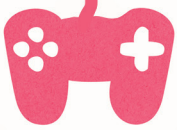
THE CAREER GAME LOOP

Learn to Earn in the New Economy



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WILEY

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Contents

About the Author		*vii*
Acknowledgments		*ix*
Foreword		*xi*
Introduction		*xv*
Part I	**Choose Quest**	**1**
Chapter 1	How Gamers Learned to Choose	4
Chapter 2	Five Tactics for Expanding Horizons	22
Chapter 3	Professional Pathfinder and Job Feel	32
Chapter 4	Gravitational Pull and Expecting the Unexpected	42
Chapter 5	This Game Is Beatable	54
Chapter 6	Community Loop: Mentors	62
Part II	**Level Up**	**78**
Chapter 7	How Gamers Learned to Learn	82
Chapter 8	Fundamentals, Platforms, and Mindsets	100
Chapter 9	Build Your Own Tutorial	114
Chapter 10	Mastering Durable Skills	122
Chapter 11	Community Loop: Coaches	132

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Part III Job Hunt 138

Chapter 12 How Gamers Learned to Hack the Grind 142

Chapter 13 Free Your Mindset 152

Chapter 14 Tell Your Story 156

Chapter 15 Ask, Then Negotiate 162

Chapter 16 Community Loop: Sponsors 166

Part IV Job Craft 174

Chapter 17 How Gamers Learned to Reinvent 178

Chapter 18 Why Gamers Job Craft 188

Chapter 19 How Gamers Job Craft 198

Chapter 20 Community Loop: Bosses 210

Part V Beyond the Loop: Hiring, Managing, and Promoting 218

Chapter 21 How Managers Learned to Lead 222

Chapter 22 Hiring Career Loopers 230

Chapter 23 Managing Career Loopers 240

Chapter 24 Promoting Career Loopers 246

Conclusion 252

Index 258

Introduction

Think this job market is tough? Try life as a witcher.

If you've played *The Witcher*, or seen the show, or read the books, you'll know: witching is a scary business. If you've never heard of *The Witcher*, you'll just have to take my word for it.

On a good day, you'll fight a frothing horde of sludge zombies whose greatest ambition is to claw you to death, pickle you in swamp muck, then consume you bit by tender bit. On a bad day, you might get tangled up with a rotting corpse who's got a bone to pick with the living and an army of plague-infested rats at her command.

The wild thing about witchers—and the gamers who control them—is that they don't just fight one of these horrors and call it a day. They go looking for these fights, one after another, again and again and again.

Werewolf down? Let's get ourselves a vampire. Vampire slain? Let's move on to the demonic, faceless gravedigger and his violent mob of undead spirits.

Players of *The Witcher* aren't trapped in a revolving door of vicious nightmares. They're making an intentional effort to find these creatures and battle them, repeating an elaborate procedure every time.

I want to break down that procedure for a moment. (Stick with me—I've got a point here.)

First, the player goes looking for a quest. Maybe they pick up a contract to help a struggling town. Maybe they pity someone who's desperately searching for their wife. One way or another, there's a monster out there, and the player volunteers to slay it.

Next comes the prep. The player interrogates locals about the monster, then does some forensic probing at the scene of the crime. They get their potions brewed and their gear packed.

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And then they chase down their leads. Find the monster. Fight it. Kill it.

On the other side of victory are rewards. Bags of gold. Shiny new gear. The player levels up their character, improves their gadgets, grabs new equipment, and seeks out their next quest.

Then the cycle begins again.

In the world of game design, this repeating procedure is called a *core game loop*. And, as far as I'm concerned, it's the key to unlocking career growth in the new economy.

Big Bad Uncertainty

Previous generations entered the working world knowing, from the start, what they would do and how they would do it. Where you grew up, who your parents were, what you looked like, how much money you had, what school you went to—these things determined what kind of career you'd have. And once you had that career, there was usually just one way to do things: the way they've always been done.

Then came the digital revolution and everything changed. Free software. Free information. Digital social networks. Rapid communication breeds rapid innovation, and rapid innovation breeds rapid disruption.

Every time technology steps forward, businesses rise and fall. Jobs disappear. Jobs spring up. Jobs transform. Value shifts. To stay nimble, more employers recruit a disposable contract-based workforce. So you get remote work. The gig economy. Where will I live? What will I be doing a year from now? The more we learn about technology, the more uncertain our own lives become.

Today, things like race, gender, class, geography, and sexuality continue to influence our futures dramatically, in big and bigoted ways. But most of us have lost the algorithmic certainty that dominated our parents' and grandparents' careers. There are just too many variables. Technology transforms too quickly. News travels too fast. Disruptors upend whole industries overnight. In the new economy, nothing about our careers is certain.

