

2014 Heart-Shaped

IndieCade Milestones

IndieCade Humble Bundles 1 & 2

IndieCade Events

IndieCade East, February 14–16, Museum of the Moving Image, New York City

IndieCade Showcase @ E3, June 10–12, Los Angeles Convention Center

IndieCade + Cards Against Humanity Showcase @ GaymerX2, July 11–13, InterContinental Hotel, San Francisco

IndieCade Festival, October 9–12, Culver City

Leap Motion 3D Game Jam: Presented by IndieCade, October 19–November 30, distributed

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...” Dickens’ famous opening of *A Tale of Two Cities* captures the deep contrasts that characterized 2014 for indie games. There were more platforms and publishing avenues than ever before, so much so that concerns began to be raised about “discoverability” (Hiscott 2014). At the same time, games that once seemed impossible on consoles—including artgames—were getting publishing deals. That all three major console makers, plus one major publisher, were sponsors in 2014 said something about indie games’ value to the mainstream. That year, around half of the games published in the PlayStation Network were indie, and there were even intimations that indie games were contributing to sales of PlayStation 4 (Johnson 2014). The purchase of IndieCade sponsor Oculus VR by Facebook and Microsoft’s acquisition of *Minecraft*, a game that seemed the very essence of indie, were making ripples throughout the ecosystem, again illustrating the transience of the term “indie.”

IndieCade Nominees were going on to win awards not only at the Independent Games Festival but also at the mainstream Game Developers Choice Awards. IndieCade 2013 Official Selection *Papers, Please* by Lucas Pope (whose *Mightier* had also been in the 2009 Festival) won three Independent Games Festival awards in 2013, including the Seumas McNally Grand Prize. Meanwhile, *Luxuria Superbia*, a 2013 IndieCade Nominee, won the Nuovo Award, while the Audience Award went to IndieCade Festival 2012 award-winner *The Stanley Parable*. All of these works radically redefined the term “game.” On Kickstarter, games were continuing to rise, despite already being the biggest funding category, with over \$1 billion raised that year. Even so, many were predicting the imminent “pop” of the “indie game bubble” (J. Conditt 2014; Plunkett 2014; Vogel 2014).

At the Game Developers Conference that year, the International Game Developers Association released the results of its 2014 Developer Satisfaction Survey. While the survey primarily focused on quality-of-life (including labor practices) and diversity issues, its authors (including myself and then-Executive Director Kate Edwards) were surprised by the finding that nearly half of developers surveyed identified as indie (Edwards et al. 2014). Participation by women had nearly doubled since the last survey (taken in 2005) from 11.5% to 22%, although gender discrimination remained the top category of discrimination cited, followed closely by ageism. Inclusion of students in the survey indicated that female participation was trending up among this demographic as well, with 30% identifying as women.

IndieCade at E3 is full of hugs... and games.

—Jessica Conditt, *Engadget*

At the same time, the game industry’s “gender trouble” was beginning to surface on a public level. Two thousand fourteen was the nadir of a growing scourge of harassment known as “Gamergate,” a hate campaign aimed specifically at women and queer indie creators and journalists, many of whom were part of the IndieCade community. For those outside the industry, this seemed like an anomaly, but for those inside, it was the culmination of a decades-long quandary. At the center of the controversy was a so-called “game journalism ethics scandal” involving Zoe Quinn, whose *Depression Quest* was a Night Game Official Selection the prior year, and writer Leigh Alexander’s now-infamous “Gamers’ Are Over” article in *Gamasutra* (2014). Alexander’s piece coincidentally echoed Ludica’s “Hegemony of Play” article (Ludica et al. 2007), which critiqued the male-gamer stereotype as a marketing construct.) Alexander’s article had spurred a cybermob that called on sponsors to pull advertising from *Gamasutra*, a decision that ultimately backfired on companies that did so, most notably Intel (Tassi 2014).

