

How to Score Your First Game Job

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Important Caveat

- This talk is geared toward getting into the industry by working at an **existing company**
- Not by starting your own company or making your own indie game

Six Steps of Success

1. Picking a Discipline
2. Building Skills
3. Setting Expectations
4. Building a Multi-Purpose Network
5. Developing the Right Mindset
6. What to Expect from the Industry

But First...

Who am I and why should you listen to me?

- Game dev since 2004
- Worked on 24 games for 17 companies



But First...

- Full-time, contractor, indie, hiring, lecturer
- Producer, game designer, writer
- Console, PC, Facebook, licensed IP, educational, text games, military training simulations
- What does this mean?



But First...



****Important Shameless Plug****

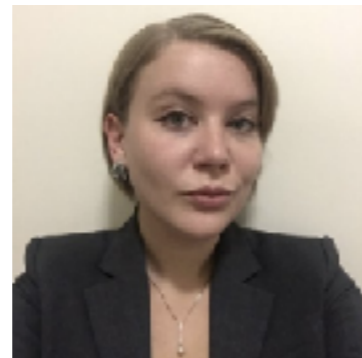


scoreyourfirstgamejob.com

More Perspectives



Evan Berman
Bethesda



Caitlin L. Connor
Gameloft



Dennis Crow
Cloud Imperium



Raison Varner
Gearbox



Coray Seifert
Experiment7



Josh Raab
Big Huge Games



Nick Madonna
PHL Collective



John McLean-Foreman
Freelance/Directive Games



Evan Skolnick
Telltale (Former)



Neil Sveri
Dreamsail



Dylan Tredrea
Rovio

Part 1: Picking a Discipline

“I thought I decided what I wanted to do quite early in my career but that ended up evolving and taking different forms over time.”

—Nick Madonna, Founder/Business Development | PHL Collective



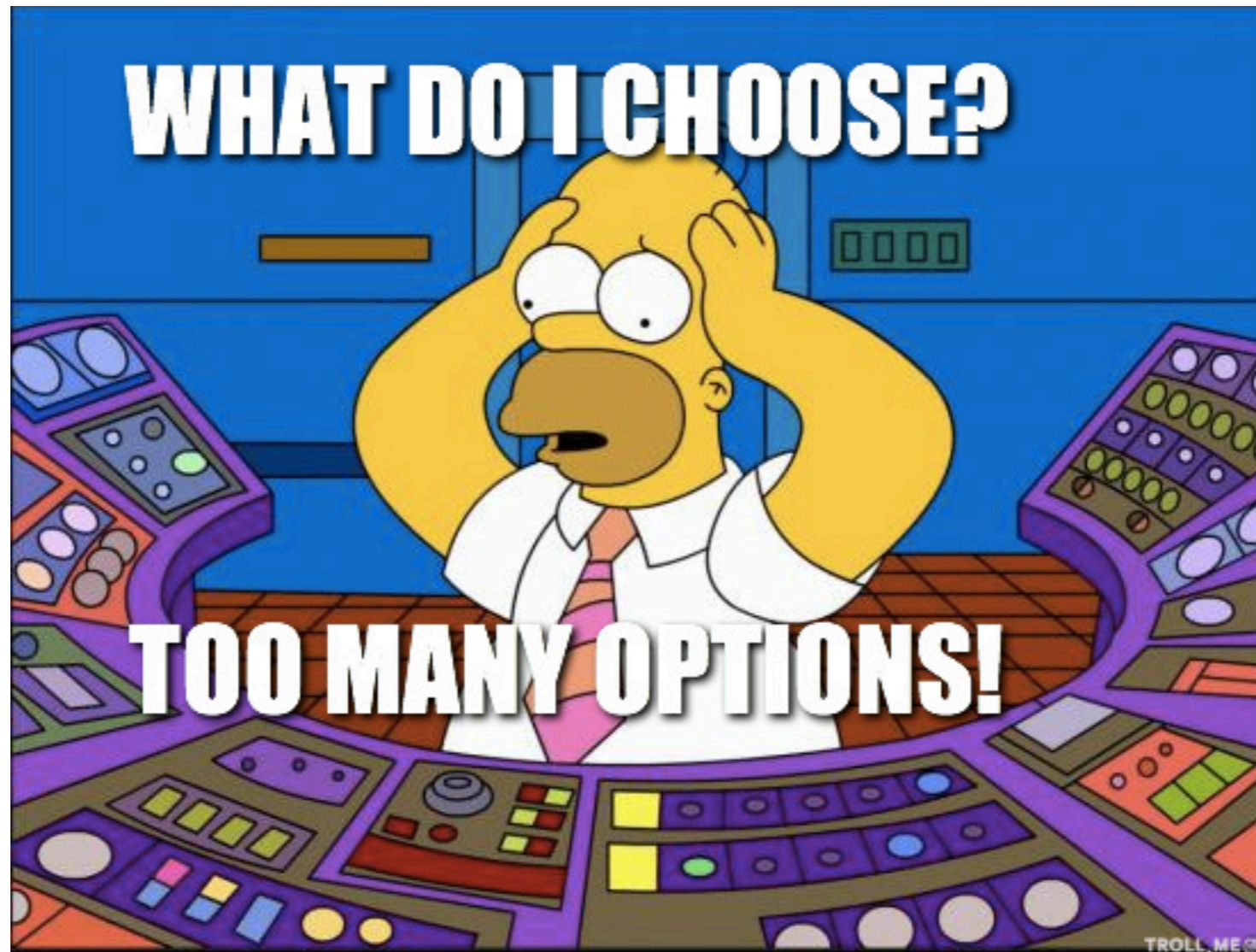
Part 1: Picking a Discipline

- Game Design
- Game Programming
- Art
- Animation
- Sound Design
- Composer
- Community Management
- Production
- Writing
- Quality Assurance/Testing

