The IndieCade Way

Redefining Games, Redefining Indie

Simply put, independent games are games that come from the heart and follow a creative vision rather than a marketing bottom line. Independent developers are not owned by or beholden to a large publisher. This means that they generally have smaller budgets than mainstream games, but they also have the freedom to innovate and enlarge our conception of games and game audiences.

Indie developers can run the gamut from artists to academic researchers to students to emerging development studios striving to make the next big indie hit. They can be one person or a large team. They may be internally funded, funded by grants or private investors, or not funded at all. The key is that they create games based on their own unique vision.

—IndieCade's first Festival press release, 2008

When IndieCade was first conceived, the term "indie" was a work in progress. Beyond "not funded by an ESA member"—a parameter on which everyone in the festival circuit seemed to agree—there were also a variety of unspoken, subjective, and arbitrary notions around indie. At the time, the focus was on longplay PC games—mostly ones that had the potential for commercial success and often included a kind of nostalgia for early video game genres, particularly platformers (Juul 2014). At mainstream game conferences, summits or showcases were held around such genres as casual, serious, mobile, and even student games, all of which fit the generally accepted definition of independent but were not included in indie summits and exhibitions. Emerging practices—such as the burgeoning artgames, documentary, and activist game scenes; emerging genres such as pervasive/alternate reality games and interactive fiction; and games created by academics—were largely excluded. For IndieCade, these new and previously undefined genres and contexts were where *all* the action was—they were sites of innovation and needed to be included under the indie mantle.

At the same time, debates were raging in both indie and academic communities about the definition of the word "game." Among indie festival jurors, disputes were notorious for breaking out about whether a submission could be excluded on the grounds that it was "not a game." Meanwhile, academia was grappling with its own taxonomy wars, trying to develop a clear definition of "game." In 2007, the year of IndieCade's first Showcase, Ludica (the feminist game collective comprised of Jacki Morie, Janine Fron, Tracy Fullerton, and myself) presented a paper at the Digital Games Research Association conference about the ways debates over the term "game" created an inadvertent privileging of certain types of games—and hence players—over other games, and how academia was recapitulating the status quo by uncritically accepting industry marketing constructs (Ludica et al. 2007). "The Hegemony of Play," as the paper was titled, articulated the oppressive constrictions of the industry from which indies sought emancipation. Though authored from a feminist perspective, it paralleled many of the viewpoints held by indie developers themselves (Costikyan 2000; Jenkins 2006a; Ruffino 2013).

Against this backdrop, the IndieCade team grappled with the question of whether to adopt "indie" and "game" as part of its public identity and brand. Adopting these terms had the benefit of connecting to an existing community and set of practices but also brought along their baggage. In the end, we realized that adopting these terms provided the unique opportunity to influence their evolving definitions. The description of independent games from the Festival's first press release also presented IndieCade's guiding principles, which have changed little since their inception. From the onset, as founders, we sought to make the terms "indie" and "game" as inclusive as possible—for the sake of both innovation and diversity. Welcoming different game types and genres also had the effect of instilling diversity among creators. By emphasizing innovation over production value and embracing games that went beyond established genres, IndieCade had a hand in shaping the emerging definition of indie, including the "indie aesthetic" (Juul 2014).

IndieCade sought to broaden the acceptance of indie games by choosing games for qualities that were *not* based on production value, type of creator, platform, genre, funding source, or whether they fit a regimented definition of either "indie" or "game." Its premise was that all indie games are created equal and would be judged on their own merit as experiences. The festival welcomed not only different genres but also un-games, not-games, and anti-games—including works that sought to challenge the very definition of "game." Though subtle, this effort represented a sea change in what fundamentally counted as indie games—a viewpoint shared by others and which rippled outward into other indie communities, and, eventually, the mainstream.

A Community of Play and Practice

IndieCade is, above all, a community of both play and practice. In my prior work, I've written about communities of play, particularly those whose play is transformed into creative practice, which I term "productive play" (Pearce 2006b, 2009). Game developers participate in a different type of productive play in that their play is an integral part of their practice. IndieCade's most basic function is to provide contexts for play—a place where developers can share their work with one another and a larger audience, get feedback to inform subsequent iterations, share ideas and approaches, and continue to reiterate and refine their work. At an instrumental level, festivals and showcases require jurors, chairs, and curators to engage in a critically informed style of play to determine which games emerge as the strongest, as well as to give developers constructive feedback to factor in as they revise their work.

