

(Note: This article was originally published in the [2014 GameCareerGuide Digital Edition](#); minor edits have been done for corrections and formatting)

Your Job Is An RPG

Advancing Your Continuing Career Within The Game Industry

By Sheri Rubin

So here you are - all those years of hard work building your brand, learning your craft, and networking have paid off, and you're living the dream as a video game developer. Now you just have to do well at your job, and the rest will take care of itself...

...except it won't.

The reality is that to not only get in but stay in this industry you'll need to put in some hard work both in and outside of your normal jobs or projects. It doesn't matter if you're a generalist or a specialist, if you've been in the industry for 2 months or 2 years (or even 2 decades!) - it doesn't even matter if you're "indie" or "AAA" - the same rules apply for everyone, and wearing rose-colored glasses won't help you one bit.

One of the biggest misconceptions people have is thinking once you've gotten a job in the industry you've already proven yourself worthy, so you can always get that next job. Believing in that misconception can be a costly, time consuming mistake as you can find yourself back at square one, without a job, having to "re-prove" yourself all over again.

Instead, you need to think about your career as if you were in an RPG, and learn how to equip, train, and become a successful adventurer.

The reality is that this industry is constantly changing, and one skill you honed to perfection may get nerfed in 6 months, becoming irrelevant. You may be tromping through forests only to find out that most mercenaries have taken to sea, because boats are the new way citizens like to travel.

If you're running your character (aka you) correctly though, you will constantly hear the beloved "ding!" and get access to the best loot and best adventures.

So how do you level up? You start with the character creation process (goals); procure your equipment and armor (personal brand); move on to training (professional development); and then go out and find the best bars, inns, and local festivals (networking).

Creating Your Character

As you prepare to create your character make sure you read up on all the classes (disciplines) to choose from, as each has their own strengths and weaknesses. There are also different ways you can go about developing as an adventurer, from training up in a specific set of skills or spells (e.g. shaders and automation) to rising up the ranks in a guild (e.g. seniors and lead).

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](#).

Since you're in the industry, you've already done the prep work of choosing your class, figuring out your base stats and skills, and setting out to get experience as a junior adventurer. But what happens when you level up: Have you figured out what you want your character to do and be as it gets more experience? What feats (Improved Crash Finding) will you choose? Where will you put your skill points (rigging, textures, lighting)? Should you go multi-class (designer/programmer) or focus on a sub-class (quest writer)?

The best way to ensure you have the career you want is to decide what paths you want to take. If you have no idea what kind of adventurer you want to be at level 20 then you'll spend levels 1-19 just randomly rolling the dice and hoping it all works out – if you can keep your character alive that long! Instead, if you think a bit farther than your current quest you can make sure you're finding the right equipment, learning the right spells, going on the right quests, and hanging out with the right adventurers.

So take a moment to really stop and think about what it is that you want long-term. What goals do you have and why do you have them? Do you want to become known for a specialty (environments)? Do you want to lead a guild (creative director)? Become a trainer (game educator)? The answers to those questions and more will really help you define your path and make progress a lot easier as you take the next step in creating your character: procuring equipment and armor.

Procuring Your Equipment and Armor

Whether you prefer to travel solo as an indie or in a party, you still need to set yourself up for success and come across as authentic and credible. For example, if you were a software engineering lead, but you couldn't write a single line of code, your compatriots probably wouldn't trust you to lead them into battle.

You need to constantly be aware of and maintaining your personal brand. Whether you know it or not, you have one - your brand is a set of characteristics, style choices, and other things that represent you. It's in the way you talk, the way you look, your profiles, your business cards...basically everything!

How you appear to others and act towards others can often affect your career as you move through the industry, because it directly ties into your ability to network and interface with other people. It can mean the difference between rising through the ranks or being shamed out of the industry.

So before you run off to the smithy buying up silver chainmail or red robes let's figure out your brand. The things you need to know are:

- What do you think is your brand?
- Would outsiders agree that's your brand?
- Is your branding consistent?
- How can you change or update your brand?

