

Dream Job: App developer

By Mark King, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 11.23.16

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Sean Murray (right) and Hazel McKendrick of English video games developer Hello Games photographed at their studio in Guildford, England, December 12, 2013. Photo: Rob Monk/Edge Magazine via Getty Images

Many users of smartphones and other handheld computers have daydreamed of inventing a killer app, one of the simple and often brilliantly useful little programs that run on touchscreen phones and tablet computers like the iPad.

Although they are often minimalist in design and function, apps have become big business. According to technology research firms, global app sales reached 211 billion downloads in 2015, worth around £33.4 billion (\$41.1 billion). "Angry Birds" is one of the most successful apps ever and Guinness World Records 2016 says it has been downloaded more than a billion times.

Riding The New Wave Of Technology

Justin James is not a typical IT nerd. James is an experienced app builder and works in a trendy office in the West End of London. He dresses smartly and enjoys traveling and fine dining. The fact that he can rattle off a Star Trek reference is perhaps the only indicator of a life beyond computing.

An Australian by birth, James began a management and finance degree at the University of Perth in Australia in 2000, but lasted only two years before deciding it wasn't exciting enough. He "bailed out" and began playing around with computers while working in a movie theater. "I had always messed about with them," he says, "but it was at this point that I finally realized I could make a job out of my love of computers."

While studying for a computer science degree, also in Perth, he took a class on software programming for mobile phones. It was then that he realized he could become part of a new wave of technology. "While I was growing up, computers took off in popularity. Then later the Web exploded and now mobiles (cellphones) are too. It's exciting to be a part of it."

Armed with this knowledge, James set about creating a future for himself. He traveled around before arriving in Britain, taking various jobs, including at a ski resort and as a chef.

First Apple, Then Grapple

James then got a job with Apple computers in London before joining Grapple in August 2010. The company had only launched seven months earlier. James started as a multi-platform developer (building apps that work on different types of phones) and instantly enjoyed his work. "As well as building the app a client wants, there is so much scope for experimentation," he marvels. "I get to play with all the latest devices."

James impressed the Grapple bosses enough to become head of development after just 4 1/2 months. "We often get asked to build something speculatively for a client and it's great fun to let your imagination run wild, especially if the app ends up being given the green light," he explains.

It is the experimentation that James clearly savors. He also enjoys working on apps that can run on iPhones and BlackBerries as well as Nokia phones and devices running the Android operating system. Indeed, much of Grapple's success has been because it allows programmers to use standard HTML coding (used by website designers) to produce mobile apps, allowing it to recruit from a larger, more talented pool than that offered by mobile-only developers.

A Diverse Group of Developers

Grapple's office is decorated in fluorescent purple, orange and green and the workforce looks young, inspired and global. At a developers' meeting, accents are from across Europe, the United States and even Brazil. The company began with three people but now, only a year later, the staff has grown to almost 60.

The company created more than 70 apps across five different mobile platforms in less than a year of trading, going from an initial two apps a month to 35 to 40 per month.

Some of the company's customers include a sportswear manufacturer, a popular global fashion designer, and a vehicle rental agency.

James' job is to take an idea from the client, create the app and deliver it on time and on budget. It is easier said than done. "It often involves taking large chunks of data and making it work for the user. It's about coming up with different solutions to the same problems. You're building on stuff all the time, taking what has worked with something else and applying it to a new app," he says.

Some apps can be built in days, others can take up to a month. It depends on the level of complexity. Facebook, Twitter, Google Maps and even email integration will take longer. Grapple has in-house testers to ensure the finished product ticks all the boxes and, most importantly, is exactly what the client wanted.

"I got into computers because I was working with them in my spare time anyway," James says. "You could say my hobby is my job."

Job Stats

Pay: Junior developers make around £20,000 (\$24,300) per year, with James one step up from there.

Hours: 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. most days.

Best thing: "Getting to play with the whole range of mobile devices out there and be part of the new explosion in technology."

Worst thing: Judging when to stop. "I don't have forever to build an app, so I have to stop myself from running wild. It means I have to stop myself from over-complicating things. ... The potential for creativity and how far you can go is endless."

Overtime

James loves visiting roller coasters. "My next trip will be to the Six Flags Great Adventure park in New Jersey to ride Kingda Ka – the tallest coaster in the world and the fastest in North America."

Quiz

- 1 The central idea of the article is developed by:
- (A) interviewing an app developer who wants more people to study computer science
 - (B) explaining how clients communicate what they want to app developers
 - (C) providing information about an app developer's background and job experiences
 - (D) highlighting the skills necessary to become a successful app developer
- 2 Which of these sentences from the article would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) Although they are often minimalist in design and function, apps have become big business.
 - (B) James impressed the Grapple bosses enough to become head of development after just 4 1/2 months.
 - (C) At a developers' meeting, accents are from across Europe, the United States and even Brazil.
 - (D) James' job is to take an idea from the client, create the app and deliver it on time and on budget.
- 3 Why did James MOST LIKELY become an app developer?
- (A) He did not enjoy studying finance at school.
 - (B) He knew the pay would increase over time.
 - (C) He knew he would be promoted to head of development.
 - (D) He was excited about software programming.
- 4 James would MOST LIKELY agree with which of the following statements?
- (A) Creating new apps for clients requires high levels of creativity, attention to detail, and focus.
 - (B) It is difficult to stay interested in app development when technology is constantly changing.
 - (C) Brand new app developers should avoid trying to integrate apps with Facebook, Twitter and Google Maps.
 - (D) Allowing programmers to use HTML code ensures that Grapple can recruit people who might not be able to get jobs at other companies.