This relationship between play and practice speaks to IndieCade's distinctive role as a cultural intermediary in that it operates very differently from commercial game expos. The latter tend to be far more focused on marketing, whereas IndieCade has always foregrounded *play* and its *creators*. IndieCade's exhibition philosophy starts with the goal of crafting an environment conducive to play, one in which gamemakers are on hand to interface directly with their audiences. For developers, this means having as many people as possible engage with their work, observing players, obtaining feedback, and building a following through direct engagement with both games and gamemakers. For the creator community, this means playing *one another's* games, discussing

the gamemaking process, providing productive feedback, and sharing techniques and methods, whether they be technical solutions or creative approaches. Many developers have reported that participating in IndieCade "upped their game" by pushing them to innovate further, try new things, take risks, and explore new genres and domains. Having other developers play your game contributes to the all boats rise ethos of IndieCade in which developers inspire one another to excel. This spirit is aptly captured by IndieCade's 2015 slogan: *Inspire. Create. Play.*

Curating Community

The IndieCade community has been carefully crafted over the past twelve years with an eye toward inclusiveness and diversity, often through engaging existing communities of practice that had not previously been in dialogue. Although the jurying and curating process is, by necessity, one of exclusion, IndieCade has nonetheless looked for ways to broaden community inclusion beyond the games in its Festivals or Showcases. The importance of curating community cannot be overemphasized, especially in the beginning, as failure to do so can lead to unintended outcomes (Alexander 2014).

IndieCade's early Showcases provided an opportunity to set the tone by curating creators, which in turn gave jurors broad benchmarks in terms of what an IndieCade game might look like. However, it was the selection of the initial jury that set the direction for the Festival's unique style and approach. The jury for the first IndieCade Festival in 2008 was small and hand-picked across the team's collective networks to represent a wide range of voices and genres. Jurors included journalists who had written thoughtfully about games, academics who taught and wrote about game design, developers who had gotten their start in student categories, fine-arts curators and practitioners, and experienced and highly respected indie and mainstream developers and publishers. This meant that whatever type of game was submitted, a juror would be assigned based on their qualifications to review that type of game. The jury, therefore, became the starting point of IndieCade's community curation, not only because they had a hand in selecting games but also because they promoted festival submissions within their respective communities.

Through this approach, IndieCade was able to attract a wide range of gamemakers from around the world, even at its very first Festival. IndieCade's gamemaker community has grown exponentially over the years—starting with the 20 games exhibited at the first E3 Showcase in 2007 to 36 at the first Festival in 2008 to 130 shown at the 2013 and 2014 Festivals. Other members of the community have also steadily expanded, including attendees, conference speakers, staff, organizers, and volunteers.

In the first couple of years, IndieCade was produced by a tiny team that included its three cofounders and a small group of volunteers and collaborators who did everything from installing games and plugging in computers to organizing and cat-herding participants. As IndieCade's community grew, co-organizers stepped up or were invited to volunteer in various roles such as Conference Co-Chairs, Official Selections Curators (our term for curated games, as opposed to the ones selected by the jury), Awards, and Jury Co-Chairs, always with an eye toward diversity. All were supported by a growing army of student volunteers, many of whom graduated into roles as Nominees, Awardees, Official Selections, and Program Chairs. The core team took it as a good sign that people wanted to help. Also included in that community were sponsors, first a small handful, eventually expanding to include major consoles and publishers, new technology companies, and a wide range of corporate partners with a stake in the indie ecosystem. I liken the growth of the IndieCade community to playing the game *Katamari Damacy*—a giant ball picking up more and more components and becoming larger, more unwieldy, and more beautiful with each added item.

Exhibition

IndieCade's distinct exhibition style has evolved over time but is driven by many of the same principles as its jurying process and overall goal of being different than the standard expo. This means keeping the focus on games themselves and creating spaces that are more socially engaging than trade-show booths. In a way, IndieCade has adopted its own version of Juul's "indie style" (Juul 2014, 2019), which some critics dismiss as funky but which is akin in many ways to the challenges faced by indie developers.

This means working with appropriated spaces that vary wildly in size, on a meager budget, all while trying to convey a unique and identifiable style and attitude. The exhibition process has been one of constant reinvention—from its "indie oasis" on the sprawling E3 trade-show floor to a single-room windowed gallery for the 2008 Festival; from the diasporic layout of the Culver City era to the film soundstages of the USC School of Cinematic Arts; from the modern gallery spaces at the Museum of the Moving Image and the Japanese American National Museum to the classrooms and auditoriums at Santa Monica College. Regardless of scale and context, IndieCade's aim is to create exhibitions that are inviting, intimate, and playful, with an ethos that transcends the physical and technical constraints of any given site.