Part 1: Picking a Discipline

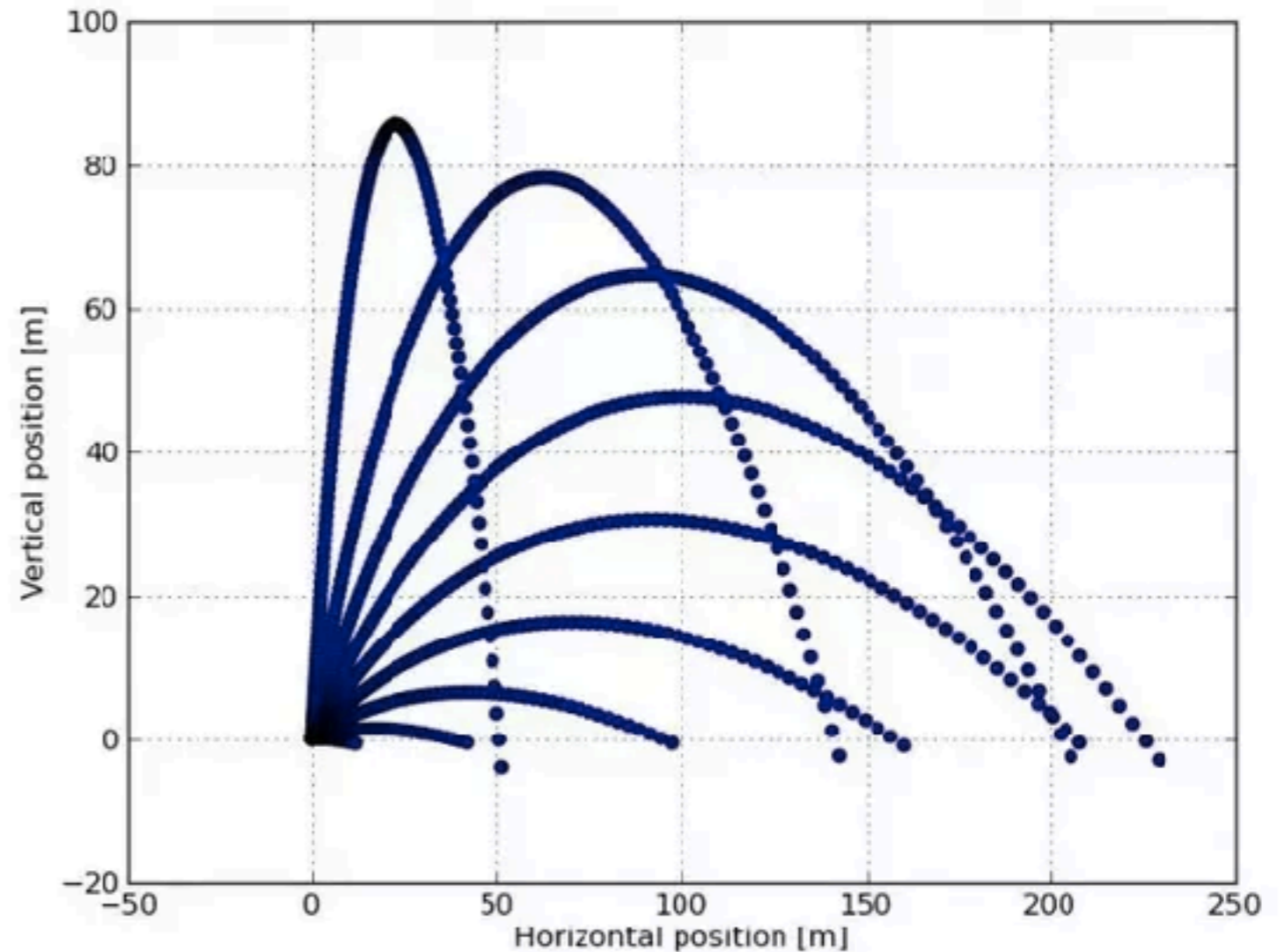
- Think you're not good enough? That's OK
- Skill building will get you there
- You can always improve skills, but you can't fake it to yourself
- Try a few things out - no need to commit in the beginning