Perhaps in an attempt at reconciliation, the Game Developers Conference gave its Industry Ambassador award to Anita Sarkeesian, creator of the *Tropes vs. Women in Video Games* series, whose own 2012 experience with cybermobs foreshadowed Gamergate. As Stephen Colbert wryly observed in an October interview with Sarkeesian, it was easy to understand concerns since the entertainment industry was so well-known for its “journalistic ethics” (Colbert et al 2014). *The Guardian* would later describe Gamergate as the “canary in the coal mine” for the strange turn in real-world politics in 2016 (Lees 2016). Indeed, many individuals implicated in Gamergate, such as Breitbart News’ Steve Bannon, went on to influence the 2016 election (Lees 2016).

Although it was unsuccessfully targeted, IndieCade chose to stay out of the public fray; however, its organizers were involved in ongoing private discussions about an appropriate course of action. The consensus was that a public statement was not necessary since IndieCade had always been very clear about where it stood on issues of inclusiveness. To quote Leigh Alexander: “When you decline to create or to curate a culture in your spaces, you’re responsible for what spawns in the vacuum” (Alexander 2014). As a highly curated community—despite everything going on that year—IndieCade continued to maintain a harassment-free environment. If anything, the maelstrom made the community even stronger, and its constituents roundly rejected overtures from Gamergate’s antagonists (The Mary Sue 2014).

Amid this swirl of rancor, the enduring image of IndieCade’s 2014 events was a pixelated heart. This came about as the result of a competition won by game developer Danielle Swank, who conceived of the heart-shaped grid from 2014 Nominees that adorned IndieCade’s T-shirts, posters, and other materials. IndieCade intern Parker Mann, who would go on to work for many years with IndieCade in various capacities, built a giant heart-shaped frame that formed the perfect photo opportunity to counter the brewing storm. This collective affirmation captured IndieCade’s fierce resistance to the hatescape that was Gamergate.

2014 was the best year for local multiplayer gaming since online multiplayer gaming became the industry default. That focus could not have come at a better time. 2014 was a year where a creeping toxicity made online gaming communities a less inviting place to inhabit....

This year, I spent far more time playing local multiplayer titles than I did online titles... It wasn't because the local games released this year were so high quality, either (though they absolutely were). It's because each one possessed a more intangible trait: They managed to make my entire social circle love video games just as much as I do.

—Griffin McElroy, *Polygon*



Photo by Al Gonzalez

“IndieCade, the video game industry’s Sundance.” Los Angeles Times



IndieCade East 2014

The second IndieCade East included another long-running exhibition, *Indie Essentials: 25 Must-Play Video Games*. Co-curated by Matt Parker and Aaron Isaksen, with Sam Roberts and the Museum of the Moving Image's Curator of Digital Media, Jason Eppink, the landmark exhibition served as a retrospective to introduce a broader museum-going public to indie games. It included some of the most influential games in the rise of indies, spanning the pre-IndieCade era: *Alien Hominid* (The Behemoth, 2002) and *N* (Metanet Software, 2004); early IndieCade favorites such as *Machinarium* (Anamita Design, 2008), *The Path* (Tale of Tales, 2009), and *Dear Esther* (The Chinese Room, 2009); more recent Nominees such as *Gone Home*, *Kentucky Route Zero*, and *Quadrilateral Cowboy* (2013); as well as a few that had not been in IndieCade, such as *Minecraft* (Mojang, 2011). Alongside the exhibition, IndieCade also launched its first collection for Humble Bundle, a retrospective of IndieCade games included *The Dream Machine Chapters 1-3*, *And Yet It Moves*, *Luxuria Superbia*, *The Bridge*, *7 Grand Steps: What Ancients Begat*, and *Dear Esther*.

Matt Parker was again Chair of IndieCade East, and former *Edge* magazine editor Margaret Robertson and her husband Kevin Cancienne, best known for creating the multiplayer game *Dog Park*, served as Conference Co-Chairs. Tale of Tales' Auriea Harvey gave a highly personal keynote about her initially long-distance relationship with collaborator/husband Michaël Samyn, in which game development became a kind of love letter between the two. She also talked about how their most recent game, *Luxuria Superbia*, reflected these themes. In his keynote, Rami Ismail, the creator of *Ridiculous Fishing*, gave a personal account of his path to game development as a half-Dutch, half-Egyptian designer. Bennett Foddy's keynote outlined "The State of the Union," addressing initial rumblings and grumblings that the indie movement was over and foreshadowing the widespread anxiety that would manifest the following year about the so-called "indiepocalypse."