IndieCade has never had the resources to hire a professional exhibit designer in the sense of a museum or E3 booth subscriber. Indeed, the entire Festival costs less to produce than a single publisher booth at E3. In other words, IndieCade operates with a production value on par with indie developers' means. This necessitates adapting to a wide range of exhibition contexts. The closest the Festival has come to working with larger budgets involved coproductions of IndieCade East with the Museum of the Moving Image, which had an in-house exhibit design staff.

Even in the context of a professionally designed museum like those created for IndieCade East, the focus is squarely on games and the people who make them. Projects are grouped based on thematic, experiential, or aesthetic threads, with minimal decor. In most cases, the exhibition design of a game display falls on the gamemakers themselves, which is important because it gives them a measure of autonomy. With the exception of the first two IndieCade @ E3 Showcases, which used standard ESA-issued kiosks, developers have significant control over how to show their own works, with light IndieCade branding sprinkled throughout in the form of banners and signage. More often than not, the games' own branding takes the foreground—a phenomenon that has become even more predominant with the increase of installation-based, tabletop, and live games. Embracing a wide range of games has the downside of creating what sometimes feels like a "crazy quilt" of experiences, but, essentially, that crazy quilt *is* the IndieCade experience.

Programming

In addition to exhibits, IndieCade's programming has evolved over the years, shaped in large part by the volunteer leadership that runs its various components. During the first two years, the cofounders programmed the Festival and Conference themselves. But starting in 2010, volunteer committees formed to curate programming, beginning with IndieCade's Conference. This input from the community has been critical as it allows their concerns to drive the conversation. From 2010 to 2015, the main Festival Conference was co-chaired by game designer and professor John Sharp, along with a number of co-chairs who together set the tone for what an IndieCade Conference would look like. Over time, other components were added, including IndieXchange, a marketplace to bring together developers, publishers, and funders (which was initiated by game journalist and blogger Jane Pinckard) and GameU, an educational program targeted to students and aspiring developers (initially launched by game professor and indie developer Jeremy Gibson Bond and later joined by Chris DeLeon, founder of Gamkedo and designer of IndieCade 2010 Nominee *feelforit*).

Each of these programmatic components originated within the IndieCade community and emerged in response to a particular need or impetus from its members. The matchmaking function of IndieXchange in particular developed from the festival's relationships with sponsors and represented an attempt to support bridge building in a more hands-on way. This particular aspect of IndieCade is distinctive because in most other contexts that bring together developers with publishers and funders, interactions occur largely through informal networking; to better serve its constituents and sponsors, IndieCade decided to intermediate by making direct introductions. The crafting of these conversations, whether through conference programming, educating emerging gamemakers, or connecting creators to the resources they need to flourish, is one of the things that makes IndieCade unique among independent festivals.

Photo by Kurt McDonald

The IndieCade Way (Con't)

Sponsorship

IndieCade's sponsor constellations over time can be viewed as a barometer of trends within the larger indie ecosystem. Historically, IndieCade has received the bulk of its big-ticket sponsorships from two types of private sector companies. The first is publishers wishing to cultivate relationships with indie developers. Over the years, this has included most of the major players. Sony led the herd in 2010, followed by Nintendo, Microsoft, Activision, Time Warner, and Electronic Arts. This is the constituency represented by the ESA, who benefits both through direct exposure and the indie credibility that comes with an IndieCade partnership. Other types of publishing and subscription services have come on board as well—Adult Swim, Gamefly, Jump, among others. One of the draws for major publishers has been the fact that mainstream Triple-A games have become increasingly costly and time-consuming to produce, making indie games a low-cost way to quickly refresh their offerings.

The second major sponsor group has been tech companies aiming to evangelize their platforms with indie developers. These may be older companies with new tech, such as LG Electronics, who looked to the IndieCade community for content for a new 3D phone platform, or Google, who collaborated with IndieCade to promote its augmented reality (AR) toolkit. Others may be start-ups with emerging technologies, such as the indie console OUYA, Leap Motion's gesture recognition interface, and Oculus VR, all of whom were with IndieCade from more or less their beginnings. IndieCade has also been supported by consumer hardware and accessories companies, such as Nvidia (graphics cards) and Turtle Beach (headphones), both of which have provided loaner technology over the years.

