

1 Effective Networking (GDC Guide)

Note: This is part of a series of articles called [Effective Networking in the Games Industry](#). I'm writing these articles in no particular order, so I'm sorry if this seems scattered. I promise I will collect it all and put it on my permanent webspace for future reference.

Why GDC?

For anyone in the game industry, there are two events held in the United States every year that kick the pants off of every other event. One event almost anyone who plays video games knows about. Of course I'm talking about [E3](#). As for the other event, many people new to the games industry don't even know exists. This event is the [Game Developers Conference](#), or GDC.

Many people who want to work in the games industry, especially young people, want to go to E3 because they think it will help their professional development. This is, however, patently false. E3 is a marketing and press event, with about 30,000 attendees if I'm not mistaken. Unless you are a journalist, or involved in marketing, the only reason you go to E3 is to either demonstrate your game to the media/publishers, or to be a fanboy and see what new games or hardware will be coming out in the next year. E3 will almost certainly not increase your personal potential as a game developer.

I will say without reservation that GDC is a fantastic event, and has always been (professionally speaking) the best week of my year, hands-down. GDC is smaller than E3, where something like 10,000 professional game developers come together and talk shop. Where E3 is game marketers speaking to the press and the fans, GDC is game developers speaking to other game developers. Compared to E3, the press presence at GDC is practically nil, which is an excellent quality for any event.

GDC is really good for a few things:

- [Learning about the games industry](#). When you attend sessions, you get to hear professional developers talk about important issues in areas ranging from design and programming to legal and business. More importantly, in between sessions and during the after-parties, if you play your cards right you get to hear war stories straight from the horse's mouth. It is in learning these stories that you undergo a kind of individual acculturation: over time, you become a part of the game industry's unique culture, and all of a sudden you talk the talk, and even begin to walk the walk a little bit. This will also teach you about the stark realities of the industry, and help you determine exactly what it is you want for a job.
- [Meeting professionals](#). A more important subset of this would be making friends with professionals, although just meeting people is a good way of building your [weak ties](#).

- Building confidence. Going to GDC and [successfully engaging in conversation](#) with the pros is one of the greatest feelings you'll ever have, especially if you're not yet a professional game developer yourself. It can give you that confidence boost you need in order to put up with getting rejected or ignored by a dozen game companies in a three month period. Not that [I know anything about that](#).
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The Space

GDC 2006 is being held in the San Jose Convention Center (SJCC), and is run by CMP Media. Last year it was held in San Francisco for the first time ever, and while a lot of people welcomed the change (the convention center in SF has more space, SF is a cooler city, it's closer to a lot of Bay Area studios) I found it to be bad for networking. Why? Well, the space itself was pretty good. The problem was the city. San Francisco is awesome, which means that the developers, rather than hanging around the convention center after the day's session, would disperse into the city, hang out at their friends' nearby studios, etc. Which meant it was harder to find new people to hang out with in the evenings.

San Jose sort of keeps everyone confined to the same 6-block radius downtown. I like that. It means I have a better chance of running into attendees I don't know.

