



## **Advancing Your Game Industry Career within the Same Company (It Can Happen)**

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*July 18, 2005*

We've all seen the retirement party scene in movies and commercials: Hal is retiring after 25 years at the company. Toasts are given and cake eaten before a tearful Hal packs up the last of his desk and walks out the door.

Does anyone in the game industry ever get a retirement party? If you make it with one company for more than a year you may feel as though you deserve one. Is the only way to advance to continue to jump from developer to developer? Or is an upwardly progressing career path within one company an actual possibility in games?

In short, the answer depends on you and the company. The following addresses what a company can do, and what you can do within that company, to advance your career so you can have your retirement party cake and eat it, too.

### **Company-side: A Radical Case Study**

While Radical Entertainment (*Hulk*, *The Simpsons: Road Rage*, *Scarface*) prided themselves in being a non-hierarchical company, they were surprised to hear their employees tell them that they wanted, not so much job titles but, rather, a clear career path with defined steps up the corporate hierarchy. Typically, for example, employees in this industry start out as an Entry-Level Programmer or Entry-Level Artist and the next time they achieve a different title may be 8-12 years later when they become a Technical Director or Art Director. That's right, a new title in just 8-12 years.

What Radical's employees wanted were incremental acknowledgments and monetary rewards along the way to signify career rites of passage: Entry-Level Artist, Junior Artist, Intermediate Artist, Senior or Lead Artist, and, finally Art Director (same path with Programmers). Radical listened. While there is no differentiation on business cards - a Programmer is a Programmer is a Programmer - deep inside the company, when it's time for performance review or merit increase, the company brings out the salary grades and titles and talks about people within the context of Junior, Intermediate, or Senior.

Radical's employees also said that they wanted a position to aspire to other than Art Director or Technical Director. Not all highly talented or technical people should manage people, but for lack of alternative career or monetary opportunities, these people become managers. In response to this, Radical created "guru" positions. These positions are equal in status and pay to an Art Director or Technical Director, but gurus need never manage people. While they should and will mentor others, as imparting knowledge is part of Radical's stated core values, they do not need to delegate, manage, discipline, hire or fire.

The company's new process provides a very clear career path structure. The career path helps monitor a person's success as well as indicate to both employee and manager when that person has fallen off the path or, worse, is floating aimlessly, and helps force discussions around career planning at least once a year. These discussions highlight where people are on their career path, help determine who is, and who is not, making progress, and, finally, what the plan of action should be to get that employee back on the path.



While not every game developer has such clearly defined career path planning for employees, plenty do offer opportunities to advance within the company. But, ultimately, it's up to you to make it happen.

## **Employee-side: What You Need to Do (Also When and How)**

Along with your technical skills, to truly advance in the game industry, you must have specific career skills which, if applied consistently and effectively, will lead to professional success.

### **The First Year**

A forward progressing career path can be followed within one company, particularly in a forward-thinking company, but you must take a proactive approach to make that progress happen. Further, that proactive approach needs to start the first day you walk through those doors because you need about a year to lay your foundation for long term results. And time flies when you're having fun and making games. Your first year with a company is the time to establish yourself in your new job and within the company. This is the time to form effective working relationships with subordinates, peers, and your manager.

During your first few weeks on the job observe the workings of the company and, specifically, your division or group. Who on the team is a weak player? Who clearly wants to advance? How do the office politics operate? And, perhaps most importantly, how does your boss work? Watch how your manager operates and do your best to emulate this style. The more you understand likes and dislikes and basic personality traits, and if you work within those parameters, the better your relationship.

**Get your manager on your side.** A mutually supportive relationship with your boss must occur in your first few months on the job. This is the person who allocates company resources so you can perform your job. This is also the person who can offer you the choice work assignments you want, as well as the person who can recommend you for a raise or promotion. If you strive to exceed your manager's expectations and do everything you can to support your manager, your manager, in turn, will support you back. At the end of the day, your boss genuinely wants you to succeed and it's your job to figure out how to help them help you.