Perhaps the most invisible yet significant contributor to IndieCade's success has been its academic partners. While university sponsors typically contribute smaller amounts, the critical mass of their financial support, the unpaid labor of teachers and students, their cumulative submissions, as well as the provision of space and institutional infrastructure have all been key to IndieCade's survival. The currencies of academia tend to reward public presentation, such as exhibiting work or giving a talk, and volunteer service to the academic or professional community. This is one of the reasons why IndieCade became one of the first indie festivals to accept faculty-created games, which were routinely rejected by festivals as they did not fit into preexisting categories. Hence, in the language of tenure, while not compensated financially, involvement in IndieCade can confer a high degree of value to an academic's résumé.

Additionally, at any given time, one- to two-thirds of IndieCade's cofounders have held full-time academic positions. Academic infrastructure supports actual events—three of the last four IndieCade Festivals have been hosted at academic institutions, as were the first two years of IndieCade Europe. This infrastructure also supports IndieCade through jury hubs and jam sites throughout the year. Finally, IndieCade operates to a high degree on a system of good karma that involves a number of intangible benefits, such as increased visibility, job referrals, and other rewards that are difficult to quantify.

IndieCade has been criticized—appropriately—for underserving the arts and alternative game development community (Sharp 2015b); however, this shortcoming is driven by funding realities in a country with a long tradition of devaluing art as both a cultural and economic engine (Kaplan 2018). It's important to note that IndieCade's public funding has come exclusively from city governments such as Bellevue and Culver City and has rarely been adequate to support artists' needs, including travel funds and speaker honoraria. Only for IndieCade Europe has regional funding been supplemented with broader arts funding from the European Union.

IndieCade's Seasonal Cycle

Historically, IndieCade's seasonal cycle has been anchored by the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 in June followed by the October Festival, known colloquially as IndieCade Prime, which is timed to align with the academic calendar. IndieCade East was added in 2013 and usually takes place in early spring in conjunction with submissions for the IndieCade Showcase @ E3. Since 2016, IndieCade Europe has taken place in the fall following the October Festival. Submissions typically open in February, around the time of IndieCade East, and close around the end of the school semester in late April or early May.

Tying IndieCade to the academic calendar is based on several considerations. First, after studying other events and constituents within the ecosystem, the cofounders noted that festival submissions often fell at times that were less than optimal for both students and their instructors. Positioning deadlines toward the end of the school year synced with the production cycle of academia, when capstone and thesis projects are due and grants are typically wrapping up. Second, an early spring deadline allows for the curation of the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 to draw from the submission pool. Third, this timeline allows jurying and festival planning to take place over the summer, a more convenient time for both academics and students, two constituents whose volunteer labor is critical to IndieCade's sustainability. This also made life easier for the cofounders with day jobs in academia. When IndieCade East was launched in February 2013, it became an opportunity to announce submissions and host game jams whose output could be submitted and/or shown at both the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 and the Festival.

While the history of IndieCade is organized in a linear fashion, it's helpful to bear in mind that, since 2013, IndieCade East has served as both the close of that cycle (in that it tends to showcase games from the previous year) and the start of the subsequent cycle in that it launches submissions and hosts game jams whose output will be shown in the coming year.

Evolution of the Submission & Jurying Process

Beyond curating community, IndieCade's cofounders realized that the Festival's foundational values needed to be reflected in its jurying process and system. IndieCade took very seriously its responsibility as a gatekeeper and "cultural intermediary" (Bourdieu 1984 ; Parker, Whitson, and Simon 2017). Though not perfected, IndieCade has been committed to several guiding principles that drive the evolution of its software and process over time.

Promote Innovation: First and foremost, IndieCade honors creativity and innovation. This means privileging originality and craftsmanship over production value, championing the evolution of established genres, and embracing games that defy genre and break rules. It also means looking beyond the traditional metric of commercial viability and even intent. Gamemakers have different aspirations and reasons for making games, as well as varied definitions of success, all of which need to be embraced. In order to promote innovation, we have to create checkboxes for things that don't exist yet. The IndieCade jurying mantra is "Surprise us!"

Fair & Equal: IndieCade affords everyone an equal opportunity at success. Importantly, within the jury system, game types are not classified in a hierarchical system that privileges one type of game, gamemaker audience, or production process over another. This means integrating forms that previously have been largely excluded—like casual, artgames, and serious games, as well as emerging genres such as pervasive/alternate reality games. We also treat games made with modded engines and creation tools as equals with games programmed from scratch.