Part 1: Picking a Discipline



Part 1: Picking a Discipline

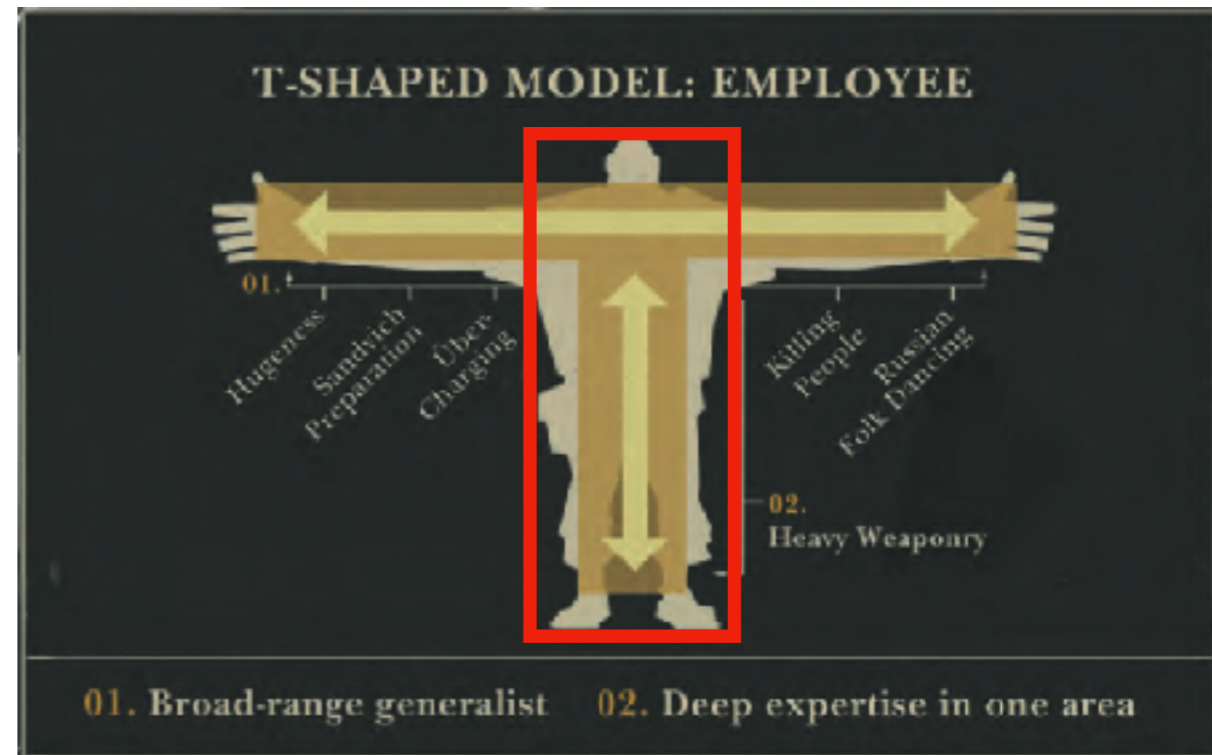
- Career paths are fluid
- Trajectories change
- Three ways they can change:
Specialization
Expansion
Transition



Part 1: Picking a Discipline

Specialization

- Going deep
- Game design:
Level design,
system design, multiplayer design, IAP design
- Art: 3D character design, 2D concept art, prop design,
vehicle design

