

Art by Sha Chen Li



ARTSTATION GUIDE TO GOING FROM STUDENT TO PROFESSIONAL ARTIST

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PREFACE

This idea for this guide came after the amazing reception the “ArtStation Guide to Freelancing” received. I couldn’t wait to put together another guide and I thought helping students take on the world would be a good follow-up.

I spent eight years working in the video games industry, so I’ve seen how hard it can be to get your foot in the door when you don’t have any experience. Fret not because countless artists have walked this path before you and we’ve brought together their knowledge to help you make the first steps.

Our guides are more than just instructions—they are the lived experiences of the amazing artists on ArtStation. It was a real joy to interview Alex Beddows, Clinton Crumpler, Jacob Norris, Jonathan Hemmens, Kieran Goodson, Kim Aava, and Marcel Schaika about starting out in the industry.

While this guide is based mainly on working as an artist in the gaming industry, a lot of the lessons hold true for many other industries.

Without further ado, I hope you enjoy the ArtStation Guide to Going from Student to Professional Artist.



Bianca Marques

ArtStation - Digital Marketing Manager



Chapter 1

Before You Graduate

As daunting as it might sound, you should start planning for your career while you're still in school. The earlier, the better, but even if you're reading this at the end of your formal education journey, it's never too late to get started.

Taking on an internship during your studies or right after you graduate will give you useful experience to find a job later. Some educational programs include an internship as part of the curriculum, but even if yours doesn't, studios often take on students as interns. Internships can often lead to employment, there's a ton of value in the work experience and the connections you'll make during the internship.

Internships may only come up towards the end of your formal education, but don't wait until then to get started on initiatives to build your career. There are tons of steps you can take from the start of your time in school.

Decide on a Field

Depending on your school and your program, you might already be on track for the exact field you want to work in. If that's the case, your path is clear. But, for those in a broader program by the mid-point of your studies, you should start narrowing down

what interests you. The industry is a huge place, and if you don't focus your development, you will end up spreading yourself too thin. University's most significant value is the time it buys you to explore. This doesn't just mean the choice of broad disciplines like character vs. environment art, but also to test out and learn pipelines, techniques and styles.

The current trend in the video game industry is that there's less need for generalists and more need for highly skilled, specialized workers. Deciding which job you wish to pursue allows you to focus your time on one area and become highly proficient in it, making you more employable.

Some factors to consider when narrowing down your field is firstly what interests you most. Ask yourself: What kind of work do you like doing? Can you see yourself working in that niche day in and day out? Another factor is job availability. See what kind of work is available in your area — you may not have the means to move to another city right out of school. A bit of practicality never hurt anyone.

Focusing on the field you want to work in will help you narrow down what courses to take with the remainder of your time in school. It should also become a guide for the pieces you work on both in and out of the classroom. These pieces will probably end up in your portfolio, so make them work for you.

Career Marathon

Finding your first job in the industry and building your career is a marathon, not a sprint. Building your portfolio and resumé after you graduate is far from ideal. You should be working on your application material while you're still in school.

Protip from Marcel Schaika

“Don't start building a portfolio at the very end of your schooling. Always keep your portfolio in a representative state, even if you want to add content later. You never know when a company is hiring or an opportunity will arise.”

A good portfolio takes months to put together—add to it as you complete pieces, and always be refining, tweaking, and changing out pieces. If you start this practice early on and consistently supplement your schoolwork with personal projects, you should have a portfolio ready by graduation.

Like your portfolio, your resumé and LinkedIn profile should be an ongoing project. Don't wait until you see an awesome job listing to write your resume. Start with a base resume and add to it as you expand your skillset.

An overlooked part of your career-building marathon is posting your art regularly. It's important to set up ArtStation and social media accounts for your work. Get in the habit of keeping a posting schedule, at least once a week. Not only is this a good habit for getting your work out there and seen, but it also forces you to work on your skills and techniques. Posting regularly is also a great way to keep track of your progress as an artist—you can easily scroll through your old work and see how much you've improved over time.

Make Friends

Your classmates are not your enemies; they are not your competition; they are your allies. School can be rough, but having friends in your program will make your studies easier, and a lot more fun. Making friends will only strengthen you as an artist because you can rely on each other for feedback, help with assignments, or collaboration on personal projects.