Inclusive: IndieCade invites a wide range of people, both game designers and jurors, to participate, in turn evading the inadvertent bias that often operates below the surface of software systems and their accompanying processes. This means creating a jury that reflects the diversity of gamemakers whom IndieCade aspires to attract. Critically, it means bringing into the fold creator communities that are already diverse, even if this requires navigating outside of individuals' existing networks and comfort zones.

Responsive & Adaptive: IndieCade is committed to responding to changing trends and avoiding restrictions that would disqualify a game before it is even submitted. One of my comments to gamemakers has been, "If your game is a one-off installation on the moon, we'll make sure it gets a proper jurying."

Flexible: The Festival takes into account a wide range of genres, platforms, and contexts, including those that have not yet been invented. We make sure that every drop-down menu can be expanded as new technologies and contexts emerge, and we use flexible reviewing criteria that are not exclusionary. This means allowing games to be juried based on a variety of methods, including playtesting, event attendance, and even documentation in cases where an actual playing is impossible.

Extensible & Scalable: Of all the challenges in the development of its jury system, the biggest struggle has been scalability. While the Festival always envisioned itself as the focal point of a growing indie game ecosystem, the founding team could not have anticipated how large the indie scene would become. This is partly a result of IndieCade's inclusive approach as well as the inherent paradox within promoting innovation. Expecting the unexpected is hard. It's much easier to expect the expected.

Usable: Ironically, usability of the jurying software has been another challenging principle to realize and is another area in which the Responsive & Adaptive approach comes into play. IndieCade has historically worked on a shoestring budget, meaning experience design is often superseded by functional consideration. Furthermore, the online software includes many different user types, and multiple modes of interaction need to be addressed. Over time, through many iterations building on feedback from end-users as well as the talents of design contributors, the jury system's usability has steadily improved.

The Submission System

An online jury system is a very complicated piece of software to develop, sustain, and improve over time. It's a dynamic relational database with distinct user groups who enter the system from different angles, each with their own set of requirements. Furthermore, users can have multiple roles, including Gamemaker, Juror, Curatorial/Jury Chair, and Administrator. All these parts are interconnected and have to adapt and scale up at a rapid rate. The proliferation of new platforms, including mobile and VR, as well as board games, custom interfaces, live and site-specific experiences, and the explosion of new exhibition and distribution models, have meant that IndieCade's software and process have had to be continually upgraded. In a very real sense, the jury system is in perpetual beta mode because it will never be finished by conventional software development standards.

The design of IndieCade's jury system software drew on the team's past experience as festival operators for Slamdance and ALT+CTRL at the University of California, Irvine, as well as juried events such as the Interactive Media Festival and New Media INVISION Festival in the 1990s (both headed by IndieCade advisor Hal Josephson), and D.I.C.E. and the Independent Game Festival. The functional design of the system was led by Sam Roberts and myself.

The first iteration was developed by Adam Robezzoli by adapting blogging software. The second iteration was programmed in Java by Summers Pittman, then a student of mine at Georgia Tech. In 2010, IndieCade was approached by Colombian indie developer Santiago Zapata from Slashware Interactive. Zapata had submitted a roguelike in 2009 and been a juror in 2010, which inspired him to offer to help with the jury system. With design direction from Sam and myself, he programmed the third iteration in Java at a reduced rate as part of an in-kind IndieCade sponsorship and has continued to work on it over the years. Santiago's version became the underlying code that was subsequently built upon by others, including Diana Hughes and Margaret Moser, who worked on improving usability, and Neil Malhotra and Keith Turkowski, who contributed to expanding and scaling the system as the Festival grew. Today, the IndieCade jury system continues to undergo regular refinements in response to varying factors, including changes in submission types and quantity, changing roles and personnel, and feedback from jurors.

Initially, IndieCade's jury software was crafted to manually assign particular individuals to each game—a crucial feature supporting the Festival's commitment to fairness because games needed to be reviewed by people with the appropriate qualifications and expertise. In the beginning, the cofounders personally knew every juror in the system. Therefore, if we had an artgame or anti-game of some kind, we could assign it to someone with an understanding and appreciation for that type of game. In the first year, with just under 100 submissions, this process was not too difficult to manage.

But as submissions grew exponentially, it became harder and harder to scale up this labor-intensive process. By 2014, when the Festival surpassed 1,000 submissions, new methods had to be developed. Jury Co-Chairs were added, and many aspects of the juror assignment process became automated, sometimes with mixed results. Ultimately, the ideal solution turned out to be a semi-automated approach.