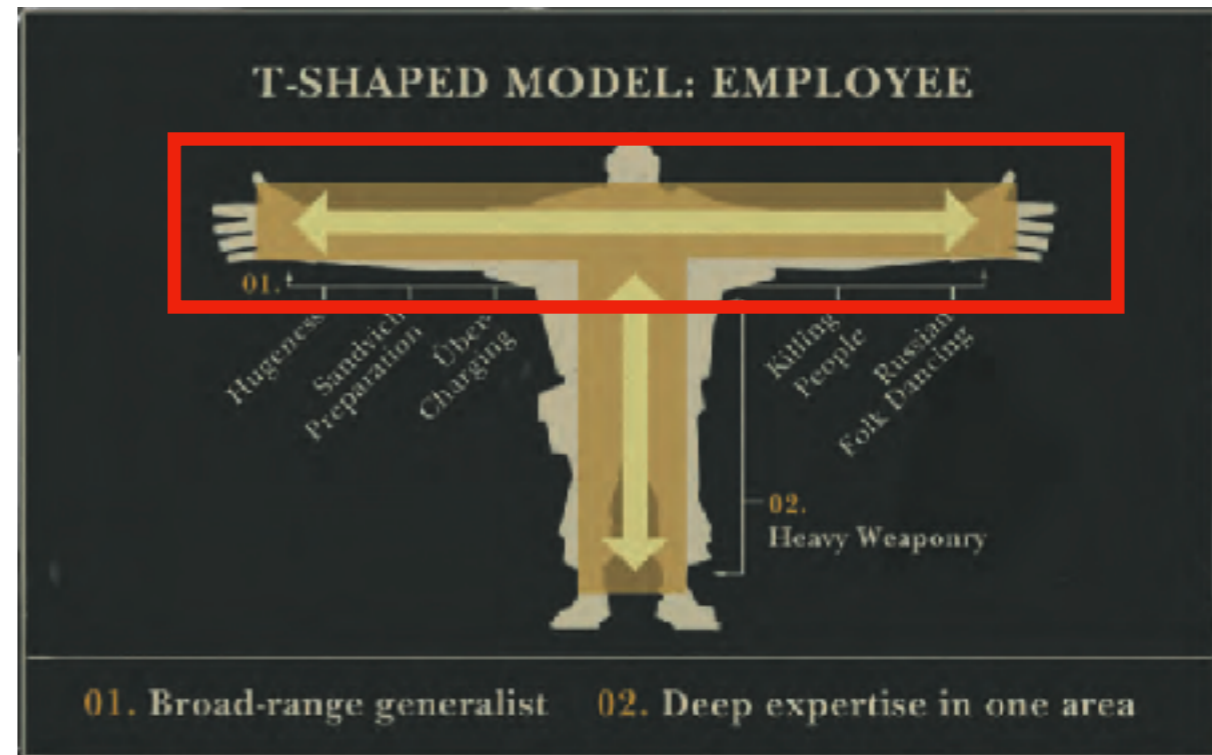


valvesoftware.com/company/Valve_Handbook_LowRes.pdf

Part 1: Picking a Discipline

Expansion

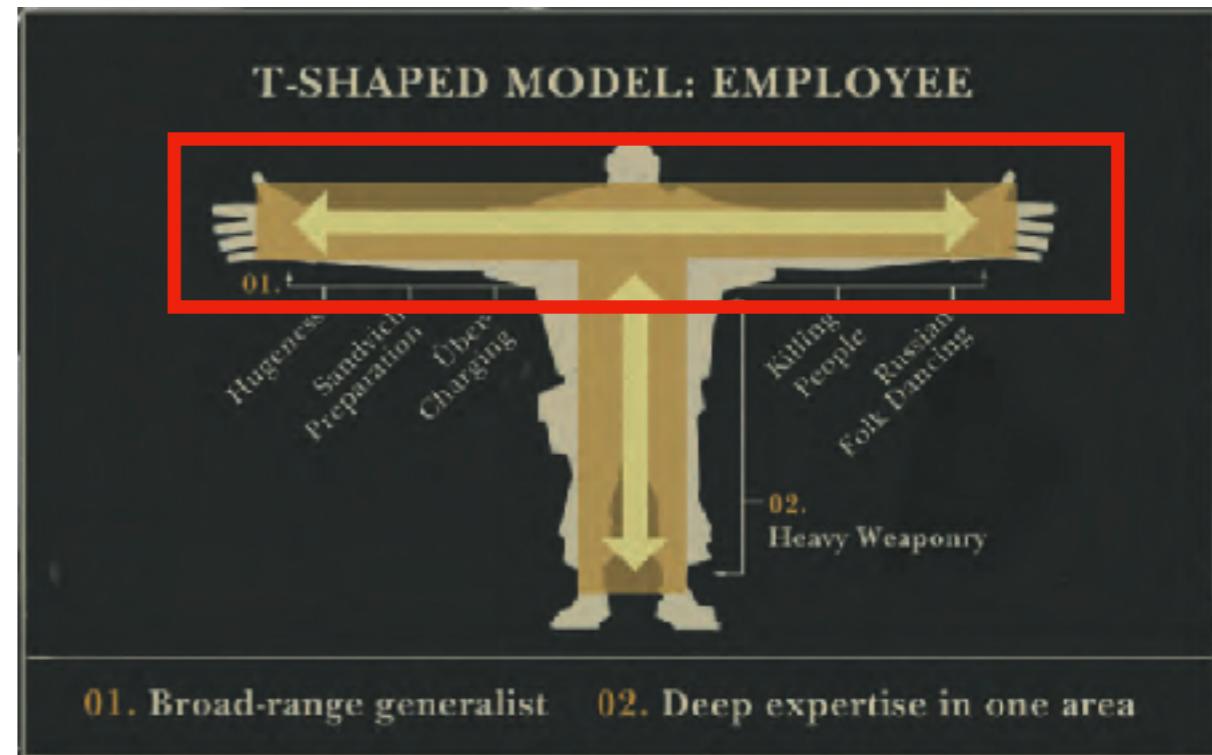
- Going wide
- Game design:
 - Writing: Writing scripts, cinematics, manuals, documentation
 - Production: Producing VO, running focus groups and doing press demos



Part 1: Picking a Discipline

Expansion

- Going wide
- Art:
 - Tech side: Refining assets, implementing into the build
 - Production: Refining the art pipeline when working with external people



Part 1: Picking a Discipline

Transition

- Going elsewhere
 - Artist to producer
 - Programming to game design
 - Game designer to creative director
 - QA to ???



Part 1: Picking a Discipline



Interests - Skills - Opportunities

Part 1: Picking a Discipline

Interests

- If you want to go that route

Skills

- If you have already been developing your skills to get started, even in a small way

Part 1: Picking a Discipline

Opportunities

- If you have opportunities to learn from others
 - Working with other people on projects like game jams or part time projects
- If your company needs someone to do a task and you're the best candidate
- If a good fit for a contracting gig comes up

Part 1: Picking a Discipline

Part 1 Takeaways:

- Try out disciplines before selecting one
- Your career is a journey
- Pay attention to your interests, skills and opportunities

Part 2: Building Skills

“Early in your career, you need to create at a ferocious pace. It might not be perfect, because you’re just starting out...The quality will come with time and repetition.”

—**Coray Seifert, Director of Production | Experiment 7**



“I don't think there's a substitute for working on small student or indie projects. You learn the terminology, the development process and it lends you credibility by having a shared language about development during interviews.”

