Formal Art Training
-Ben Mathis

One of the most difficult things for someone wanting to get into the game industry is figuring out how to train up one's skills. Finding where to go for a quality education is difficult. Keep in mind that there is nothing magical about formal education. Every skill needed to be a great artist can be learned on your own through hard work, perseverance, reading, and talking with other artists. A formal education is in no way required. However, some people enjoy the camaraderie of a college setting and the due dates and pressures that ensure you work. There is also the atmosphere of learning, and knowledgeable teachers that have already been where you are and can show you the way. No matter how good the school is that you end up attending, you are still the most relevant factor in your success. If you are the type to want to attend a formal school, picking one out can be difficult.

When applying for a job, one of the factors that really makes a difference is your artistic ability. Knowing how to use a 3d program is only a small part of being a good game artist. Developing your artistic eye and sense of aesthetic is a much more important task. If you wish to pursue character art, your knowledge of anatomy and character design is key. If environment art is where your interest lies, you will need knowledge of architecture and interesting spaces. Either way you will need to know about color, light, composition, perspective, mood, contrast, etc. The technical aspect is actually the more simple of these skills. That's why I suggest keeping the technical skills in your spare time, and going to a more traditional art school for the foundational art skills. There are plenty of on-line tutorials and people willing to help on message boards. There are books, and help files to learn what every button and exporter does in a 3d package or game engine.

Most game studios don't care where you went to college, they simply want to see what you can do. This is mostly because of the fact that many degrees being offered are not an endorsement of skill. It's a nasty cycle. Universities pump out graduates regardless of their skill so that the universities can receive the full tuition. This in turn devalues the degrees (even if the student is very skilled) because the degree was provided regardless of ability.

Unfortunately, many traditional schools exhibit the same problem. That being said, there are some that legitimately care about the foundations and passing information to a new generation. One type of school I recommend is an "atelier". The best place to find a good atelier is http://www.artrenewal.org. Take some time to read their philosophy. Although sometimes overzealous in bashing less representational art, 90% of the philosophies depicted herein ring true. Art Renewal has a list of schools that they endorse based on the skills and experience of the teachers. If you attend an "atelier", you won't get a traditional degree. These schools are only interested in teaching the arts, not jumping through arbitrary obstacles that have been constructed in order to qualify as an "accredited college". The only reason you would especially need a formal degree would be to facilitate working in the US. The US government is a stickler about needing a bachelors degree for a working Visa. Even then, I would suggest getting a degree that provides a strong art foundation more than I would recommend the pursuit of technical degree. The good thing about an atelier is that they are small and inexpensive compared to the more technical schools.

What you can do right now, is to carry your sketchbook with you everywhere you go and draw every chance you get. Buy some quality art books, I recommend:
"Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain" by Betty Edwards,
"Color" by Betty Edwards,
"Problem Solving for the Oil Painter" by Greg Kreutz,

"Harley Brown's Eternal Truths for Every Artist" by Harley Brown

If there is a school you wish to research, disregard all of their advertising. Take the guided tour, open up the school's web site, and pay very close attention to the artwork of the current faculty and artwork of recent students. Use web sites like conceptart.org's school forum, and check if the school you are interested in has been discussed already. If you can find a current student, question them about their experience with the school. If they are still in the beginning years, try to have them ask the upper classmen what they think of the education. If you are unable to find a current student via the web, ask the school by email if they can put you in touch with a current student in the field you are interested in studying. Try to get in touch with the faculty in your area of interest. Ask those professors to explain the goal and topics covered in their classes. See if you can visit on a non tour day and sit in on a class in your chosen field.

Whatever you do, don't go into a ton of debt. The skills you need can be learned for very little money if not free. Realize that no matter what the cost of your education in dollars, it will occupy a great deal of your time. This time is supposed to provide you with the foundations to earn a living afterwards. Take your time and investigate to ensure you get the best education possible.