified or unenthusiastic for a particular role.

They generally include aptitude tests for mathematics or programming skills, a few written questions (a small piece of design work, for example), and always include submitting a resume and cover letter.

You'll probably go through many screenings in your career, and the more you do it, the better you'll get at it. You can also find practice tests online to help you prepare.

Telephone Interviews

Some companies may conduct telephone interviews. Treat it exactly as you would a 'real' interview, even down to dressing the part (it'll help put you in the right mindset).

Technical Interviews

Technical interviews are by far the most common kind of interview in the industry.

They are designed to further test your technical skills to determine if you are qualified enough for the job.

Again, there is skill to taking a technical interview. Be positive, but don't boast, and don't be afraid to ask for help if you need it (or for clarification if the question is unclear).

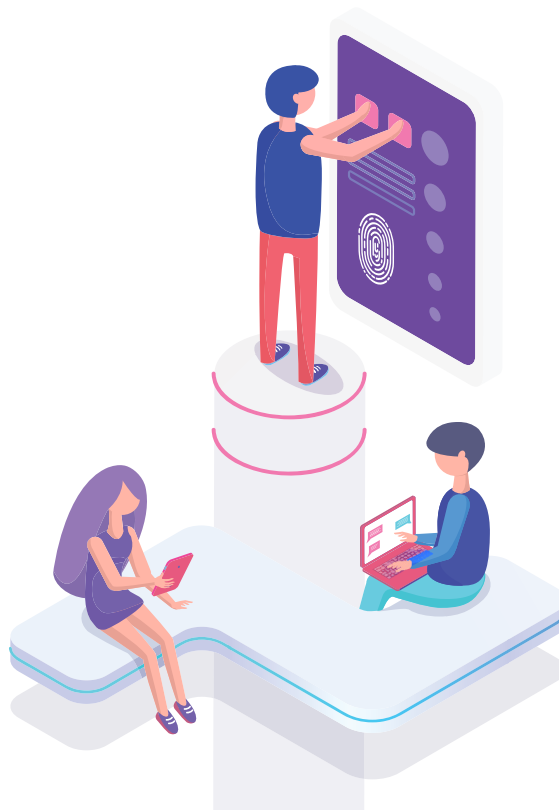
Final Interview

If you make it to the final interview, a congratulations is in order. Getting to the final interview is hard and worthy of celebration in itself.

A final interview is usually to decide between you and a few other candidates.

Be passionate, easy-going, and professional, and you'll be fine!

At this stage all applicants will be qualified, so they may be just trying to find candidates who they would feel comfortable working with - so be friendly!



YOUR FIRST JOB

So you went to the final interview and nailed it – they called you and offered you the job.

Congratulations! Now what?

Signing the Contract

Your job should issue you a contract (if they don't, pressure them for one), which you will need to sign prior to starting.

Contracts should lay out your terms of:

- ▶ Employment
- ▶ Your wages
- ▶ Anything you are entitled to (such as holiday and bonuses)

Read the contract carefully before signing it.

Non-Disclosure and Intellectual Property

Most companies will get you to sign a nondisclosure agreement (NDA) and an intellectual property ownership document.

It's common for you not to be allowed to talk details about work to outsiders, and for any ideas you come up with about the company's business.

Don't worry too much about this – so long as your name goes on the credits, you should be able to use the work as part of a portfolio (just make sure to ask permission first!).



YOUR FIRST DAY



You've signed your contract and it's your first day on the job - what should you expect?

The first day is often an exercise in getting used to the workings of the company. Don't expect to be coming up with new game ideas on your first day!

Once you're used to the company and the routines of the team you're in, you'll often be asked to start by reading other people's documentation and making game play or story suggestions.

This is to get you used to the documentation as well as getting you to contribute ideas.

You'll slowly be asked to contribute more and more to different projects.

Networking and Connections

Arguably one of the most important skills you will learn on the job is how to network (and I don't mean that in the sense of computer networks!).

Learning how to talk to people outside of your team is an invaluable skill, and it will help you further your career.

You never know who you will speak to next, or who might know of a better opportunity.

You should always come prepared to a networking session. No one wants a telephone number on a scrappy piece of paper, so make sure to bring business cards.

They don't need to be expensive to look professional, and you can experiment with color and shape to make yours stand out. Know what you want to talk to people about. Such as any openings they might know about.

Prepare an elevator pitch of yourself, including your job title and what you do.

HOW TO GET PROMOTED

Once you've landed a job and have begun to establish yourself, the next step will be to start climbing the corporate ladder.

Not only will a promotion come with a bigger paycheck and more perks, it helps you develop professionally by giving you more opportunities to hone your skills.

There are **many ways to get promoted in the gaming industry**. Most involve either climbing the chain of authority, or moving to a completely separate department.

You could also choose to take on more responsibility within the team you are currently in.

This could take the form you being promoted to a **senior designer position**, or to a **lead designer** role further on in your career.

Lead video game designers are often responsible for one project at a time. Whereas senior designers are responsible for multiple projects.

Other career path promotions might involve you moving studios, or even starting your own and promoting yourself! Stay open to all opportunities.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Game design can be a very rewarding career.

The joy you experience from watching others gain pleasure from your work is incredible.

But it's also more work than most people think.

If games are your passion, you'll find your niche, even if it takes you a few tries.

Remember that above all else, your career should be fun and fulfilling, and you'll be fine.

Further Reading:

- ▶ [Articles about Game Design Careers](#)
- ▶ [Video Game & Design Resources](#)
- ▶ [Find the Right School for You](#)
- ▶ [See The Top 5 Online Game Design Programs](#)
- ▶ [Video Game Deals and Discounts](#)