What do you think is your brand?

You need to know who you are in order to cultivate your brand, but the key here is you need to know who you *really* are not who you *think* you are or who you *want* to be.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Would outsiders agree that's your brand?

Ever have a coworker who says – and tries to act like - they are a reliable, dependable teammate but all you see is someone who is late to work, doesn't finish their tasks, and constantly screws up? That's someone whose idea of who they are does not match up with how the world sees them.

Is your branding consistent?

Are you portraying yourself as a serious professional on your website and social media profiles but your resume is in Comic Sans (the horror!) and your blog posts are all animated gifs? That is not showing off a consistent brand and will leave others confused about what to expect from you – especially when considering you for a project/job.

Let me be clear, I am not saying that you have to be and act completely serious and “professional” all of the time. You could choose to present yourself in all situations as quirky or laid back, or make it clear in your branding that you are laid back but can be serious and professional when the situation warrants it – e.g. during contract negotiations with a publisher.

What I am saying is that no matter who you are and which way you go with your brand, you do need to a) make your presentation consistent and b) understand the potential pros and cons of your choice.

How can you change or update your brand?

Although some of your traits, behaviors, and personality may be mostly immutable (you just can't help being Chaotic Neutral, can you?) it doesn't mean your brand is set in stone. There are things you can do to change, update, and maintain your brand without losing your authentic self.

“5 Words or Phrases” Self-Assessment

So let's figure out your brand so that you can then pick out the equipment you need to be a successful adventurer. One of the easiest ways to begin getting a handle on your personal brand is to complete the “5 Words or Phrases” self-assessment.

This is a 3-step exercise (with a bonus step for the overachievers!) I created as a very simple method to make sure the inner you matches the outer you. I cover this in more detail (see Resources) in *It Doesn't Matter Who You Are* - complete with a downloadable worksheet - but here, in brief, are the descriptions for the three main steps (plus the bonus step!) that comprise this exercise:

Step 1: Ask yourself who you are

Write down five words or phrases that you think describes yourself – the current you, not who you were or who you want to be. This is not how you think others perceive you, but your own feelings about yourself.

Step 2: Seek insight from people you trust

Find at least five trustworthy people who know you (at any level) who can be honest, even brutally so. Ask them to give you five words or phrases – negative or positive - that they feel describe and define you as a person to them.

Step 3: Compare and contrast

Compare the two sets of answers to really assess your self-awareness. If you said you were punctual and hardworking and your friends agreed that's great. If, instead, they said you were lazy and late that's still great. At least you now know that others see you differently, and better yet, you can do something about it!

Bonus Step: The 5 words you wish to be

Consider completing the extra step of writing down the five words or phrases with which you would like to be used to describe you in the future. This gives you a goal to shoot for and allows you to create actionable steps to help you get there.

Selecting the Right Armor, Weapons, Tools, and Other Equipment

Now that you have your goals and you've figured out your brand, it's time to head to the market and pick up the items you need to complete your brand and set you up for success in your quests. Maybe all the armor you purchase is a certain color (I usually wear or carry something purple to most industry events) or you may need to build out your portfolio to post on the town bulletin board. Perhaps you need to outfit yourself with clothes to wear at your day job, and clothes for speaking at conferences. Here is a sample list of things you might have in your inventory when you're done shopping to furnish your brand:

- Clothes (Doesn't have to be suits and ties, but don't look like a hobo either)
- Business cards (You need your own, not just your company's cards)
- Website/Blog (Preferably on your own domain – see below)
- Portfolio (yes, even for producers!)
- Social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc.)
- Professional email and domain (no sexy mama85@domain.com please!)
- Multiple, tailored elevator pitches (you need different pitches for different things)
- Resume, game credits list, etc. (and always keep it updated!)

Once you've purchased all your gear it's time to start your training!

Training Your Character

So far you've figured out your base class, your stats, what kind of adventurer you want to be, and bought the equipment you'll need to get going. All good adventurers know that training is an essential part to being a valuable mercenary – and to staying alive!