The best way to start networking is to add your classmates and lecturers on ArtStation and LinkedIn. It's not enough to just add people to follow; engage and interact with them on

MARATHON CHECKLIST



Resumé/CV



Portfolio



ArtStation Profile



Posting work to Social Media



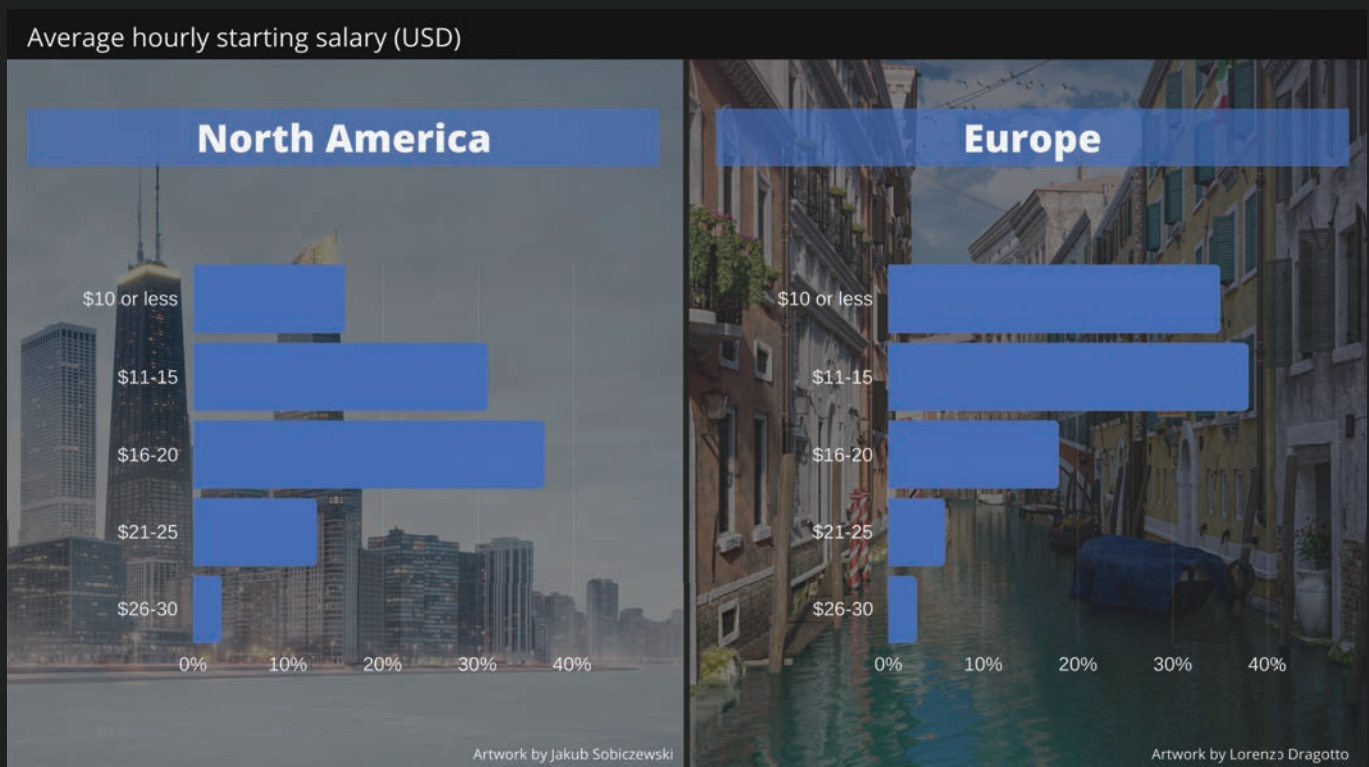
LinkedIn Profile

these platforms; like their work, ask for advice, and read what they post. These connections early on will help your career in the long run.

Do Your Research

While you're still a student, start compiling a list of studios or companies you're interested in working for. Research factors like prospective salary, benefits and work conditions for each one and keep this information in a spreadsheet along with links to their job listings. That way, when you graduate, you already have a list to work from when it comes to applying.

Do your research when it comes to your finances as well. Your financial standing once you've completed school will affect how far you can travel for work and how long you can commit to job hunting before you'd need to take on a temporary non-industry job. Taking steps while you're in school to be frugal or set up an affordable living situation can really help you financially.





Chapter 2

Portfolio & Resumé

Here's the chapter where we answer the big daunting question of "What do you put in your portfolio and resumé when you have no real work experience?" Everyone has to start somewhere, and this chapter will give you the footing you need to apply for your first industry job.

