

The Freelancing Life

by Matt Forbeck

Working as a freelance game designer in the adventure gaming industry is a job like no other. You're essentially your own boss, although you're often at the mercy of those who hire you. You get to create new and amazing things from whole cloth, but you usually have to write to someone else's outline. You get to work your own hours, which can sometimes turn into all-nighters in those final days before a deadline.

In short, it's a hard and sometimes thankless job that most people—including, often, your friends and family—aren't likely to understand well. But I love it, and you might too.

The Basics

A freelancer game designer is someone who creates material for adventure games under contract to a publisher. Most of the time, the freelancer is hired on to work on a concept the publisher has already developed. When this happens, the freelancer usually signs a work-for-hire agreement with the publisher that states that the publisher owns all rights to the freelancer's work on that project.

If you come up with the basic idea for a project and manage to convince a publisher to bring it to market, you might be able to retain the basic rights to the game or at least arrange for a nice royalty for yourself. The trick, of course, is that most publishers already have plenty of ideas of their own and aren't looking for any from outside their company. They might want people to help them flesh out their own ideas, though, and that's where the freelancer typically comes in.

As a freelancer, you're expected to be able to write or design to your editor or developer's exact specifications. If the company wants a card game that teaches colors to children by means of a cast of licensed characters, then that's what you give them, not your favorite house variant on chess.

Most freelance work in the adventure game industry comes from the roleplaying category, and that's mostly what this article is concerned with. However, many of the ideas here can be applied broadly to other categories too.

If you're a solid game designer with a good grasp of details like balance, player interactivity, and elegance in design, you can find jobs working with all sorts of different games: miniatures battle games, card games, board games, collectible card games, collectible miniatures games, wargames, and even roleplaying games. Don't turn your nose up at any of them. Work is work, and the more good work you do, the better your chances of getting more, better work in the future.

Breaking In

If you want to become a freelance game designer so you can bring your magnum opus to market via the one lucky publisher that manages to finally recognize the brilliance of your work your first time out, you're going to end up more disappointed than when you found Santa's presents sitting in your parents' closet. If no one's ever heard of you, chances are that no publisher is going to want to take a risk on you. Even "name" designers sometimes have trouble finding outlets for their personal designs, and those are the people you're competing against.

To overcome this obstacle, then, the best thing to do is earn yourself a name. There are a lot of ways to do this. Probably the most common advice is to start out by writing some magazine articles and then work your way up into bit pieces for larger books until an editor hands you your first full book to write.

That's a load of hooey.

If you're trying to get published in a magazine, you're probably one of dozens—even thousands—of different aspirants hoping for the same thing. You need

to stand out from the crowd somehow, and posting your e-mails to an editor in pink-and-purple HTML isn't going to cut it.

There are two proper ways to break in.

First, you can self-publish. This is also known as doing things the hard way. Publishing requires both a wide array of skills and some amount of cash. If you don't have these, developing them just so you can impress another publisher is silly. If you have the skills to pull this sort of thing off, you might be better off trying to become a real publisher, but that's fodder for a whole different article.

Of course, the web has changed things. It's possible now to publish small pieces either on a web page or as a PDF that can garner you some attention. Assuming you have a computer and a connection to the internet already, the only thing you're risking here is your time. It's a valuable commodity, true, but blowing a couple weeks or months on getting your PDF adventure done properly isn't nearly as painful as losing several thousand dollars in printing and warehousing fees on top of that.

The second and best way is to know someone in the industry. The old saw about who you know being vital is just as true in adventure games as it is anywhere else.

If you don't know anyone outside of your own gaming group, this can present a problem. However, the adventure gaming industry is small. It's not that hard to meet people, and if you make a good impression you have that foot in the door you need.

Figure out everything you can about the company (or companies, if you're serious about freelancing) you want to write for. Hit their websites. Haunt their message boards. Read and play their products. Learn.

Most game companies are always hunting for volunteers to demonstrate their games at conventions. Offer to do this, especially if it means a chance to meet the company's owners or editors. Once you spend a weekend running games for a beleaguered company president, he or she is sure to remember who you are when you call or e-mail later about work. Once a person can connect a face with your name, you're instantly ahead of the pack. From there, it's up to you to let your talent, dedication, and professionalism snag that juicy assignment you've been dreaming about.

Tools of the Trade

If you're going to be a freelancer in the adventure games industry, there are some things you'll need.

First, either own or have full access to a computer with an internet connection. Few publishers are willing to deal with a writer who can't submit work electronically. The hassles with having to get the text from a typewritten page into a desktop publishing program are far too many to have to bother with, no matter how brilliant that text might be.

