The World's Largest Indie Video Game Festival is Still Taking Risks.

—Schindel et al, *Hyperallergic*

By 2018, in spite of the dip in the so-called "indie bubble," various factors of the ecosystem continued to trend in favor of indies. The number of games funded on Kickstarter again broke records, totaling $200.9 million in revenue (Kickstarter 2019), although the vast majority of these were board games. In the digital space, console shakeups were underway. Sony was publicly stepping away from indies even while publishing them in record numbers, and competing platforms were extending a hand to independent developers. Nintendo released a number of IndieCade games under its "Nindies" mantle, including *Hyper Light Drifter, Enter the Gungeon, Nuclear Throne, TowerFall, Shovel Knight, Night in the Woods,* and *Baba Is You.* VR was now completely mainstream, thanks in large part to its early adoption by independent developers fueled by content investment from Oculus.

At the same time, there was now an increasing number of options outside the console world, both in terms of funding and publishing. By the start of 2018, the Indie Fund—which had launched in 2010 with the goal of funding three games a year—had funded nearly 50. Indie film studios were also getting into the act, such as Annapurna's interactive division, which launched in 2016 and by 2018 had published a number of IndieCade games including *Gorogoa* and *Donut County,* as well as *What Remains of Edith Finch* by Giant Sparrow (whose *Unfinished Swan* was in the first IndieCade Festival), *Ashen,* and *Florence.* ARTE, a Franco-German television production studio that had published a number of titles including IndieCade games *Bury Me, My Love, A Fisherman's Tale,* and *Homo Machina* with partial funding from the European Union, became an IndieCade Europe sponsor.

Indies could also go direct to their audiences by self-publishing through Steam, itch.io, and the App Store, the latter of which ranked former IndieCade Nominees *Gorogoa* and *Donut County* among their top games of 2018. *Donut County* creator Ben Esposito cited the showing of the game's early prototype, *Kachina,* at the 2012 IndieCade Festival as pivotal to his successful redesign of the game (Hudson 2018). This is one of many examples of the importance of the "community of play and practice" in helping developers iterate and improve their designs with the help of their peers.

Two thousand eighteen was also a reminder of the precarity of IndieCade itself. Although the Festival had been criticized in the past for its dependency on the hegemonic console makers from which indies sought emancipation, the absence of those very companies caused some to question IndieCade's ongoing relevance. However, as Marcus Garrett pointed out in a 2018 article, its apparent waning relevance to the mainstream console market also served to amplify IndieCade's *importance* to games overall and indies in particular. As indies achieved a higher degree of independence, they were increasingly dependent on the indie community as a forum for their work.

Little more than a decade ago, video games produced outside the mainstream were largely an afterthought, found only in small online communities or derogatorily labeled "casual" games. The proliferation of game-making tools, the coming-of-age of a play-literate generation, and a growing consensus on canonical works has pushed the medium into maturity, expanding what we talk about when we talk about games. Today, a renewed interest in virtual and augmented reality, along with an expanding field of interactive experiences—escape rooms, immersive theater, mobile social applications, and more—sketches the boundaries of a vast space of expression. —Top Shelf Gaming (Garrett et al 2018)

IndieCade Presents: A Decade of Game Design, which opened the weekend of IndieCade East and ran until May 27, 2018, was a follow-on to the previous years' anniversary celebrations looking at the evolution of key gamemakers. It was structured around duets of work by the same gamemaker, typically an early IndieCade game paired with a more recent example. The pairings included work by Tale of Tales, Tracy Fullerton's USC Game Innovation Lab, members of Copenhagen Game Collective, Anna Anthropy, Ed Keys, David Kanaga, and second-wave VR pioneer Nonny de la Peña. Two example pairings were Jason Rohrer's *Passage* alongside his newer work *One Hour One Life,* an ambitious massively multiplayer online game in which the player has 60 minutes to build a society with other players; the other example was Mollendusria/Paolo Pedercini's *Unmanned* with *A Short History of the Gaze,* a virtual reality "essay" about the relationship between gaze and violence.

Concurrent with *A Decade of Game Design* was an exhibition of another game at the museum that would go on to be an awardee at the Festival later that year, *The Game: The Game.* Created by Carnegie Mellon University professor Angela Washko, the heavily researched interactive documentary put the player in the uncomfortable position of a woman being targeted by a male pick-up artist.

