

## Interview Assessment 1

**Name of Professional:** Michael Breault

**Profession/Title:** Clinical Professor

**Business/Company Name:** University of Texas at Dallas

**Date of Interview:** September 27, 2016

### **Assessment:**

My first interview was with Mr. Michael Breault, a clinical professor of narrative game design at University of Texas at Dallas. Going into the meeting, I was hoping to learn about game design with an emphasis on narrative and story writing. I wanted to discover how the script and story was designed and written for games and to see if that was a possible interest of mine. Since it was my first ever interview with a professional, I also wanted to see why he was passionate about game design and what led him to that point.

After the interview, I learned that it is important for a designer to love games. If you don't enjoy gaming or spending many hours in front of a computer or console, then the industry is not for you. Due to my injury to my right arm, I have been unable to play many games, but I still greatly enjoy playing them in what little time I have. Mr Breault stated that you will get burned out very quickly if you do not live and breathe games.

Another important thing to know is that designers have to be persistent, especially if you become a freelancer. Mr. Breault commented on how much of his working career was spent just searching for work and constantly requesting studios to give him work while he was not tied to any studio. I asked him if he recommended becoming a freelancer at one point in my career, and he completely recommends it. Some of the reasons he gave is that there is "more freedom and ability to do what you want" because you are not under any company's rules and regulations. Another benefit

he gave was that “you get to choose how much you work,” which means more time can be spent with family and friends. However, he warns that “finding new work is difficult” and it felt like a “financial roller coaster” at some points. Knowing all of this, I have come to the conclusion that I may want to start off in a studio because I need to gain a lot of skills and experience to be successful in the video game development industry. You need to be very aggressive and never let up on any potential work to succeed as a freelancer, which is not economically smart just coming out of college and starting in the industry with a load of debt to pay off from school. I will not forget about the possibility entirely, however, as it does have potential to be one of the best experiences ever.

Another trait video game developers, especially designers, need to have is the ability “to criticism and improve from it.” Being a story designer, Mr. Breault was used to his scripts and ideas being rejected and criticized over, but with every failure, he learned something new. He also said “you need to act professionally when your work is being critiqued and able to keep calm, even if what they are saying is wrong or bad advice.” Knowing this, I can now get myself mentally prepared and train myself to take criticism as a compliment and not a direct insult to me or my abilities. I have always been able to take the heat of criticism, but I need to work on actually learning from it and applying it to what I do. Game designers have to deal with their ideas and plans being constantly changed and critiqued, so flexibility is a key skill, which I have thanks to ISM and band schedules.

The last important detail was actually learning about the story writing process in relation to gaming, which was very interesting to learn. I have always had a talent for writing, but I can never see myself as a full dialogue and script writer. It is very advantageous for me to realize this early on, however, where I still can learn about other aspect of video game design.

## Interview Assessment 2

**Name of Professional:** Phill Johnson

**Profession/Title:** Senior Game Designer

**Business/Company Name:** Playful Corp

**Date of Interview:** September 29, 2016

### **Assessment:**

The second interview I did on the subject of video game design with Mr. Phill Johnson, a senior game designer at Playful Corp. His company makes games that utilize virtual reality, so I was expecting to hear answers to my questions that are completely different from what I know about game design. I wanted to know how someone went about the process of thinking and creating a game from scratch. The other thing I wanted to see was an actual video game studio with employees working in it.

The interview included a tour of the studio and the ability to try out a virtual reality game Playful Corp just produced and was selling, called *Lucky's Tale*. I learned that this studio is not really as big or like a traditional office space as I expected. Instead, it felt more relaxed and like a home, which was very settling and more personable to me. I noticed that there were little to no dividers between each person's computer space, meaning it is better to discuss and plan the game with other people. Each part of the studio was split into different steps of the game production sequence, such as animation, concept art, and quality assurance. This is a very effective way to organize the space in my opinion because it allows every part to be on the same page with each other. In other words, communication is very easy to engage in, which is one of the most important parts of the video game production sequence.

