

10 Steps to Becoming a

PROFESSIONAL INDIE GAME DESIGNER





Image from Torchlight II™. ©2014 Runic Games®, Inc. All rights reserved.

10 Steps to Becoming a

Professional Indie Game Designer

We're in the midst of a surging "indie" movement—indie music, indie movies, and indie games are thriving as the power to produce and distribute creative material becomes more and more accessible to anyone with a computer and access to the internet. If video games are your passion, chances are you've considered what it would be like to create your own. If you're of the indie mindset, perhaps you'd like to do it your way, on your time, avoiding the big corporate studios.

Indie games (short for independent video games) are produced by multi-talented individuals or small teams, without the funding and resources of major game studios. It's all part of the charm, giving many of the games a homespun feel and unique character.

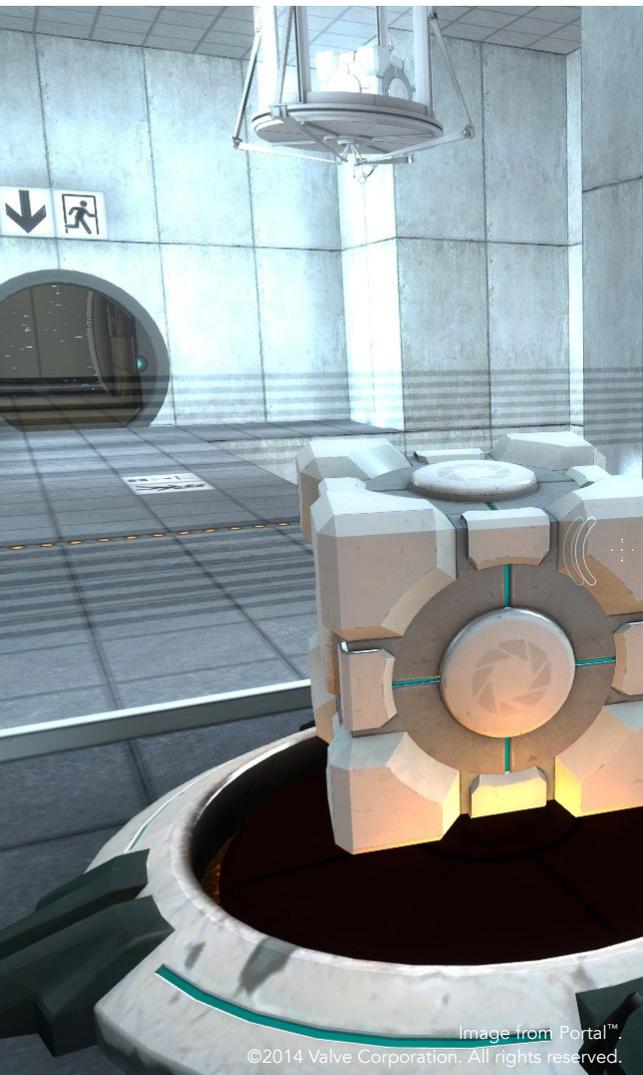
Indie games (short for independent video games) are produced by multi-talented individuals or small teams, without the funding and resources of major game studios. It's all part of the charm, giving many of the games a homespun feel and unique character. Most Indie Game Developers rely on digital distribution and online promotion to spread the word about their games. Some indie games gain a small following, while others take off, like Minecraft, the increasingly popular indie sandbox game from Mojang. Since its release in 2009, Minecraft has surpassed 20 million unit sales across all platforms.

So, what's it like to be an Indie Game Developer?

Since indie games don't require publisher approval, Indie Game Developers are free to make their own important artistic decisions. For many, it's a rush to see the creative process through from start to finish, unhindered by a corporate vision. Extremely driven Indie Game Developers write, code, animate, score, market, and distribute entire games singlehandedly. Indie game team members typically tackle multiple aspects of a game's creation at once.

A professional Indie Game Developer must possess creative vision, technical skill (or a skillful team), and extreme dedication. Indie game development can be laborious, but for many, the satisfaction of creating a game from scratch and releasing it to the public is worth it. Even if you opt for a different career down the line, the gaming industry teaches skills that are applicable to a variety of tech-related jobs.

Extremely driven Indie Game Developers write, code, animate, score, market, and distribute entire games singlehandedly.



Transition from playing games to making games in 10 steps:

1. Play games and practice modding.
2. Take game design and game development classes.
3. Come up with your own game premise and concept.
4. Stay current with indie game publications, websites, and blogs.
5. Network and build a team.
6. Earn a relevant degree.
7. Fund your game.
8. Learn business fundamentals and market your game.
9. Be realistic and don't get discouraged.
10. Continue to game, learn, and network.



STEP 01: Play games and practice modding.