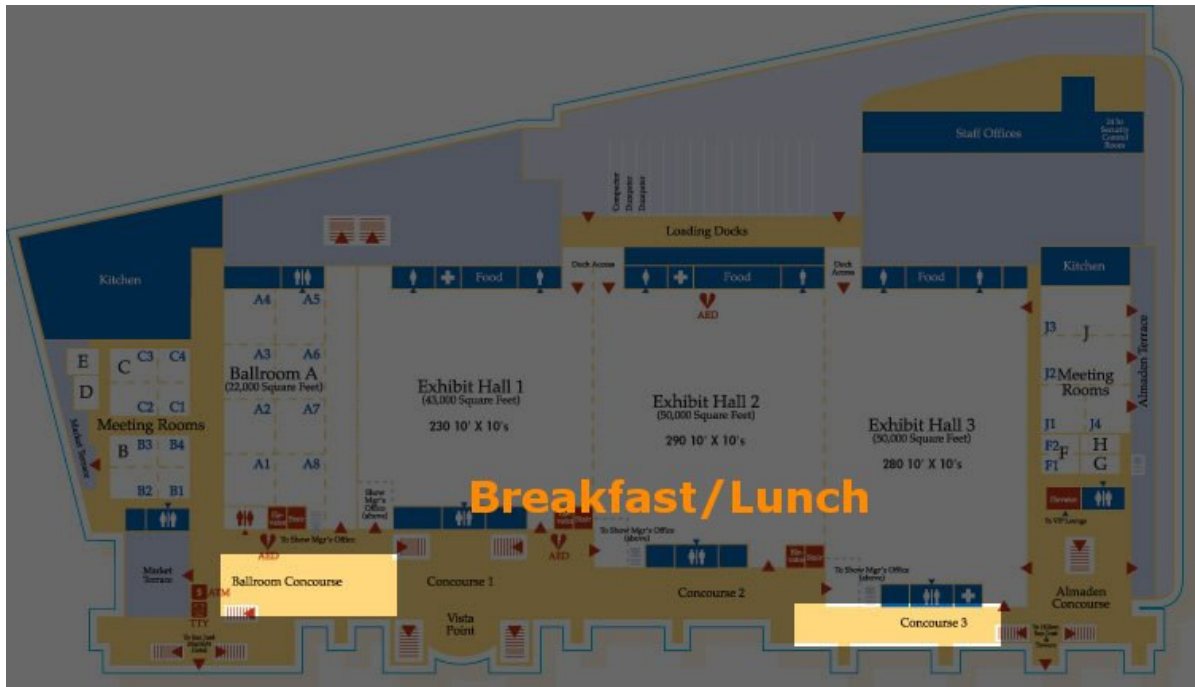
The SJCC is essentially one big floor. All the action happens on the exhibit level (except for registration, which takes place downstairs). There are some places and times that I've found are good for networking, and others that aren't so good. I'm going to discuss those in the remainder of this article. This is from my memory of past GDCs. None of this may be true anymore. CMP may have changed the whole structure of the conference, for all I know. But all signs point to my advice being relevant once again. Just take it with a grain of salt.

Everybody Eats

What do you have in common with the CEO of a game company? You both need to eat in order to live. While that may seem blatantly self-evident and useless, it in fact has major ramifications for networking.

At GDC, people who possess the right conference passes (basically anything but the Expo-only passes) get free breakfast and lunch every day. CEOs and grunts alike descend upon the food tables during the designated feeding hours. It is truly a sight to behold! All of these people are clamoring for two limited resources: food and a comfortable place to sit. What this means for an intrepid networker is a chance to obtain these resources and leverage them to your own networking benefit.

I've highlighted in this map where the food and seating are usually found.



A Breakfast Strategy

Show up to GDC very early. Breakfast is from 8am to 9am. The first sessions start at 9am. Show up at 7:30am. Pretty much nobody will be around at this point. This is good for two reasons.

First, you'll be there with just a few other early birds. They'll have nobody else to talk to but you! Networking doesn't get much easier than this.

Second, all the breakfast seating will be empty. This will not be true in 45 minutes. Grab a seat at a table now. There will be about 4 to 6 empty seats at your table. Once the tables start to fill up, one of two things will happen. People might ask to sit at your table, which means you get to say "why, certainly" and then engage them in conversation over breakfast. Or, people will look longingly at your table but not sit down because they think you've claimed it for someone else already. At this point, you can survey the people who are seatless, determine who is interesting to you (often a person's company and position are listed on their passes hanging around their necks), and offer seats to the interesting people and their friends. You haven't even met them and you've done them a favor. You're off to a good start.

A Lunch Strategy

Try and grab two lunches. This isn't technically allowed, but if you have a lunch-enabled pass, you can hit both lunch lines and usually finagle a second lunch. This is not because you need to eat two lunches to network, but it means if you've met somebody earlier with a non-lunch pass, you can offer to procure a lunch for them. You will get in their good graces, I guarantee, and it's a great way of making friends.

Hang Out With Smokers

This was mentioned in Mencher's article, but I'll reiterate here: smokers are people too! No reason to leave them out of your networking strategy. Head out to the terrace where most of the smokers spend their off-time. It's a nice break from the monotony of the conference halls.

I've highlighted the smoking terrace here:



Small Sessions

Everyone gets excited about the big-name people, but I never actually go to their keynotes. The only big-name sessions I ever attend are Will Wright's, and that's only because he is freaking brilliant and also the best presenter you will ever see.

I like the small sessions more. They are less claustrophobic, there's less press, it's less of a

general zoo, and it's just easier to meet people after the sessions. The small sessions tend to have people who are genuinely interested in the subject matter of the session, and not the star power of the speaker, so most of the people you see at the session will be more than willing to strike up a conversation about the content of the presentation.

Open Spaces

People tend to hang around in the open spaces, and to rush through the crowded spaces as quickly as possible. So you should hang out in the open spaces, too. You'll meet more people. This map has my favorite open spaces highlighted, along with some particularly bad places to get hallway networking done.