This chapter includes many suggestions, so it's important to look into what strategies work best with your experiences. It's also crucial to get both your portfolio and your resumé reviewed by at least one of your peers. It's hard to critique your own work, and a fresh set of eyes will help spot any obvious mistakes.

Portfolio

There's no sugar-coating the fact that you're up against a lot of competition. Your portfolio has to be your prizefighter. You need to grab the hiring manager's attention and hold it.

Setting up your portfolio on ArtStation is one way to mitigate risks that would otherwise come with setting up your own website. Not to mention many recruiters and hiring managers in the industry are used to navigating ArtStation's interface. The last thing you want is to set up a beautiful site only for it to take ages to load the images.

Set Up

When setting up your portfolio, make sure the artwork can be seen immediately.

Put effort and care into crafting your thumbnails so that they present your work well. Taking the extra time to put together thumbnails that show off a thoughtful composition will make them “pop” visually.

Choose a clean and simple URL for your portfolio; this will make it look presentable on a resumé but will also make it easier for managers to type in the URL if they’re given a printed version of your resumé.

Content

You’re going to need an end goal for your portfolio. What kind of artist do you want to be? What kind of studio do you want to work at? The answers to those questions should be reflected in your portfolio.

Your portfolio is meant to demonstrate the skills that you’ll need for the job.

Create personal projects that tackle one or two of those skills at a time so that the project scope stays small and doesn’t get overwhelming.

Resumé

Your first impression is not when you walk through the door. It’s when your resumé falls into the hands of the HR team. So even if you have the best portfolio, or you’re amazing at interviews, none of that matters if your resumé is too messy for them to look into you further.

If you’re looking to apply at a specific company, look closely at the work they create. They will most likely have a visual formula or style that carries throughout all of their games. Include works in that style so you’re not leaving any guesswork as to whether or not you’ll fit in there. For example, it’s difficult to see if an artist can do photorealistic work if there is only stylized content in the portfolio.

Less is more; only post your best work. The hiring manager would rather see four amazing pieces of art rather than three amazing and three questionable pieces. You’ll always be judged on your weakest piece because that’s what they can expect from you in a time crunch or on a bad day.

Leave out works-in-progress; you want to show that you can finish a project and that finished project is studio-quality. Your portfolio isn’t set in stone; it should reflect your current skillset, so you should update it as you improve, replacing or updating your pieces.

Set Up

Make sure your resumé is clear, honest and neat. In most cases, the portfolio is what matters most when it comes to applying for jobs; it is the first thing HR looks at. If your resumé is too messy, consisting of multiple pages, or it isn't exactly clear what it is you do, it could be thrown out before your portfolio is even reviewed.

Try to keep your resumé down to one page; as a student without experience, it's unlikely you have much to put down. Keep only the most relevant information; no one cares that you spent a summer working at a fast-food restaurant. As a general rule, have the most important information as high up the page as possible and save any extra information, explanation or details for your cover letter. Keeping things organized and concise will ensure your resumé is quick and easy to read.

Remember to keep your resumé clean and readable. Make sure the font you use is professional and easy to read. Using small or unusual fonts will only irritate the reader. If you're not sure where to start in terms of a resume layout, there are tons of online templates available for free. Canva has amazing templates for you to get started, and most word processors also include some free ones.

Content

When you don't have work experience there's still quite a bit you can put on your resumé instead. Make sure to include things like internships or volunteer work related to your field.

Protip from Kim Aava

If you do not have any job experience or didn't secure an internship, there are a few things you can do to gain experience such as: freelancing; joining a mod community; creating tutorials; participating in online challenges; and/or selling in assets stores. All of these are things you can add as job experience and will let potential employers know that you can work in smaller teams, meet deadlines, communicate and/or create things based on art direction.

You can add a section for your personal projects and name it something like, Creative Work Experience or Academic Projects. This will allow you to show the work you've done either at school or on the side.

Another area you can focus on is any awards or competitions you've won. These can be awards within your program or online art competitions. ArtStation Challenges are a great example of a recognized online competition. Discuss how you approached the competition from the planning stages, execution stages, collaborative aspect of working with others if it is a group competition, and this can display the skills that are used day-to-day in a studio.

If you're part of an artist community such as a modding community or a fan-art recreation community, you can include that too. Make sure to note what kind of projects you work on as part of the community. Artist communities are great to join while you're still in school because it'll give you more pieces to add your portfolio, and the community provides a place to get helpful feedback.

