

Put your money where your mouth is

-Ben Mathis
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I've always liked the saying, "You can talk the talk, but can you walk the walk?". I see so many people talking about this or that, but when it comes to putting actions behind their words, they can't be bothered. The amount of action you take to bring something about, is directly proportional to your desire for it to exist. If you take no action, you don't really desire the thing, but instead like the idea of it. I see this situation running rampant in the entertainment industry, specifically in games. The first portion of this paper is addressed to people not yet in the game industry. The second part addresses people currently in the game industry who are unhappy with their current job. The final part addresses anyone and everyone, professional or amateur, who is unhappy with the current state of the industry.

Advice for people trying to land their first job in the game industry

If you are a singer, and you desire to move people emotionally with the power and quality of your songs, you won't practice your scales forever. You won't wait for the Phil Harmonica to call you up and have you perform. No! You sing to anyone and everyone, every chance you get. For the practice, for the actual chance to move someone, and because you honestly enjoy singing. This same situation should be true of someone who wants to work in game development. If you want to be an artist, you should be working on your art. If you say you want to be an artist, but never work on your art, you only like the idea of being an artist, not the actual act itself. The same is true for game design and programming as well. I see tons of people studying to work in games. When I talk to them, online, in person, in the classroom, they try to convey to me in words how much they want to work in games. Yet when I look at their portfolios it's obvious they don't invest more than a couple hours a week on it. If you have to wait for someone to pay you to do something, you don't honestly want it. When I see students that are pumping out a new model and texture every week, regardless of the quality, I see someone who is going to make it in the game industry. They are hungry, and have passion. If they aren't currently good, they will get good, out of sheer tenacity and passion.

While you are at school, you should spend as much time as possible working on your portfolio. You have the rest of your life to relax and have fun, college is the time set aside for preparing for your career. In an industry as competitive as ours, there is no room for the lazy. If you have applied to lots of places, and they have seen your portfolio, and they don't offer you a job, you are **not** good enough yet. Sometimes a single place isn't looking, or wants someone with more experience, but with the current state of the game industry, there is always a job for good people. Many companies will manufacture a position for someone if they are good enough even if they weren't currently looking. When that happens it is called an opportunity hire. Some students believe it's because they don't have enough experience. This is almost never the case. The reason companies list experience requirements for job listings, is to discourage the people who know that they currently aren't good from applying. No company will see an awesome portfolio, and then decide not to hire you based purely on not having any experience, unless it's for a senior or lead position. Remember you will always have people with experience and shipped titles competing with you for jobs, and they have been paid to work 40-80 hours a week for a while. If you are investing only 5-10, you aren't going to be catching up anytime soon.

I've had some students ask me how many characters or environment pieces to have in a portfolio before applying places. This is the wrong question to ask. You should keep making assets till you get hired. That's how you know when you are good enough. When a company is willing to invest the money to hire you, it's a stamp of approval. If you haven't gotten hired yet, then keep adding things to your portfolio, and if there is anything old on it that doesn't reflect your current level of ability, then take it off. This way your portfolio will constantly be improving, and eventually a company will see the level of ability they are looking for and extend you a job.

For the students and amateurs trying to get into the industry, do not complain about the difficulty getting a job. It is not difficult to get a job. It's difficult to get a good portfolio. People with good portfolios get lots of job offers. Luckily what is needed to get a portfolio is readily available to all, and that asset is time. If you aren't willing to invest it and make the sacrifices needed to put time towards your portfolio, don't complain, because it's your own fault. Use that energy towards working on the portfolio instead of complaining. If your portfolio is currently not good enough, then the more time you spend per week practicing and improving, the less weeks will need to pass before you land that first job.

Advice for people currently working in the game industry, who are unhappy with their current job

Now for the people currently working in the industry who want a new job, but are having problems getting one. So you landed that first job, and all was peaches and cream till the first crunch. Or maybe you didn't mind the crunch but the poor management is driving you nuts. Maybe you don't like the art style or game content anymore, or the company isn't ever going to ship a title because they can't get their act together. Now you want to switch to a new company where things will possibly be better, but no one seems to want to hire you. The audacity!

This portion is very similar to the advice given the students. If you have been applying around to many places, and no one is biting, the most likely reason is that your portfolio is not good enough. The second most likely reason is that it doesn't contain recent enough work. It might be really good work, but it's pixel art and you are applying for a character modeler position, or it's low poly and the company wants high poly normal mapped assets because they are doing a next generation game. This also really falls under the portfolio not being good enough, this time not in the sense of quality, but in content.

