

Game Job Interview Questions And How to Answer Them

By Jake Simpson [05.12.09]

[In today's feature, industry veteran Jake Simpson lists 12 common questions asked of video game industry interviewees, and offers tips on how to best answer them.]

You're avidly applying for your first job in the video game industry. A couple of companies saw your enormous potential in your resume and cover letter, and they want to bring you in for an interview. How should you prepare?

In the game industry, there are several interview questions that tend to come up a lot. Here's a smattering of those and some tips on how you might handle them.

1. Why do you want to work here?

(This question implicitly includes, "Why do you want to leave where you are?" if you're currently employed.)

This question is an open opportunity to show you've done some research on the company where you're interviewing. All companies and interviewers are flattered when the interviewee knows who they are, knows what games they make, and wants to be a part of their experience. Do your homework and put on a good show!

Don't say things like, "I need a job," or "I need to move to Sacramento." Instead, pick a few things that are germane to the company in question. The more specific your reasons are tied to the company, the better. "I want to work on FPS shooters" isn't as good an answer as "I want to work on Game Franchise X because I played the first two games and still see potential for future growth of the product." It's sycophantic, yes, but interviewers are as prone to flattery as anyone else -- although don't give that as your only reason.

When explaining why you want to leave your current job, the trick is to not be negative. Pick a couple of points that are inarguable, for example, "There was no career development" or "They weren't working on the kinds of games I'm interested in," rather than "Their management is clueless and they are going to die soon." The game industry is a small community -- you could very well be talking smack about your interviewer's close buddy.

If you were let go or fired, it's better to say something like, "We decided to part ways," or "It was my time to leave," rather than go into too much detail, unless directly pressed. In that case, the interviewer probably already knows what went down and is just looking to see what you'll say. Answer the question quickly and without negativity, and move on. You want to leave a positive impression.

2. What games are you playing?

If you plan to work for a video game company, you'd better be playing games -- and you'd better be able to demonstrate that.

It's good form to mention some games that are in the same genre as the games made at that company. It's even better if you mention playing some of the games that were actually made there. Again though, don't go over the top.

At the very least, play the demo of anything they've produced. You need to be knowledgeable about the genre, what you enjoy about it, and how the development of these games is affected by the genre (as much as you can be). So research the company before the interview.

How you answer this question can be a deal breaker or a deal maker for hiring managers. They want to hire people who are demonstrably passionate about the games their company makes. Saying, "I have a level 70 mage in World of Warcraft and a level 40 druid in EverQuest," to Blizzard makes the point that you are immersed in its product genre.

Demonstrating some knowledge about older games also shows you're grounded in game history, which is never a bad thing. The wider your knowledge base, the more you can forestall going down blind alleys in terms of implementation and design, which benefits everyone, and that's exactly what a company is looking for in its employees.

3. How would you make the games you're playing better?



You'd be surprised how often this question comes up, even if you aren't interviewing for a design position. Everyone wants a developer who has design sensibilities because it inevitably means she or he will be more involved and engaged in whatever is going on.

Knowing ahead of time how you might answer this question means you'll come off sounding like you've actually thought about a game in development terms. Game studios are looking for people who think as they play -- about what they're playing, how it's done, what could have been improved, and most importantly, what they can rip off.

One downside to adopting this mentality is that it becomes harder to enjoy a game for what it is, but that's an occupational hazard in all jobs.

Believe it or not, you can answer this question in an entirely positive way. However, if you decide instead to criticize a design or implementation decision in a game, be sure you have a solution to the problem too. It's not enough to moan about the final strider battle in Half-Life 2: Episode 2; you have to have an idea of how it could have been made more enjoyable, perhaps through easier car control, or not destroying all the supply stations so quickly.

If you decide to bash a game that the company where you're interviewing developed (and that takes courage; some companies will applaud you while others will diss you for not drinking the Kool-Aid), then ensure that what you're criticizing isn't something subjective but something that everyone has had a pop at. Be ready to back up the criticism with proof that it's an agreed-upon flaw, not just you being nit-picky.

