

2007 Prototyping IndieCade

The IndieCade Way (Con't)

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

fIow, *Portal*, and *Everyday Shooter* published

Independent Games Festival Mobile announced

iOS and Android phone introduced

Kokoromi launches GAMMA 256

IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2007

The initial IndieCade Showcase @ E3 built the foundation for IndieCade's culture and aesthetic: challenging conventional wisdom and presenting new standards for success. It celebrated dead genres like adventure games; new genres such as documentary and artgames; and successful genres that had not been "counted" as indie, such as casual games. It also eschewed hierarchies: games by students were shown alongside those of their professors, whose work had previously been largely ignored. Casual games were mixed with "hardcore" games and PC games with mobile. In addition, new strategies were introduced for genres that were notoriously challenging to exhibit—such as pervasive and installation-based games—through play samples and documentation. The Showcase included games that were making the rounds at other festivals and exhibitions, as well as games being exhibited for the first time. Finally, it was one of the few places at E3 where you could meet the developers themselves. It provided exposure to press, potential sponsors, and the industry credibility of being part of the biggest annual commercial event in the game industry. IndieCade had created a prototype of the "anti-E3" that would eventually become a full-fledged festival—right in the middle of E3 itself.



It was relatively easy to be disruptive against the backdrop of E3, a notoriously risk-averse environment. Most of the mainstream industry innovation taking place in 2007 was in the platform and distribution arenas. This was the year of the iPhone, Nintendo Wii, PlayStation 3, and PlayStation Network. But the content presented by E3 constituents was largely lackluster, suffering from an acute case of "sequelitis" and "portification," with the notable exception of the first game in the award-winning *Uncharted* series. For the holidays, Sony was introducing *Killazone 2*, *Unreal Tournament 3*, *Metal Gear Solid 4*, and *Gran Turismo 5*, as well some new offerings, including, as one journalist described, "PlayStation Home . . . (yawn)" (Rivera 2007). Xbox 360's offerings included the sequel *Viva Piñata: Party Animals*, *Halo 3*, *Call of Duty 4*, and *Resident Evil 5*, to name a few (Miller 2007).

The first selection of games in the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 in 2007 set the tone for the embrace of indie games and gamemakers and showed how these intersected with other aspects of the emerging indie ecosystem. In total, 11 hands-on demos and 8 videos were showcased from a mix of new and previously curated works drawn from Slamdance and ALT+CTRL. Though relatively small in comparison to what IndieCade has become today, that first Showcase presaged a number of trends and established IndieCade's unique style of curation.

The adventure game renaissance was captured by Tale of Tales' early demo *8*, a lyrical exploration game based on *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Bone* by Telltale Games, best known at the time for the *Sam & Max* series. IndieCade was the first to exhibit pervasive games, including documentation of British art collective Blast Theory's *Can You See Me Now?*, a game where players in a virtual world interact with runners in the real world via mobile devices. The rapidly growing serious game genre, which indie festivals were slow to embrace, was represented by *Revolution*, a local multiplayer *Neverwinter Nights* mod about the American Revolution created by MIT's Education Arcade; *Whyville*, an online science world for kids; and *The Arcade Wire*, a suite of news-based games by Ian Bogost's studio Persuasive Games. True to its early embrace of artgames, the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 included *Fijuu2*, an abstract game by New Zealand artist Julian Oliver in which users generate paintings from within the game engine. It also featured a video showcase that included Mary Flanagan's epic ten-foot-tall, functional vintage game controller [*giantjoystick*].

Many of the games at the first IndieCade Showcase @ E3 went on to garner success and acclaim. *N*, *Steam Brigade*, and *Yet It Moves* (Nintendo Wii), as well as *Braid* (Xbox) by Jonathan Blow and *Everyday Shooter* (PlayStation) by Jessica Mak, both of whom were present at IndieCade's booth—one of the few places at E3 you could interact with creators. Others included Tracy Fullerton, who showed an early version of *The Night Journey*, her NEA-funded collaboration with Bill Viola that went on to win an award at the first IndieCade Festival and be published on the PlayStation 4. Also on-site were Fullerton's students Kellee Santiago and Jenova Chen showing *Cloud*, the game that launched thatgamecompany, which would go on to produce *fIou*, *Flower*, and *Journey*.

The Showcase also broke new ground in terms of diversity, years before controversies over sexism in the industry would reach a boiling point in 2012. About half the games shown included women in creative leadership roles—still unusual at E3 even now. Subverting the policing of the word "game" was a key strategy for IndieCade's co-founders (two-thirds of whom were female) to promote innovation and diverse content and people.

In spite, or perhaps because of, its limited attendance of roughly 3,000 to 4,000 (far less than the usual 60,000 attending E3), the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 provided an onramp for IndieCade to establish itself as an influencer. With by far the largest selection of games of any exhibitor and the most diversity in terms of both people and content, IndieCade was able to leave a mark, even before launching its first Festival.

The 2007 IndieCade Showcase @ E3 also kicked off a longstanding tradition of after-IndieCade parties. Conveniently located just blocks from the event venue, Tracy Fullerton's mid-century house hosted the first post-E3 barbecue, accompanied by massive vats of guacamole and Stephanie's homemade macaroni and cheese. Other than eating, drinking, and having in-depth discussions about game design, what did indie developers do at the after-party? Play games, of course!