What does this mean for you? You need to be working on your portfolio. The best approach in my opinion is to always be working on personal projects. That way you always have work that is not covered by NDA that you can show a potential new employer. This way you can work on a new technology you might not have available in your current game. Also if you want to work on a more cartoony game, and your current employer makes dark realistic stuff, you can work on a portfolio that would be relevant to the places you actually want to work. Even if you aren't looking for a new job it's a good idea to always have a personal project on the burner. This way if you do change your mind about your current job, you can start applying right away. The added benefit is that the extra time spent practicing will most likely result in improvements in your speed and abilities, which can result in raises and promotions at your job, as well as basic respect and clout for being on the ball. If you aren't willing to work on something constantly, expect to really have to pour on the extra hours on your folio when you do decide to switch companies. Then you will need to generate enough work to have a current portfolio in a relatively short period of time. Rather than a few extra hours a week, you have to put in a few extra hours a day. It's still doable though.

For the current professionals that want to switch jobs but can't seem to generate any companies interest, do not complain about the difficulty getting a new job. It is not difficult to land a better job. It's difficult to keep a current, relevant, quality portfolio. People with good up-to-date portfolios get lots of job offers. Luckily what is needed to keep up a quality portfolio is readily available to all, and that asset is time. If you aren't willing to invest it and make the sacrifices needed to put time towards your portfolio, don't complain, because it's your own fault. Use that energy towards working on the portfolio instead of complaining. If your portfolio is currently not good enough, then the more time you spend per week practicing and improving, the less weeks will need to pass before you can land a new and better job.

Advice for people who are unhappy with the current state of the industry.

This final portion is for people who don't like the games the industry is currently putting out. Whether it's your disappointment with the art styles chosen, the game play mechanics, the level design, or the quality level of the finished product, this portion is for you. You feel that the art is all the same, that no one makes original game play, derivation and copying is the name of the game. You feel that companies are so concerned with the bottom dollar that they do not care a single iota about the product's quality level, so games are shipped out earlier and earlier, with more bugs and less substantial features than ever before. You think that new ideas and original game design is left by the wayside in order to make way for sequels, sports franchises and blatant ripoffs of other successful titles. Well I happen to agree with you, but my thoughts on the situation are as follows.

My thinking for people in this situation (and myself) is very similar to my prior two points. If you care enough about the situation, you would do something about it other than talking. There exists a variety of editors, training material, and support forums on the internet and in bookstores to undertake some form of game creation. If art is the area you would like to see something new, then come up with a visual style you like and start replacing assets in an existing game that you enjoy. If you think that the current level design in games is poorly thought out with no real planning put into the players emotional state as they proceed throughout the level, then take an existing game you enjoy that comes with an editor, and figure out how to implement your own levels. If you think current game design is repetitive and boring, and you yearn for something interesting and original, then start reading up on game design and theory. Get a game with an open ended editor with heavy documentation and existing assets (UnrealEd, Quake3, HalfLife2, Neverwinter Nights, Game Maker) and learn simple scripting and work on altering up the game design. You might not be able to make that jazzercise franchise simulator you've been dreaming of yet, but you can certainly practice learning what is fun, and how to revise and polish your ideas. If you are able to achieve some level of success at this personal endeavor, you have greatly increased your chances at commercial success where you might be able to make your dream game. Having replaced all the art assets in a game with a visually cohesive art style of your own choosing would look really good on an application to be an art director. An entire games worth of level design with quality pacing and player involvement will be extremely attractive to a company when you apply for position as a level designer. If you were to take a game editor and alter the game play mechanics, or even create your own entire game design, even using all of the games existing assets, would be convincing when applying for a game designer position. If you are already an existing employee in one of these fields but you don't get the control you want, you can get a lot further towards your goal of having that control by showing your company the type of quality product you can produce when you call the shots. In short, show some initiative.

If you were to try to raise capital for a start up company I think you owe it to both your investors and any employees you hire to have already done this. Practice makes perfect and there is very little chance you are going to get a game design correct your first attempt. It is equally unlikely you will be able to make an appealing and cohesive art style if you have never done so before. Likewise again on level design. If you've never attempted it at the level you wish to be involved, you have very limited likelihood of success. Matthew 25:21 comes to mind, "Well done my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful with the small things, and now I will entrust you with greater things." By showing initiative in your area of supposed passion, you will go a long way into convincing others.

As a small aside, if you have never been involved in the game creation process before, do **not** try to be the driving force behind a game development studio. Idea men are useless in a small company, and I don't think I'm being unfair by saying your ideas are most likely bad if you are unable to contribute to the development process in some way besides managerial skills. Let me put it another way. The actual game design is the hardest part of the game development process to get correct. It is far harder than learning a 3d program, a painting program, a map editor, a programming language, or even the theories of fine art. If you cannot manage to learn, to a proficient level, one of these easier tasks, you are guaranteed to fail at creating an immersive, quality, interactive experience. That point bears repeating again in a different structure. You have no place in a small game studio if you lack the ability to contribute in at least one area of actual asset creation be it code, art, or level design. Even if you are the driving financial force, you are still not qualified to make design decisions. Going even beyond this previous point, I don't think anyone should attempt a startup until they have at least one shipped title either on a commercial level or a personal level. You owe it to yourself, your employees, your financial backing, and the chances of your games success to at least see how game development is currently attempted. Yes there is quite a bit wrong in the modern development process, but there is also several decades of experience in place that you can learn from, even if it's only what to avoid.