Skills and software proficiency are another common section of resumés. If you do plan on including this section, avoid using charts or diagrams that show this off. They tend to be tacky and take up a lot of space when a simple list would suffice.

Resume Checklist



Your Contact Information



Tool & Software proficiency



Education



Relevant Awards



Student Game Projects



Personal Projects



Link to Portfolio

To Check



Easy-to-skim



1-page



Neat, professional format



Chapter 3

Job Hunting

Fill out the application, hit send and off it goes into the void. Never to be heard from again. Job hunting can be frustrating and feel like a fruitless effort. Meanwhile, it looks like your old schoolmate found a job in a heartbeat. What does it take to get noticed? Read on to find out.

Applying

Adages like “less is more” or “quality over quantity” don’t stand up here. With limited experience, you need to apply to as many locations as you can. Now is not the time to be picky with where you work. You need that first job to build experience, so it doesn’t matter if you don’t like that studio’s games or the location isn’t ideal. By working in a job where you get to practice your skills for a large portion of the day, you’ll have the opportunity to grow your skills and work towards your desired job. Once you have some in-studio experience, you can start being pickier with where you apply.

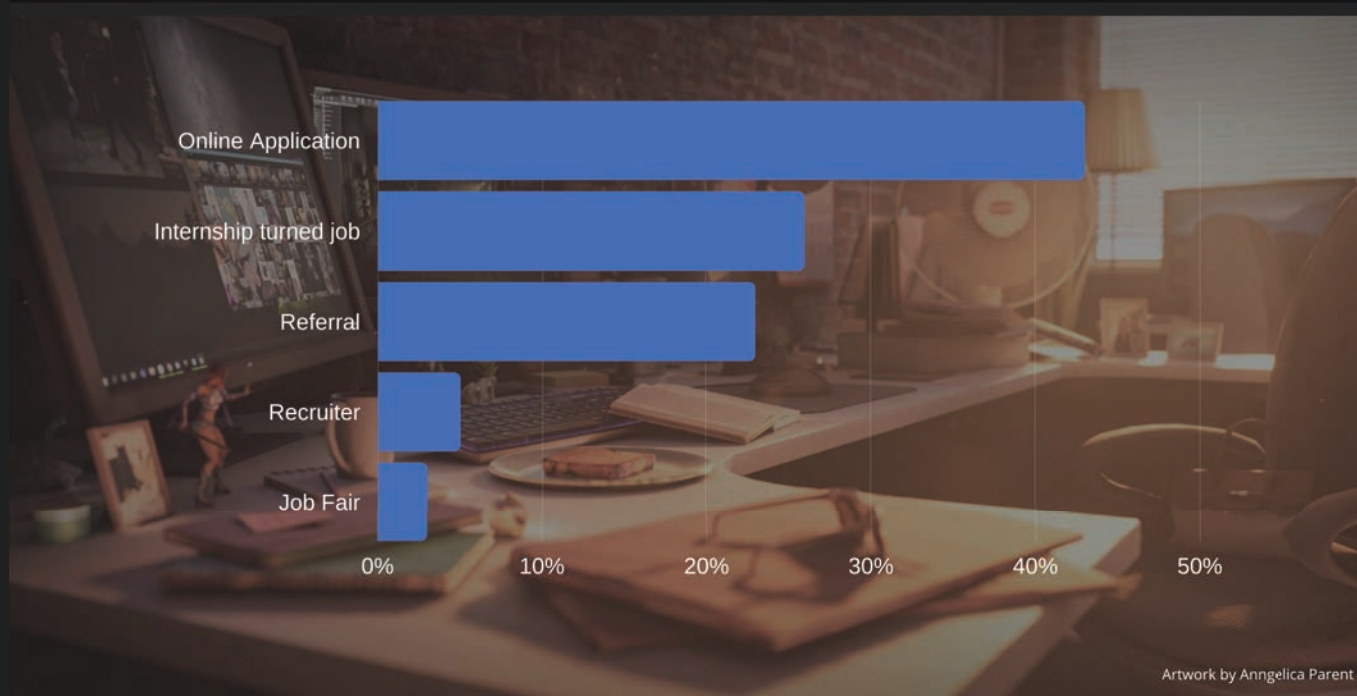
Cast the net wide, and don’t be discouraged by mid-level positions. When a studio posts a job for a mid-level artist, there is also a possibility that they’re looking for artists of many different levels despite the job requirements. Be honest about your skill-level and lack of experience when applying for a mid-level job. If the studio is impressed by your work, you will likely be offered a junior role.