Not surprisingly, IndieCade East featured a high concentration of sessions around trends in live and performative gaming. Boston-based creator Kellian Adams Pletcher did a "post-mortem" on her live interactive show *Club Drosselmeyer.* There was a conversation between immersive theatre creator Ed Sylvanus Iskandar and Survios' Robert Nashak, and an improv workshop for game designers with the Upright Citizens Brigade. Night Games included live and digitally augmented social games, including a selection of local massively multiplayer games for a 30-person ESC platform from ESI Design, whose lead designer Pete Vigeant was the Night Games Chair that year.

Custom and alternative hardware was another continued area of disruption. An excellent illustration of the "interdependency web" described in the opening of this book was Move 38, whose *Blinks* platform had been a finalist at the 2016 Festival. *Blinks* had ties to academia (emerging from an MIT master's thesis), had shown at IndieCade, received funding through Kickstarter, and sponsored its own game jam at IndieCade East 2017. Over the weekend, developers learned to create games for the smart illuminated tiles. The winning game, *BeRrY,* created by two NYU students from China, became one of the featured games to ship with the commercial edition of *Blinks.* The World Builder Award went to *6 Minute Life,* which was inspired by the games of Jason Rohrer, who was featured in the *IndieCade Presents: A Decade of Game Design* exhibition.

There was also an IndieCade Nominee Pop-Up, which included selected games from the 2017 Festival and an open-format game tasting/show-and-tell. Throughout the weekend, attendees played Local No. 12's *The Metagame,* which had become a staple of IndieCade events as an instigator of conversations and debates about games as a cultural form.

Photo by Tracy Fullerton

Photo by Angela Washko

IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2018

The IndieCade Showcase @ E3 2018 illustrated the ebb and flow of the indie ecosystem and its role in the larger game industry. Even as Sony publicly distanced itself from indies while continuing to publish them in record numbers, other publishers were leaning in. Nintendo had introduced Nindies, its independent label for the Switch. Following E3, Google would go on to sponsor an AR game jam at IndieCade's 2018 Festival in October. And there were still more surprises yet to come the following year, especially from Google and its mobile archival, Apple.

This shift of attention to mobile platforms was significant. Although the platforms themselves were late to the table, indies had already figured out that smartphones were a pathway to broadening their audiences outside of the narrow target demographic of mainstream consoles. Games had been the top category in the App Store for years, and indie games in particular were in the limelight. Earlier that year, thatgamecompany had released some advance footage of what would arguably be its first actual indie game—*Sky*. Their platform of choice? iOS. Despite their history with Sony, the studio chose instead to put their newest game in front of a broader and more diverse audience.

The element of surprise was always key to the success of the IndieCade Showcase @ E3, and reviewers pointed out the diversity and unexpected nature of the games on offer. *Meriweather: An American Epic*, by *Killer Queen*'s Josh DeBonis, had some IndieCade history. Josh had been working on the game for years and even given presentations about it. Two games were called out by the press for their innovation in VR—*Drums of War*, set in a fantasy world with drumming as the central mechanic, and *Kaisuo*, a game based on traditional Chinese puzzle boxes—both of which received several E3 awards including Editor's Choice - Malditos Nerds / Candidate (St-Amour 2018). It also shared a runner-up slot with *Fire Escape*, a voyeurism game inspired by Hitchcock's classic film *Rear Window*, made by iNK Stories, the creators of 2016 awardee *1979: REVOLUTION* (HG Staff 2018).

Mixed and augmented reality were areas that were unique to IndieCade's Showcase @ E3. *Tendar*, by IndieCade recidivists Tender Claws, had a unique interface where the well-being of your virtual pet fish depended on your facial expressions and real-world behavior, and went on to win the 2018 award for Innovation in Interaction. Gabriela Gomes' *Healing Spaces*, a mixed reality experience for caregivers of older adults with dementia, caught the attention of one reviewer:

> Among the bombast and cacophony of E3 2018's West Hall last month, nestled firmly in IndieCade's line of featured video games, sits a young woman at a table, a seemingly empty display behind her. . . . Her name is Gabriela Gomes, the experience she's brought with her to E3 is . . . not like anything else at the industry's largest trade show. (Fanelli 2018)

As always, the IndieCade team did a good job of predicting games that would become Festival finalists and award-winners, such as *Bluebeard's Bride* by Magpie Games, about the notorious wife-killer, that went on to win the Grand Jury Prize.