IndieCade @ E for All 2007

One impetus for ESA downsizing E3 to a smaller format was the increasing presence of fans, which publishers felt distracted from their primary business agenda: making deals with brick-and-mortar retailers and distributors. For lack of anything else, E3 had become a default fan convention until the founding of PAX (the Penny Arcade Expo) in 2004. But the downsizing and exclusivity of the E3 summit format also left fans out in the cold and resulted in a loss of revenue for tertiary businesses such as expo-booth designers and live performers (e.g., professional cosplayers and booth babes.)

With the growing success of PAX and other fan conventions like Comic-Con International and Dragon Con, the producers of E3, IDG World Expo, saw an opportunity, and, with the blessing of the ESA, decided to host its own consumer-facing event. Dubbed “E for All,” it ran for only two years. However, for IndieCade, E for All provided the opportunity to playtest its concept with mainstream video game fans while creating a media buzz. Its content overlapped significantly with games shown at the IndieCade Showcase @ E3. But, notably, the indie scene was still in its infancy, so most of the games circulating in the festival circuit were unpublished and virtually unknown outside of industry circles. This created an opportunity to test the core premise of the Festival, which was to bring these games out of the professional silos within industry expos to a broader audience.

As with E3, the contrast between IndieCade’s area and the rest of the convention was striking: the sheer number of IndieCade games again exceeded those exhibited by mainstream publishers. In addition, IndieCade @ E for All provided one of the few opportunities for fans to interact with actual game creators—a transformative experience, especially for children. Even when E3 had allowed limited fan attendance, minors were explicitly prohibited, so having an all-ages pre-Festival test run was illuminating. While there were some games specifically targeted to children, like *Whyville* (an online science game for kids) and *Freedom Fighter 56* (about the Hungarian revolution and designed for classroom use), and others that were kid-friendly, such as *Cloud* and *Bone*, most of the games were adult-focused. Nonetheless, even those had traction with younger attendees. One surprise was that children were transfixed by *The Night Journey*, which rewards contemplative exploration and staying still, two game mechanics that are rarely seen in mainstream commercial games.



Photographer Unknown

IndieCade @ GameCity 2007

An opportunity to do a second public prototype—this time in an international setting—emerged when IndieCade was invited by British game journalist, historian, and event organizer Iain Simons to produce a showcase for the UK’s GameCity Festival in Nottingham. Though billed as a festival, GameCity was more of a fan convention, with a focus on mainstream and Triple-A games. The IndieCade @ GameCity location, in a windowed mezzanine of the Broadway Cinema, created visibility from the street and an intimate environment for enjoying the range of games on offer. The setup presented a typical array of obstacles: the graphics cards on the provided computers would not run many of the games, so an emergency run had to be made to replace them, and the PlayStation controller inputs for *The Night Journey* had somehow become inverted, so turning left made you go right and going forward made you go backward. (Initially, it was thought that this might be a creative choice, but it was later attributed to a driver bug.) In addition to the exhibition, IndieCade also organized sessions throughout GameCity on indie games.

IndieCade @ GameCity 2007 included hands-on demos as well as a video showcase with American games *Cloud*, *The Night Journey*, *Braid*, and *Everyday Shooter*, as well European offerings such as *Steam Brigade*, *Tale of Tales’ The Endless Forest*—a massively multiplayer screensaver where users play a magical human-faced deer wandering about a forest—and two games by Alex Mayhew, *Beethoven’s Hair* and *Prospero’s Island*, the latter of which was a work-in-progress created in collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company. It also included documentary/serious games such as *Escape from Woomera* (Australia) and *Freedom Fighter 56*, by Atlanta-based Lauer Learning, an interactive graphic novel about the 1956 Hungarian Uprising. After playing *Global Conflicts: Palestine* (Denmark), an educational adventure game where users play a journalist reporting on the Palestinian conflict, numerous visitors said in surprise, “Wow, this is a really good game!” These were precisely the types of games that had been previously overlooked in indie game circles.

Many individuals who would go on to be advisors and friends of IndieCade were in attendance: Margaret Robertson, former editor of *Edge* magazine, who would go on to become a Conference Chair for IndieCade East; Brandon Boyer, journalist, future chairman of the Independent Games Festival, co-founder of *Venus Patrol*, and former editor of *Offworld.com*; Robin Hunicke, co-founder of *Funomena* and an IndieCade advisor and supporter; and Keita Takahashi, the wildly imaginative creator of *Katamari Damacy*, who was awarded the IndieCade Trailblazer Award in 2017 for his body of innovative and influential work. It was also at IndieCade @ GameCity that Stephanie Barish met Jon Burgerman, the Nottingham-born artist who would create the branding, banners, posters, and postcards for IndieCade’s inaugural Festival the following year.



Indiecade@GameCity

The Indiecade Studio, Broadway

Everyone knows what indie means for films – smaller budgets, greater creative freedom, and the possibility of elevation to cult status. But what does it mean for games? Is it a proving ground for the next generation of Miyamotos? Is it an environment where gaming’s artistic aspirations can flourish? Is it the last bastion of pure, no-frills videogame fun?

GameCity is proud to welcome the Indiecade showcase to this year’s festival, to answer these questions and more. Highlighting some of the most innovative work from around the globe, Indiecade gives you the chance to talk and meet with some of this amazing new talent, and play the games that are rewriting the gaming rulebook.

Come and join in the beginning of a beautiful friendship - look out for the special indiecade sessions featured on the website.

www.indiecade.com