You'll want to do your research before applying somewhere. Don't just email your resumé around blindly; look up the companies you want to work for, check any potential job openings. Recruitment is usually based on the company's needs and production time.

Once you find some openings, check out the portfolios from people who already work there. Look at the style and quality of the pieces and see what you can learn from them and what you can incorporate into your own portfolio. If you apply at a studio that focuses heavily on tilables and trim sheets, then your 1-to-1 props won't be as relevant to them.

The last thing to check before applying is whether you know anyone who works at the company you're applying to. Many companies offer referral bonuses, so most people are more than happy to refer a friend. Even if the person can't refer you, it's always helpful to reach out; they might be able to give you some tips on applying at the very least. Remember to be kind and courteous to whoever you get into contact with.

How artists found their first jobs



Data: ArtStation Student to Junior Artist Survey 2020

The percent of artists who had to move for their first job



Data: ArtStation Student to Junior Artist Survey 2020

Have the Right Attitude

After you've sent out a round of applications, see what happens. If you land a job, congratulations! If you don't, take a look at your portfolio. Perhaps you need to improve your skills a bit more before sending out another round of applications. Try getting feedback from people in the industry so you know what skills you should focus on. Everything is a learning experience, including learning about the application process.

Keep in mind how you present yourself in an interview. No one wants to work with a rude, arrogant person. Make an effort to be nice, humble and friendly. Don't act like you know everything; it usually leaves a much better impression if you are aware of your weaknesses and you can openly talk about them.

Regardless of how the job hunting process goes, be courteous of people's time. Keep emails and phone calls short and simple. Whether it's a hiring manager or an industry veteran you'd like feedback from, a few sentences will suffice for an email. Save the details and lengthy explanations for the interviews, or if they ask.

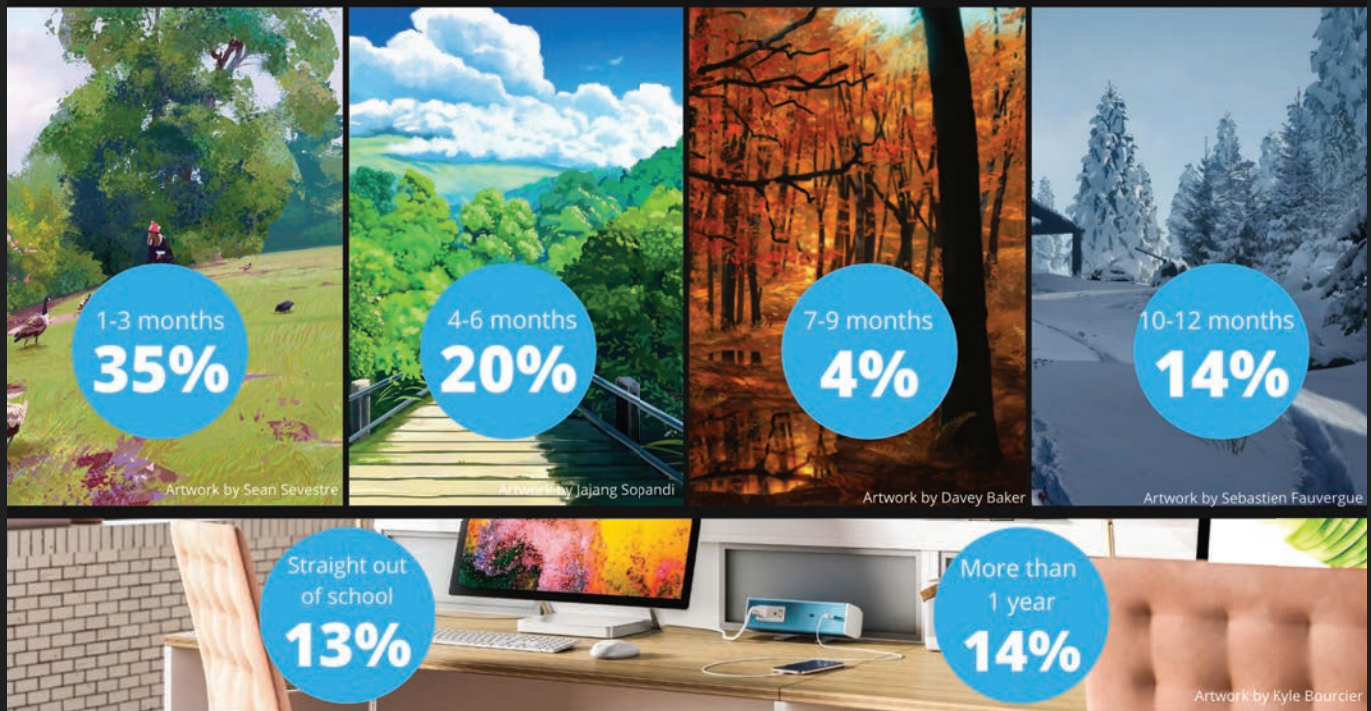
Take any feedback you get professionally. Sometimes it's not easy to hear but that's no reason to lash out. Always thank the person who provided you with feedback, even if you disagree with it. Humble yourself. No one is born a master artist; failure is part of the process.