There were also IndieCade's signature quirky spectacle games, such as *Ideal Meal* by USC students Kai Nyame Drayton-Yee, Madeleine Smiley, and Nicholas Roush, which involved manipulating giant chopsticks to collect enormous-sized noodles, vegetables, and dumplings into an oversized ramen bowl. One of the sponsors, RepliCade, brought a set of its miniature replicas of classic arcade machines.

The IndieCade Showcase @ E3 after-party was hosted by Glitch City, which had moved to a new location in Culver City. It included the collective's monthly Demo Night, featuring a series of five-minute Micro Talks.

IndieCade Google ARCore Game Jam: Playing TogethAR

While indies continued to experiment with VR, the bigger story of 2018 was the rise of AR. Indies were increasingly interested in the opportunities for innovation afforded by "mixed-reality" applications, and those developing the technology were growing increasingly interested in indies. This was, of course, an area where IndieCade could be of assistance.

As AR was coming to the fore, and a few weeks before the Festival, IndieCade partnered with Google to host a sponsored game jam to promote its ARCore developer kit. The theme "Playing TogethAR" urged creators to use their childhood playground experiences as inspiration to produce a wild array of creative outcomes. A showcase was presented and the winning team's game—*UndAR the Sea*—received completion funding.

> *IndieCade always offers a nice respite from the wall of undulating human flesh and heat that is the rest of the E3 show floor. The loose confederation of independent developers often produces compelling and bizarre gaming experiences outside of the big studio system.*
>
> —Brian Heater, Okast, 2018

IndieCade Festival 2018

In 2018, the Festival found a new home at Santa Monica College, bringing it back to its 2007 roots when the first Showcase @ E3 took place in a hangar at the Santa Monica Municipal Airport. The new arrangement was orchestrated by longtime supporter David Javelosa, a veteran video game composer turned college professor at Santa Monica College. David had long aspired to host the Festival there, and the completion of the College's new Center for Media and Design—which housed games, film, and animation—set the stage for a move to the new venue. Located in the heart of Santa Monica's Silicon Beach district, the Center was surrounded by game studios, including Santa Monica Studio, Riot Games, Naughty Dog, thatgamecompany, Activision, and Lionsgate (which had launched an interactive division in 2014), among others.

Two thousand eighteen was a year of reshuffling in the console space, marked by a noticeable absence of console sponsors. New tech was continuing to be a major source of support, with Oculus continuing its long-standing partnership with IndieCade and smartly investing in content and taking meetings to fund indie projects during the IndieXchange. VR studio Survios hosted the awards ceremony for the second year in a row.

The exhibit design and layout presented new challenges as well as opportunities. While games were distributed among varied rooms and open spaces, the smaller footprint merged an intimacy that harkened back to the first Festival in 2008, with the exploratory quality of Culver City. However, the distributed nature of the exhibit created some wayfinding challenges, similar to those faced in the early Culver City days. Parking was an issue, but the location was also walking distance from the brand-new Los Angeles Metro station. The building encircled an outdoor courtyard that included umbrella-shaded seating and served as a social hub for informal gatherings, playing board and Big Games, and Night Games programming.. Throughout the weekend, musical acts also performed there.

Over 100 games were on display at the 2018 Festival, including Official Selections and sponsored games, among them 36 Nominees. As we had already seen from the IndieCade Showcase @ E3 and the Google ARCore game jam, augmented reality was starting to come into its own. In addition to the Game Jam Showcase, there were several other games of interest. Finalist *Tendar*, which had been in the Showcase @ E3, won the Innovation in Interaction Award for combining AR and facial recognition. Chaim Gingold (a University of California, Santa Cruz graduate and former IndieCade Conference Co-Chair) and Luke Iannini demoed *La Tabla*, an augmented reality game table, as part of the Gaming Everywhere curation. Also shown was *Healing Spaces*, which had captured a lot of attention at E3.