As for the virtual reality, I did not know what to expect. The moment I placed the headset on my head, I felt like the entire world disappeared around me. It felt like I was playing a normal game, but the experience was different than normal gaming sessions because I believed I was actually part of the game. This was due to the fact that I was able to turn my head and in my chair and the camera would follow as if I was looking around inside of the game's world. This therefore opens up a whole new door of possibilities to consider after college, since virtual reality is now a rapidly developing sector of video games according to Mr. Johnson. Before this interview, I knew of VR, but I was unaware of how large it has become in recent years and how sophisticated and interesting the technology associated with it is. It is a tangible and possible field to go into after I graduate, which makes me wonder whether I should start more research on this very different area of the video game universe.

The interview also exposed to me possible problems in virtual reality that need to be solved. The inevitable question of horror games and how terrifying of an experience it would be was raised, and while Mr. Johnson seemed enthusiastic about the idea, he states "it wouldn't catch on now because of potential damage to equipment caused by people thrashing around when they see something very scary." This has led me to thinking that there needs to be some way to safely secure the goggles to the user and make sure they won't fall off, as well as make sure all cables are well away from the user so they don't pull them out or mess up the wiring configurations. Another major problem Mr. Johnson addressed is that virtual reality "can make a person sick," so it does limit gameplay and potential ideas from becoming a reality. The camera angles, character placement, controls, and graphics all play a part in determining the nauseating level of the game, and Mr. Johnson addressed that there is no definite way of measuring this other than simply testing out the game and reporting how you feel afterwards. More possible research can be made on what exactly

makes a person's stomach churn, so this opens up another door for a potential solution to be reached.

Virtual reality is an increasingly growing field, and my meeting with Mr. Johnson proved that. Playful Corp has already produced a successful game solely intended for use with VR goggles, so that proves how fast the industry is really moving. I have an opportunity to become something groundbreaking and revolutionary, and this all became clear thanks to one interview.

### Interview Assessment 3

**Name of the Professional:** Jonathan Skinner

**Profession/Title:** Lecturer, Level Design

**Business/Company Name:** The Guildhall at SMU

**Date of Interview:** October 7, 2016

#### **Assessment:**

My third interview was with Mr. Jon Skinner, a level designer teaching at The Guildhall at SMU. The Guildhall is a graduate school that is part of SMU that places an emphasis on video game design, development, marketing, and management. I felt it very advantageous to take advantage of the school's close proximity to me to interview with the professors and lecturers there. I wanted to know the specifics of level design and see if it is an interest of mine. After the interview, it seemed to perk up my interest, as designing levels would allow me to demonstrate my creative abilities and some of the level architecture can be quite stunning, so it would be very interesting to be a part of that process.

While Mr. Breault spoke about the past of video games and Mr. Johnson looked to the future on the endless possibilities with virtual reality, Mr. Skinner's focus was on present day production and creation of video games. This allowed me to have a very realistic and advice offering interview session. An example of this was when Mr. Skinner warned about jumping right into freelancing when just out of college because "you need to have a lot of experience and be really good to succeed as a freelancer." While it is possible for new-graduates to become a freelancer, it is quite difficult to get contracts with companies because they simply do not know of your capabilities if you have not demonstrated them at any other company. In other words, you need to make a name for yourself and "build a reputation," which is mostly accomplished by working for a larger studio. Mr. Skinner also stated that the ultimate question one has to ask themselves when choosing between freelance jobs and a studio job is "do they

want to work on franchise and get good at something, or bring their own ideas to life?" This further strengthens my decision of working for a large gaming company when I first graduate from college so that I can make a name for myself. In the video gaming industry, connections with other developers are key to landing jobs and finding work, so landing a job and getting to know my colleagues will help me in the future of my career.

The other major point Mr. Skinner emphasized was the need for designers to "have great technical and artistic skills and a broad knowledge" of the world. This way, a designer can look towards various sources for ideas, and even build off of the universe of that work. A designer needs to be able to take many different parts of society, pop culture, history, and nature and blend all of them into a masterfully written game. This means that I need to stay both current and well educated on past events when the video game calls for any of these pieces. For example, if I were making a game set in a dystopian society run by a crazed dictator, I would need to include elements from various tyrannical societies seen throughout time, such as the Axis powers in World War II or North Korea, as well as fictional societies, seen in works like Orwell's novel 1984. This will greatly enhance the player's experience of the game since they will be engaged in the various elements from different sources.