4. What's the best game of all time and why?

The most important thing here is to answer relatively quickly, and back it up. One of the fallouts of this question is age. Answering "Robotron!" to a 20-something interviewer might lead to a feeling of disconnect. But sometimes that can be good. It means you have to really explain why it's the best game of all time. Can you verbally and accurately describe a game to another person who has never played it? You'll rack up some communication points if you can.

What you shouldn't say is whatever the latest hot game is, or blatantly pick one that the company made (unless it's true and your enthusiasm is bubbling over). Be honest. Don't be too eccentric and niche, and be ready to defend your decision.

5. What will you bring to the team? Why do we need you?

This is a general question that applies to all interviews. There are two ways to answer: the big answer and the little answer.

The big answer requires you to have some knowledge of how the company operates. Who does what? Your goal is to slot your experience, passion and skills (and if you are a student, your passion, skills, and desired career direction) into any holes the company may have -- and it should have some. Otherwise, why are they hiring?

The little answer is to name some of your previous experiences and best qualities and hope that's enough.

Care needs to be taken that a) you don't sound arrogant in assuming the company will die without you and b) you don't say negative things about the company. Statements like, "Well, you obviously can't do good Q/A. You need a good Q/A manager," are likely to go down like a lead balloon. Frame your answer to suggest that you would bring extra expertise, and therefore improvement, to something that's already in place.



6. What's your biggest weakness? Or, if I hired you, what would I regret about it in six months?

This is a common question in all job interviews. There are generally two kinds of responses: the brutally honest and damning one ("I get upset with people who don't carry their load"), and the sycophantic one ("I'm a perfectionist").

What most employers are looking for is an honest answer that is followed up with an example of something you have done to work on your weakness. For example, you can say, "My workspace tends to become extremely disorganized," as long as you follow it up with, "but recently, I've put in a lot of effort to go paperless, and I'm extremely systematic in the way I manage my email

inbox."

The other secret to this question is not so much in the answer but how long you take to respond. If you answer too quickly, you might be suggesting that you already know all your worst points because they are blatantly obvious and you've been told so many times. If you take too long, it will seem as if you're searching for an answer that sounds good, doesn't make you look bad, and is something the interviewer would be happy to hear. Again, it gives the perception that you are being ingratiating rather than honest.

By the way, the best answer I've heard is, "I don't know. What do you think I'd regret in six months if I worked here?"

7. How do you feel about crunching?

At smaller studios, this is the 64 million dollar question. My advice is to be 100 percent honest. If you won't crunch, say so now. It may well put you out of the running for a job, but ultimately that's a good thing. No, really, it is! If the company works a lot of overtime and you don't want to do it, then taking the job is going to be punishing for everyone.

Having said that, the last thing any interviewer wants to hear is, "I won't do it" because that predicates a perceived lack of involvement and passion (not that passion should equal overtime, but the perception of refusing to do something before you're even in the circumstances could be the difference between getting a job offer and having the company pass you up).

Phrase your answer in such a way that you don't sound confrontational with the interviewer. She doesn't want to get into an argument; she just wants to know where you stand. Understand that this question is meant to gauge, roughly, how you might fit into the company culture.

8. Okay, we're going to work through a problem here...

Often in game job interviews, you will be presented with a problem to solve, or even a full-blown test, depending on the position. It might be grease board work, it might be a conversation, it might be a level design test, it might even be a code test at a PC.

The premise is that the interviewer wants to see how you work. Often, once you've answered the question, the interviewer will change the parameters to see what you'll do.

But what do you do if you have no clue what's being asked, or if it's outside your area of expertise? That's a panic moment if there ever was one. Take a deep breath and realize that this is a moment where you need to say, "I'm not sure I understand the question," or "That's not something I've done before." But immediately after that, start asking questions about the problem and take a stab at solving it.

That's one of the biggest things you can do at this point -- admit ignorance then have a go anyway. Showing a willingness to try something outside your field of knowledge is huge to interviewers. It shows you want to learn and be more than what you are now. Sometimes, the fact that you tried is more important than the actual result, and sometimes, you'll have an interviewer who will give you hints toward a solution just because you showed that willingness to try. The more junior you are the more likely this is to happen.

Occasionally, interviewers will deliberately put you out of your comfort zone just to see how you'll react, so be aware!