The Gaming Everywhere exhibition track, which focused on diversity of both gamemakers and contexts, circulated throughout the Festival over the course of the weekend. It included mobile games like *Losswords* (renamed *Dear Reader* when it was released for Apple Arcade) by IndieCade alumni Local No. 12 (John Sharp, Eric Zimmerman, and Colleen Macklin), and *Vestige*, an immersive VR film by Aaron Bradbury and Paul Mowbray that was about loss and grieving that was making the rounds in the documentary film festival circuit. The Wise Guys created *Werewolf Party*, a take on Dmitry Davidoff's 1986 analog party game *Werewolf* (also known as *Mafia*) for the opening reception at Santa Monica's Bergamot Station arts complex.

A few digital games stood out in terms of subsequent acclaim, and the awards provide insight into where indies were headed on a larger scale. The Impact Award went to *The Game: The Game*, which was described by the *Los Angeles Times* as a horror game of psychological entrapment (Martens 2018). Other games that went on to receive critical accolades included *Pixel Ripped 1989*, a VR game about getting sucked into a 1980s retro-gaming world, and *Just Shapes & Beats* by Berzerk Studio, also shown at the Showcase @ E3, a co-op multiplayer

music/bullet-hell game that was published on Nintendo Switch. *EXPOSURE: a game of camouflage*, by The Sheep's Meow, in which you play a tiny creature in an abstract world evolving to preserve your own life and that of your offspring, was described by one reviewer as an "instantly unique" game with a highly intuitive interaction scheme (Wood 2017). The playfully ironic *Flight Simulator*, which came out of the NYU Game Center Incubator, described itself as a "passenger simulator" with the main objective of managing boredom on a commercial airline flight. *I WAS HERE*, by Kate Smith, used space within the game to evoke a woman's memory of her boarding school romance with her roommate and took the iThrive Find the Kind Award.

The diversification of voices continued to be a prevalent theme, particularly Indigenous voices. *Thunderbird Strike*, by Anishinaabe/Métis/Irish game designer and scholar Elizabeth LaPensée, drew from indigenous storytelling to tell a contemporary story of environmental justice. *Mulaka*, by Lienzo, was set in Mexico and used stories of the Indigenous Tarahumara to explore similar themes. The award for Innovation in Aesthetics went to *Nishan Shaman*, a game produced by a Chinese team and based on a folk legend from northern China, which was published by Chinese game and social media giant Tencent.

Alternative controllers and interfaces continued to flourish, coming from a broad variety of influences and contexts. On the one hand was the influence of escape rooms, which could be seen in finalists like *The Klaxo Radio Hour* by Haunted Ephemera (Martzi Campos, who had created 2016's *Beautiful Corner*, and Jesse Vigil), which used a vintage radio as an interface to an interactive audio mystery. On the "artcade" side was Patrick LeMieux's appropriative *Octopad*, which divided the eight control buttons on an NES controller among eight

players, transforming vintage single-player games into uproarious local multiplayer experiences. And then there was the bizarre and wonderful "not quite sure where this fits" feeling of *Unicornalia*, in which players donned a physical unicorn horn as their primary interface to tried to balance between the eponymous protagonist's inner feelings and her daily responsibilities. The Night Games lineup included *ctrl.me* by Thomas Gauthier-Caron, a game that used the haptic feedback in Move controllers to give players directions on how to move their bodies.

Board games were particularly celebrated in 2018. In addition to *Bluebeard's Bride* taking the Grand Jury Award, there was also an array of creative and experimental tabletop games. The aptly-named *BlindFold*, by Tom Ackerman, was a strategic game played by folding paper while wearing a blindfold. A special playtest area allowed board game developers to come and test works in progress with Festival attendees. Kickstarter's Luke Crane, also a game designer in his own right, presented his tabletop game *The Gift* as part of Day and Night Games.

The trend in live performative games continued to grow, producing several highlights of the 2018 Festival. *Puppet Pandemonium* combined a live puppet show with a video game to create a seven-player theatrical experience, and had earned *alt.ctrl.GDC* award earlier that year. *Asta Grande*, by Pietro Righi Riva, a live massively multiplayer auction game where players bid for "legendary" items, took the Innovation in Experience Design Award. *Escape from Godot*, by Andy and Jeff Crocker, transformed the infamous Beckett play into what they described as "escape room antics meet iconic existentialism in this interactive, theatrical play puzzle."