Lastly, in terms of attitude, just be honest. Don't lie about your experience or how proficient you are in a skillset. Lying will only bite you in the rear when you're found out. You don't want your dishonesty preceding you and keeping you from great jobs down the line.

Protip from Clinton Crumpler

Talk with employers and studios any way you can, and show potential employers your work in every available format. Posting on Discord, ArtStation, LinkedIn, and any other viable professional platform is great for exposure and getting your work seen. You would be surprised how I have hired an artist after seeing their work was shared to me from a friend-of-a-friend-of-a-friend.

How long does it take artists to find their first job



Data: ArtStation Student to Junior Artist Survey 2020

Unwritten Rules

Application Pacing

Once you've applied to a place, don't apply again for at least six months. Most of the time, if you were not called back, it's because your work isn't up to their standards. If you apply again later on, make sure you do so with a new and improved portfolio. Applying again before you've brought something new to the table is a waste of your time and the studio's time.

Doing rounds of applications tends to be more effective than 24/7 applying. Dedicate yourself for three months of high-quality applications, meaning tailor-written cover letters for each studio and tweaking your resumé and portfolio as needed.

Timing

Try to respond promptly to emails that you have spell-checked and corrected. Don't keep people waiting weeks or be lazy to respond. This also applies to art tests, questionnaires, and application information. Anything that gets you closer to a job shouldn't be put on the

back burner. Always try your best to deliver things on time and without requesting too many special considerations.

Be a Work-in-Progress

If you're not chosen for a job or if you don't hear back after an art test it's perfectly fine to send a follow-up email thanking them for the opportunity and asking if there's a chance for some feedback. It'll show you're not only polite and professional but willing to grow from the experience. Furthermore, by taking a critique seriously and actively working with it, you show much more than development in your art skills. It shows that you could be an excellent person to work alongside in a studio position. If you can't listen to feedback now you will struggle in a studio where you don't have the choice to ignore feedback.

Social Media

Be active on social media and share your work confidently. The more exposure your work has, the better chance the right person will see it and potentially have work for you.

You can also use social media (such as LinkedIn) to reach out to employers or HR at different studios who can get you in direct contact with the individuals who deal specifically with hiring artists.

Most importantly, join the art communities. With Discord, in particular, there are lots of ways to socialize with industry pros, give and receive feedback, and have fun meeting other like-minded people. Help others by giving them honest and polite feedback. Showing you want to see others grow and are actively trying to help them also indicates a strong trait that would be a real positive in a studio setting. While staying respectful, avoid empty feedback like saying "good job" or "nice" as that doesn't help anyone improve their skills.

Chapter 4

Networking

Networking can be a dirty word. It sometimes implies trying to make a connection and only valuing another person for what they can get you. This shouldn't be what you're aiming for. You should instead focus on socializing with other artists and industry professionals. After all, if you're going to spend 40+ hours a week working with someone, you might as well become friends.

Visions of networking might also include attending crazy industry parties or after-work networking events. In reality, these sort of activities can help you connect with new people, but as they're currently few and far between focus your attention on other ways to connect. Consider attending virtual conferences, taking part in game dev forums, going for lunch with new people, and twitch chatting with content streamers.

Cultivate relationships with people over time. You don't have to be best friends with everyone but having a good relationship and pleasant demeanor with your peers can go a long way.