9. Where do you want to be in five years?

Personally, I love this question because it reveals if a prospective candidate has a plan at all or is just drifting from job to job as so many are wont to do. There's nothing wrong per se with people who drift along the currents, it's just that those with a plan (or at least a desire to move in a particular direction) are generally much more interesting people. Plus, they are almost always inherently more predictable, which is always a benefit for employers.

Having a desire to move forward helps everyone. It helps you measure your progress, and it gives the company a plan to help you get there.

Of course, it does depend on you knowing what you want. Most people tend to know what they don't want, but not necessarily what they do want, which is a problem -- particularly if you express that in an interview. Interviewers would rather have a list of things you want to attain rather than things you don't.

One optimal answer is, "Still working for you making games," but it smacks of sucking up, so I'd recommend saying something a little more generic: "Still looking for a challenge and putting in that extra effort to make great games."

The best response I've ever heard to that question was, "I want your job!" and the individual who said it to me indeed has my old job! But be wary of sounding confrontational.

10. What game would you make if money were no object?

Everyone has a pet project they would want to make if they had the chance -- it's just inherent in the game developer psyche. This is your chance to expound on it, and the more realized your idea is, the more it will be seen as proof that you know what you're doing.

Taking an existing idea and adding, "but I'd make it cooler!" isn't the answer (the number of times I've heard Q/A staff wanting to become developers tell me they want to remake Counter Strike "but better" is staggering); it just shows you have enthusiasm, but no original ideas.

Bonus points if you can take an existing IP license and make a compelling argument for a game out of it. People who can actually do that are at a premium in our industry since most tie-ins, well, suck.



11. What do you do on your own time to extend your skills?

As a programmer, do you work on home projects? As a designer, do you doodle design ideas or make puzzles? As an artist, do you do portrait work?

Having hired many people in the past, one of the things I can speak to with authority is that those people who spend their off time working on discipline-related projects are the ones who are always up on current trends, have new ideas, are most willing to try something new, and will be the ones taking stuff home to tinker with on their own time. Now that shouldn't be expected of everyone, but the sad reality is that there is competition for jobs out there, and those who are prepared to put in the extra work are the ones that are going to be in hot demand.

Demonstrating that you learned C# over a weekend because you thought it was cool for prototyping is exactly the kind of thing a programming manager wants to hear. Suddenly your toolset expanded, and not only did it show willingness to do something without being told, it makes you more valuable.

The only care to here is to not mention an outside situation that might detract from or compete with your day job.

12. Do you have any questions?

Yes. Yes, you do have questions. Some of your questions will have been answered in the normal give-and-take of conversation, but you should always be asked if you have others (and if not, something's wrong).

Having questions means you're interested. Some questions are best directed to HR, while others should be asked of managers and future co-workers. Ask questions that show an interest in the position and the long-term plans of the company. For some ideas, see "Questions You Should Ask in an Interview," below.

It's Just a Conversation

Always have something to say. Most questions asked in job interviews aren't knowledge-test questions. They're more like an invitation to converse on a given topic. If you can't answer them directly but can at least talk about what the question means, that's a good start.

Be as honest as you can be. A company generally gets only a day with you, maybe two, to gather all it can before making a life-changing decision, both for you and for them.

They need to see who you actually are rather than whom you think they want to see, because if that's what you do once you've started, it will become obvious pretty fast, and then bad things tend to happen. They need to be comfortable that there are no surprises coming with you as much as you need to know that they are solvent and able to actually ship what they say they will.

Be honest. Be open and engage in the conversation with your interviewer. Express interest in what they are talking about. If you don't know or understand what's being asked, ask them! They don't expect you to be mind readers and it shows you can ask when necessary. After all, it's just a conversation.

Questions You Should Ask In An Interview

- What are the core working hours?
- How do you assign or schedule tasks? Who gets to decide who does what and estimates time?
- What's the career path for this job? How do I get to progress? What is the process for promotion?
- What training approach do you use? How would I learn new skills?
- How are personnel reviews handled? Who does them and how often?
- Are there any specific development processes used here, for example, Scrum?
- Who would I report to?
- If I'm hired, what is the next game I might work on? How much input would I have on that?
- Is there a relocation package?
- What bonus structure or incentives are there?

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