IndieCade Festival 2018 (Con't)

Festival sessions explored signature topics that were atypical of standard industry events, including alternative genres (such as escape rooms and immersive theatre), alternative controllers, and board game design, as well as more thematic topics such as activist games, intimacy in games, historical games, empathy in games, and practical topics like how to keep a team together. A special panel entitled "VR Time Travel" brought together early VR pioneers like Jacki Morie with younger stars in the field for a historical perspective on the rebirth of the genre. I hosted a keynote with *No Proscenium*'s Anthony Robinson about the ways in which immersive theatre and game design were intersecting.
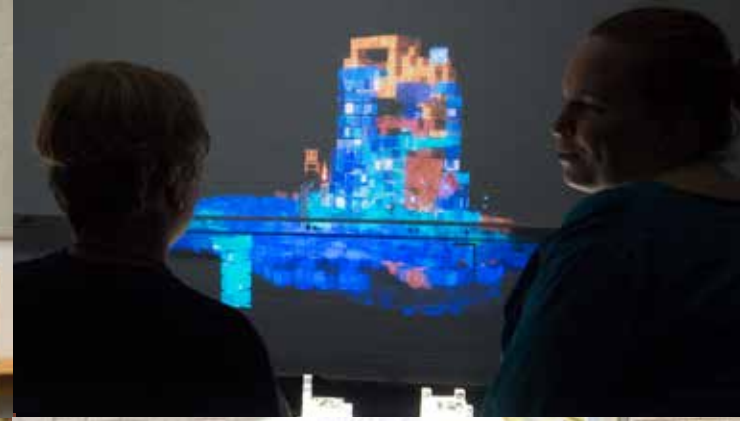
The gala awards and after-party were held once again at Survios, which transformed its parking lot into an outdoor theatre. Hosted again by Asher Vollmer and Sarah Elmaleh, the awards offered trophies by Katie Diaz (then Mason) of KT's Creature Comforts, a revisiting of the charming soft-sculpture steampunk characters that she had created for the prior year's awards. Two special awards were given out, including the second Bernie De Koven Big Fun Award, which was awarded to Doug Wilson (one of the original founders of the Copenhagen Game Collective and creator of *Johann Sebastian Joust*). Doug was selected for his commitment to what he called the "digital folk game," a combination of physical play with technological augmentation. The Game Changer Award went to Kate Edwards, who, as former Executive Director of the International Game Developers Association, had taken a leadership role in advocating for diversity in the game industry and had gone on to tackle the issue of ageism with her "50 Over 50" list of game-industry luminaries.
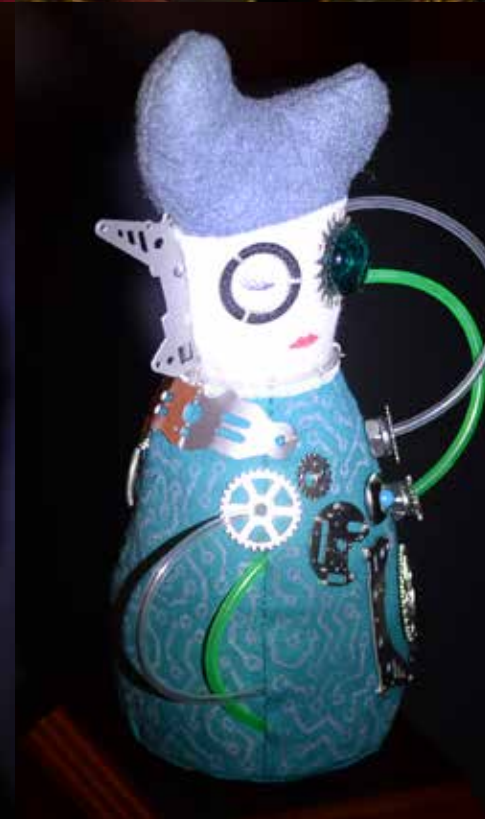
IndieCade Europe 2018

The third IndieCade Europe was again hosted at the Conservatoire national des arts et métiers (CNAM) in Paris, with the help of Capital Game and continued support from the Île-de-France regional government, the City of Paris, the French government (DIRECCTE) and the European Union (ERDF), as well as a number of other regional sponsors, including conferences—Paris Game Week, Nordic Game Jam, Game Connection, and Game Rome—*Le Monde* (a Paris newspaper), ARTE, and others.