—**Raison Varner, Sound Designer and Composer | Gearbox Software**



Part 2: Building Skills

Skill building is largely two things:

1. **Working** on projects
2. **Researching** how to do things you don't know to do yet

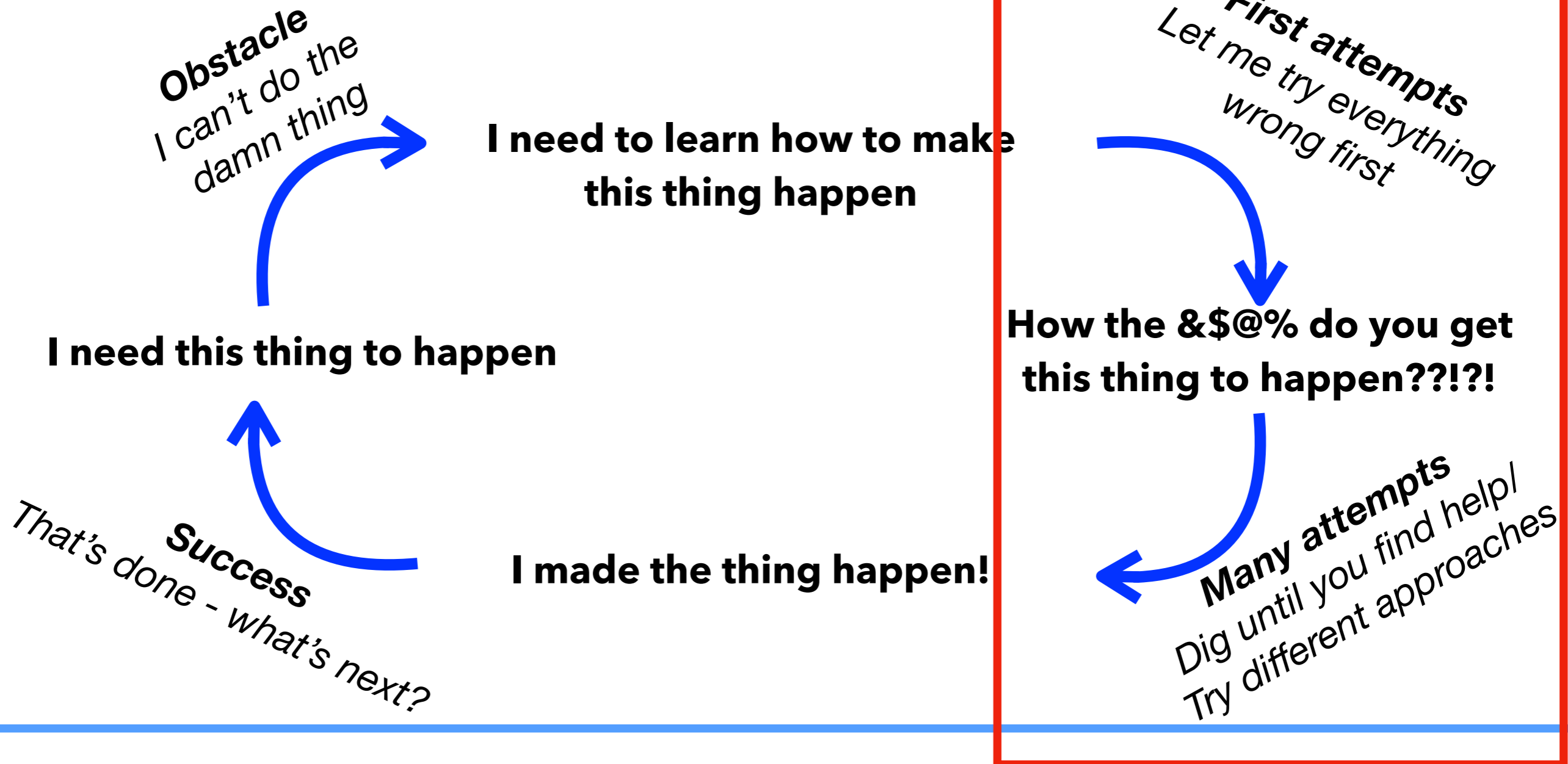
Part 2: Building Skills

The Circle of Skill Building



Part 2: Building Skills

The Circle of Skill Building



Part 2: Building Skills

What kind of projects should you work on?

- Sample games: Nice, but not required
- Q: What are the best kinds of projects?



Part 2: Building Skills

What kind of projects should you work on?

- **Finished** projects of anything in your discipline will do the job
- **Small** projects are great
- Small, reasonably-scoped, bite-sized, self-contained projects

Part 2: Building Skills

Examples

- Composition: Main theme, sample level scores, in-game music for a hypothetical project
- Art: Series of concept sketches, or 3d renders for a hypothetical project
- Game design: Design doc for a sample level of a hypothetical project
- Programming: Short single-screen prototype of a game mechanic for a hypothetical game

Part 2: Building Skills

Examples

- Composition: Main theme, sample level scores, in-game music for a **hypothetical** project
- Art: Series of concept sketches, or 3d renders for a **hypothetical** project
- Game design: Design doc for a sample level of a **hypothetical** project
- Programming: Short single-screen prototype of a game mechanic for a **hypothetical** game

Part 2: Building Skills

- The game itself **doesn't matter**
- **Practicing your skills** and **getting experience finishing** a project is what matters



Part 2: Building Skills

Do game jams!

- Online or in-person
 - Ludum dare: ludumdare.com
- Event-based ones in person
 - Global game jam: globalgamejam.org
 - Indie game jam calendar: indiegamejams.com

Part 2: Building Skills

Make an online portfolio!

“I hadn't released any projects when I was hired [at DreamSail], so I had to rely on my own personal experiments and demos. So since I didn't have the strongest body of work, I had to present it well and prove that, even with no releases, I knew what I was doing.”