**Be a performer.** Your first year is also the time to establish goodwill as someone who works hard daily and consistently performs better than expected. Employees who are valued the most work hard every single day. They carry out responsibilities better than expected and enthusiastically put forth the most effort. This includes staying up-to-date on developments in your field and upgrading your skills to best position yourself for the future. Take the initiative to attend that session on building systems to create dense, immersive storytelling, or read that new book on AI techniques without prompting from your boss.

**Volunteer for additional responsibilities.** To put yourself in situations where your skills and talents will be noticed, you may need to raise your hand and offer to take on more work. Success tomorrow depends on how much you contribute today, and you must find ways to make your abilities known. This may mean volunteering to do even more work, as well as assisting coworkers when they need help. Taking on more responsibilities than your job description may sound crazy, but those who advance aren't just average performers or "coasters", they go above and beyond the call of duty and so should you.

**Perform your job better than your boss expects and make sure your boss knows about it.** Promotions come to those who stand out as exceptional, so do what you need to do to outshine



your competition. Not only should you jump in to do more than those functions outlined in your current job description, you must then perform those additional responsibilities exceptionally. Focus on producing results that will make both you and your boss look good, and develop a reputation for being a problem solver. As a way to keep your boss informed of your initiative, ask your boss for feedback on your performance.

The qualities companies take into account when considering employees for promotions include consistent demonstration of effort, good interpersonal skills, leadership ability, and a self-starting attitude. You know the adage that you only have one shot at a first impression? Your first year is your shot at a first impression. This is the time to demonstrate you possess these qualities, so make the most of it.

## **Personal PR and Getting Positive Attention**

Public relations or "PR" is not just for big companies, and it's not just about press releases and exclusive screenshots, rather, PR can be applied on an individual level. Consider yourself a hot new game and think of creative ways to get yourself noticed, not by the media, but by managers and decision-makers.

**Volunteer for company committees.** One way to generate some good buzz is to volunteer for company committees or projects. Most game companies have a product idea review committee that meets on a monthly basis to review game design proposals. They want a variety of people from all different career disciplines and perspectives on this committee, so join in on the fun. Work yourself into an active role on any committee you join. This involvement will help you develop your own leadership skills and build relationships with other groups within the company.

**Send your boss your own "press release" and keep an achievement file.** Keep your boss and any other hiring authority updated on your efforts. A memo that highlights your achievements is one trick to use. Think of it as your own press release. Also, be smart and keep a file that contains a written summary of all your achievements, this way, when you are called in for your next performance review, you have a written record of your achievements at the ready. Admittedly, blowing your own horn can be difficult for many, but if done with the right attitude, you won't look like a brown-nosing jerk.

**Write articles for your department or internal company newsletter.** Writing articles for your department for the company's internal newsletter is another technique for getting noticed. Even writing articles on your area of expertise that get published in the game development media may be a smart move. Be sure you get any pre-approval to do so and, once published, be sure your boss sees a copy.

**Participate in company functions .** Company events such as holiday parties are great opportunities to get to know others on a personal note and make your presence known. However, please bear in mind that they are not opportunities for free liquor and making a fool of yourself. Don't drink too much at these events, and don't talk about work issues.

## **Your Skills**

Efforts to improve your skills don't end with your first crucial year, rather, attending that session and reading that book should be ongoing, self-motivated efforts. Game companies value employees who stay current on development and trends in the industry. People who can help navigate the ever-changing terrain of games are definitely the most valued.



Ways to keep yourself fresh and on top of industry developments include attending conferences, seminars, or workshops such as the Game Developers Conference, E3, and D.I.C.E. Attend meetings of your local International Game Developers Association (IGDA) or other organizations dedicated to the games industry. Naturally, you should also regularly read trade publications such as *Game Developer Magazine*, *GameDaily*, *Gamasutra*, *Develop Magazine*, etc.

Further, your efforts for improvement should not be solely in the realm of technical skills. If you're weak in interpersonal skills such as communication or management ability, then train yourself by participating in relevant networking groups and seminars, even develop a foreign language speaking ability - any specialized knowledge you develop will only serve to increase your value.