The games were varied, representing diverse creators from around the world, with a special focus on European gamemakers. *Homo Machina*, developed by Darjeeling, was an ARTE-published game that created an interactive visualization of the human body as a giant 1920s factory based on the work of German scientist/infographics pioneer Fritz Kahn. Considered a documentary game, it had been in A MAZE. and the Sheffield Doc/fest earlier that year. InnerspaceVR's *A Fisherman's Tale*, described as a surreal VR puzzler/virtual exit room, had been published by ARTE and met widespread acclaim internationally. *Anyball* was a sports game with a twist: the rules of each game were procedurally generated, requiring players to guess the rules *while* they are playing. Another alternative sports game was *WHAT THE GOLF?*, by Danish studio Triband, a physics-based golf parody that used everyday objects as golf balls, which won the IndieCade Europe Grand Prize. The IndieCade Europe Jury Grand Prix Award when to augmented reality game *Laser Mazer,* which overlaid a virtual maze onto a real-world space.

Speakers included Jakub Dvorský of Czech studio Amanita Design (creators of *Machinarium*, which was in the first IndieCade Festival), on their newest game, *CHUCHEL*. Mink ette, a game designer who had worked with immersive theatre companies Punch Drunk and Coney, gave a talk about escape rooms. There were several talks by creators working at the intersection of art, custom controllers, and interaction design, including Tatiana Vilela dos Santos, the creator of *MechBird*; Lucile Cossou, an alternative controller designer; and Mónica Rikić, a Barcelona-based installation and game artist.

IndieCade Europe also introduced a new concept: the "playformance," in which indie developers do a live playthrough of a game to create a kind of hybrid, game-based performance drawing on the "let's play" format. Examples included programmer, maker, and human-computer interface specialist Lucile Cossou performing the singing game *One Hand Clapping* and Jedidjah Julia Noomen transforming the single-player *Reigns: Game of Thrones* into a local multiplayer game by asking the audience to vote on choices as she played through the game.

Performance was a dominant theme throughout, as it had been at IndieCade Prime. Matt Adams of Blast Theory, the arts collective whose live 1998 experience *Kidnap* is considered a proto-ARG, spoke about exploring power through games, rules, and agency. Johanna Koljonen (Participation Design Agency), a Nordic larp guru and co-creator of *Inside Hamlet,* discussed the integration of physical immersion, embodiment, and agency in live action role-playing games. *The Incredible Playable Show*, which had received the Jury Special Recognition Award at IndieCade 2017, was performed, and Lena Mech of the Copenhagen Game Collective and Wonder Pug Adventures discussed live games in real spaces and also moderated a large-scale game during the awards ceremony.

The Trailblazer Award went to Belgium-based Tale of Tales' Aureia Harvey and Michaël Samyn, creators of *The Path* and Independent Games Festival award-winner *Luxuria Superbia*. Harvey and Samyn had been implicated in IndieCade since its inception. Their unfinished game prototype *8,* based on Sleeping Beauty, was in the very first IndieCade Showcase @ E3 in 2007. By 2018, their work had appeared in 17 more IndieCade events, and their staunch independence had stood as a model for numerous other gamemakers.

In 2015, the pair had famously announced that they would no longer be making commercial games (Walker 2015) as the result of poor sales of their game *Sunset* (Samyn and Harvey 2015). But this so-called failure really points to a larger failure of the greater ecosystem (the very failure IndieCade was founded to solve)— the notion of "market" as the primary measure of success. While this can certainly be *one* marker of success, one which the Festival had always supported, IndieCade was founded first and foremost to help gamemakers create their own definition of success. This still leaves us with the fundamental challenge of sustainability, a challenge that can only really be met through mutual support and interdependency.

Europe Photos by La Fille d'à Côté