—Neil Sveri, Programmer and Co-Founder | DreamSail Games

Part 2: Building Skills

- **Don't** make it super fancy
- **Do** use a site creation tool like WordPress, Squarespace or tumblr
- **Do** actually make it exist
- **Do** build upon it later
- **Do** do the *secret ultra portfolio sauce tip*
- Portfolio development is a skill too
- So is branding/marketing - gotta do it!

Part 2: Building Skills

Secret ultra portfolio sauce tip:

- **Only show your best work**
- Quality > quantity
- Deciders have limited time and mental bandwidth

Part 2: Building Skills

Optional: Think about presenting your projects in an interactive way

- Writers: Make a small Twine game (twinery.org) based on a story you wrote
- Artists: Make a reel, even for static assets
- Audio: Make sound replacement videos
- Game designers: Make pen & paper prototypes and upload the instructions how to print it

Part 2: Building Skills

Find a way to put your stuff in someone's hand

- Literally or metaphorically
- Get deciders thinking about your projects in a tactile way
- Aim to set you and your stuff apart
- Give them another chance of having it resonate

Part 2: Building Skills

Part 2 Takeaways:

- Define small-scoped projects you can finish
- Collaborate with people in game jams, or just use them for deadlines and structure
- Make an online portfolio, focusing on just presenting your best work, and maintain it

Part 3: Setting Expectations

“Looking back, I spent about 2 years breaking into the games industry by working on mods, independent puzzle games, and a highly experimental MMO. I thought I would never make it.”

—**Coray Seifert, Director of Production | Experiment 7**



Part 3: Setting Expectations

Not discussed often, but important

- It takes a while to break in when you're starting
- It's helpful to have an idea of how much time is involved so you don't get discouraged
- It's harder to track progress when you don't have an estimate to work with

Part 3: Setting Expectations

Three general categories:

1. Before college (middle/high school)
2. During college
3. After college/working world

- College: Not 100% required
- Secret lessons!



(Also old memes)

Part 3: Setting Expectations

1. Before college (middle/high school)

- Hope:
 - Release your own game!
 - Get rich!
 - Get hired by your favorite company somehow!

Part 3: Setting Expectations

1. Before college (middle/high school)
 - Realistic expectation:
 - Get positioned to look for jobs after college (or equivalent)
 - Transition from college to industry OR
 - Getting a non-game job after college to support yourself while improving your skills

Part 3: Setting Expectations

1. Before college (middle/high school)

- What to do?
 - Priority of focus:
 1. Skill building
 2. Competitive analysis
 3. Networking

Part 3: Setting Expectations

1. Before college (middle/high school)

- **Skill building**

- Make small projects, build your portfolio

Part 3: Setting Expectations

1. Before college (middle/high school)

- **Competitive analysis**

- Play games

- Play *a lot* of games

- Build your competitive analysis skills

Part 3: Setting Expectations

1. Before college (middle/high school)

- **Competitive analysis**

- Get exposed to different genres, games for different audiences
- Play some bad games - what makes them bad?
- Write game reviews - practice critique, deconstructing experiences, how you could improve them

Part 3: Setting Expectations

1. Before college (middle/high school)

- **Networking**

- Meet people and get other perspectives on what you're doing
- Online is fine



Part 3: Setting Expectations

1. Before college (middle/high school)

- **Networking**

- Find communities:

- Ludum Dare ludumdare.com

- TIG Source tigsource.com

- Invest in making contacts now

Part 3: Setting Expectations

2. During college

- Hope:
 - Graduate & immediately get a dream job at your favorite company!

Part 3: Setting Expectations

2. During college

- Realistic expectation:
 - It will take some time to get a game job (maybe a few years)
 - It will probably not be for a company you love
 - It will probably not be for the role you really want
 - They probably won't make your favorite kind of games

Part 3: Setting Expectations

2. During college

- Realistic expectation:
 - Stay afloat: Get a non-game job, live at home for the interim
 - Opportunity to develop professionalism: Put the work in first, reward comes later

Part 3: Setting Expectations

2. During college

- What to do:
 - Priority of focus:
 1. Skill building
 2. Portfolio building
 3. Networking
 4. Competitive analysis

Part 3: Setting Expectations

2. During college

- **Skill building**

- Make a lot of smaller projects, build portfolio
- Small projects are best for portfolios and for developing skills
- Sound familiar?

Part 3: Setting Expectations

2. During college

- **Portfolio building**

- Similar as skilling building in before college phase, with an emphasis on portfolio projects and concrete output
- You're closer to being ready for jobs, so you'll need to ramp up your portfolio and how you present yourself/your work

Part 3: Setting Expectations

2. During college

- **Networking**

- Building off from before college phase
- You're closer to getting ready for jobs
- Start making connections, even very early ones
- More experienced people can help you learn more and also introduce you to opportunities

Part 3: Setting Expectations

2. During college

- **Competitive analysis**

- Stretch that high education
- Why do you like your favorite games? What about them works? What about bad games doesn't work?
- Write game reviews - they're like extra papers you assign yourself!



Part 3: Setting Expectations

3. After college/working world

- Hope:
 - Your favorite game company will take a chance on you!