My meeting with Mr. Skinner provided me various ways to succeed in the field. Reputation is everything in the video game industry, as well as possessing vast knowledge of everything. It proves to me that video game design is going to be a learning process everyday, which excites me, since I love gaining new knowledge everyday.

## Interview Assessment 4

**Name of the Professional:** Gary Brubaker

**Profession/Title:** Director, Video Game Design

**Business/Company Name:** The Guildhall at SMU

**Date of Interview:** November 16, 2016

### **Assessment:**

The fourth interview in my ISM program was with Mr. Gary Brubaker, the director of The Guildhall at SMU and previous video game designer for some notable companies such as Stormfront Studios. Not only was my interview about his role as the director, but it also included his past experiences as a video game designer. Going into this interview, I wasn't as nervous as when I interviewed Mr. Skinner, but I still felt some weight that I was interviewing the person in charge of Guildhall, which is a potential school to receive my master's degree in video game development in the future. I wanted to know not only information about video game design, but also how a video game development centered school teaches their students, since there are not very many schools with such a specialized area of teaching. After the interview, it encouraged me to just download Unity or some other game development package and just start designing games that way.

Something of note from my interview with Mr. Brubaker is that I have been thinking about the process of making video games somewhat lopsided. The way that I thought video games were produced was that it started with a story idea first and then gameplay to go along with it, but Mr. Brubaker said that the game I have in mind that way would basically be an interactive movie and not really a game. TellTale games, maker of The Walking Dead video game series is a perfect example of a company that chooses to put story over gameplay. While their games are amazingly detailed and well made, it feels more like the player is watching the action and not really involved. Mr. Brubaker says that the infamous

question that is always asked to game designers is whether or not they want “to be a game designer or a film director,” because while they are similar, they have enough differences to lead someone to the path they thought they wanted, but in reality they can lead someone down the wrong path. This has made me realize that I need to shift my focus to the gameplay and interaction of my game instead of the story. In essence gamers don’t play games for an amazing, over the top story and strong narrative. Instead, they play for an experience and to feel like they are involved in the game’s world. Having no story or definite characterization for the main character allows the gamer to insert themselves into the game and show their own qualities and choices instead of the written story choosing for them.

A great example of a game that allows gamers the ability to choose their own adventure is Skyrim, produced by Bethesda games. Even though there is a main questline and somewhat of a larger story, for the most part gamers enjoy the game because it gives them the freedom to do whatever they want and be whoever they wish to be. In other words, Skyrim has immense replayability and allows gamers to play for hours and very seldom get bored or feel like they are grinding like players have to do in RPGs.

Mr. Brubaker also stated that a game designer has “to be a jack of all trades,” which means I need to be skilled in writing, cinematography, drawing, and programming if I want to be successful in all that I do. Mr. Brubaker was pleased that I was attending Texas A&M for my bachelor’s degree in Visualization because their program is very broad and teaches their students many different aspects of computer use. The other fact he said was that Guildhall is defining things on their own because there has never existed any program such as theirs. In that sense, the game makers, especially in virtual reality, are the pioneers of game production. This makes me very excited, as I want to explore new things, so possibly going into virtual reality will give me that opportunity.

## Interview Assessment 5

**Name of the Professional:** JR Honeycutt

**Profession/Title:** Game Design

**Business/Company Name:** Artana

**Date of Interview:** November 18, 2016

### **Assessment:**

The fifth interview I had was with Mr. JR Honeycutt, a board game designer at Artana. I met with him at BGGCon, a board and tabletop games convention, which was very interesting to see and tour around. I never even knew so many people loved playing board games and actually taking part in community events, so it genuinely shocked me how many people were in attendance, which was over three thousand people. I already knew that Mr. Honeycutt was not a video game designer and a board game designer, so I adjusted my interview questions to not focus on specifically video games, but games in general. I wanted to learn how a person can even pursue a career in a seemingly declining area of entertainment. What I learned was that the board games industry is a very open area to become a part of, so it is easy to gain more members. After the interview, I was encouraged to take more notice of the board games industry and see if I can possibly become a part of in the future as a designer.

