

2012 New Genres, New Voices

IndieCade Milestones

Indie Games go mainstream

PlayStation Network expands presence at IndieCade

IndieCade Events

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 5–June 7, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade Festival, October 5–7, Culver City

The biggest story of the indie ecosystem for 2012 was Kickstarter. Although the crowdfunding site was launched in 2009, 2012 was the year its full impact on the indie ecosystem took hold. The blossoming love affair between games and Kickstarter was already exceeding expectations. Highlights of 2012 included Double Fine raising \$3,336,371 for *Double Fine Adventure*, roughly eight times its initial ask of \$400,000. OUYA, a console system designed to support indie developers, met its Kickstarter goal in only eight hours. Finally, Oculus Rift exceeded its \$250,000 goal for its first prototype nearly tenfold, ultimately bringing in slightly over \$2.4 million. The last two efforts resulted in long-term partnerships with IndieCade. In particular, the Oculus/IndieCade partnership has been one of the most productive and enduring relationships, leveraging synergies between the hardware platform—which recognized early on the vital need for content—and the Festival, which connected the platform with creative early adopters.

The other big Kickstarter story of 2012 was Anita Sarkeesian's *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games*, a video series she launched as part of her Feminist Frequency website on gender and media. Sarkeesian's modest campaign for \$6,000 triggered a firestorm of misogyny, hate, and harassment, as well as a massive wave of support, resulting in her bringing in over \$150,000—more than 25 times her initial ask. The ugly cybermob that targeted Sarkeesian was the precursor to “Gamegate,” laying bare the industry's long-tormented relationship with gender. Much of this ire would fall onto indie developers in the years to come, no doubt a response to their growing notoriety and influence in the indie game scene (C. Campbell 2019).

Two thousand twelve also marked the year that indie games went mainstream. Two 2008 IndieCade Nominees—*Machinarium* and *The Unfinished Swan*—were published on consoles, and thatgamecompany's *Journey* won Game of the Year at the Game Developers Choice Awards. The Indie MEGABOOTH, a triumph of indie collectivism, had its debut at PAX East in Boston. Founded by Kelly Wallick, the MEGABOOTH allowed indie developers to have a presence at large fan conventions by joining forces to rent a large booth that would have otherwise been cost-prohibitive. Wallick, whose sister Adriel founded the Indie Train Jam, had previously worked at a few Boston studios, including Infrared5 and Firehose Games (Parker, Whitson, and Simon 2017).

As issues of diversity in games began to come to the fore, IndieCade continued to invite and embrace new voices and perspectives. Perhaps the biggest breakthrough in that regard was growing attention to queer games—a trend that would continue in subsequent years. This was not merely a matter of principle; it also had to do with the practical reality that new voices brought innovative new ideas, stories, characters, and approaches to play, agency, and empathy.



IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2012

By 2012, it was evident to E3-goers, including the press, that indie games were on the rise—and the place to see them was the IndieCade Showcase @ E3. In previous years, the booth had been inside the main show floor, but in 2012, the showcase was given a space in the convention center lobby, which meant entry did not require an E3 pass.

A feature story in *Wired* magazine that year entitled “IndieCade: 7 Indie Games that Rocked at E3,” put *Johann Sebastian Joust* by Doug Wilson at the top of that list. This game used PlayStation Move controllers with a deceptively simple tag-like mechanic in which players had to hold their controllers still while knocking at others; musical interludes created the opportunity to move. *Joust* brazenly upended the conventional wisdom of the mainstream game industry by taking the focus off the screen and putting it on players themselves. Other games mentioned by *Wired* included *Songlines*, Samantha Vick's Kinect-based game where you fly like a bird, and Jeremy Gibson Bond's *Coalesce*, an iPad game where you merge bubbles by drawing lines (Rigney et al. 2012).

Other indie darlings that captured attention at the Showcase @ E3 included Edmund McMillen and Florian Himsl's *The Binding of Isaac*, which quickly ascended as an indie hit; Steve Swink/Cube Heart's *Scale*, a game that used a deceptively simple resizing mechanic to solve puzzles; *Sound Shapes*, a hybrid game anthology/music album co-designed by Jessica Mak, whose *Everyday Shooter* was in the first IndieCade Showcase @ E3; *SpellTower*, Zach Gage's word puzzle game; and *Prom Week*, from the University of California, Santa Cruz's Center for Games and Playable Media, which used artificial intelligence to craft social arcs among a fictional group of high-school students. *Prom Week* also earned a spot in Republican Senator Tom Coburn's infamous *Wastebook* of poor uses of government money (Cox 2012).

