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Community Colleges Power Up Video Game Programs

From video game art to programming, students can enter the field with a community college degree.



A degree can help professionals stand out in the sometimes unsteady field.

By [Ellen Ryan](#) | Jan. 25, 2016, at 9:30 a.m.

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For some, playing video games is fun. It's relaxing. Why not study for a job in the field?

"It's not always a stable career," says Deb Solomon, professor of computer gaming and simulation at [Montgomery College](#) in Rockville, Maryland. "A lot of people move all around the country working 60-, 70-, 80-hour weeks, then get laid off when the project's done."

But maybe that's no problem. "If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life," says Russell Allen, a fall 2015 Montgomery College gaming graduate now studying simulation and digital entertainment at the [University of Baltimore](#). "That 'aha' moment is just awesome."

Though the gaming field has many areas of study, programs often divide them broadly into design and production, art and animation, and programming. Here's a look at a program in each area.

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- **Game design and production:** Design students learn to consider everything from type of game – platform, side scroller – to style – gritty, cutesy, fantasy – to characters. But like all Montgomery

College gaming majors, design students learn business skills, too, such as working in teams, meeting deadlines, analyzing the market and building a website and portfolio.

With games used in advertising, advocacy and training as well as entertainment, "a lot of these skills are transferable," Solomon says. "Team management, programming, e-learning, Web and database work – all of these have nongame applications."

Many grads have gone into testing as a career or as a steppingstone. "Regular software design probably pays a little better" than game design, she says. "It might not be as fun or as cool, but it's more stable and steady."

Allen, who's focusing on level design, says friends have been hired by creating short videos showing how they found and fixed bugs in a game. "My advice to students is to play a broad array of games," he says. "That's more beneficial than trying to jump ahead by designing in high school."

The Gamasutra Salary Survey 2014 lists the average U.S. game designer salary as \$50,625 for those with less than three years' experience. Testers made less, according to the survey by the professional video game industry website.

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• **Game art and animation:** Austin, Texas, is "a hotbed of gaming innovation," says Garry Gaber, department chair in game design, animation and motion graphics at [Austin Community College](#).

Using industry-standard software, the college's art/animation students work in teams on principles of animation with both animate and inanimate objects. Art concepts include modeling, texturing, organic and inorganic work and unwrapping – which Gaber describes as figuring out where lines will go for filling in, "kind of like paint by numbers."

Art and animation grads "get their feet wet with a two-year degree," he says. Entry-level jobs include junior artist (modeling, texturing), junior animator (making things move) and texturer (creating textures for models). Employers include game studios, film and video makers and other businesses.

Gaber says it's rare for graduates to do both art and animation; except at a small studio, most specialize. Still, "this field is always evolving. The more versatile you are, the more chance you have of getting a job."

Finn Staber, programmer/designer at Austin video game developer Portalarium, has hired many of the school's graduates at several local studios. "The key to successful game developer education is to have an agile curriculum that changes rapidly every session and trains developers with applicable knowledge of current industry needs," he says. To Staber, ACC's Game Development Institute "has an advantage with [its] advisory committee of professional game developers."

The Gamasutra Salary Survey 2014 lists the average U.S. game artist/animator salary as \$50,463 for those with less than three years' experience.

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• **Game programming:** [Mesa Community College](#) near Phoenix, Arizona, gives game technology students "an introduction to game design, programming and content creation, with a focus on production," says occupational program director Burton Borlongan. Those who focus on programming are well prepared because "the curriculum is platform neutral; it isn't focused on any one game console or mobile phone."