Rapidly changing trends in the indie landscape have also necessitated modifications from year to year. In 2008, the technical parameters were relatively easy, since most indie games were played on a personal computer of some kind. Some were Flash- or browser-based, others were executables or run-time files. Jury profiles included not only jurors' expertise but also their platform access. One early issue (which seems quaintly old fashioned now) was that there were very few cross-platform games; typically, games were developed for PCs or Macs, but rarely both. Games submitted as mods or on top of another platform or engine, such as Unreal or Half-Life, meant the juror needed to have that software on that specific platform in order to review the game.

However, these issues were nothing compared to the tsunami that hit with iOS. Suddenly, the infernal acronym UDID (Unique Device ID) was introduced into the lexicon. As most developers know, a UDID is needed in order to run a prototype on a particular device. During the first year of iOS submissions, UDIDs were emailed between jurors and developers by hand; eventually, the UDID was added as a juror parameter. Later still, this process was made easier by apps like TestFlight, HockeyApp, and Desura, which allowed developers to create stand-alone prototypes that could be deployed to multiple devices. But dependence on them could be catastrophic, such as when one of the online iOS prototyping platforms went down on the last day of jurying. Android games, which should have made things easier, were even harder as they tended to run on specific hardware models. Windows Phone submissions were the most challenging since few jurors had one, even people who worked at Microsoft. Over time, the interoperability of Unity's game development tools allowed developers to check multiple platform boxes since increasingly, game builds could be output for multiple platforms. Other engines, like Unreal, eventually followed suit.

In the early days, most submissions were unpublished or self-published. But with the introduction of online distribution portals, indie games were increasingly available on platforms like Steam and the App Store. This meant developers could provide coupons so that jurors didn't have to pay for self-published games that were already available for sale online. Consoles breaking into indie games added another element of complexity. First, there was Windows XNA, an attempt by Microsoft to create a Windows development environment compatible with Xbox, but it meant jurors had to have the XNA framework installed on their computers. With Sony and Nintendo consoles, the development and delivery platforms were different; reviewing an unpublished PlayStation game, for instance, required a juror to have either a test kit or a dev kit, which were expensive and required a contract with Sony to even get. This also meant locating jurors who were already working in these platforms and had access to these development tools. Then came a proliferation of new proprietary hardware, starting with different non-iOS tablets, OUYA, peripherals like Oculus Rift headsets, Leap Motion hand-gesture inputs, and Sifteo Cubes. Fortunately, all of these became IndieCade sponsors who provided loaner hardware for jurors.

The next two complicating factors were people and stuff. Local multiplayer as a category underwent a proliferation on the heels of games such as 2011's *Johan Sebastian Joust* and 2012's *Hokra*. These games opened the floodgates for other multiplayer games, such as 2013's *Spaceteam*—which took advantage of iOS local networking via Bluetooth—and 2014's *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes*, in which one player wears an Oculus Rift headset while others yell out instructions from a printed technical manual. Previously, most jurying had been done online, but these types of games meant people had to jury games in groups.

Board game submissions began in 2010 and expanded tremendously after *Cards Against Humanity* broke at IndieCade 2011. In addition to necessitating groups of jurors to play them, board games introduced the added challenge of maintaining physical artifacts. Initially, tabletop games were played at IndieCade's offices, at the time located at NextSpace, a coworking space in Culver City. Soon, board game jurying grew to coffee shops and food courts, board game cafés, and even people's homes (Asher Vollmer was a regular board game jury host). Eventually, the volume of tabletop game submissions grew too large for the Los Angeles–based jury pool to address on its own, so boxes were shipped to university game labs, board game cafés, indie collectives, and studios around the country. A special board game curators' committee was also put in place to review these games for jurying and curation.

Beyond multiplayer tabletop and digital games, there were also other games that required special handling. First, there were alternative controller games, which included games like 2009's *Pluff*, a children's game with a stuffed animal interface, or 2015's *Line Wobbler*, a one-dimensional race game played on an LED strip. In the second group were live and performative games, including live action role-playing and field games, such as *Killer Queen* or *Coffee: A Misunderstanding*. Since a number of these games were making the rounds at other festivals, one approach was to embed jurors at various events, such as Come Out & Play, a physical game festival, alt.ctrl. GDC, and GaymerX. This might include assigning a game to someone who had already seen it or requesting jurors in advance to play them at events. This was fairly easy to do as many jurors both attended and exhibited their own games at these venues.

