

As cofounder of the CMU Game Creation Society (www.gamecreation.org), a highly active independent developer for 11 years (www.deleongames.com), and a Technical Game Designer with Electronic Arts in Los Angeles (two time intern, soon full-time), Chris DeLeon has always been willing and eager to help budding developers get started. The following questions are from a letter sent to CMU's School of Computer Science.

1. What type of education is needed to become a Video Game Designer?

There are several jobs which are often loosely categorized as "Video Game Designer." Which position(s) you are specifically interested in affects which educational options I recommend exploring:

- **Software Engineer**: These developers program (usually in C++) the workings of the video game world. Most have an undergraduate degree in Computer Science; some continue their education into grad school with a focus on graphics, artificial intelligence, or other subfields within Computer Science.
- **Producer**: This is primarily a business role, in which the developer coordinates the efforts and objectives of many other contributors on the team. This generally involves an education in Business Administration, ideally with a minor or double major in Computer Science, Art, or another field utilized by content creators (it helps to speak the same jargon as the people you manage!).
- **Game Designer**: Game Designers conceptualize and prototype features, levels, and interactions. Designers must exercise an eye for gameplay balance and pacing, and be able to work within the constraints imposed by the technology and team's vision. A designer often has experience modding (editing and creating content for published games), and it helps to have independent games created over the years to demonstrate key skills. An education in Computer Science can help distinguish your capabilities from others seeking these positions. Most Game Designers have years of experience in the industry filling another role, often beginning their careers as Software Engineers.
- **Writer**: The writer on a team helps steer the vision and content for a game outside of gameplay aspects – back story, character definition, dialogue scripting, and so on. Education and experience in writing definitely helps, but strong portfolio work is a must.
- **Content Creator**: "Content Creator" actually describes a variety of distinct positions: artists, animators, composers, and so on. Education and experience in the related field (3D modeling, animation, music/sound composition), preferably with skills relevant to both digital work and traditional expression.

2. What school or college is best suited for my career?

Any school with a strong undergraduate Computer Science degree can be a good start. My experience with Carnegie Mellon University has been very positive, but I have also heard good things from my peers at Stanford, Cornell, and other peer-institutions. Schools specializing in content creation (Full Sail, Guild Hall, Digipen) may be something to consider if you are interested in working on art, animation, music or sound, and even if you are interested in design/engineering since they can provide strong collaborative work environments.

3. What type of salary can one receive as a Video Game Designer?

With a few years experience, a Software Engineer may earn ~\$65,000/year, a Game Designer may earn ~\$47,500/year, and a Producer may earn ~\$60,000/year. Salaries vary greatly by company, experience, responsibilities, local cost of living, and numerous other factors.

4. Are there any responsibilities or requirements for being a Video Game Designer?

A game developer needs to have a passion for video games, an active imagination, and competency with a wide range of technical skills: computer use, programming, math, and understanding of the latest technology/industry news. Understanding industry history beyond the latest hits – classic games, famous designers, historical business and technological precedents – can help establish credibility, but that type of background isn't essential.

5. Is there any advice you can give me to help me pursue this career?

Start early, find books or internet resources to learn C++ programming (I advise *against* using "Game Maker" and other software tools to shortcut learning), and try to get experience creating finished games. Start *extremely* simple (number guessing text games, Tic-Tac-Toe, Simon Says, Pac-Man...) and build upon that. Having finished games in your portfolio can do a lot to help demonstrate your relevant abilities and passion. Along the way you'll also pick up many of the skills which are needed for doing this line of work professionally. As you get older and more experienced, seek opportunities to work on team projects to learn more about teamwork and integrating work from multiple contributors.

6. Could you please send pamphlets or any additional information on the career of Video Game Designer?

Check www.gamecreation.org and www.deleongames.com for more resources, and feel free to leave questions at either website's message board.

7. Would it be possible to interview you at your convenience?

Absolutely. An interview by e-mail would be most convenient, since it allows me to think over the questions for awhile after receiving them, and reply when I have free time. My e-mail address is chris@deleongames.com.

Thanks for writing, and good luck!
-Chris DeLeon
www.deleongames.com