The first part of my interview with Mr. Honeycutt was spent touring around the convention and seeing all that it had to offer, as well as meeting various people he knows of who also work in the industry. The first thing that seemed very meaningful to me was that everyone seemed to know each other's names and jobs, meaning that the people are very connected to each other. There exists a parallel between the video game and board game industry in that both have to have extensive connections and that reputation means everything. If you want people to hire you, you need people to know what talents and skills you have. Therefore, one needs to demonstrate to the world how much they know and also

need references so that they can land the job they want. The other main part of his tour was the sheer amount of games that was present at the convention, which means that it is a well established and profitable industry to go into. It is therefore more stable than the far newer video game industry, but also rapidly aging as people turn to technology for entertainment. It may be a fun and exciting field to pursue, but I am not certain on whether or not it can stand the test of time much longer. Maybe improvements will be made so that the younger, new age generation can take a bigger part in the board games business, but for now there is still a concern present for the far future.

When Mr. Honeycutt and I sat down to have a short interview session, he immediately called over a video game designer named Mr. Eric Lang to speak about the aspects of video game design that he did not know of. The most interesting part when speaking to Mr. Lang was that he suggested I take a minor in psychology in the future. The reason for this is so that I am able to understand the tendencies of humans so that I can attune my game to be better connected to the players. This is a very good reason to take psychology, which is something I have never considered, so more research is needed into what specifics it entails. When speaking to Mr. Honeycutt, the biggest advice he gave to me is to have fun and be kind. When I engage in fun activities, I will know what fun looks like and can therefore incorporate it into games. The kindness part is completely optional, but Mr. Honeycutt says that it leads to more fulfilling relationships with people and a happier life overall. This will serve me well as I pursue video game design as a career for the future, and I will soon not forget about this fantastic meeting.

## Interview Assessment 6

**Name of the Professional:** Skyler Jermyn

**Profession/Title:** Lead Video Game Designer

**Business/Company Name:** Gearbox Software

**Date of Interview:** December 7, 2016

### **Assessment:**

My sixth interview I had was with Mr. Skyler Jermyn, the lead video game designer at Gearbox Software. Mr. Jermyn is also my mentor in the ISM program, as I knew right away that he was the right choice for me. The company he works for is famous for producing video games such as the Borderlands Series and Battleborn. It is technically an independent company, which is much different than working at companies such as ID Software and Ubisoft, since they both have parent companies. Gearbox has more flexibility with the games and ideas, but is still a relatively large developer. I therefore adjusted my questions to better suit his working style by asking questions specific to Gearbox and his role as lead designer. I learned that Gearbox Software is very different from other industries in that they are not afraid to hire new and inexperienced designers, which is an important thing for someone just graduating from college. After the interview, I was encouraged to start immediately teaching myself the basics of modeling, texturing, coding, and art development.

Mr. Jermyn made the point of making an extensive portfolio the most important part of landing a job in the industry. In his words, “Being able to show what you made is valuable.” For that reason, you need to have a medium of showing what you have developed, which means I need to get either a website or on a forum for game designers that is able to showcase my work without anyone stealing my works. Therefore, research needs to be done on what is best to show anything related to games, animation, or any entertainment sector. Mr. Jermyn attended the Guildhall at SMU, but he said that “no one cares

really about education, the portfolio is what matters the most.” He also commented on how he spent many long nights designing and coding while he was being taught at the Guildhall, not for educational purposes but because he was adding more to his portfolio. If I expect to get hired as fast as he did, I must be hardworking and diligent on producing as many things as I can that can demonstrate my skills. To be successful in any field, it requires a large amount of dedication, which is something I am willing to have towards video game design.

The other main point Mr. Jermyn was describing to me was the kind of work a lead game designer does. He states that he is in charge of getting people to agree on how the game needs to be. Many times does he need to find a compromise between people and what to put into a game. He misses being just a video game designer, however, as he is mainly involved in schedule balancing and the logistics of what to insert into a game. He does make the most relationships with people out of any designer, as he needs to be present in meetings between the computer scientists, art developers, producers, and the story writers to be the voice of the rest of the game designers.

Overall, I am very excited to work with Mr. Jermyn and learn more about video game design under his guidance. I cannot wait to start my journey to becoming a successful video game developer, as the sky is virtually the limit for what I can accomplish if I can always learn and be mentored by people of Mr. Jermyn’s skill and caliber.