At the 2012 Showcase, IndieCade introduced the industry to the emerging queer games movement with Christine Love's *Analogue: A Hate Story*, a visual novel that explored gender and patriarchy through a fictional sci-fi setting.

Physical and tabletop games were also in full swing. The Wise Guys, who had made their IndieCade debut the prior year with *Twistianopolis 500*, presented *Pickpocket Junction*, where players wore trench coats and tried to pick one another's pockets. NapNok Games (formerly KnapKnok), whose founders were part of the *Dark Room Sex Game* team in 2008, presented their card game *Who Took the Apple?*. Mary Flanagan's activist game lab Tiltfactor showed *ZOMBIEPOX*, a values-driven strategic board game designed to show how epidemics spread. Also included was USC's *Reality Ends Here*, an alternate reality game developed as a way to orient new students to USC's School of Cinematic Arts by getting them to embark on creative projects together.

Paste Magazine's top five top games at all of E3 included two IndieCade games. The first was 2008 Nominee *The Unfinished Swan*, which was featured in the PlayStation booth. The second was *Hokra*, featured in IndieCade's booth, which went on to become part of Sony's *Sportsfriends* compilation published by Die Gute Fabrik.

Shortly after the Showcase @ E3, in the runup to the Festival, a short video was released called *What is IndieCade?* Among the comments by interviewees was Conference Co-Chair John Sharp, who memorably said, “IndieCade is where we go to get our batteries recharged.” (GMP 2012)

It's a diversity that's certainly welcome amongst the countless sequels that govern the show floor. And a few seconds watching those smiling attendees playing the games in the IndieCade booth demonstrates something that's sometimes overlooked in the hustle and bustle of E3: a simple love of play.

—Brian Heater, Engadget

IndieCade Festival 2012

The submission pool continued to expand, making the juried Festival increasingly competitive. At the same time, new games were being submitted that the organizers thought needed to be seen. To address this, IndieCade Official Selections was introduced as a curated showcase within the Festival to highlight new works and voices. One of the games that served as the impetus for this was Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia*, a breakthrough game whose elegant premise was to convey the struggles of gender reassignment through game mechanics. Official Selections also provided a venue for showing works in progress. Another example from 2012 was a prototype called *Kachina* by Ben Esposito, which eventually evolved into the 2015 award-winning *Donut County*.

While the Culver City Firehouse Headquarters had become home to the Festival's Nominees, IndieCade Official Selections—which were curated rather than juried—were housed in a tent in IndieCade Village alongside a cluster of picnic tables where visitors could play board games. IndieCade Village was also home to the Creators Lounge (sponsored by OnLive), a casual hangout with beanbags and rugs for developers to network and get relief from the California sun.

Nominees that year included Molleindustria's *Unmanned*, a melancholy and disturbing meditation on a day in the life of a drone operator, which took the Grand Jury Award; *Botanicula* (by Amanita Design, creators of *Machinarium*) won Story/World Design; Jason Roberts' *Gorogoa*, the devilishly clever visual puzzle game, took the Visual Design Award; and Davey Wreden's highly acclaimed Half-Life 2 mod, *The Stanley Parable* won IndieCade's 2012 Special Recognition Award, becoming one of the most talked-about games of the year. Other Nominees were *Analogue: A Hate Story*, which had been in the Showcase @ E3, and *FTL: Faster than Light* by Subset Games, which Penny Arcade called "Firefly by way of a rogue-like" (Kuchera 2012).

This year also marked the beginning of the local multiplayer zeitgeist, which included mobile and artgames. On the mobile side was *Bloop*, a multiplayer single-screen iPad game best described as "Twister with fingers," in which players madly tried to touch the most buttons of their own color to win; *Row Row Row Remote*, by Tom Sennett and Salil Malkan, in which players used their own cell phones as oars; and the return of Matt Parker's *Recurse*, which had been at the 2010 Festival and had been ported to the iPad using its built-in camera feature.