Also, most publishers prefer to handle much of their communications by e-mail these days. If you don't have an e-mail address of your own, get one. It's not unusual for a publisher to never speak with an author unless they happen to meet at a convention. E-mails shot back and forth are usually good enough.

Use a proper word processing program. The default is Microsoft Word, although most publishers accept RTF (Rich Text Format) files too.

Use a spellchecker. Editors might forgive the occasional typo in your work, but not using a simple backup like a spellchecker to help clean up your text is nearly unforgivable. It displays a lack of effort to polish your work, and it makes the editor's job harder if he or she has to constantly be cleaning up after you. The editor is the person who hands out assignments and approves your work so you can get paid for it. You want to do everything you can to make the editor's life as easy as possible.

With that in mind, use a spellchecker on your e-mails too. Many people consider it a waste of time to polish a quick note like an e-mail, but when you're trying to sell yourself as a writer you should take every chance you get to look like a good one.

Have a good dictionary and thesaurus at hand at all times. There are fine online versions you can use in a pinch. You should also select a style guide and stick to it religiously. Many publishers have a style guide they prefer, and if you can figure out what it is (asking often works here) grab a copy and study it thoroughly. As a default, pick up Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. It's short, cheap, and the basis of most larger guides.

Some publishers also have writers' guidelines posted on their website. Download these, read them, and follow them to the letter. This is your chance to show that you can follow directions well. If you can't be bothered to give proper consideration to a company's stated guidelines, you shouldn't expect them to bother giving you an assignment.

Despite the fact that computers continue to threaten to kill off the printed page, get yourself a printer too. It's hard to proof text on a computer screen, and if you're just starting out you shouldn't even try. If possible, print your material out, let it sit for a day or two, and then read the hard copy. You'll be amazed at how many errors will leap off the page at you.

If you can wrangle a friend or two to proof your material for you before you send it in, do it. Be prepared to take whatever criticism they offer, and use it constructively to improve your work. A harried editor is more likely to simply reject a poor submission than give you some idea for how it could be better. Take a dress rehearsal or two before parading your stuff out in front of a paying audience.

The Work

The number of full-time freelance designers in the adventure game industry is extremely small, especially if you only consider those who have been at it for two years or more. It's a rare person who actually succeeds at it. If you don't feel like jumping in with both feet, consider setting aside some of your spare time instead. Find deadlines far enough off that you can still hit them with room to spare. Work your way into it slowly, and if it seems like the right thing, you can make the big jump when you're ready.

Or you can just jump right in and see if you sink or swim. Be sure you have enough savings to keep yourself paddling for a while first. The phrase "starving artist" only sounds romantic when it's not your belly that's empty.

Once you have an assignment, take it seriously and do your best work. As a rule, freelancers who produce solid work on time always get more work. Those who turn in crap or who flake on their deadlines get the opposite.

Many freelancers seem to think that it's better to get a piece exactly right and turn it in late than to turn in something less than the best on time.

They are wrong.

A publishing company functions on cash flow. It has a schedule of products that it has promised to deliver, and if you don't turn your material in on time you jeopardize those promises. That means that the company either has to break its promises because of you or that the editor has to work long hours to make up for the time you ran over your deadline. Neither of these situations makes the company happy with you.

No design is ever perfect. Game designers are tinkerers by nature, always coming back to a design—whether it's theirs or belongs to someone else—and playing with it until it's better. Given an unlimited amount of time, this process might never end. That's why there are deadlines.

When you get a deadline, plan for it accordingly. Do your best to finish the work early. This gives you time to polish your work to a shiny finish. It also prevents you from shooting past the deadline if something unpredictable happens in your life.

You might be jumping for joy when you get your first gig, but there are going to be days between then and the deadline that you just don't want to work on it. It's work. If it was easy, no one would be willing to pay you to do it. Even on those days when sitting in front of the keyboard is the last thing you want to do, do it anyhow. It gets easier with practice.

Freelancing can be a lonely life. You often spend your work hours alone at home, tapping away on a keyboard or playing both sides of a game by yourself while everyone else (it seems) is chatting away with their friends in a cushy office job with a steady paycheck and nice benefits.

If you love the work, though, it's enough to sustain you through all those moments of thinking the grass might be greener in a corporate cubicle. If you're good at it and treat it like a real job—by giving each assignment the respect it deserves—you can even make a decent living at it, at doing something you love.

Then there is no greener grass.

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