The IndieCade East Conference was notably diverse and covered a wide range of topics. History was a prevalent theme, especially the formative decade of the 1980s: Laine Noony gave a talk entitled, "When Indie Games Came in Ziploc Bags," while Josh Lee explored the historical relationship between indie games and hobby culture. Curation was another theme, featuring New York game exhibition space Babycastles, Charles Pratt of NYU's *No Quarter* (an influential annual exhibit that had commissioned a number of IndieCade games), and the curators of the *Indie Essentials: 25 Must-Play Video Games* show. The third major topic was diversity and inclusion, including a talk and workshop by Code Liberation's Phoenix Perry about teaching programming to underserved groups, and Merritt K's delightful and empowering talk "I'm a Transsexual Witch Poet Gamecrafter and You Can Too."



Over the course of the weekend, there were a number of other gameplay and demo sessions in a variety of formats. After launching Indie eSports in response to the explosion in local multiplayer games the prior year, this program continued to be an awardee favorite, turning local multiplayer competitive gaming into a spectator sport. The tournament was enhanced by sportscaster-style play-by-plays as participants enjoyed local multiplayer hits such as *Nidhogg* by Messhof, *PARTICLE MACE*, described by its designer Andy Wallace as a "Galactic Ballet Brawler," and *Stikbold!* by Reign Brothers (now Game Swing), which was published on Nintendo Switch in 2017.

Night Games transformed the museum into a giant adult playground. Games presented included *Spaghetti Standoff* by Arkadium, a new folk game with the goal of being the last pair still connected by an unbroken piece of raw spaghetti; *Wrong Bet!*, a loud and lively game about betting and boxing by Brian S. Chung and GJ Lee; Gigantic Mechanic's *Art Boy Sin*, an installation-based game that involved moving letters and words around on walls to create poetry; and Shoshana Kessock's *The Last Ten Minutes*, a live action role play about an end-of-the-world party. Digital Night Games included *Crypt of the NecroDancer* by Brace Yourself!, a genre mash-up somewhere between a roguelike and a rhythm game that became a huge indie hit. Also included was 2013 Official Selection *Tenya Wanya Teens*, a game controlled via a grid of multicolored buttons, originally created by uvula (Keita Takashi, designer of *Katamari Damacy*) with Venus Patrol and Wild Rumpus for their 2013 Game Developers Conference party.



...a broad cross-section of software developed outside of major studios that proves its own worth in design and engagement. Despite the various platforms and perspectives...the exhibition is all about the power of shared experiences in gaming.

—Allison Meier, *Hyperallergic*



IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2014

With a record number of submissions, diversity continued to be a major force in 2014, both in terms of developers and games, with a growing influx of special format and local multiplayer games. Among the latter, the most notable trend was cooperation, and the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 gave us the opportunity to shine a flashlight ahead. One of the best examples of this co-op trend was *Bounden*. Created by Dutch Game Garden member Game Oven in collaboration with the Dutch National Ballet, each player holds one end of an iPhone, then follows a groove around a sphere on the phone's screen, producing a beautifully choreographed dance. Another co-op game was *Choice Chamber* by Studio Bean (Michael Molinari), which used the onboard voting mechanic of Twitch.tv to crowdsource player choices: the crowd voted in real-time on what weapon the player got from a loot chest before confronting a monster. The game went on to win the IndieCade Technology Award later that year. In contrast, *T.R.E.E.*, created by 16-year-old Franz Michael Ressel, was a slow-paced game with an asynchronous mechanic that allowed players to grow and prune a shared tree over time. Themes of nature could also be seen in analog games like *Grow*, by Chris Hassebrook, T. A. Pribbenow, and Kyle Bromley, and *BLOOM*, by Alisa Andrask and Jose Sanchez from the Architecture School of University College London.