Artgames included Kaho Abe's *Hit Me!*, in which two players tried to hit a button atop their opponent's hardhat, and *Swordfight* by Kurt Bieg and Ramsey Nasser, in which players wore joysticks as strap-ons with the goal of pushing each other's buttons. These were also examples of the growing alt.ctrl trend, which included games like *Nevermind*, a game about anxiety with a biofeedback device, and *Open Source*—a live-action "pong" simulator inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's 1966 augmented tennis performance *Open Score*—in which players used their bodies as rackets, locating the invisible ball's trajectory through binaural audio.

Analog games were also expanding. The Big Games program, chaired by *Humans vs. Zombies*' Joe Sklover, included games such as *Field Frogger*, a physical version of *Frogger* by ESI Design's Peter Vigeant; the Wise Guys' *Pickpocket Junction*, which had been shown at the Showcase @ E3; and *Dreams of Your Life* by Hide&Seek. Analog games held a prominent place across all the awards: the Technology Award went to a book, Zak Smith's *Vornheim*, and the award for Game Design went to *Armada d6*, by John Sharp and Eric Zimmerman, a board game that used dice in a novel way and had a fictional origin story. The Interaction Award went to *INTERFERENCE*, an installation by Eric Zimmerman and Nathalie Pozzi that was submitted via documentation and not viewable at the Festival until the following year due to space constraints. Finally, many developers were moving nimbly between digital and analog and custom and conventional controllers. For instance, *Killer Queen*, a chaotic multiplayer field sport, appeared in the Big Game program in 2012, only to reappear the following year as a digital "New Arcade" custom installation.

As indie games were beginning to make waves in the mainstream industry, IndieCade became increasingly hands-on as a liaison between developers and publishers. IndieXchange was now co-chaired by Jeremy Gibson Bond with help from Juan Gril and Karin Ray. It had expanded significantly and moved from NextSpace to the Veterans Memorial Building in Culver City. The Game Tasting show-and-tell format also grew, allowing anyone registered for the IndieXchange to show their games. The program included a series of professional development workshops on topics such as marketing and public relations, fundraising (including grants), intellectual property, and contracts.

This year, the Conference took on a decidedly punk-rock ethos, perhaps inspired by Anna Anthropy's book *Rise of the Video Game Zinesters* published earlier that year (Anthropy 2012). The Conference Co-Chairs—John Sharp, Tracy Fullerton, and Richard Lemarchand—all identified as having punk-rock roots. Lemarchand had just left Naughty Dog to take a position at USC in the program headed by Tracy Fullerton, in addition to charting a new path as an indie developer. Anthropy, along with myself, Akira Thompson, and 2011 IndieCade Trailblazer Megan Gaiser, staged a discussion about inclusiveness (Ligman 2012).

The Conference celebrated some industry milestones by commemorating the 50th anniversary of *Spacewar!*—generally acknowledged as the first computer game—and the 30th anniversary of *Doom* with a keynote conversation between the two games' respective creators, Steve "Slug" Russell and John Romero. Mary Flanagan also offered a talk on art and activist games. Creators such as Eric Zimmerman, Mark ten Bosch, and Jonathan Blow gave talks on their creative practice and process. The *Well-Played* panel series became a regular part of the Conference program. Artgames were also a prominent topic of discussion, with speakers such as Daniel Benmergui, Brenda Romero, Rod Humble, and Eddo Stern, as well as a discussion on influences featuring Naomi Clark, Phil Fish, and Kaho Abe.

The 2012 awards took place once again at the Santa Monica Woman's Club and were hosted by iconic gamer Felicia Day, creator of the web series *The Guild* and *Geek & Sundry*. The 2012 Trailblazer Award went to Elan Lee, credited as one of the inventors of the alternate reality genre with games such as *The Beast* (created to promote the Spielberg film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*) and *I Love Bees*, developed by Microsoft for the *Halo 2* launch. Lee was also one of the founders of 42 Entertainment and Fourth Wall Studios, both of which were known for innovative transmedia projects that blurred fiction and reality. Three years after receiving the award, Lee would set a Kickstarter record for his card game *Exploding Kittens*.



Photo by Al Gonzalez