Everyone's a Witcher

I've spent the entirety of my own career chasing this storm of uncertainty. As a college junior, I interned at the FCC, the federal agency that

regulates communications. It was 1994, and the FCC had their hands full with radio, phones, cable, and TV. A new form of communication was emerging—the internet—and the question was whether they should regulate that, too. The FCC took this matter so seriously that they assigned it to an intern (me) and locked her in a windowless room to figure it out.

The following years sent me down a winding road through tech, education, and workforce development. Where would the internet take us? How would work evolve? How would education evolve? To me, the answers to these questions all seemed interdependent.

For years, I ping-ponged around the worlds of tech, work, and learning. I became the CEO of an educational gaming company. The COO of a career-training venture. I worked with the White House to promote the use of games for education.

Everywhere I went, I built teams, and those teams surprised me. I found that, as among all my employees, the contributors who grew up gaming seemed most equipped to triumph in the face of 21st-century challenges. They learned new skills quickly, solved unsolvable problems, made fast friends with folks from very different backgrounds, and communicated clearly even when the way forward felt unclear.

Eventually, this discovery led me to Unity.

You might not have heard of Unity, but if you play video games, then you've seen our work. We design one of the world's most popular "game engines," which is what it sounds like: a super-powered digital machine that makes games go. Like the engine of a car, you won't see the Unity Engine unless you pop open the hood of your game. But whether you see it or not, it's there, whirling the wheels and racing things forward.

At Unity, I lead our efforts in education and workforce development. I'm privileged to work with a team of dedicated designers, educators, creators, and organizers—many of whom helped write this book. Together, we educate people to work in games, and we use games to educate people to work in anything.

In my role, I've interfaced with every kind of professional under the sun—people from every socioeconomic background, in every sort of industry, at every stage of their careers. Ivy league grads. Community college students. Mid-career pivoters. Job seekers from emerging countries. And what I hear everywhere is the same: Worry. Stress. Terror in the face of uncertainty.

In a landscape of short-term contracts, frequent layoffs, and the menacing forward-march of artificial intelligence, we all feel like witchers—scrounging for contracts, surrounded by monsters.

But here's the thing . . .

There's a reason why people love playing *The Witcher*.

Chaos Is a Ladder

It's certainly true that the economy is changing, and that our careers are changing with it. But I don't think that's bad news. In fact, I think it's terrific news. There has never been a more exciting time to work.

Previous generations experienced more career certainty precisely because so little was possible. Things were the way they were, they worked the way they worked, and there was nothing you could do to change that.

But today, *anything is possible*. Our futures are no longer solely determined by whether we got the right degree from the right school or took the right job in the right city with the right title. And the environment around us is constantly shifting.

Today, the average person spends just four years in any given job.[1] Experts estimate that 85% of the next decade's jobs haven't been invented yet.[2] And of the jobs that do already exist, an estimated 1.1 billion of them will be radically transformed by new tech.[3] Bottom line: 40%—nearly *half*—of the skills that define career success are about to change.[4]

If all that uncertainty sounds like chaos, that's because it is. But chaos is good for us. Great even. Because, as anyone who's seen *Game of Thrones* knows, "chaos is a ladder." If you're open to adapting, it's a clear climb to the top.

That's what we'll need to do if we want to flourish in the new economy: adapt. It used to be that career growth was rigid and linear (see Figure I.1). First you went to school, then you started your career.

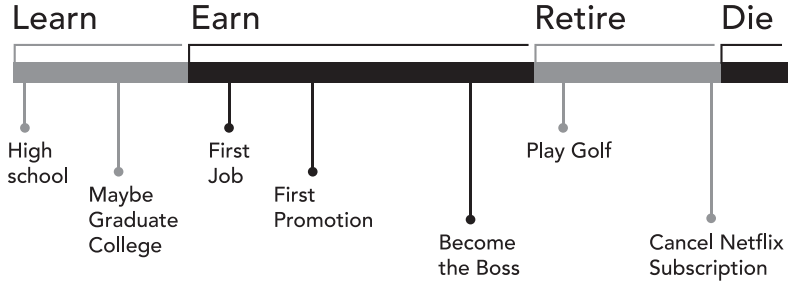

Figure I.1 Linear Career

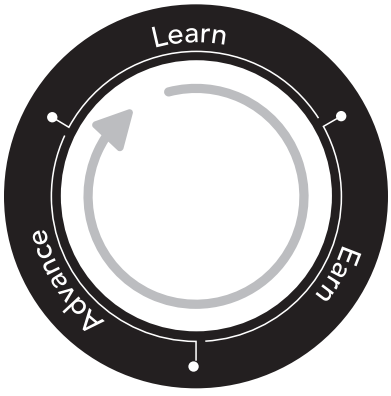

Figure I.2 Looping Career (learn-earn-advance loop)

First you learned, then you earned. But now, and in the decades to come, we will learn and earn continuously, always developing new skills and applying them. Always adapting (see Figure I.2).

Learn, earn, advance. Learn, earn, advance. If we can repeat that cycle, we'll thrive.