Training, aka professional development, is another crucial piece of the character building process that is getting and staying in the industry. You have to constantly be learning and growing and improving yourself and your craft. Why is this so crucial?

It's crucial because:

- **It helps you deal with an industry that is constantly changing** - the popular engines, languages, tools, and platforms of today aren't always the same tomorrow
- **It keeps you relevant and valuable** – ensuring you're up to date on best practices and allows you to contribute to lots of different projects/tasks. This helps you avoid the chopping block and makes you more valuable as a job candidate

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

SHERIRUBIN.COM

CAREER RESOURCES

- **It increases your credibility** – you're staying on top of and able to talk about current areas in your craft, giving you more chances for getting speaking gigs, deals, and work
- **It offers you more options** – you have more jobs you qualify for, more freelance jobs you can earn, etc.

Although each class has different spells or skills they may train in there are places you can go to help you figure out what to train in that are fairly universal for all characters:

- **Your boss/management** – duh! - talk to your boss and the leaders you respect at your company and ask them how got there, what you can do, where they see the company going
- **Those in your desired job** – if you want to be a lead, go talk to a lead; if you want to be a designer, go talk to designers – ask them what they feel is critical to do their job, what they are learning now
- **Trade press articles/surveys** – look at what developer press outlets and trade organizations like ESA/UKIE are saying is trending for platforms, tools, engines, and other areas of the industry
- **Professional associations** – go to the IGDA or your discipline's related association (such as PMI for project managers) and read up there on trends and best practices
- **Current job descriptions** – look at what people are asking for in current job descriptions in the areas you're interested in: what they are looking for now, what's gaining in popularity, and what skills/software/ experience you don't have yet that they want

Once you know what you need to train in, you can find the right resources to make sure your character is in a battle-ready state. There are many ways for you to learn new skills or hone your craft but a few of the major areas include: internal company resources; online libraries; virtual and physical courses; and game development events (such as conferences and jams).

If you still feel like you need more training or some of those places can't teach you the specific skill you need, there are a few other places you could check out as well: game dev groups like IGDA Chapters and SIGs, industry nights, and co-ops; online groups/forums like deviantART, StackExchange, or TIGSource; specific groups/programs like Toastmasters, IGDA Scholars, GameMentorOnline, and Scrum Alliance; even you. Yes, YOU!

You can make your own games or apps; volunteer; read books and blogs; watch or listen to creative media or find mentors; and so much more! Just use your imagination, keep an eye out for what's coming on the horizon, and watch what other adventurers or guild mates are doing.

There is not a single adventurer I know - even with decades of experience or multi-million dollar blockbusters on their bios - who is not constantly learning, growing, and challenging themselves to get better. You have to be there learning right along with them!

Finding Great Bars and Local Festivals

In order to get jobs and go on epic quests you inevitably will have to find your way to a bar, guild, local festival, or similar, in order to meet people and prove your worthiness as a mercenary. In the non-RPG world this is referred to by most people as "networking" or "schmoozing" by others.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

SHERIRUBIN.COM

CAREER RESOURCES

What is networking? Networking is about connecting, building relationships, and gaining access. It's also about having support systems and paying it forward. Most importantly, it's about learning and growing and opening up opportunities for you now and in the future. Networking can also mean the difference between getting stuck running fetch quests versus getting a chance to build up a party and complete a massive raid.

Let me make sure this is crystal clear: **Everyone has to network. Period.**

You network because:

- You want a job, a sale, a contract
- You want to get press for your game (or press for you, or a speaking gig, or...a thousand other options)
- You do it because you want to get new skills, responsibilities, or promotions

But above all else you do it because sooner or later everyone needs help – even you. Whether you are the one who needs help or you can provide the help, this is a critical piece to keeping yourself in the game. Proper networking, professional development, and branding helps you in so many areas, including job searching, promotions, game deals, and speaking gigs.