No matter what specific career you choose, whether Programmer, Artist, Designer, or Producer, you should establish yourself as an expert in some aspect of your job.

**Apply entrepreneurial skills.** Yes, you may be working for a large company, but don't let that stop you from acting like an entrepreneur. Look for ways within your company to improve productivity, improve services, increase sales, and creatively tackle technical hurdles. If you find something that needs to be done - do it! Approaching your career as you would a business you were running. People who are entrepreneurial demonstrate characteristics such as willingness to take risks and assume responsibility.

**Remember who's the boss.** It's important to apply entrepreneurial skills when trying to advance on your career path, but remember that you're not actually an entrepreneur in the sense you own the company. Rather, you have a boss you must answer to and be respectful of. As discussed previously, your boss is the person who can recommend you for a new job, promote you, assign plum work projects, get resources allocated, etc. Do everything you can to support your boss so they, in return, will support you.

**Demonstrate leadership skills.** People who demonstrate leadership skills advance in their career, so practice developing these skills. Volunteer to lead a project. Be the first person to learn a new technology and then teach it to your team members. It is expected that a leader makes decisions and solves problems, so learn how to problem solve. In demonstrating your leadership skills, be sure to treat other coworkers with respect and don't come off as a-know-it-all - this shuts people down. As we all know there are good leaders and bad leaders. Be a good leader.

## The Reality of Office Politics

It's simply unavoidable, office politics exist in every company. While most consider office politics negatively, the truth is they may also be used to your advantage. Well-connected employees can get their name removed from a layoff list, ensure they are considered for promotions, and, of course, learn information that can be useful. However, extreme caution must be taken here. The golden rule is to always consider the source of your information. For example, how is the person relaying information to you interpreting that information based on their own biases, emotional state and intellect?

Playing the office politics game requires critical thinking skills. You must always carefully weigh and interpret the data you receive.

You can get office politics working for you by participating in company events and building relationships with people in and outside of your department. Definitely don't be a snob or prima donna. Secretaries, receptionists, and junior staff may all have information you need. Exhibiting



obvious arrogance because you believe your position or skills superior to another is no way to win friends and influence people.

And keep in mind that you are not playing office politics for any other reason than advancing your career. Never share information you're told in confidence and don't criticize or gossip about others. In short, when playing office politics listen, don't contribute.

## Final Thoughts

The following may sound obvious, but sometimes we all need a good, "in a nutshell" reminder list to help keep us on track and on the right career path. A path that can be stepped on and followed within the same company. And while there may be no retirement party cake at the end of that path, an upwardly mobile and personally satisfying career is a possibility, even in games.

**Create and maintain a positive image.** While your sardonic style may make you a hero among friends, negativity has no place in the current work environment. Don't let the benefits of your skills get lost behind a negative persona.

**Keep an open mind.** While you may have just attended a tutorial on adaptive audio expertise, be receptive to others' input. Don't be a "know-it-all." Required skills are constantly evolving - you never know what you might learn from the person next door.

**Be a team player.** Share newly acquired skills and helpful tips with others on your team. If the game looks good, everyone will look good, including you.

**Present your abilities effectively.** When presenting your achievements and abilities to your superiors, do so in an organized and professional manner. Don't demand or become emotional.

**Log your skills.** If your company doesn't conduct performance reviews, keep your own log of achievements and newly acquired skills. Each week, write in a notebook the major projects you worked on, the milestones you achieved, etc.

**Quantify your skills in objective terms.** Be sure you can describe your work achievements in quantifiable, objective terms such as awards or industry recognition you have received, and projects that you created or helped implement.

**Discuss your achievements with the boss.** You've worked hard so make sure your boss knows it. It's easy for everyone to get busy and caught up in their own tasks, including your boss. Ask for a private meeting to discuss what you've achieved and where you're headed. And, if you've applied the foregoing principles, that should be on a successful career path.