There were also installation and site-specific games such as *Rider Spoke,* the pervasive bicycle game which, by 2008, had only been presented four times; *The Jejune Institute* in 2010, which ran exclusively in San Francisco for three years; *INTERFERENCE* in 2012, an installation that had only been exhibited in Paris; and 2014's VR installation *Use of Force*, which existed in a lab at USC. Games of this sort required an approach that was both strategic and tactical and often involved sending jurors to specific locations to review games.

As multiplayer games scaled up, IndieCade turned to its community, piloting a jury hub program where IndieCade jurors worldwide could meet in a regional venue to play and review games together. For local multiplayer games on commonly available platforms, such as PC or tablet, hub hosts could install the games on their own devices and have the concentration of players needed to play them. For new platforms, sponsors provided loaner equipment. Board games and custom controllers were mailed to jury hubs or developers could be sent in person to run demos.

Starting in 2013 in Los Angeles, the program was rolled out to other cities and was eventually integrated into the jury software. Many jury hub venues were already hosting community events, and IndieCade jury sessions became part of their regular repertoire. Glitch City and USC were the first official jury hubs in Los Angeles. The NYU Game Center integrated IndieCade jurying into its weekly playtesting night, and other university labs included Carnegie Mellon University, Georgia Tech, the TAG Research Centre at Concordia University in Montreal, and ModLab at the University of California, Davis. Indie collectives that assisted included Portland Indie Game Squad (PIGSquad), Boston's Indie Game Collective, Austin's (self-dubbed) IndieCade Annex, All Day Breakfast in Melbourne, Bento Miso in Toronto, and a handful of studios including Schell Games in Pittsburgh and Cards Against Humanity in Chicago. Additionally, in 2012, Jury Co-Chairs were added—first Holly Gramazio of Hide&Seek, then Cindy Poremba of Kokoromi, and Drew Davidson of Carnegie Mellon University and editor of the *Well Played* book series—all of whom had extensive festival organization experience. By 2015, over a third of IndieCade's 1,300-plus submissions fell into special format categories.

Assigning and Reviewing

IndieCade jurying assignments are on a case-by-case basis, meaning the system does not employ an all-jurors voting mechanism. Rather, assignments are made by the Jury Chairs or Jury Committee on a game-by-game basis. While labor-intensive, this is the only way to guarantee that games get fair playing and are not subject to a "tyranny of the masses" style of jurying. It also allows the committee to filter assignments for conflicts of interest, such as shared institutional affiliation. Additionally, if a juror has a conflict of interest, they are asked to abstain.

Games are ranked on scales that have remained more or less the same throughout IndieCade's history, including gameplay innovation, interaction design, story/world, impact, and aesthetics. Each game is typically reviewed by two to five jurors. Scores are compared rather than averaged. Usually, the first two scores will indicate the general direction in which the game is going in terms of jury reviews. If initial scores vary wildly, this is an indication that the game is controversial. In that case, additional jurors are added until a clear direction emerges. Notably, some scoring categories are considered more important than others, such as gameplay innovation. Based on jurying results, the jury committee then makes a list of the most highly ranked games, which generally exceeds the number of Nominee spaces available. The Jury Committee then reviews this list and reads the written reviews. From here, some games are recommended to curatorial committees of Official Selections, such as Digital Selects and Big Games. The Jury Committee then selects the 35 or 36 that will be shown as Festival Nominees—the games that are eligible for the main awards.

One of the most valuable tools produced by IndieCade's jury system is the review process, in which jurors give in-depth feedback to developers. At best, reviews can help developers improve their work—including rejected games—as well as their future prospects at the Festival. (IndieCade allows multiple submissions of the same game provided significant changes have been made.) However, because reviews are discretionary, it can sometimes be challenging to maintain consistent quality, and many jurors prefer not to give any feedback beyond the jury scoring system. To address this, jurors with a history of strong, constructive reviews are deemed Super Jurors or Review Jurors, each of whom is given a small honorarium to write in-depth reviews for a given number of games. By assigning a Super Juror to each and every game, IndieCade has been able to ensure that each game gets at least one high-quality review.