Part 3: Setting Expectations

3. After college/working world

- Expectation:
 - You'll need to put in serious work getting your portfolio together
 - Highly likely you'll need to build a decent network before anything happens

Part 3: Setting Expectations

3. After college/working world

- Expectation:
 - When you find a job, it may be entry-level at first and at a place you aren't crazy about
 - Be prepared to take a step down at first to get that experience

Part 3: Setting Expectations

3. After college/working world

- What to do:
 - Priority of focus:
 1. Skill building
 2. Portfolio building
 3. Networking

Part 3: Setting Expectations

3. After college/working world

- **Skill building**

- Build skills in the service of getting your portfolio up to speed
- Learn for the sake of learning, but with an eye toward deploying your learnings into a project that will add value to your portfolio

Part 3: Setting Expectations

3. After college/working world

- **Portfolio building**

"I made sure that every project I worked on, I took away one great screenshot, game design document, or scriptwriting sample. Prospective employers liked that I had the initiative to find a team, learn new tech, and finish anything, even if it was not quite at AAA level yet.



This portfolio was the only thing that got me a job in the industry. It's fine to list "Game Designer" or "CEO" of your startup on your resume, but if you don't have anything to show for it, it's very difficult to break into the industry."

—**Coray Seifert, Director of Production | Experiment 7**

Part 3: Setting Expectations

3. After college/working world

- **Networking**

- Once your portfolio is up, network with intention
- Meet people but don't pressure for jobs, learn more than anything else
- Let practical deadlines motivate you, but don't be desperate
- You want to accelerate the timetable as much as you can, but you can't rush it

Part 3: Setting Expectations

3. After college/working world

- **Networking**

- Apply to jobs when you feel ready, but be prepared for nothing much to come of it
- Way better results when recommended by someone internally or connected somehow
- Don't waste time applying for jobs way above your level/experience

Part 3: Setting Expectations

Secret Lessons Revealed!

Before college:

During college:

After college:

1. Skill building

1. Skill building

1. Skill building

2. Competitive analysis

2. Portfolio building

2. Portfolio building

3. Networking

3. Networking

3. Networking

4. Competitive analysis

Part 3: Setting Expectations

Part 3 Takeaways:

- The number one thing to do will always be skill building

Before college:

During college:

After college:

1. Skill building

1. Skill building

1. Skill building

2. Competitive analysis

2. Portfolio building

2. Portfolio building

3. Networking

3. Networking

3. Networking

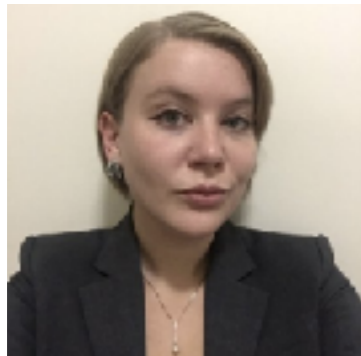
4. Competitive analysis

Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

“Practice your skills and make connections. You need both skills and connections to have a shot.”



—**Josh Raab, Associate Game Designer | Big Huge Games**



“The best way that I’ve found to keep moving up in industry is through networking and paying your dues.”

—**Caitlin L. Conner, Lead Narrative Designer | Gameloft**

Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

- Networking? Of course!
- Get some of that networking
- Networking is great
- You should do it



Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

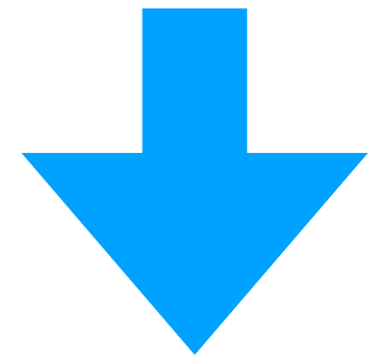
- People love to talk about the importance of networking when getting a job in games...
- ...but it can be hard to distill why it's important
- One thought: Meet people so they can get you jobs
 - Getting jobs is good!
- There's more to effective networking than that

Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

- Multiple purposes of a good network:
 - Help you get a job, by bringing opportunities to you
 - Help you improve your skills, by bringing education and feedback to you
 - Help you get better at working with others
 - Help you better evaluate others' skills
 - Help you learn how to teach others



YOU



THEM

Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network




- How to put together a good network?
- Go to events focused on game development
 - Like GDEX! Hooray!
 - Biggest is GDC, the Game Developers Conference
 - If you're in school, go to a game club if there is one
 - If there isn't, make one!



Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

- How to put together a good network?
- Go to events focused on game development
 - IGDA (International Game Developers Association) has chapters everywhere
 - Columbus has COGG

Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

- Networking is best done in person...
- ...but online game dev-message boards are good too
- Game dev communities are pretty inclusive and helpful
 - Everyone wants to improve
 - Everyone is here it because *they*  *love*  *games* 

Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

- Find out why they're there
 - What are they working on?
 - What they're good at?
 - What they like to do?
 - What they need from other people and can't do?

Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

- Set yourself apart: Be a helper
 - Keep an eye out for ways to help people you meet
 - Building a network is a long process and it takes a lot of time...
 - ...but it's worth it
 - You get out of it what you put in

Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

- Help by identifying what people need and putting people together
- You become the matchmaker, you help people out, you create opportunities, you create value for others

Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

- Personally, helping people or introducing them to useful contacts is intrinsically satisfying
 - Real-life fetch quests!
 - Nerdy? Hell yeah!
- People will remember that and will remember you as the one who made it happen



Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

- Remember: This will take time, so don't get anxious or feel like you're not doing enough
- Regular meetings/events will help
- Keep doing things and showing up!