The Basics of Networking

Before you head off to the local watering hole, you should at the very least know the basic and intermediate level skills of networking. So here are the fundamental things you need to know how to do before you start carousing it up with others:

- Shower or bathe yourself
- Brush your teeth, use mouthwash and breath mints/strips
- Put on deodorant
- Take a comb or brush to your hair
- Use a mirror to make sure you look put together
- Mind your manners
- Carry business cards with you

While I wish I didn't have to tell people this, there are, unfortunately, some (usually the barbarians and ogres!) who just don't seem to have learned them yet.

Okay...so while I was *completely and extremely* serious with those last seven tips, especially the first three, let's help you increase your mastery level from novice to apprentice.

Deciding Your Networking Style

The first thing you should probably figure out is what kind of networker you want to be, as that will help inform your actions later when you are actually out and about town. Are you the kind of mercenary who walks into a crowded bar and:

a) heads straight into the crowd yelling "Hey Joe! Hi Donna! How you doing..." trying to meet and re-meet as many people as possible?

or

b) heads off to a table in the back with some friends for a long, fun dinner?

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

The answer to that question is what helps you determine if you prefer a lot of “weak ties” (Option A) or a few “strong ties” (Option B) when it comes to how you approach networking.

Weak Ties

For some, it's about getting to meet and connect with as many people as possible online or in person – this tactic is often used by extremely sociable extroverts. Those are the people who run around conferences and saying hi to almost everyone and passing out business cards by the dozens.

The people they are connected to are usually ‘weak ties’ meaning they are in their network but they may not really know them very well. However, one advantage a weak ties networker has is that they have a very large network, and so can usually rely on their contacts to help them out and connect them to someone they need to know.

Strong Ties

The other side of the coin is those people whose main goal is to meet and connect with as few people as possible but get to know them really well – this tactic is often used by introverts (or as I call myself, a fake extrovert). They may not have thousands of people on their LinkedIn list but those they do connect with, they know fairly well.

For example, when it comes to an industry conference like GDC, I'll go to the parties and make my rounds, but then I'm generally out of there fairly quickly. Instead I'm spending most of my time having meals and late night snacks with people close to me, so I can catch up on their life, have fun, and continue to strengthen those specific relationships.

In reality, everyone has both strong and weak ties but the proportions are different. You need to decide what your main style is and how it suits your needs and personality. This can really help influence how you build and grow your various relationships with coworkers, colleagues, and friends both virtually and in person; at your job; and at industry events.

Speaking of industry events; while attending professional events is sometimes thought of as a necessary evil, they can be useful and fun too. There are many things to consider when attending events, some of which are different from what you would do when interacting with people at work or online. You can check out the resources section for more help on attending events – especially for introverts/fake extroverts if you're looking for more tips in that area – but for now let's go over some general Networking DOs and DON'Ts that apply universally to almost all adventurers:

Networking DOs

- ✓ **Talk to your mentor** – they can be useful in guiding you through this process
- ✓ **Read up from others in the industry** – lots of game devs have helpful networking advice to share on their blogs or social networks
- ✓ **Keep a list/database/whatever of your contacts somewhere** – Gmail/Outlook Contacts, Plaxo, Evernote, or even a plain old spreadsheet – but back it up, even the ones in the cloud!
- ✓ **Practice! Practice! Practice!** – any time you're around other devs is a time you can practice on your ice breakers, elevator pitches, chit chat, and so on

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Networking DON'Ts

- ⊙ **Don't do on and off again networking** – if you run too hot and cold people will think you're only there just to get something from them and then you'll go away; remember: this is about building up relationships for the long-term
- ⊙ **Don't just bash games or people** – you don't know what they've worked on (many of us are under NDA for more games than you think) or it may be something we're proud of even if we know it sucked; you also don't know who they've worked with or who they know; remember: this industry is SMALL, and we talk
- ⊙ **Don't send crappy LinkedIn/Friend requests** – if you don't make it clear how I know you then you can forget about me accepting the request (this even happens with some weak ties people too!)
- ⊙ **Don't forget to do your follow-ups, otherwise getting the contact doesn't matter** – keep in touch through social networks, emails, or at future events

And the most important tip of all? Don't be the mercenary who runs around asking everyone if they can join the other mercenary's quest. Seriously, nothing will make us walk away from you faster (except if you didn't do the basics!) than if we see you just bugging everyone else for a job. Yuck. Goodbye. Have fun storming the castle alone!