Co-op games were complemented by games with novel competition tactics. *Close Castles*, an experimental game by Asher Vollmer of Sirvo Studios (known for his addictive minimalist game *Threes!*) was a four-player strategy game where players competed with others to build the most vibrant kingdom. *Paparazzi* by Pringo Dingo Games, a frantic local two-player with asymmetrical goals, involved one player as a photographer trying to take as many pictures as possible of the other, a celebrity, who tried to avoid "losing their soul" by being photographed.

Earlier that year, the Game Developers Conference introduced *alt.ctrl.GDC*—its showcase devoted to alternate controller games, an area of seemingly endless innovation that IndieCade had embraced from its earliest showcases. A great example of ingeniousness in this arena was *Choosatron Deluxe Adventure Matrix*, a text-based adventure game generated by a receipt printer that allowed players to walk away with a print-out of their adventure. 3D printing was showcased in *MONSTERMATIC* by Clayton Mitchell (Mico Studio), an iOS game in which kids could design their own monsters and then order a 3D print-out.

The IndieCade Showcase @ E3 also highlighted the fruits of the prior year's Oculus and IndieCade VR Jam, including jam winners *Ciess*, *Virtual Internet Hacker*, *Dumpy: Going Elephants*, and *Nostrum*.



E3 Photos by Al Gonzalez

IndieCade and Cards Against Humanity at GaymerX2



In a very "heart-shaped" move, in the summer of 2014, IndieCade partnered with Cards Against Humanity to create a special showcase of indie games for GaymerX2, the second annual fan convention dedicated to LGBTQIAP+ gamers. Sam Roberts co-curated the show with Cards Against Humanity, and I attended as IndieCade's ambassador.

Even within this small selection of games, developers could be seen stretching boundaries in terms of story, game mechanics, visual aesthetics, and interaction. On the one hand was a range of text-based narrative experiences. Exemplary of this emerging trend were games like *Cry\$tal Warrior Ke\$ha*, part of *Porpentine's Twine Compilation*; *Christine Love's Hate Plus*, a sequel to *Analogue: a Hate Story*; and Aaron A. Reed's IndieCade 2010 Nominee *Blue Lacuna*, a complex interactive novel with an unprecedented array of story options.

Embodied interaction was also featured in games such as *Little Happies*, a mod of Kaho Abe's *Ninja Shadow Warrior* created with Toni Pizza, and Lea Schönfelder and Peter Lu's *Perfect Woman*, a Kinect-based game that required full-body movements to fulfill its various levels of "feminine" achievement. There were also games that conveyed a uniquely LGBTQIAP+ experience, like *Mainichi* by Mattie Brice, which took players through a day in the life of a transgender woman, and *Triad*, Anna Anthropy's polyamorous puzzle game about fitting three lovers into a bed.

IndieCade Festival 2014

The 2014 Festival was illustrative of a moment when a number of trends and factors began to converge in the indie ecosystem: game industry pioneers "going indie," VR transitioning from fad to trend to produce multiple award-winning games, and new platforms such as OUYA and Wii U pushing indie innovation. Indies' romance with mobile platforms continued, and multiplayer games—whether analog, digital, or hybrid—continued to flourish, with a decided leaning towards co-op. The interoperability of development tools like Unity now made it possible for developers to offer their games across a wide variety of platforms. It was also a record year for the number of Festival submissions, exhibited games, and diversity of game types and creators. In juxtaposition to the culture wars raging in both game culture and the industry, IndieCade maintained its "heart-shaped" ethos and reputation for inclusiveness. In this most disheartening of years, marginalized developers still reported feeling safe at IndieCade.

IndieCade Village continued to grow as the vibrant center of the Festival, housing sponsor tents by Sony, Nintendo, OUYA, Oculus VR, Leap Motion, Unreal, nVidia, Time Warner, AdMagic, Facebook, and others. It housed a Digital Selections tent for curated (as opposed to juried) games, an Indie eSports area that included a *Sportsfriends* tournament, and GameU programming targeted at young and aspiring game designers as well as game educators. Big Games and Night Games took place throughout IndieCade Village and across the street at Media Park.