Spend time playing a variety of games, studying your favorites to determine what makes them fun and engaging. Beginners can test level design within Minecraft—the sandbox game allows users to build anything they can imagine, without needing to code. Games like Portal™ 2, Torchlight II™, Team Fortress™ 2, Warcraft® III, and StarCraft® II, also allow “modding” (short for “game modification”), enabling players to customize levels, lighting, character skins, and more. Share your mods with other users and request feedback. Learning how to edit features within existing games will come in handy later as you design your own game from the ground up.

STEP 02: Take game design and game development classes.

An understanding of relevant software and programming languages is essential for an Indie Game Developer. Check if your school offers courses in game design, game development, or programming. The following iD Tech Camps and iD Game Design & Development Academy courses are also available:

iD Tech Camps | Ages 7-17

- Adventures in Game Design – Minecraft
- Adventures in Game Design – Platform & Racing Games
- 3D Game Design – Racing Games
- 3D Game Design with Minecraft
- Fencing & Video Game Creation
- FPS Game Design
- Game Design & Graphic Arts Hybrid
- Game Design for iPhone® & iPad®
- Role-Playing Game Design with RPG Maker®
- 3D Level Design – Portal™ 2 & Team Fortress® 2
- Autodesk® Maya® – 3D Modeling & Animation
- Fencing & Level Design with Minecraft
- FPS Game Design – Unreal® Engine
- Game Modding & Java™ Coding – Minecraft
- Game Programming for Apple® iOS® & Android™ with Unity
- RPG Game Design with Torchlight™ II

iD Game Design & Development Academy | Ages 13-18

- iD Game Studios 101
- Game Development for iPhone® & Android™ with Unity & JavaScript
- Game Development – Minecraft
- 3D Modeling & Animation with Autodesk® Maya®
- 3D Level Design – Unreal® Engine

These iD Tech courses build your understanding of relevant software, boost confidence, and foster vital 21st century problem solving, critical thinking, communication, and collaborative skills. You'll also network with other students and instructors who share similar interests—this could prove useful down the line.



Aqualux is an indie game created by Alex, an iD Tech alumni.

STEP 03:
Come up with your
own game premise
and concept.

In an interview conducted by iD Tech 365 students, Indie Game Designer Nick Yonge of krangGAMES said, "Inspiration can be found anywhere, at any time. The other day, I heard a song online, and that one song has inspired me to create a sci-fi action game trilogy!" Nick's games have now been downloaded over 30 million times. Keep a notebook with you so you can jot down ideas at any time—you never know where inspiration may strike.

"Inspiration can be found anywhere, at any time. The other day, I heard a song online, and that one song has inspired me to create a sci-fi action game trilogy!"

– Nick Yonge, Indie Game Designer, krangGAMES



Image from fullindie.com

When devising the plot of your game, keep in mind the macro and the micro. The macro is the big picture—the basic storyline, characters, setting, game type (fighting, puzzle, racing, etc.), and goal. The micro encapsulates the details. What abilities will the character possess? What will the levels look like and how will they function? Will there be "boss" battles? These planning stages are crucial so you have a road map when you go to program your game.

You'll also need to decide if you are going to program your game yourself (or assign the job to a team member), or if you'll use an API (Application Programming Interface) like Unreal® Engine, Unity, or GameSalad®. Research carefully and choose an API that can publish your game to the platform(s) of your choice.

STEP 04:
Stay current
with indie game
publications,
websites, and
blogs.

As your own manager, you must take full responsibility for educating yourself and keeping up on the latest games, trends, tips, and tools in Indie Gaming. Connecting with other Indie Game Developers in online communities can help you stay motivated. Read books about game development and follow prominent industry bloggers. Being "indie" doesn't mean you have to go it alone.



Start with the resources below.

Please note: This is a partial list.

Websites & Blogs

- pixelprospector.com
- indiegames.com
- indiedb.com
- indiegamehq.com
- tigsources.com

Magazines

- Grab It Magazine (grabitmagazine.com)
- The Indie Game Magazine (indiegamemag.com)
- Indie Games Developer (indiegamesdeveloper.com)

Books

- *Video Game Programming for Kids*
- *Visual Basic Game Programming for Teens*
- *Game Design (21st Century Skills Innovation Library: Makers As Innovators)*
- *The Crazy Careers of Video Game Designers (Shockzone – Games and Gamers)*
- *A Game Design Vocabulary*
- *Video Games (Calling All Innovators: a Career for You)*

STEP 05: Network and build a team.

Networking is crucial for Indie Game Developers. Attend indie gaming conventions including the Independent Games Festival, IndieCade, iFest, Boston Festival of Indie Games, and Indie Game Jam. It can also be helpful to visit larger gaming conventions: Gen Con, PAX, or Mag Fest.

“Having been surrounded with game developers every single day for about half a year, I have come to realize that they are exactly my type of people. Smart, analytical, weird, zany, eccentric, genius, technical, and passionate are all adjectives that can be used to describe the majority of game developers.”