The Connections You Have

Sending out connection requests or friend requests on LinkedIn and Facebook isn't

networking. Just because you send out a million requests doesn't mean you're making a connection. Instead, look at your surroundings, your classmates, your colleagues from your internship. Nurture these relationships, keep in touch, and take a genuine interest in their lives and work.

It might feel like your classmates are your competition with everyone vying for the same prized spot at a studio. In fact, it's quite the opposite. Once one of your group makes it into a studio, it's highly likely they'll be your way in and vice versa. When projects ramp up, they usually need to hire a ton of talent, and that's where recommendations come in. People would rather work with someone friendly than a cut-throat competitor. Relationships with your peers are usually nurtured through feedback and critique, helping share resources, sharing work opportunities, and ultimately supporting others in their goals.

Protip from Kieran Goodson

“Good networking happens over months, years and decades: it's a tweet to someone here or a thank you comment there; or a round of feedback to someone when they ask for it. It's a lot of small interactions over a long period of time.

Good networking is NOT shotgunning out connection requests on LinkedIn. It is NOT getting to know someone and expecting them to hand you job opportunities. It is NOT harassing or bombarding recruiters online so that they notice your application.”

Introducing Yourself

While you should invest in the relationships you already have don't be shy about getting in touch with people who inspire you to ask for feedback on your portfolio. Worst case scenario, they're too busy and they decline your request. Remember to be considerate of their time and not abuse any good nature.

Take the feedback seriously. Don't just go around asking for advice if you're not going

to put it to good use. It can be a disadvantage if your application later on ends up at the same person that gave you feedback beforehand. If you're in doubt about any advice you received, ask for a second opinion.

When you're connecting to someone for the first time online, make sure you include a note explaining who you are and just a quick explanation of why you're requesting to connect with them. Personalized messages will get you further than empty requests. If you are messaging a stranger, look at their profile first, find out if they're even a good fit for you to be messaging. Review and spell-check before hitting send, and make sure your messaging comes across as professional.

Fostering Small Relationships

Don't take for granted the smaller friendships you make along the way. Some connections won't turn into majestic friendships, but will maintain a back-and-forth of occasional chats and sharing artwork or tips. Usually, these types of friendships are maintained in a community setting like an art-related Discord server, forum websites or blogs. Participating in these communities is better than simply posting your artwork for others to look at without actually interacting with them.

Remember that these communities are built around the idea of give and take. Always give more to the community than you are taking. Having a positive attitude to helping others with their journey will only help build your network.

Stay Organized

Spending a bit of time getting organized at the start of a project can save you a ton of time in the long run. There's no one way to stay organized—you have to find what works for you and your industry.

We recommend using an app like Trello to keep track of the projects you're working on. You can organize your projects from multiple clients and even put in due dates. Use Trello

to keep all important information in one place: contracts, screenshots, emails, to-do lists, etc. The last thing you want to do is spend tons of time searching through your inbox for that one specification you can't quite remember. If you upkeep a system (like Trello) to hold all that information together, you'll make the most of your time.

Get into the habit of staying organized, even with small simple jobs. You'll thank yourself when the bigger projects hit.

Communicate

Communicate. It seems like a no-brainer, but it can often be overlooked or communication tactics can get sloppy. If nothing else, it's important to be mindful of your communications.

Whenever possible, opt for a phone call. Your knee-jerk reaction might be to just answer an email but getting on the phone or on a video call provides a more human approach. Talking to the client in real-time can get you so much more information and detail about what they want. In terms of landing a job, you'll be a

lot more convincing over the phone. As a freelancer, you're also acting as a consultant so the client will appreciate hearing that you're enthusiastic about the project and that you have ideas to pitch to them.

Protip from Taylor Brandenburger

I've found that clients like when you present yourself as a friend and less of a working robot that they have to type commands into. Clients like when you show you are personally invested in their projects and have character.

There have been times where I'll be in meetings and I just crack a joke to break the ice and get the room a nice chuckle. This adds to your charisma and makes working with you a more enjoyable experience.

Of course, it's all about the artwork at the end of the day, but adding charisma to your character only boosts your likability with a client.

This may seem counterintuitive, given that you'll want everything in writing, but there's an easy fix for that. After your call, just recap the discussion in a few bullet points in an email.

When you do have to send emails, make sure to go the extra mile to be personable and professional. With the lack of intonation and facial expressions of an in-person meeting, it's easy for your emails to sound cold or harsh.