In sharp contrast to what was going on in game culture writ large, IndieCade developers seemed to double down on themes of empathy and diversity. The Developers Choice Award went to *Close Your*, a short narrative student game from USC about memory loss, and one of two games—the other being *Ether One*—to deal with this issue. *how do you Do it?*, a piece about a little girl trying to figure out sex with two dolls, was a short-form narrative game by up-and-coming developer Nina Freeman, who went on to make *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list in 2016 and take a staff position at Fullbright.

Indigenous people's voices were very much coming into the mix, best captured by *Never Alone (Kisima Injitchujaja)*, based on traditional lore of the Iñupiaq people through collaboration with the Cook Inlet Tribal Council. Two OUYA games stand out due to their actively addressing diversity issues, a topic that mainstream consoles were avoiding like the plague: *Knight & Damsel*, by MK-ULTRA Games, a local multiplayer competitive/co-op game that flips traditional fairy tale gender dynamics by having players both compete and cooperate to save one another, and the heart-wrenching *Thrilled*, a horror game by Brazilian-born USC student Miguel Oliveira in which you play an escaped slave who must flee her pursuers while protecting her baby.



IndieCade Festival 2014 (Cont'd)

By all indicators, 2014 made it clear that VR was here to stay, and indies were harnessing its potential. Two VR experiences won awards: Nonny de la Peña's *Use of Force*, a landmark demonstrating VR's power to engender empathy, documented a beating at the US-Mexico border through the eyes of bystanders who stood by helpless but captured the scene on their cellphones. A crossover piece created in a USC lab, de la Peña only submitted it to the Festival after some arm twisting. *Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes*, created at the Global Game Jam earlier that year, won the Media Choice Award and was the first real VR blockbuster. It leveraged the otherwise isolating exercise of VR to create what would become a classic co-op game: one player donned a headset to disarm a bomb while up to three others directed them with instructions from a 23-page manual.

Keep Talking and Nobody Explodes carried over the co-op multiplayer trend that had begun at the IndieCade Showcase @ E3. The Audience Choice Award went to *Sunder*, created by a team of DigiPen Institute of Technology students under the name Team Mocha. In the game, each player dons a pair of old-school film 3D glasses that have been modded to reveal only one range of colors. Players therefore see different things on the screen and have to collaborate in order to succeed. Another game was *Affordable Space Adventures*, an asymmetrical co-op space exploration game created for Wii U by NapNok.

An emerging trend that was kind of the flip side of the VR trend was the move towards transmedia, mixed, and augmented reality games that integrated play with the real world or tangible artifacts. A great example was the Best Story/World Design Award winner, *The Ice-Bound Concordance*, by Down to the Wire, the studio of University of California, Santa Cruz graduate Aaron A. Reed (whose *Blue Lacuna* was featured in IndieCade 2010) and Jacob Garbe. *Ice-Bound* used augmented reality on the iPad in combination with a physical book to tell the story of a dead author who, now reincarnated via AI, enlists the player to help him finish his final novel. The Interaction Award went to *Soulfill*, a mobile-enabled graphicless live action game created by Little Wins LLC at the Global Game Jam that encouraged players to make eye contact with strangers on public transportation. Included in the Big Games Official Selections was *Sankofa Says*, an ARG created by a transmedia design collaboratory based at USC known as Leimert Phone Company (Benjamin Stokes, François Bar, Karl Baumann, and others). The game originated at a phone booth from which custom-designed quests were deployed around Culver City, bringing historical details to players' attention. Also in Official Selections was Kara Stone and Nadine Lessio's *Sext Adventure*, a feminist satire that involved "sexting" with a bot.

Two future iOS hits appeared at the Festival: the Visual Design Award went to Loveshack's *FRAMED*, which would become an indie hit and win multiple awards and citations, including Hideo Kojima's Game of the Year. In this deceptively simple interactive comic book, players rearranged frames in order to play out an animated sequence that moved the story forward. The other hit was *Mini Metro* by Dinosaur Polo Club, a surprisingly fun subway simulator that used classic stylized map graphics to bring a dynamic system to life. It went on to become a 2016 Independent Games Festival finalist and award-winner.