Part 4: Building a Multi-Purpose Network

Part 4 Takeaways:

- Networks serve multiple purposes
- It's not just about you, it's about helping the community (which includes you)
- Building a good network takes time - be patient, keep showing up, find ways to help

Part 5: Developing the Right Mindset

"I think the biggest roadblock for people trying to get into the industry is their own apprehension. I've met plenty of people with the excuse of "I just don't know how to start". The best way to start is to start."

**—Neil Sveri, Programmer and Co-Founder |
DreamSail Games**



Part 5: Developing the Right Mindset

“Being proactive at the right time and in the right way makes all the difference when turning an interest into a career.”

—***Evan Berman,***
Senior Community Manager |
Bethesda Softworks



Part 5: Developing the Right Mindset

“I always tried to find out why I wasn’t chosen for a job so that I could apply that knowledge to my next attempt.”

—**John McLean-Foreman**
Narrative Director/Lead Writer |
Freelance



Part 5: Developing the Right Mindset

- When starting out, it's going to take some time to figure out what you're doing
- If you're doing the work, it's still going to take time to get "good enough"
- Role of luck and timing: Based on the opportunities that come up or you create for yourself

Part 5: Developing the Right Mindset

The right mindset is:

1. You're not going to do it overnight
2. This is a hard thing to do
3. You are improving
4. You will get there

Part 5: Developing the Right Mindset

1. You're not going to do it overnight

- Notch: Wrote text games since he was a kid, worked for King.com for years before Minecraft
- Alexander Bruce: Worked on Antichamber for 7 years before releasing
- Eric Barone : Worked on Stardew Valley for 4 years before releasing



Part 5: Developing the Right Mindset

1. You're not going to do it overnight

- There is no such thing as an overnight success
 - It just looks that way from the outside
 - From the inside, they've been spending time building skills, building a network, coming up with ways to showcase their work and get the word out

Part 5: Developing the Right Mindset

2. This is a hard thing to do

- Lots of people want to do it, not everyone will make it
- Requires discipline, creativity, persistence, passion
- There will be stumbling points, but you have to keep going
- It has to mean enough to you to keep pushing when things get hard

Part 5: Developing the Right Mindset

3. You are improving

- Make it easy on yourself to quantify it - have frequent, completed projects you can look at
- Game jam games are good
- Tiny proof of concepts, to prove out an idea or try a new tool

Part 5: Developing the Right Mindset

3. You are improving

- When you have enough of these projects and look back, eventually they'll seem terrible
 - That's exactly what you want to see!
 - Current you > past you
 - The easier you can make it on yourself to see how much you're improving, the better you'll feel

Part 5: Developing the Right Mindset

4. You will get there

- Somebody will get those jobs
- Games will always need people to make them
- Those people are the ones who work hard, who keep pushing, who keep improving, who keep helping others, who keep creating and recognizing opportunities
- Do these things, and with a little luck, you will get there

Part 6: What to Expect from the Industry

“Don't be afraid to take low level jobs and equally important, don't be afraid to leave them, especially if it turns into a bad situation.”



—***Raison Varner, Sound Designer and Composer | Gearbox Software***

“Instability is an inherent part of our industry, unfortunately.”



—***Evan Skolnick, (Former) Senior Writer | Telltale Games***

Part 6: What to Expect from the Industry

After you've made it in - now what?

- Your first game job company probably won't be your last
- Learn as much as you can
 - Being in an environment where games are being made all day will be like nothing you've seen before
- Ask what people in other disciplines are doing
 - Don't pester them, but show curiosity

Part 6: What to Expect from the Industry

After you've made it in - now what?

- Fill those missing knowledge gaps you have about the rest of the process
- Stay hungry
- Networking doesn't stop when you break in
 - Your coworkers will probably work elsewhere in their careers too

Part 6: What to Expect from the Industry

- Be proactive, but careful of your own time
- Volunteer for projects that seem interesting, go above and beyond
- Yet don't let yourself get exploited
- Crunch is a real thing, and it burns people out
- Excessive overtime is a sign of bad scheduling and bad management and is not a badge of honor



Part 6: What to Expect from the Industry

- If coming to games from another industry, adjust your professional expectations and keep an eye on them
 - Will most likely require a step down in salary, especially for entry-level positions
- Every year there's a game developer salary survey, usually compiled by Gamasutra and MCVUK
- Read it to get an idea of how your salary compares to the survey

Part 6: What to Expect from the Industry

- Keep an eye out for the future
- If there are signs that the studio is closing or layoffs are coming, look around and make a jump before you have no choice
- Take control of the progression of your career



Part 6: What to Expect from the Industry

Part 6 Takeaways:

- Learn as much as you can, be a sponge
- Don't let yourself be exploited
- Be aware of salary realities
- Take charge of your career

Conclusion

- Getting into games is challenging, hard, difficult
- It can be an engine for personal growth and a catalyst for maturation
- In my experience the best part is the people



Conclusion

- People who want to dedicate their life's work to games
- Combining art and technology and psychology and motivation and joy and fundamental truths of human expression
- Use amazing tools to make weird interactive art
- Bringing experiences into being that didn't exist before

Good Luck Have Fun

Thanks GDEX!

Slides at benserviss.com/talks



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