Feedback

If you're going to be a freelancer, you better develop a thick skin. There's nobody to shelter you from negative feedback. As much as you're running the show, you have to accept that the client has the last word. This means you can't get upset when changes are requested or criticism is given—you just have to keep calm and do the job.

At one point or another, you'll have clients make some crazy requests or ask for something you know will look terrible. While it's alright to explain why something might not work, ultimately it's their decision. Don't take it personally or fight for your way because at the end of the day it's not your project.

You'll also get your fair share of unsolicited feedback, so take all feedback with a grain of salt. There's no reason to hurry home to redo your entire portfolio based on one person's advice. The advice clients will give may be true for their particular project but not always the industry at large.

Chapter 5

Managing Your Career and Personal Life

Have a Support System

There's a well-known African proverb: If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together. The same holds true about working as an artist and having friends with the same goals as you will make a huge difference in your success. If you're stumped with a piece you're working on, these friends will help you solve it or at the very least commiserate about the struggle. Not to say friends outside of the industry can't be there for you, but they won't be able to offer the same support, or worse, they might distract you from your goals.

Your family is another major support system you shouldn't take for granted. If your family isn't supportive of your career path, try to surround yourself with people who are. If your family is supportive, keep an open line of communication with them. Tell them about what it takes to become an artist in the industry, so they can better understand the type of dedication you need to have.

Block Out Time

Schooling, job hunting, personal projects, social life, relationships and sleep. Having everything in balance might seem like an impossible task, but the best way to handle all these moving pieces is with some extreme scheduling. To stay productive, set up work hours for yourself, like a 9 to 5 workday, where you block off an uninterrupted time slot for personal projects, another slot for job hunting and so on. Treat that time like you would at a real job. Don't switch to playing video games, or go hang out with friends midway through. Having discipline will ensure you stay productive but also make time for your personal life.

While it is important to block out time for your personal life, you will have to skip out on a weekend party, or if your budget allows, only work a part-time job to work more on your portfolio. It's about making your priorities clear for yourself. It's unhealthy to dedicate every waking moment to your career, but another night of clubbing won't do you any favors either.

Once you're working full time, keep this method of time blocks for outside of work hours so you can still dedicate time to improving your skills and working on personal projects. This will also reduce the chance of burning out because it means you're blocking in time for leisure and relationships.

You are your most valuable asset. If you don't take care of yourself, you won't be much

Protip from Alex Beddows

You need to be honest with yourself and where you invest your time. If you spend 4 hours a night playing games (which is fine), you are in no position to complain if you are not developing/finding a job. Keeping a time diary for two weeks can be very eye-opening as to just how much time we waste on a day-to-day basis.

good to anyone else. Doing small things on a daily basis to care for yourself, like taking an hour before bed to read a good book or spending quality time with your significant other can go a long way.

Overworking yourself can actually leave you unmotivated or make you lose interest entirely which will prevent you from reaching your goals.

Never Stop Learning

Focus on small projects so you can hone your skills in a specific area. It's not enough to just have these ongoing things you're sort of working on; give yourself hard deadlines for personal projects like 2-3 weeks and don't go past that. These projects should be separate from your larger portfolio pieces (which encompass multiple skillsets), and they should be targeted to one goal. Blocking out time for these little projects should continue even after you've established yourself professionally. There's always room for improvement and something new to learn.

Setting a time limit might seem odd for something you're just doing to stay sharp, but it accustoms you to make impactful decisions. You won't have time to get lost in the details because the lack of time will mean you'll maintain the bigger picture perspective you need in order to create the art efficiently. It will also help you get past the artist hurdle of art never being done. With a set timeline, you need to figure out what defines done for you.

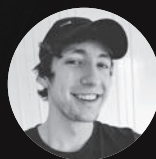
Special Thanks

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Alex Beddows

ArtStation - Learning Manager



Jonathan Hemmens

Junior Environment Artist at
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Clinton Crumpler

Owner @ Dekogon | Principal
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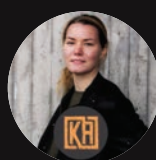
Kieran Goodson

Junior Environment Artist at
Rebellion



Jacob Norris

Lead Environment Artist @Nvidia



Kim Aava

Lead 3D Artist



Marcel Schaika

Lead Artist, Crytek

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- Jasmin Habezai-Fekri
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- Lorenzo Dragotto
- Samuel Smith
- Sean Sevestre
- Sebastien Fauvergue
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