The Festival also saw the release of IndieCade Humble Bundle 2, which included *A Slow Year*, *Artemis Spaceship Bridge Simulator* *Starship*, *Cube & Star: An Arbitrary Love*, *ibb & obb: Best Friends Forever Double Pack* (which allowed you to send a copy of the game to a friend), *LYNE*, an early access edition of *Mini Metro*, and *Proteus*.

The feel of the 2014 Festival is perhaps best illustrated through the entryway of its awards ceremony. Held at Cafe Club Fais Do-Do, a reggae and blues club and Los Angeles institution, attendees entered through a "magical portal" from a tiny room that opened into the club's much larger main space and spilled out onto an outdoor patio. This transition, from small to large, is really what this year's Festival was all about—entering through a tiny door into a space much bigger than you had imagined. The event's co-hosts also contributed to the atmosphere—two old friends who had been along for the entire arc of the indie ride. Tracy Fullerton, responsible for building USC into an indie powerhouse, and Frank Lantz, Director of the NYU Game Center and co-founder of indie ARG studio Area/Code (which had been purchased by Zynga in 2011), captured the playful and friendly East Coast/West Coast indie rivalry with their banter.

Tracy and Frank were the perfect hosts to capture the "veterans go indie" zeitgeist, which culminated in Double Fine Productions taking the IndieCade 2014 Grand Jury Award for *Hack 'n' Slash*, a *Zelda*-style game in which players had to alter code to solve puzzles. Double Fine's founder, Tim Schafer, had received the first IndieCade Trailblazer Award in 2010. After its wildly successful 2012 Kickstarter for *Double Fine Adventure*, Double Fine had launched a two-week internal game jam, Amnesia Fortnight, in which anyone in the company could pitch a game idea. Fans could donate \$1 to vote on the idea they liked best. The result was *Hack 'n' Slash*, which was supported to completion by the Indie Fund. This example illustrates the complex interdynamics of the indie ecosystem, particularly with respect to alternative funding scenarios and the high degree of communalism and mutual support among indie gamemakers. It also shows IndieCade's role as cultural intermediary in creating a forum for new works and helping all boats rise.

Leap Motion Game Jam

The October following the 2014 Festival, IndieCade partnered with Leap Motion to launch a six-week game jam for indie developers to create games for the company's hand-gesture capture input devices (designed to be used with screen-based or VR games). Participants were eligible for cash awards and inclusion in a Leap Motion marketing campaign. The first-place winner was Henry Hoffman's *Aboard the Lookinglass*, a VR game that used the player's hands as portals to the past and future; second place went to *Weightless* by Martin Schubert, with music by Chris Zabriskie, a zen experience that placed players in a floating space station. Six of these games were also included in a "Gesture" showcase at IndieCade East 2015.



IndieCade Festival 2014 (Cont'd)

The 2014 Trailblazer Award went to another veteran, Alex Rigopoulos, co-founder of Harmonix. An early example of industry/academia synergy, Rigopoulos launched Harmonix in 1995 based on his thesis work at the MIT Media Lab, alongside classmate Eran Egozy. Their goal was to create experiences that enabled nonmusicians to feel as if they were playing music. The studio got its first big break with *Frequency* and then *Amplitude* on PlayStation 2. But its greatest success came as co-developers with RedOctane of *Guitar Hero*, a game that flouted the conventional wisdom that consumers would not buy custom controllers.

Harmonix also exhibited two sponsored games at the 2014 Festival: *Dance Central Spotlight* and *Disney Fantasia: Music Evolved*, both in the music game genre that the company helped define. In line with a music game developer receiving the Trailblazer Award, music games were pervasive throughout the Festival. The award for Best Audio went to *FRACT OSC*, a music adventure/puzzle game by Phosfield Systems in which players explored and rebuilt a glowing magical world through music. Also featured were *Sentris*, by Samantha Kalman of Timbre Interactive, a kind of visual music creation toy; *Celestia*, by Cheng Yang and Yang Shi, where players navigated an imaginary world by singing; and *Soundodger Live*, an installation version of Studio Bean's bullet-hell music game that was projected onto the floor, using players' bodies as cursors.