In 2016, some managerial and procedural changes were made to the jurying process. I stepped away from my traditional role as jury wrangler to work on other projects, and Mattie Brice was hired as Associate Director of the Festival. Although the back-end remained the same, the front-end interface was modified for improved usability. Rather than one to two Jury Co-Chairs, a full Jury Committee is curated that includes six to eight people. In the first round, each game is reviewed and considered by at least one Jury Committee member, who determines if it goes on to the next round of reviews based on a clear set of qualitative criteria. Once that determination is made, the game is reviewed by one to three additional jury members. The Jury Committee is also responsible for writing reviews during this initial round. Once the remaining jury scores are collected, the Jury Committee reviews them and each member plays all of the highest-scoring games. This round determines which games make it as Nominees. Games in the second tier are then handed off to the curatorial team that organizes the IndieCade Official Selections—games that are exhibited through curation rather than jurying. As such, the are only eligible for a Choice Award—typically Developer, Audience, or Media. In 2018, this process was modified slightly to integrate the IndieCade membership program. In that iteration, developers have the option to join as IndieCade members, which entitles them to a submission-fee discount and a written review. Awards are determined by the Awards Committee, which plays all Nominee games and confers to determine award recipients, using the same conflict of interest/abstinence procedure as regular jurors.

> *Is this the year of the arthouse video game?*
> —Mark Nix, IGN

Two thousand seven was a year of prototyping and playtesting the IndieCade concept. Three pre-Festival IndieCade Showcases took place within three larger and vastly different events: an industry summit, and two fan conventions, one in the US, the other in the UK. These proto-IndieCades provided visibility for the IndieCade brand and curatorial style, an opportunity to "playtest" different exhibition strategies with different audiences, a platform for promoting submissions, and exposure to potential sponsors and partnerships. As part of its initial branding efforts, IndieCade produced a short film entitled *Ideation: Are You Indie?* with animator Jeremiah Dickey and composer Stephen Cavit, which helped address questions about the meaning of "indie."

Considering that IndieCade was envisioned as the antidote to E3, it's ironic that E3 would become the birthplace of its first Showcase. Indeed, this served as a harbinger of the growth of indie games as a force in the industry, and it also demonstrated the complex interdependencies embedded within independence. The Showcase grew out of my academic partnership with ESA dating back to my time at USC, when ESA sponsored Entertainment in the Interactive Age, an early conference I organized at the university. One of ESA's goals was, as then-vice president Carolyn Rauch put it, "to make video games look good" and highlight them as a viable cultural form. Given its longstanding goal of elevating the cultural cachet of games, it's no surprise that ESA was the first major industry organization to support IndieCade.

IndieCade emerged at a perfect time for ESA. This was shortly after Slamgate, and video games' legitimacy as a medium had once again been called into question (the very problem the ESA was formed to mitigate). The same year, in response to complaints from members about spiraling exhibition costs and proliferating consumer attendance, E3 was considering lower-cost alternatives to its traditional expo format. In 2007, it experimented with an industry-only summit featuring standardized booths and no show-floor entertainment held in an airplane hangar at the Santa Monica Municipal Airport. This low-key approach was intended to forgo the extravagant installations and booth babes that had been mainstays of E3 for over a decade. As a result, the new format made an IndieCade showcase a low-risk proposition with a potentially high payoff: good public relations for the game industry and something unique and unexpected for attendees. In addition, this was a time when indies were beginning to garner mainstream attention; Xbox Live Arcade had already been around for two years, and Sony had just launched PlayStation Network for the PS3.

The switch from custom-designed booths to standardized kiosks resulted in a major payoff for IndieCade by leveling the playing field when juxtaposed with behemoths such as Sony and Electronic Arts. In addition, the number of kiosks allotted to exhibitors was based on the number of playable game demos. From its inception, IndieCade's games always outnumbered those of mainstream publishers. As a result, the first IndieCade Showcase @ E3 had one of the largest footprints at the summit. It also introduced an element of surprise to an event that was known for its homogeneity. As IndieCade co-founder Sam Roberts put it, "In a place where everything was the same, we got the most mileage out of showing work that was different."

IndieCade Milestones

First IndieCade Showcases @ E3, E for All, and GameCity

IndieCade Events

IndieCade Showcase @ E3 Media and Business Summit, July 11–13, Barker Hangar, Santa Monica Municipal Airport

IndieCade @ E for All, October 18–21, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade @ GameCity, October 24–28, Nottingham, UK

Ecosystem Milestones

2005

Xbox Live Arcade launches

2006

Nintendo Wii launches

PlayStation 3 & PlayStation Network launch in North America

2007

flOw, Portal, **and** *Everyday Shooter* **published**

Independent Games Festival Mobile announced

iOS and Android phone introduced

Kokoromi launches GAMMA 256

All event photos by Scott Chamberlin except where noted.