Final Thoughts on Being a Great Adventurer

You've gotten this far in your travel: You created your base character, you set goals for what you want your character to be as it levels up, you acquired the right equipment and armor, and you spent some time mingling with other mercenaries. You're in your first guild or on your first quest - but the game isn't over.

Don't forget: The industry is like a big MMO that's constantly being updated, giving you more and more skills to learn, quests to complete, places to travel, and potential party members to meet. The best questers take pride in continuously practicing their skills, maintaining their equipment, and surrounding themselves with trusted party members.

So you *need* to practice your skills, and learn new ones. You *need* to constantly upgrade and repair your equipment. You *need* to go on the quests that give you the experience you need to level up and make it to the next phase of your career as a mercenary - whether that is getting promoted or getting a keynote. Everything you do to level yourself up makes you stand out from the crowd that much more, and that is what will make you a successful adventurer.

Although each of our journeys may be different we're all still playing in the same giant server, fighting many of the same monsters, while desperately trying to stay alive. If you continue to work on your character you can not only stay alive but have fun at the same time.

See you at level 20!

(Resources Are On The Next Page)

SHERIRUBIN.COM

CAREER RESOURCES

RESOURCES

It Doesn't Matter Who You Are – 5 Words or Phrases Self-Assessment Exercise

- Article - <http://bit.ly/1bqa4bH>
- Download full PDF - Includes entire original article with step-by-step guidance and worksheet to go through the review. – <http://bit.ly/5wopfull>
- Download assessment PDF - Includes review worksheet only – <http://bit.ly/5wopwkst>

3G Review Process <http://bit.ly/3GProcess>

- Learn about the 3Gs and how they can help you improve your personal branding, networking, and job searching efforts

Personal Branding Checklist

- Ready to pull together the pieces you need to help improve your brand and make networking and job searching easier? Check out this downloadable PDF that goes over many of the items you should consider having as part of your branding efforts and provides you with a handy checklist to make sure you're on track.

GDC Vault <http://bit.ly/1mYqY2Q>

- Want to learn about programming? QA? Art pipelines? Almost any topic you can think of has been discussed at GDC (the industry's largest professional conference), so here's where you can read, listen, and watch many of their fabulous sessions, often for free.

International Game Developers Association (IGDA) <http://bit.ly/1bxOZfh>

- The IGDA is the largest non-profit professional association in the world, and serves all individuals who create video games. They provide opportunities on both a local and global level for networking, professional development, and advocacy. [Full Disclosure: I currently sit on the boards for both IGDA and IGDA Chicago.]

Additional Career Building Resources <http://bit.ly/srcareer>

- Find selections of some of my favorite resources related to job searching, mentoring, volunteering, networking (including guides on attending industry events), personal branding, and professional development. This section of my personal website is constantly being updated with tools, tips, tricks, and recommended media on topics that'll help you reach the next level!

Author Information

Sheri Rubin, Founder and CEO, Design Direct Deliver

Bio

Sheri Rubin, founder and CEO of Design Direct Deliver, comes to the gaming table with 20 years' experience and more than 30 game credits to her name. As an avid philanthropist and fierce advocate for the betterment of the video game industry, she dedicates much of her free time to volunteer organizations including the International Game Developers Association (IGDA) and the Red Cross. Sheri received her bachelor of science degree summa cum laude in Business Administration and serves on the board of several organizations including IGDA, IGDA Chicago, and Rival Games Oy. She can always be found emailing from sheri@designdirectdeliver.com and occasionally found tweeting from [@SheriRubin](https://twitter.com/SheriRubin).

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).