– Eddie Lee, Indie Graphics Programmer, Former Q-Games Employee

These events provide ample opportunities for brainstorming, learning, networking, and collaborating with like-minded individuals who may be interested in bringing their talents to your team. As Indie Graphics Programmer Eddie Lee states on his blog, “Having been surrounded with game developers every single day for about half a year, I have come to realize that they are exactly my type of people. Smart, analytical, weird, zany, eccentric, genius, technical, and passionate are all adjectives that can be used to describe the majority of game developers.”

STEP 06: Earn a relevant degree.



Image from schooloftomorrowusa.com

Pursuing a degree in game development or a related field is an excellent way to expand your skills and meet peers who share your passion. Here is a ranking of the top 15 colleges that offer game development majors, courtesy of the Princeton Review (2013):

1. University of Utah (Salt Lake City, UT)
2. University of Southern California (Los Angeles, CA)
3. DigiPen Institute of Technology (Redmond, WA)
4. Rochester Institute of Technology (Rochester, NY)
5. Massachusetts Institute of Technology (Cambridge, MA)
6. Drexel University (Philadelphia, PA)
7. Shawnee State University (Portsmouth, OH)
8. Savannah College of Art and Design (Savannah, GA)
9. The Art Institute of Vancouver (Vancouver, British Columbia / CAN)
10. Michigan State University (East Lansing, MI)
11. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (Troy, NY)
12. Worcester Polytechnic Institute (Worcester, MA)
13. Becker College (Worcester, MA)
14. New England Institute of Technology (East Greenwich, RI)
15. North Carolina State University (Raleigh, NC)

If none of the aforementioned schools are practical for you, look for colleges that offer any of the following subjects or majors:

- Interactive Media & Game Development
- Computer Science
- Computing/Information Systems or Information Technology
- Engineering or Mathematical Sciences
- 3D Modeling & Animation
- Graphic Design and Digital Media

Even history, literature, mythology, sociology, and psychology can be useful, especially for game designers and conceptual artists.

STEP 07: Fund your game.

Many Indie Game Developers rely on crowd-funding (e.g. Kickstarter, Indiegogo, GoFundMe, etc.) to create and publish their games. Others opt to search for a willing publisher. Since the vast majority of Indie Game Developers do not start off with a budget, their games are distributed digitally. If you choose to organize a crowd-funding campaign, do your research. Some platforms, like Kickstarter, will take a cut of 5% if your project is funded. Indiegogo takes 4% if your project is funded, or 9% if you do not meet your goal, while GoFundMe takes 5% from each donation you receive. With each platform, there are additional payment processing fees averaging 3-5% depending on the vendor.

KICKSTARTER

STEP 08:
Learn business
fundamentals and
market your game.

Take an introductory course in business so you can talk-the-talk if someone makes you an offer for your game down the road. In the meantime, make sure to read up online about how to effectively market your game. Set aside some funds for advertising. Create a Facebook page, Twitter account, and blog for your game. Social media is vital to the success of indie games. Design a logo, and make it memorable. Remember that as an Indie Game Developer, you are not just responsible for creating the game. You're also in charge of building a brand for your game. If you're not artistically inclined, recruit a teammate who has an eye for catchy colors, fonts, and design.

STEP 09:
Be realistic
and don't get
discouraged.

Remember that it's okay to start small. You don't need an expensive computer, pricy software, or even a whole lot of coding knowledge to get started. APIs like GameSalad® and Construct are available for free download. Pay attention to what other Indie Game Developers are creating. See what's working and what isn't, and plan your own game accordingly.



Image from GameSalad®. ©2014 GameSalad®. All rights reserved.

A career in Indie Game Development is not a walk in the park. However, for those who are motivated by a creative vision, the journey is feasible. Be meticulous in your planning, stay organized, and surround yourself with positive teammates who inspire you to bring out your best qualities, and your creativity.

STEP 10:
Continue to
game, learn,
and network.

For those in a DIY (Do It Yourself) career such as Indie Game Development, the learning never stops. Continue reading pertinent websites and publications, and keep your coding skills polished. The industry is always changing. Take new courses and expand your knowledge.

Make a point to attend an indie gaming convention at least once per year to network and stay on top of the latest developments in the indie gaming world. Keep in mind that the technical skills and 21st century skills you learn as an Indie Game Developer (critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration, and innovation) can benefit you in a variety of tech fields. Work hard, have fun, and game on!

For more information about our
Game Design & Development courses, visit iDTech.com.

©2014 Runic Games, Inc. Runic Games and Torchlight II are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Runic Games, Inc. throughout the world. ©2014 Valve Corporation. Valve, Team Fortress, and Portal are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Valve Corporation in the U.S. and/or other countries. ©2014 Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. Warcraft, StarCraft, Blizzard, and Blizzard Entertainment are trademarks or registered trademarks of Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. in the US and/or other countries. All rights reserved. All other trademarks are property of their respective owners.



iD Tech
CAMPS, ACADEMIES & ONLINE