If you are waiting for someone to pay you to innovate or create a new spin on game design, you will be in for a long wait, and a lot of disappointment. Even a single game green lit by a CEO that fails on the store shelves can cost them their job. I know if I was the CEO I would only green light projects that were seeming surefire hits. Which is of course what they do, and why we see the games we see. Someone has to pay for the game, and if you really want to carry out your particular vision of a successful game, it has to be you. I'm not talking about dollars, I'm talking about elbow grease. It's incredibly hard to get someone to finance your game design if you have zero experience in a design and managerial position, and even harder if your idea deviates from the current fare of game design and art style. This makes it necessary for you to pursue something more modest as your first foray, and if successful will pave the way to something more substantial.

There is most likely a good reason that games like the one you are envisioning are not in existence. It's most likely that they are not really a good idea. The next most likely idea is that it won't be a sure fire hit, and an extension of that, that it would not be profitable enough to make it worth the funding (to a publisher who needs to give their management six and seven figure salaries). However there is a chance that it could be a very good, and original idea that people would enjoy. If you truly believe this, then you should pursue bringing it to life with whatever means you have at your disposal. If you are Will Wright, that might mean a staff of 100 people and a fifty million dollar budget. If you are an amateur or even a low level professional, that most likely asset you have is time and energy. You might be able to coerce people into helping you, but with them you will have only yourself either till the completion of your idea, or until enough is finished to entice help from others. This means a lot of late nights, a lot of learning new skills you might not love or be as proficient at as your main skill. It means foregoing a lot of the activities you currently engage in when you come home from work or class. You don't have to become a hermit that works an additional eight hours a day after work is done, consisting on nothing but ramen, water, and the socializing you get during the lunch hour during the hour, but it might mean creating space in your current agenda for the project you have in mind.

For the people that want to see original game design, fresh art styles, and quality games, do not complain about the lack of said games. It is not the industries fault it has been constructed as a commercial enterprise first and foremost, and original inventive games are risky from a financial standpoint. It is not difficult to work on original, fresh, quality, artistic games. It's difficult to get paid by someone else to do so. Those few people who do, have shown initiative and prior success by working hard for the privileged. People who have made good games in the past get opportunities to do so again, and opportunities to take their ideas even further. Luckily what is needed to create or be involved in a quality, original game is readily available to all, and that asset is time, and energy. If you aren't willing to invest that time and energy and make the sacrifices needed to work on a fresh game mechanic, an original artistic style, or immersive level design and pacing, don't complain, because it's your own fault. Use that energy towards someone on that type of game in your free time instead of complaining. If you currently cannot coerce others to assist you, or convince someone to lend financial backing, then the more time you spend per week working towards your goals on your own, the less weeks will need to pass before you can see your game completed or manage another attempt in a more official capacity.

My closing comments are a wrap up of all the points above, as I believe they are highly related. Everyone has the same number of hours in the day as Albert Einstein and Madam Curie. Those people who make significant contributions to the world, whether they be of science, philanthropy, or even entertainment, are people with a driving ambition. Those people who don't wait on an established entity to back and fund their visions, they instead dig in and work towards those goals they believe worthwhile. They put their confidence in the value of their idea higher than their level of personal desire for casual apathy. They are the walkers, not the talkers. They are the movers and the shakers. Most importantly, they are the types of people that make memorable games.

There are normally two things you can have in life, the first is a steady secure job with an established company. It brings with it the security of a paycheck, and in the case of games, a high likelihood of your product shipping, plenty of staff to work on all the areas of production, and benefits. The second thing you can have is total pursuance of your ideals. Most of the time there is an absence of security, as you are having to fund it yourself, there is no guarantee of completion, you and anyone else involved will most likely have to wear a variety of hats, and there is a very low chance your product will see widespread success. I believe there is a way to balance the two, but it will involve a lot of personal sacrifice and effort. Gallons of elbow grease, a potentially stunted social life, low television absorption and immense personal growth into new areas of game development are all required, but the end result is that you can see something you are proud of brought to life. For those now that complain without putting in effort to change things, it makes another saying come to mind "put up or shut up".

Finally, I blame the current state of the industry on the lot of us. There are a lot of people who have ideas for what they think would make a good game, almost everyone wants to be a driving force in a games development. Yet every person interested in game design, rather than work on something on their own, instead dream in their head of the day when they work at some company that will allow all their dreams to come true. I believe that if every person who wanted to design games was working on a personal game, yes we would see a lot more crappy attempts, but with them would come those rare gems, those people who really were visionary and had a smashing idea for a successful and memorable interactive experience. It's my hope that at least one of these types of people reads this paper and uses it as the motivation to raise their fist to the establishment and strike out on their personal vision, in whatever means they can, and bring to the world a fresh original art style, inventive characters, well-paced, emotionally involving level design, or a quality memorable game.